



Bird breeders, rescuers meet in Tampa

posted 1/4/01

By Laura LaFay
SPECIAL TO THE HERALD-TRIBUNE

Marc Johnson spent eight freezing days in a Massachusetts suburb last winter, playing tapes of Moluccan cockatoo calls in an effort to lure an escaped cockatoo named Max to safety.

Residents told Johnson that the bird had been at large in their neighborhood for three months and the owners had made no effort to retrieve the captive-bred bird. Johnson failed. A red-tailed hawk got to Max first. Late December found Johnson in a hotel lounge photographing the last of three large tropical birds placed near the palm trees, pool and spa to amuse bar customers. According to the bartender, who tipped Johnson off, a drunken bar patron strangled one of the birds, and another was stolen. The hotel has promised to buy a larger cage for the remaining bird and to consider removing the military macaw from the lounge at night.

This month, Johnson will be away from his Rockland, Mass., home again. He and about 100 other parrot-welfare specialists and organizations across the country have been invited to the Radisson Riverwalk Hotel in Tampa today for the first Parrot Welfare Summit.

The World Parrot Trust, an international group devoted to the preservation of parrots in the wild and the welfare of parrots in captivity, is convening the unusual meeting to address a growing problem: the thousands of exotic birds dumped and abandoned annually by owners who no longer want them.

There are interlocking causes for the epidemic of parrot dumping, according to World Parrot Trust Director James D. Gilardi. Breeding parrots in captivity has never been easier, and with prices of some of the beautiful, larger birds running thousands of dollars, more and more people and companies are trying their hand at it.

More birds are available for sale than ever before and more people are buying them. But few know that the smart, sociable, energetic bird they're bringing home is capable of destructive and unsettling behavior when bored, ignored or mistreated.

Depending on the breed and circumstances of each bird, those behaviors can include incessant screaming and feather-plucking, self-wounding, depression, biting and

dangerous levels of aggression. While some parrot behavior specialists have been able to show bird owners how to deal with such problems, many owners don't have the time, money, commitment or inclination to take the trouble.

No one knows this better than Johnson, who has transformed most of his house and all of his barn into a sanctuary for about 187 unwanted Cockatoos, Macaws, Conures, Amazons, African Greys and other exotics.

"I've gotten to know them and respect them like friends," Johnson said. "They are all little individuals. They have such intelligence and such depth to their personality and they are gentle and forgiving."

Among the birds that have found a home with Johnson are a blue-fronted Amazon that was left in his cage at a local dump, an umbrella cockatoo stuffed into a cardboard box and left on the steps of the New England Wildlife Sanctuary and another umbrella cockatoo that was wrapped in a towel and brought to a pet store by a woman who feared that she'd be evicted if she kept the bird.

Dozens of birds have been brought to Johnson by people who had no idea how loud they would be, how much care and attention they would require and what a mess they would make. Cockatoos, which form strong bonds with their owners and then cry out for them loudly and persistently, are frequently dumped, he said.

"Ninety percent of the people who bring me their birds say the same thing: 'If I knew then what I know now, I never would have gotten a bird,'" Johnson said. "They buy them because they have this image of a cuddly pet that will do tricks and talk and sit on their shoulder."

Gilardi, who has a doctorate in ecology and has spent years studying parrots in Peru and Saint Lucia, said, "The public has always been unclear on the downside of owning parrots. Everyone is pretty much clued in on the cuteness factor."

Unlike dogs and cats, Gilardi pointed out, exotic birds do not have centuries of domestication behind them. Most are just a few generations removed from the wild, where they are free-flying flock animals and tend to mate for life. What they need from people, he said, "is a close personal relationship in lieu of a mate."

"People don't think about what their bird would have been like had it been born in the wild," Gilardi said. "They spend 24 hours a day with a mate for their entire life. They fly around together. If they want to eat something, they eat it. If they want to go somewhere, they go."

"You can't take an animal like that and put it in a cage and feed it the same thing every day and expect it to be fine during the 98 percent of the time you aren't there and happy for the 2 percent of time you are there."

Because of the bird dumping, dozens of parrot rescue organizations have sprung up nationwide. But they vary widely in size, standards and philosophies. Some, like Foster

Parrots, won't turn away a single bird. Others take a certain number and no more. Some allow birds to be "adopted" out to new owners. Others believe strongly that this only adds to the problem.

Parrot rescuers disagree about standards, with some insisting that each parrot should be quarantined and tested for disease upon arrival at any sanctuary for the safety of the other birds, and some insisting that, if they did that, there would be no money or resources to care for all the birds that need it.

In addition, more than a few rescues have earned the animosity of breeders and pet shops owners who feel criticized and threatened by the information they dispense. Almost all are desperate for money to keep going.

Gilardi hopes that the Parrot Welfare Summit will bring rescuers together in a positive way to identify issues and talk about what can be done.

For example, he said, parrot rescuers are in a unique position to know which birds are more likely to be problematic pets. That knowledge could be used to persuade breeders to "make some subtle decisions" about which species to breed and promote. "That would solve a huge part of the problem right there," he said.

In hopes of attracting as many people to the summit as possible, Gilardi scheduled it on the eve of a three-day symposium -- also at the Radisson Riverwalk in Tampa -- on sanctuary, rescue, rehabilitation and adoption of companion parrots.

The symposium, sponsored by the Gabriel Foundation, a well-respected parrot sanctuary in Aspen, Colorado., is expected to attract a large number of avian behaviorists, breeders and vets.

Johnson is eager to make this trip. A former potter, he has made it his life's work to rescue parrots. It is his goal to someday raise enough money to build a domed rainforest for rescued parrots, a place to educate the public and to shelter the birds he loves so well.

Meanwhile, the moral support and friendship of like-minded crusaders in Tampa will go a long way.

"Just the fact that we can all get together and show some unity to the public -- demonstrate that there are so many people concerned about this problem -- is a great thing," he said. "It's one more step in the cause. It may not be a big one, but it's important to take every step we can."