

"This was a normal living room a year ago," Marc Johnson explains as he steps into a room now brimming with brightly-colored birds. A dozen red and green macaws make themselves comfortable atop their open wire enclosures or perched on the rope strung around the room like Christmas garland. There is a chorus of "hellos," and Floyd, a gregarious blue and gold macaw, shifts his weight from side to side, dancing with delight at Marc's arrival. Floyd should be glad to see Marc, who converted his own home into the headquarters of Foster Parrots Limited, a non-profit rescue and adoption service for mistreated and unwanted pet parrots like Floyd. Some 200 birds representing 44 different species - most of them large, all of them loud - now call Marc's New England farmhouse home.

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## Parrot Problems

Marc cares for the birds full-time, aided by just one paid employee and a flock of up to 20 volunteers. "And at the end of the day," Marc says, "I never feel like I've done enough."



**Marc and his staff take extraordinary care of "clients" like Psycho.**

Why does he do it all? Today, the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) estimates there are some 50 million pet birds in the United States, making them the second most-popular house pet behind cats and just ahead of dogs. Unlike cats and dogs, however, pet parrots can live up to 100 years and cannot easily be neutered or spayed. These two facts mean parrot populations - especially when bred for profit - can mushroom out of control.

"Some of these birds have the intelligence level of 2 to 5-year-old children," he says stroking the nearest bird. "If you went to work for eight hours and left your child in a playpen you would wind up with a very maladjusted child."

While many pet parrots are well taken care of, a neglected bird reacts more dramatically than a less than pampered pooch. Without lots of attention and intellectual stimulation, neglected pet parrots can develop psychological problems uncannily similar to humans - aggression towards others or compulsive self-mutilation.

Most of the once-beautiful birds in Marc's care have plucked themselves clean.

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**Traumatized birds often pluck out their own feathers, or those of a mate.**

The result is a squawking, sometimes violent bird that unprepared pet owners are anxious to get rid of. Traditional animal-welfare organizations are not prepared to care for these intelligent, highly sensitive animals. And often these physically or emotionally damaged birds face many years of pain, isolation or homelessness.

## Planned Parrothood

"Last year we took in 160 birds, and placed 35," Marc figures. "Yeah, that's a bad ratio. But, right now, the people who are applying to adopt a bird are the same people who bring them in."

Marc gives the birds away for free, but finding potential adoptive parents who live up to Marc's exacting standards is not easy. Marc carefully screens prospective parrot owners, ruling out anyone under 25 years of age, anyone with a 9-to-5 job, cat-owners, owners of some types of dogs, etc. One caller asked for a bird to match the décor of a newly renovated room.



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Marc requires all applicants to volunteer at Foster Parrots to expose them to the noise, mess and attention-seeking demands parrots make. At the same time, volunteers can also see for themselves the sad consequences of impulsive pet ownership. Marc hopes volunteering will also discourage people who might plan to breed the birds for profit.

"We have a strong anti-breeding stance," he explains as he slices up apples for the birds, carefully removing the seeds. "Years ago, dogs were in this position. The media exposed puppy mills, but now we're making the same mistakes with birds."

More than lax owners, more than shortsighted breeders, Marc faults the pet trade industry for deceptively marketing the ever-growing number of unwanted parrots.

"The pet trade packages birds as a convenient pet," says Marc. "Pet stores make you think tidy pellets are enough for birds. They don't tell you you'll be cleaning sweet potatoes off the wall."



**Marc serves up a mid-day snack.**

### **Humble Beginnings, Lofty Goals**

Ten years ago, Marc Johnson was a potter, living in a three-room apartment in Cambridge, MA. "I got a bird to keep me company," he recalls. "I didn't recognize the sadness of that bird. It came to me over many years."

In his street level studio, Marc and his bird became well known. Before he knew it, Marc had thirty cast-off birds in his three-room apartment. He and his wife relocated to their present home in a more rural town about one hour south of Boston for more space. But Marc explains that there seems to be an "if you build it, they will come syndrome," at work, and the couple's living quarters are again filled beyond capacity with homeless birds.

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The room across the hall from his bedroom doubles as an office and quarantine ward, a strawberry iMac against one wall and five caged birds against the other. In the cage closest to the window, Sonny, an otherwise beautiful cockatoo, wears an Elizabethan collar meant to keep him from picking at the ghastly wound on his chest.



**Sonny's acute self-abuse tendencies may never be cured.**

Sonny's self-mutilation is likely the result of severe neglect and it's not a habit he'll easily break. At roughly 20 years of age, Sonny could face another 50 plus years of anguish. Marc stresses providing the birds with quality of life over length of life, and with a bird like Sonny an outsider wonders about euthanasia. It's not something, however, that Marc wonders about.

"I don't think it's my role to decide," he says with certainty. "I like to try everything I could possible think of first."

But trying everything is taking its toll on Marc, who works with the birds nearly every waking hour.

"I do this seven days a week," he sighs. "I never go on vacation, it's hard to get away even for an afternoon. I can't do it much longer."

He may not have to; the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Animal Cruelty (MSPCA) visited Marc's home recently to better understand the scope of the problem and how to solve it.

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**"We're trying to do good," Marc comments. "Every bird will give back what you put into it.".**

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**With the right amount of care and attention, these birds can thrive.**

sponsorship for the project.

Additionally, Marc works closely with several other groups around the nation that take in unwanted birds. Marc sites The Oasis Sanctuary in Arizona, the Midwest Avian Adoption & Rescue Services, Inc. in Minnesota, and the Lucky Parrot Refuge and Sanctuary in New York City as his particular allies. Marc also dreams of creating a museum-like educational center that would also serve as a permanent home for parrots that aren't suitable for placement in adoptive homes. He spends much of his time drumming up corporate or private

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