

My Bird-Shaped Heart

How a childhood pet inspired an advocate's career

by KATIE CARRUS

ON THE IPAD:
Watch Katie Carrus
take a trip to
Project Perry.



I am not a crazy bird lady. Swear. I own zero embroidered parrot sweaters (a forearm tattoo with an excerpt of a Mary Oliver poem about crows is as far as I'll go). My hair is kempt (OK, during a business meeting I did spot a small feather where it shouldn't have been, but only once). I have successful romantic relationships, and I have never dressed up my bird in a costume or walked him in a stroller (we use a backpack with a perch and screened front for summer hikes, thank you very much).

Oh no. I am a crazy bird lady. Wait—I can explain. Like a lot of kids in America, I grew up with pets. My family had the occasional gerbil or parakeet, but dogs and cats were our mainstay. Then for my 10th birthday, my dad gave me this neat little gray bird who dug shiny things and, in my young mind, was a major step up from the parakeets we'd had. Slightly bigger and boasting a curved fan of feathers atop her head, this, my friends, was a proper bird. Of course I named her Birdie (remember: I was 10).

Those who know birds know that cockatiels are ubiquitous in the pet trade: popular for their mild manners, relatively low noise level (I said relative—we're talking parrots here), and also relative domesticity (due to their longer time in captivity). This cockatiel did not disappoint. Social and cuddly, with just enough spunk and attitude to make her real, Birdie was my baby.

We grew up together. Whenever I was home, she was out of her cage. She was my constant companion through homework,

birthday parties, childhood disappointments, and dreams for the future. Birds are incredibly smart and emotionally complex, so it was easy to bond with her.

But as is common with kids, my schedule got progressively busier. After-school activities sometimes kept me away until late at night. Weekends I might spend an entire day out. And every time I came back, Birdie was waiting for me. She never got angry at me for fully living my life while she waited in that cage to live hers.

I wouldn't question this until college, when something clicked and she took on more importance to me. I'd always loved her, but I started considering her interests beyond being my pet. I noticed how happy she was being out of the cage, flying around, interacting with me and others in my life. And I newly appreciated the unconditional love she brought to my days, in that way that only animals can do.

I guess it's natural in college to challenge everything you once believed to be true. Combine this with the related "What should I do with my life?" question, and my relationship with this single cockatiel led to curiosity about all birds. Clearly I couldn't land my dream job of kissing them all day (yes, you could kiss Birdie). But I could see what other birds were up against and if I could help.

What I found was fodder for 500 lifetimes. I learned about factory farms, where billions of chickens are intensively confined, living harsh lives from beginning to end. They could all be Birdie, I thought. I

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changed my eating habits and resolved to work toward ending animal abuse in industrial agriculture. And I learned about parrots. That they're wild animals, that what endears them to us (their smarts, their hearts) are the very things that almost guarantee their needs will never be fully met in a human home. And that though I was just a kid—and we just didn't know better—it was so unfair to keep my childhood companion in a cage so often, all those years.

Birdie was sweet-natured enough to forgive me, every time. And as restrictive as her life was, she was luckier than many other birds. My avian birthday gift died in 2006 after sharing her life with me for 16 years. My gift to her is to work to make things better for captive parrots. I don't think I'm any different than the millions of Americans whose lives have been forever changed by an animal. Mine just happened to have feathers—that, OK, occasionally wind up in my hair. In a meeting. At work.

► **EDITOR** of humansociety.org, Katie Carrus lives with a rambunctious rescued Senegal parrot, Squirrelly.

“There are so many parrots out there, I just don’t like adding birds to the marketplace,” says E. B. Cravens. One of the most respected parrot breeders in the world, he lives on the Big Island of Hawaii. He’s explaining why he’s largely quit the business.

Cravens writes frequently on parrots and their care. He has great insight into their nature. I wanted to talk to him about the psychology of parrots—especially the babies and parents in big breeding operations.

“Absolutely, they are factory farms, pumping out parrots. There are also conscientious breeders, and lots have stopped breeding too, like me.” At captive breeding’s height, he says, maybe 750,000 parrots per year were being produced in the United States. Now that number is maybe 100,000 per year as people learn more and more about how difficult parrots can be in the home.

He speaks slowly. His voice is gravelly, resonating with thoughtful wisdom. The marketplace for parrots has slowed, he says, and that has weeded out a lot of breeders. But he is concerned about the effects of the factory farming system on the parrots themselves.

“All these parrots, the babies, they’re orphans,” he says. “My breeder friends hate it when I say this. But that’s what they are, orphans.”

Cravens has been letting his own parrot-parents follow their “strongest impulse”: raising their offspring themselves. Baby parrots need closeness. In the wild, they’ll spend months and months in constant contact with their parents. But in a factory-style breeding operation, they never see their parents or are removed early on to be raised by people. The result is young parrots who don’t know who they are, who spend their lives in a no-birds land between human and animal.

At first, the young parrots are cuddly and affectionate. “People are smitten,” Cravens says. “They think, ‘Oh, this parrot really loves me,

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— MATT SMITH, THE CENTRAL VIRGINIA PARROT SANCTUARY

just like a baby.’ And you want to be loved like that. But the truth is, it’s just lonely. It’s needy.”

In a few years the parrot hits puberty and develops intense needs for bonding with a mate.

“It gets sexual, and the problems really begin. It may attach to one person in the family and grow hostile to others. It may even bite or attack others. ... The parrots become dysfunctional because they have not been allowed to have a childhood.”

The owners of Santa Barbara Bird Farm in California, Phoebe Linden and her husband have not bred parrots in 11 years, out of concern for what breeding does to the birds’ mental health.

“There are so many crazy, whacked-out parrots,” she says, emotion filling her voice. “Every domestically raised bird is traumatized. To some extent all are. Some birds respond to trauma, like some people, and have no effects. Some drag their trauma around with them all their lives.”

She adds, “We don’t have a parrot problem in the country. The parrots are not the problem. The problem is people. Too often, they want the parrots to be decorations. Or they don’t focus enough on the parrots’ needs.”

Most fundamentally, the parrot sanctuary picture calls us to a rethinking of what it means to live with a captive parrot.

To see what this new attitude means, I visit Matt Smith at his Central Virginia Parrot Sanctuary in Louisa, Va.

He founded the facility, nicknamed Project Perry in honor of his first parrot, in 2004. Now in his mid-30s, he provides a home for





about 150 birds. The highlight of his sanctuary is the aviary he's built for African greys.

"I have a soft spot for them—their intelligence, maybe. Especially the old wild-caught breeder birds. They've been through so much."

The aviary is about half a football field in size and home to 43 African greys.

"What parrots want," he says, "is flight and flock—two things they're denied as pets in most homes."

In the evenings, we sit in the aviary amid the parrots. It's full of plants and tree trunks. Two-thirds of these greys are old breeder birds, and many hang back in the corners, far away from us. "They've lived for decades in a little cage. They're usually fearful of people."

Soon a group approaches us. Chico flies down the path and lands on my shoulder. Dobbie, his brother, flies in too. They were left here by a couple who had to move back to Europe.

Stormy takes his usual place on Smith's leg. He was an abuse case, left without food and water by his owners when they went for a week on vacation. His friend Max also arrives.

"Max is confused sexually," Smith says.

Jasmine waddles up to us. Before Project Perry, she was in a Virginia animal shelter and was going to be euthanized—a fate more common than we realize, says Smith.

CiCi and Chuck Chuck also waddle in for a visit. Stormy and

Max hop onto my camera pack, nibbling the zippers. Others clamber up on my lap and arms.

"So we let the birds decide what they're going to do," I offer. "Our interactions are on their terms."

"You hit the nail on the head," Smith replies. "My whole philosophy is allowing birds to be birds. They are little people, yes. But they are not human."

Smith has plans for more outdoor aviaries like this—one for Amazons, another for macaws—in which he tries to replicate as much as possible their lives in the wild.

"It helps reduce their destructive behavior for birds that are traumatized," he says.

It's a simple but profound and transformative idea: Let parrots be parrots. ■

BEAUTIFUL HAVEN

Among birds taking refuge at Matt Smith's Central Virginia Parrot Sanctuary (opposite page and above) are African grey parrots, jenday and golden-capped conures, cockatiels, and green-winged macaws. Experts highlight an urgent need for more places like Smith's: accredited sanctuaries where birds can fly and choose mates in large aviaries—some small measure of recompense for the damage other humans have caused.

► **CHARLES BERGMAN** is a writer and photographer living in Washington state. For five ways you can help captive parrots, plus resources for advocates and caretakers, go to humansociety.org/parrots.