



CONSERVATION OFF THE PORT BOW

By: Constance Woodman
 Texas A&M Univeristy
 Veterinary Pathobiology
 Email: gryphus@gmail.com

Chris Biro has made a living for two decades by travelling around the United States, as a pirate (with a real cutlass) and a fully rigged pirate ship. His educational bird show, “The Pirate’s Parrot” teaches general audiences about parrots in the wild and as companion animals.

During the shows, flighted birds have total freedom to fly, play, and interact with audience members. Chris recalls them back to him by using trained behaviors. During a recent show a concerned women, likely familiar only with wing-clipped parrots, asked “will they come back?” Chris, always the scallywag, shrugged and said “I hope so.”

Chris’ interest in bird training extends beyond shows. For many years he gave the birds he worked with opportunities to build their flight and survival skills in varied and interesting locations. He has worked to create behaviorally balanced groups of parrots who are autonomous, aware animals, while also being friendly and interactive.

Chris has created a scenario where birds can learn complex, wild-type behaviors, while under the protection of a human caretaker. His practices could have significant impacts on conservation.

Before I met Chris, I knew him as the



Photo by Scott Ripley, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ripleyphoto/>

the pirate guy from the internet who taught me how to fly my pet parrot outside instead of clipping her wings. His “Freeflight List” on Yahoo Groups was my tutor in the early 2000s. I remember fourteen year old me receiving an e-mail from Chris, answering my questions. I spent hours dissecting the information then took my young parrot outside to practice flying. Years later, I met Chris in person when our paths crossed again. I was hired to film his birds in the Canyonlands of Utah.

During filming I realized that the birds Chris trains are incredible. Hand-fed pet birds are not supposed to avoid predators, mob predators, find food, excavate nest sites, navigate long distances, or respond in parallel to the alarm calls and activities of local wildlife when there is a predator threat!

Chris’ parrots are like wild birds... But snugly! This is very significant because of what science learned when conservation biologist Noel

Snyder released captive parrots into the mountains of Arizona in the 1980s; parrots from the pet trade tend to get eaten, sicken, and starve, when released.

After filming, I worked with Chris to quantify his approach, and convinced Chris to enter the conservation world beginning with the zoo community and the aviculture (bird breeding) community. We wrote and presented our first paper in 2008. Today, Chris has expanded our initial one-page methodological summary into a ten hour course. Now, individuals in Australia, Europe, the U.S., and the Middle East have reproduced Chris’ methods and continue to have excellent results with their own birds.

Our non-profit, Bird Recovery International, was founded to translate Chris’ techniques into conservation tools. Current strategies to prepare captive-bred parrots for release involve an entire team of trained staff to manage the large colonies, translocations, and may require the presence of existing wild



flocks for integration. With Chris’ method, only a single person is needed, and birds need minimal caging for sleeping and bad weather. There is no need for an expensive large aviary, large numbers of staff, and huge numbers of birds. The high survival rates of a managed flock as they learn wild skills would mean hundreds of birds don’t have to be released to create enough survivors for reproduction. By utilizing the pet trade to produce birds rather than a specialized breeding project, existing expertise and facilities provide birds with no need to re-invent the wheel. The human overseeing the birds’ education can recall the them from dangerous situations until they have the appropriate skills to deal with threats. So, even though there is not a wild flock to integrate them into, there is low risk to the parrots.

Having been accepted into the ABS NSF-IGERT program, I am currently writing a comparison paper to see what conservation can learn from

free-flying birds compared to existing methods to prepare birds for release. For example, one standard currently used in conservation is to make parrots in a cage watch a hawk hurt another live parrot. In contrast, Chris allows his birds to develop habits and behaviors to avoiding predators through practice. The birds gain useful behaviors when pursued by benign but curious gulls, ravens, or turkey vultures. I personally prefer Chris’ method.

My long term hope is to fly a flock of parrots here at Texas A&M in order to carefully study the process of wild skill acquisition. With the support of my advisor, Donald Brightsmith, I believe I will be able to bring these unique methodologies and results created by “Captain Chris the Pirate” into the conservation mainstream. 🌿

Photos of wild behaviors by hand-raised pet trade birds trained by Chris Biro

Below: Foraging with and responding to signals from local prey species. Multi-species flocking in response to threat. Excavating nests and laying eggs (which are not left outside to hatch, Chris is not interested in creating potentially invasive parrot populations.) Opposite: Predator evasion, wild foraging.

