

None Are Free Until All Are Free: The Pet Trade Impact on Endangered Parrots

By Karen Windsor, Foster Parrots, Ltd.

Avian veterinarian and the head of One Earth Conservation, Dr. LoraKim Joyner, gently folds her fingers around the baby to steady him as she presses her stethoscope against his skin and listens. He is naked and smelly and the pin feathers are only just beginning to punch through his hot skin. There is much that can be learned from this exam, not only about the nestling's health, but also about the health of the parents, the natural habitat and, ultimately, the human communities that share this environment with the birds. When the exam is over and the samples of blood and fecal matter have been taken, this little baby will be placed back into his nest along with his siblings. The nest will be monitored with the hope that the babies will be raised here by their parents until they fledge, though this is not guaranteed because poaching in this area is a constant threat. These yellow-naped parrot (aka Amazon) babies are highly prized as pets, and with a loss of 92% of their total population over the last 35 years, they represent one of the world's most critically endangered parrot species.

One never imagines, when they purchase a baby parrot from a pet store or from a local breeder, that their purchase incentivizes the illegal poaching of parrots in the wild, resulting in the harm or death of thousands of baby parrots. But it does. That legal purchase confirms the monetary value attached to parrots, which ultimately compels illegal trafficking and the extraction of birds from the wild. It is widely known that up to 75% of trafficked parrots will die in transit because the conditions under which illegal transport is conducted are violent and torturous. But many baby parrots targeted by poachers never even make it that far. Poachers often cut down nest trees to access the chicks. Large numbers of these chicks die when their trees come down.



*Yellow-naped Amazon chicks in their nest in Nicaragua
Photo by One Earth Conservation*

In a study conducted across only 14 of 33 existing Latin American countries, biologists determined that between 400,000 – 800,000 parrots are poached each year. On a global scale, between two and five million birds of every species are ripped from their wild places annually. If only 25% of poached birds survive long enough to make it into homes as pets, then those who promote parrots as pets and create the demand are on the hook for a mind-blowing number of dead parrots.

Birds are the most abundantly trafficked of all wildlife on a global scale and 90% of trafficked birds are parrots. Illegal trafficking is generally enmeshed with corruption and other violent criminal activities such as drug and weapons trafficking. Even human trafficking. These are the threats that collide with the lives and cultures of

of indigenous communities. In this respect, what harms the parrots also harms the people. In places like Honduras and Guatemala where macaws and Amazons are all but disappearing, communities are confronting the violence and are risking their lives for their parrots. LoraKim Joyner recounts the story of her friend, Tomas Manzanares, an indigenous community leader in the village of La Moskitia in Honduras, who was shot four times in 2010 and nearly died trying to protect La Moskitia's scarlet macaws. "Tomas showed me his scars and recovering wounds," LoraKim says. "I asked him why he was willing to risk his life to return to help his parrots and he said, 'Doctora, everything is at risk, and I'm willing to risk everything. If the birds don't make it, neither do my people.'"



At the Rescue & Liberation Center in Mabita La Moskita, Honduras. Security concerns requiring military escorts for the conservation team - Photo by One Earth Conservation

But not everybody survives. In 2020 Pedro Viteri Arriola, who worked with the NGO Alliance, COLORES, was murdered trying to protect an Amazon nest on his ranch in Guatemala. The chicks were taken. In 2021 in La Moskitia, parrot ranger, Narciso Montoya, was murdered as well. Conservation organizations working in the field to confront the demand for parrots as pets live with the heartbreak of losing the parrots they love... and also the people they love.

These days the majority of parrots trafficked in Central America stay in Central America where the relationship of the people to their parrots is an indelible aspect of their culture and where parrots have been kept as pets, used in rituals and medicine and even hunted for food for centuries. But the rapid decline in flagship species like scarlet and great green macaws, yellow-naped parrots and yellow-headed parrots throughout their native ranges is astounding and deeply concerning. The IUCN Red List assessment of yellow-naped Amazons went from "of least concern" in 2004 to "critically endangered" in 2021, with remaining parrots now numbering only between 1000 and 2499. As few as 150-200 scarlet macaws (Central American subspecies *m. cyanopterus*) remain in Guatemala. While trafficking into the U.S. has declined significantly over the past 3 decades, trafficking of parrots in their countries of origin and across borders into neighboring Mesoamerican countries continues to meet the demand. But is the dramatic decline in parrot populations evidence of an increase in demand? Colum Muccio, Director of Development for Arcas and the Wildlife Rescue and Conservation Association in Guatemala, ponders the question. "We are getting fewer confiscated animals at our rescue centers, but is that due to less effort on the part of enforcement authorities (probably), or is there less trafficking (probably not) or is wildlife simply being wiped out? All this depends on the species. I think with the yellow-naped parrots we can pretty safely say...the animals are being wiped out."

Also of concern to conservationists is the preservation of natural habitat sufficient to sustain wild parrot repopulation efforts. "Over the years, we have shifted from purely wildlife rescue and rehab to habitat protection," Colum continues. "Why are we saving all these chicks if they don't have anywhere into which they can be released? Also, the wildlife trade is just such an incredible waste; so few animals make it to market. Wildlife rescue and rehab is so difficult, and probably only about 50% of the animals we receive are successfully rehabilitated and returned to the wild to fulfill their role in the ecosystem. So we really need to focus on protecting habitat and busting traffickers."

It is widely believed that the Wild Bird Conservation Act (WBC) of 1992 virtually eliminated both legal and illegal importation of wild birds into the U.S., and that the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) effectively regulates and protects endangered parrots worldwide, but there are wide gaps in these statutes that let parrots fall through. In 2019, in an effort to revitalize U.S. breeding stock, American parrot breeder, Paul Marolf, and associates petitioned U.S. Fish & Wildlife to allow the importation of 4,000 endangered African grey parrots from South Africa to Marolf's 'Rare Bird Farm' (parrot mill), located in Miami, Florida. Marolf and his Captive Breeding Program (CBP) associates claimed that "there would be no negative effect on the survivability of the wild population" because although 55% of the greys to be imported were, admittedly, wild-caught, these had been harvested from the wild many years earlier. Although greys are a CITES Appendix I trade restricted species, Africa does not participate in CITES or recognize restrictions on importing or exporting wildlife – even endangered wildlife – and South Africa is the largest legal exporter of birds, mammals and plants in the world. One would think that the WBC and CITES restrictions would prohibit the importation of endangered African greys into the U.S., but clearly there are legal avenues that can be exploited. U.S. Fish & Wildlife granted Marolf a permit for the importation of only 150 of the requested 4,000 African greys. Which was fortunate. Unless you happened to be one of the 150.



Congo African Grey Parrot - Photo by Brian Jones

Despite the closing of U.S. and European borders (2007) to wild-caught parrots, the trade in parrots finds other legal or illegal avenues. Guyana and Surinam, the only two countries in South America that still legally allow the exportation of their wildlife, not only condone the trapping of their own birds, but they also serve as funnels for illegally trafficked parrots from neighboring countries, Brazil and Venezuela – and beyond. Western Asia, Africa and the Middle East continue to offer enthusiastic markets for parrots, whether endangered or not, and many parrots exported from Guyana and Surinam oblige these markets.



Yellow-Crowned Amazons being trafficked through Guyana

Domestic parrot breeding exploded in the U.S. after the Wild Bird Conservation Act went into effect in 1992, transforming what had once been a cottage industry into one of the most lucrative of all exotic wildlife industries in the U.S., placing over 20 million parrots in American homes over the last 30 years. But curiously, this has not eliminated the smuggling of parrots across the Mexican border into the U.S. A 2007 study by Defenders of Wildlife revealed that over 100,000 parrots are smuggled into Mexico every year, and while most parrots captured in Mexico – or trafficked into Mexico from other Central American countries – remain in Mexico, an estimated 9,700 are illegally smuggled into the U.S. That's still a lot of wild-caught parrots. And it's mind-boggling to think that parrots are being smuggled into a country that is buckling under the weight of an overwhelming unwanted parrot problem.



Hispaniolan parakeets confiscated in the Dominican Republic - Photo by Danika Oriol-Morway

Based in San Diego, SoCal Parrot, a nonprofit dedicated to wild parrot conservation, education and protection, works with officials and confronts the tragedy of illegal trafficking across the border. When traffickers are apprehended and smuggled parrots are confiscated by officials, folks believe the parrots have been saved and there's a happy ending to the story, but that is generally not the case, and ultimately the rescue/confiscation itself becomes a part of the tragedy. Veterinarian, Dr. Patricia Latas is a board member and advisor with SoCal Parrot, and her work now is focused on confiscated wild parrots, avenues to their recovery and rehabilitation, and supporting the success of naturalized wild parrots in the urban landscape.



***Critically endangered yellow-headed parrot, confiscated at the Mexican border and brought to SoCal Parrot
Photo by SoCal Parrot***

“It is difficult and often impossible to return poached parrots to the wild,” she explains. “These birds are far from home. Border patrol and USDA-APHIS officials do not have the manpower, resources or experience to rehabilitate. Most confiscated parrots are euthanized. Neonates are automatically euthanized because officials don't know how to feed them. Parrots that aren't categorized as endangered species are also routinely euthanized.”



Neonate yellow-headed parrot, confiscated and transferred to the care of SoCal Parrot - Photo by SoCal Parrot

Janet Trumble, the Operations Director at Oasis Sanctuary in Arizona, also witnesses the tragedy of birds confiscated at the border. “Since we are in the region, we are so often contacted for birds coming up through Mexico,” Janet says. “Most of these cases are small seizures...one, two maybe three birds. Large seizures aren't seen as often at the Mexico border, at least not the numbers or regularity seen with the African species.” According to the NGO, Defenders of Wildlife, however, it can be assumed that successful seizures of parrots at the U.S. border represent only 1%-3% of the actual number of birds trafficked.

The consumer demand for parrots as pets is a call that's heard around the world, ensuring there will always be a global market. But how can we love parrots without hurting them? LoraKim Joyner and I work at opposite ends of the same problem, and we meet in the middle to try to support one another through our devastation: she trying to

reconcile the death and loss she experiences in the field as she fights to save parrots, me having hit my ceiling for seeing parrots in cages and witnessing the neglect, abuse, and degradation of their lives in captivity.

“I feel more strongly than ever that extractive economies with demand and consumerism fueling them are harming all of us at very deep levels,” LoraKim offers. “This goes beyond the politics of the trade and keeping parrots as pets. This is a basic existential threat to earth and her beings, including humans. Having a parrot in the home is a harmful behavior that seeks to repair the alienation we all feel. We want intimacy with the earth and we use birds in the home as a way to soothe our aching hearts. We have to find other ways.”



Scarlet Macaw, confiscated, rehabilitated and released by Macaw Conservation Costa Rica (MCCR) on the Osa Peninsula, CR - Photo by Foster Parrots, Ltd.

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