

ZAZU'S HOUSE: Life and Love in a Parrot Sanctuary

By Emily Lott Robinson

As it happens, a severe snowstorm hits the Seattle area right before my first day volunteering at Zazu's House, a sanctuary for parrots near the top of Lake Washington. Road conditions cannot deter me however, and I inch my way onto the icy streets before daybreak. Few other drivers have made my choice. The roads are empty and the world is quiet. The only colors interrupting the deep blue permeating both land and sky are the neon pinks and reds of the drive-thru espresso stands scattered across the predawn landscape like welcoming hearths.

Once at the sanctuary I pull into the driveway, wait for the iron gates to swing open, and drive into a winter wonderland.

Undisturbed swaths of snow are surrounded by a lacy border of ice-encrusted trees and branches. The big house comes first, where



Scott and Christy live. Then the drive curves towards the first of the flights. The blue-gray buildings blend seamlessly into the winter dawn. Wild birds are whirring and chipping, scratching for a meal under the snow. As I open the car door I

immediately hear the coarse calls of the macaws in the Big Flight, an echo from the primordial jungle splitting open the Northwest sky.

I pick my way cautiously over the frozen gravel path and enter the double doors of the Big Flight. Long-tailed shapes loom in the tops of giant trees, and as my eyes get accustomed to the dim morning light, a carnival of colors emerges like an exploded piñata. Brilliant reds, blues, greens, and yellows shine down unapologetically from the rafters, undefiled by the bars of a cage. I sense hundreds of examining eyes swiveling towards me, and after a brief moment of silence, a chorus of “helloes” rains down in high raspy voices.

Zazu’s House was founded in 2000 by Scott & Christy Hensrude, made possible by the financial success of an auto body business they established and built together. The sanctuary for parrots (mostly macaws) lies sequestered



inside a wooded twelve-acre plot. Bald eagles soar overhead, on their way to and from their nests on the nearby lakes, and bears and cougars are not uncommon visitors. The woods around the sanctuary provide a convenient source of perching and chewing fodder for the voracious macaws. There are two main flights; one

(“Special Needs”) houses about forty of the smaller birds and the more challenging cases.

The “Big Flight” was constructed in 2010 using volunteer labor and donated materials to accommodate the growing flock of macaws, which has now reached one hundred or more. The Hensrudes make use of recycled materials whenever possible, and find a way to

use every donated item that comes their way. “If we can’t use it, we’ll give it to one of the other local sanctuaries,” Christy says.

The discarded seed mix is in turn donated to sanctuaries for pigs, and local chicken and duck flocks. Nothing



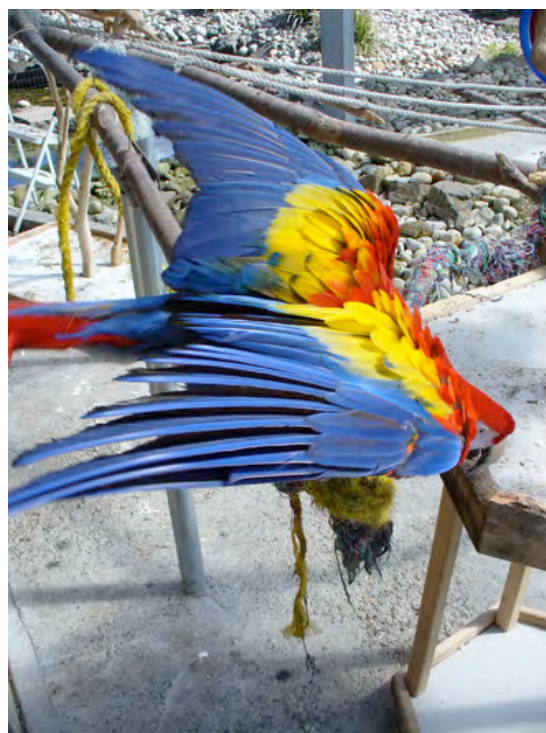
goes to waste, even inadvertently: an impromptu field of sunflowers, millet and pumpkins sprang to life from leftover seeds thrown out onto a hillside—a Northwest rendition of the important role parrots play in the life cycle of their native rainforests.

Operating costs are immense. Christy forages for surplus stock from seed factories whenever possible. After her overtures to other grocery stores were rejected, she persuaded a nearby Costco to let her take their overstock of fruit for the birds.

Avian veterinarian Dr. Elizabeth Kamaka provides much of their medical care pro

bono. There is no paid labor; they rely utterly on their own resources and on volunteer assistance. Nevertheless, donated time and materials cover only a small portion of the total costs of running the sanctuary. After heating, water, medical and other costs are calculated, Christy estimates that they spend approximately three thousand dollars per month to keep and care for the birds—most of which comes straight out of Scott and Christy’s generous pockets.

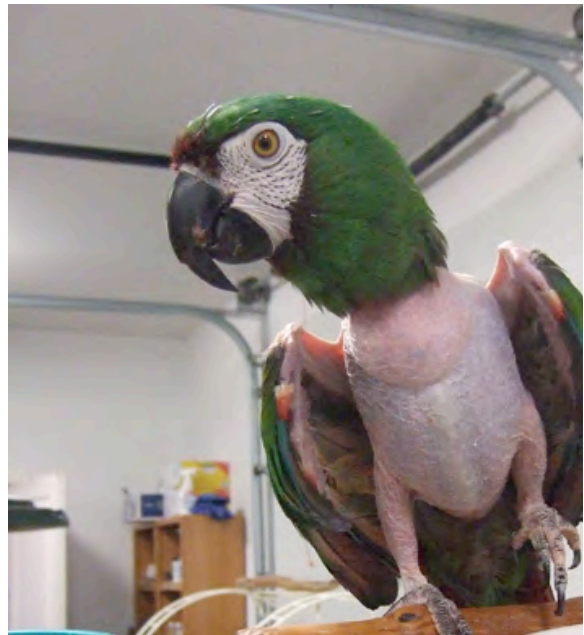
Christy is a beautiful woman whose manicured features and impeccable hair make her look as though she has just stepped off a pageant runway. As I wipe off the sweat and dust and grime I accrete after just a few hours of working with these birds, I crave to know by what miracle she is able to keep up her appearance while living within feet of one hundred and fifty parrots, let alone working with them every day! Neither Hensrude grew up with birds, although



Christy was an animal lover from childhood. Their love affair with parrots began, as Christy describes it, when they walked into a pet store intending to buy a turtle for their son and instead walked out with two macaws. They wanted their birds Howard and Zazu to have a high-quality, free-flying life, so constructed a large indoor-outdoor aviary next to their own house to accommodate the birds’ flying needs. They adopted their first seven avian refugees from another rescue

operation that had been forced to shut down. Over time this number has swelled to well over one hundred fifty birds, mostly macaws but a handful of Amazons, African Greys, and other parrots as well.

Christy knows every bird in the sanctuary by sight. They know her, too. When she enters the flight a huge uproar commences—a greeting fit for a Titania or the Queen Mother, and matched only by the din when she leaves. Christy accepts only birds personally referred to her from a vet or other rescue. Most of the birds come from loving though not always perfect homes. “No one expects to get cancer, get divorced, lose their job, lose their house,” Christy says. “I’ve hugged owners who were bawling as they left their birds.” Others truly have the best interests of their parrot at heart. “They feel their birds are not happy, and they want them to be happy.” Some owners who return for their birds are hurt when their baby does not want to leave Zazu’s—sometimes physically. One owner was badly bitten by her parrot as she tried to carry it out of the flight. “It was just like a small child,” Christy explains, “It didn’t want to leave its friends!”



This does not mean all of the parrots at Zazu’s come from wonderful loving homes. Many owners do not understand their bird’s needs, thinking that if the bird bites when they try to step them up, it means they want to stay in their cage. “They

don't see it as abuse to leave them in their cage all the time," explains Christy. "They think they're doing what the bird wants." One sadly plucked Severe Macaw, "Lovey," suffers from permanent kidney and liver damage due to the ice-cream-and-peanut-butter diet supplied by its overindulgent caregiver. But Christy does not judge. "These people aren't giving up their birds because they don't love them," she says. No, in too many cases it is because they love them too much.

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My job as a volunteer is to help feed, water, and clean up after these birds. I have never been inside Zeus's stables, but I guarantee his horses are no match for one hundred macaws. The Big Flight is a four thousand-square-foot, cathedral-sized structure, every inch of which is



littered with seed husks, fruit rinds and poop. I wear an ancient sweatshirt, torn jeans, and a kerchief over my hair for obvious reasons. I maneuver a janitor's cart around the flight and refill trays on raised platforms with food, clean water and fresh fruit. The trays must be fixed securely in place; otherwise these enterprising birds will waste no time in dumping the entire contents onto the ground. After the rounds, the entire flight must be scraped of droppings and swept. The whole process consumes several hours and a goodly amount of physical strength—and

doesn't even begin to address the entire amount of work that caring for these birds requires.

On my first day at Zazu's, a Blue and Gold Macaw introduces herself: "Meekah Meekah Meekah," she announces, bobbing her head up and down. She promptly hops onto my cart and hitches a ride. She accompanies me the entire time, making sure I am doing everything correctly, defending me from the other birds, and chattering away nonstop in indistinct mumbblings. Her favorite phrase besides her name is, "I love you!" Other parrots introduce themselves as well ("You're a good boy Gilbert"). Most merely eye me curiously from their selected perch high in the huge live trees inside the flight. Some nimbly climb down fat ropes and demand, "Step up!" Others, like

Mollie, try a more direct approach and attempt to swoop down onto my shoulder, emitting a merciless shriek like a harpy eagle. A few mischievous types will creep up and chew at my shoelaces when I'm distracted. One pair of Blue & Golds are busy nest-building in a corner. As I pass by with



my cart, one waddles over ferociously as the other calmly continues excavating its hole in the wall. Another pair decide to set up camp inside the box of food mix on my cart. They don't like my taking any of "their" food away though, so I have to evict them using a long stick we carry around for such purposes. The female doesn't like this at all, and wreaks her revenge by ripping off my headscarf when I

am not looking. Exceedingly pleased with herself, she waves it triumphantly back and forth like a trophy of war until she gets bored and drops it.

By the time I finish the rounds on my first day, I have reached that frightening stage of fatigue that deflates every cell in my body, and reduces my patience level to that of an infant. My arms and legs are shaking with exhaustion, my neck aches, my eyes sting. I know I had better leave for home quickly because I don't even have enough energy reserves

for polite conversation. I drive home bleary-eyed, take care of the basic needs of my own two parrots, and take a long hot shower, and a mouthful of pain reliever. I have no energy for anything at all for two full days, including being nice to my husband. "This must be what



janitors go through," I realize, with a newly fervent appreciation for people who perform hard labor on a daily basis. As time went on however the excessive fatigue has waned, and I'm now able to recover most physical and social skills by the end of the day.

On my second visit Meekah does not accompany me but shouts "I love you!" from her perch on one of the food troughs. Instead I make new friends--one Blue & Gold in particular who follows me around the flight, repeating, "Hello!" insistently

until I step him up. I'm a classical singer by day, and couldn't resist testing a few of my operatic vocalizes in the Big Flight to hear the acoustics and see how the birds react. It is a surreal experience to hear the raucous birds fall silent as they listen, trying to diagnose this mysterious new sound. After about fifteen seconds they must figure it out because they pick up right where they left off. As I finish my work and leave the flight, one eerily human voice says cheerfully, "See you later!"

The Special Needs flight houses not only the smaller birds but also the serious pluckers and the handful of birds who must be caged due to their over-aggressive behavior (illness or posing a danger to others are the only reasons a bird is caged at Zazu's House). One pair of Blue & Golds are particularly zealous biters. I call them "the Bad Boyz." We have a game of sorts: I attempt to change their food and water bowls, and they try to bite my fingers off. I try a new evasion strategy every visit and they parry with their own, a kind of medieval arms race through the bars of a parrot cage.

Mainly their antics just make me laugh. But one day as I am wrangling with the Bad Boyz my finger gets too close. Lightning-quick, Bad Boy #1 somehow wedges his beak through the bars and slices open the tip of my left forefinger just below the nail. His beak is so sharp it doesn't hurt, but blood is escaping fast so I squeeze a thick towel around the slice and hike off to the first aid kit in the next building to bandage myself up. I can tell it is bad. I don't want to abandon my work though, so I wrap my finger up in gauze as tightly as I can, layer on scads of bandages, and pray that the bleeding stops of its own accord. I manage to finish my rounds (not easy with one mummified forefinger), but even after I get home hours later the

bleeding has not slowed. I do not have time to go to the hospital for stitches so I perform my best attempt at staunching the flow and *will* the bleeding to stop with all my might. After about four hours it does, but it will be three weeks before the wound is healed, and Bad Boy #1 has left a permanent half-moon-shaped scar on my hand. Still, I don't hold a grudge—how can I? It is a game for them, nothing more.

Bitten fingers and aching limbs notwithstanding, I eagerly anticipate my volunteer session every week. The sanctuary is a magical place for me, inhabited by colorful spirits that sublimate my physical suffering and transport me to a higher



plateau of existence. For some reason the parrots' obvious indifference to my life widens my perspective, helping me to transcend my own petty frustrations and sorrows. On some days I'm not sure who is helping whom. I am reminded of giant trees in ancient forests, or the columns in the great gothic cathedrals of Europe: while humans scurry around at their feet, distracted by their short turbulent lives, these *axes mundi* stand unaffected, uncaring and unchanging. The parrots, shining brightly in their treetops, invite the eye upwards, away from the mire of terrestrial concerns and towards some enchanting celestial sphere.

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My immediate supervisor is Roy. Roy is a tough old lion, a sort of hybrid between Saint Francis and Saint Nick. Roy had never owned a parrot before becoming facilities manager at Zazu's, but he has always shared his home with animals: dogs, goats, a pot-bellied pig. Roy is not paid; as caretaker he lives rent-free in decent quarters on the sanctuary grounds which is his only compensation. When he first started volunteers were scarce, and he was responsible for all of the feeding, cleaning, fruit-cutting, scraping, sweeping, laundry, maintenance of cages, toys, and structures, restocking supplies, and garbage disposal—all this along with the vital task of providing companionship to these orphaned parrots. He is on call 24-7 for emergencies and deliveries. There are no days off at this job, and no sick days. "The first week I felt too tired to get up in the morning," he admits. More volunteers are available to help now, but the vast majority of the work still falls to Roy. When I asked him how many times he has been bitten he says, wryly, "Hundreds."

Roy freely confesses that he never was a bird person. I ask him how he sees parrots now, after living with them in close quarters for several months, exposed to their impish tricks and their magic. He replies, "Pretty much the same way as before—they're noisy, messy and destructive!" And yet, I've seen Roy take a bird on his hand, and sit with it for an hour; spend hours on rigorous cleaning; bandage a bleeding finger and head right back into the maelstrom. He tells me the story of Fiesta, an appropriately named Fiesta Macaw who followed him around constantly when he first came to Zazu's. Fiesta was a biter. As Roy says, "He didn't do it out of malice—he just didn't know how to do anything else." Fiesta flew after Roy constantly, clinging to the nearest window grate as he worked his way around the

Big Flight. As the bird became more intrigued by Roy, he would fly to the ground at his feet, and climb up his legs all the way to his shoulder—a convenient launching pad for more biting. This pattern continued for several weeks, until one day Fiesta flew to the ground at Roy’s feet and waited expectantly until Roy stepped him up onto his hand for the first time. Roy explains that they two of them now have “an understanding”; Fiesta has learned that biting is not the only form of interaction, and Roy agrees to suffer the occasional bite as an acceptance of this bird’s individual character.

Roy is not a bird person. He does not have a deep love of or fascination with parrots. He devotes his time and lifeblood to the task of caring for these outcasts because he feels that we have a duty towards these creatures who did not ask to become part of our lives, yet who were brought into them for our enjoyment and abandoned when their keeping became too difficult or inconvenient. Roy feels an unquestioned sense of responsibility to help animals in need. In his view, a commitment has been breached, and he as a member of the human race has an obligation to make amends for others’ failures. To Roy, this duty seems self-evident.

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The third major figure at Zazu’s House is Christy’s husband Scott. Aware of the stress cracks that even one parrot can inflict on a marriage, I ask Christy how Scott feels about this massive refuge operation. She assures me that he is fully on board, that “he enjoys seeing the birds become happy.” She relates the story of Francine, an ailing Blue & Gold Macaw they took into their own living space who died only recently. Francine fell head over heels in love with Scott as soon as she

moved in and would scream constantly if he were in the house but not holding her. “If he wanted to be alone he would have to crawl into the house on his hands and knees to avoid being detected,” Christy recalls. When Francine’s health declined to the point where her feet atrophied, they brought her to the vet who confirmed that she was near the end. She offered to euthanize her but they couldn’t do it. “She wasn’t in pain,” Christy says, “and we wanted to be with her.” She points at the brown leather armchair where Scott sat all day with Francine lying on his chest, her head nestled against his neck. When he was forced to get up he would hand her gently to Christy, but Francine would tug her head towards Scott in a feeble attempt to get back to him. Late in the afternoon she died. This was several months ago, but Christy still cries as she tells the story.

“I was born to be a shepherd of animals,” Christy says when I ask about her own history. “Scott thought I was crazy when I would make him pull the car over to help an animal on the side of the road.” She is devoutly religious and feels fortunate to be able to support both animals and people in need with the resources garnered from their small business. Before establishing Zazu’s House, they supported a charity that pairs birds with troubled children, giving them something to love, and creating a relationship beneficial to both. For Christy, there is no Great Divide between helping animals and helping people. When I ask her whether some people don’t criticize their choice to devote so much time and money to these birds she seemed confused by the question. “We help both,” she answers. She does not view the situation as either/or—which makes me wonder why so many other people do.

Her life is often a struggle. “I lift hundreds of pounds every day,” she says. “I’m covered with cuts and bruises, and my whole body aches by evening.” Taking time for vacation and travel is difficult. Hardest for Christy is when her family feels marginalized, resenting all of the time she must spend with the parrots. Still, she firmly believes God has made it clear that this is her mission in life.

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One day as I forced the cart around a corner in the Big Flight, I froze. Just ahead, a splash of color lay on the ground like spilled red, yellow and blue paint. It was a Scarlet Macaw, either dead or near death. She lay on her breast, wings spread against the cold cement floor—a stereotypical image of a macaw in flight, except that her eyes were closed. Not sure what to do, I went to find Christy, who immediately dropped her work and ran back with me to the flight. She gently lifted the bird. “She’s still alive, she’s still alive!” she exclaimed, and hurried out of the flight with the Scarlet cradled in her arms like a baby as the other macaws in the flight initiated a huge rawking alarm.

As I watched her rush out, murmuring endearments to the dying bird clasped to her chest, I realized something I hadn’t before. There are certain people in the world who voluntarily expose themselves to death and pain and the evils wrought by nature and human nature, such as doctors, veterinarians, and people who devote their entire lives to defending species from almost-certain extinction. For some reason I’ve always assumed that these people only manage to do what they do because they don’t care as much as many of the rest of us—because they have found some way to harden their hearts to the suffering and casualties of human ignorance they witness on a daily basis.

I can't speak for all of them, but clearly, Christy does care. She suffers the abuse, illness and death of each individual bird, and continues her mission anyway. Inspiring indeed to those of us who use our fear of emotional pain as an excuse to do less than we otherwise might. I realized that, in the end, people like Roy, Scott and Christy do what they do out of love—and love, as we know, can inspire one to Herculean feats.

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After my rounds are complete, I empty the dirty dishwater, restock the food mix, wash the fruit bowls, throw the towels in the laundry and wipe down the cart. I'm filthy, my back aches, my vision is blurry, my ears are ringing. Insensible to my pain, the birds are happily rummaging through today's offerings, performing the complex algorithm that informs parrots which is the absolute choicest morsel. As I depart for another week, the metal door clangs behind me, and Meekah's eternal lament echoes in my ears: "I love you!"



Epilogue/Insert:

One of the most important things the small community of people who truly appreciate the magical spirit of parrots can do is help to reduce the need for such refuges in the first place. Among other things, we can educate others and raise awareness about the gravity of the decision to adopt a parrot. Prospective owners should consider their decision as carefully as they would any other lifelong commitment: they should be able to say with confidence that they agree to take this bird for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health.

Places like Zazu's House are rare but not uncommon. A quick online search will locate multiple parrot rescue operations in your area. Any amount of time, money, or other resources you can afford to donate will be greatly appreciated by humans and parrots alike. For more information on Zazu's House, visit www.zazushouse.org, or look for them on Facebook.

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