

Parrot Adoption Education

By JUDY HILL

When my husband David and I decided that we had a mission to start a Parrot rescue and rehabilitation group, we had many decisions to make. We of course had to agonise over the name, and then thinking of a better one after the fact. Then the big decisions came. The largest was how were we going to house the birds placed in our care? After careful research we chose to operate out of foster homes. We chose this method for many reasons. The first and most important reason to us was the quality of care for the birds. We knew that we were unable to be at a site every day to give quality care, since we also needed to work to continue to pay our bills. So we took out an advertisement and started screening potential homes. We decided upon guidelines for eligibility. They didn't need to have parrot experience, just a willingness to learn. We try and match foster family and parrot well. We don't want to overwhelm a volunteer with a more difficult bird than they can handle, although it is fun to see someone take on a challenge they were uncertain of and do fantastic with the bird. We've found that with guidance, "rookie" bird people can come up with very clever ideas. We do often hope by taking as much time to match a right foster home, it may turn into a permanent home.

When the parrots live in our homes we can spend much more time with them than if they were at a centre. We can monitor everything much more efficiently; see how they interact with a family and watch their weight, which is critical during this adjustment period, especially if we have to convert them to pellets and get them on fresh foods. Yes, all these items can be watched at a centre, we just feel problems are more likely to be missed there. The parrots act very differently in a home

setting versus a hectic centre.

As with any rescue organisation the most critical part can be quarantine procedures. We try to ensure the birds are taken to a vet before they enter our program. If that isn't possible we take them to a vet whom we work closely with. We have them tested for contagious diseases as a minimum requirement. We have to decide by each bird's history, type of bird and good advice from our vet what tests we run. This is the most costly part of our operation. It is frustrating to need to spend a couple of hundred dollars on a sweet Cockatiel (*Nymphicus hollandicus*) to make sure he's healthy, and know we can maybe recoup \$25 on adoption fees. Some adoptive families are willing to take on all the medical bills. Our vet has been very good to us with regards to fees. She recently preformed an amputation of a wing for us at no charge.

Using foster homes makes the process of showing someone many birds, a more time consuming process. However this does give us more time to get to know the families. We do home visits on all adoption homes, but it's nice to spend more time with them. We tell people who call us they had better get used to us, because we are going to be part of their lives if they adopt through us. We have made many friends through adoptions. Once someone has adopted they usually want to volunteer for us.

Limits on fostering

We set limits on how many each of us can foster at any one time or adopt. We don't allow any one person to take on too many birds. We don't adopt to people who are collectors or breeders. Because we are careful to set limits, at times we have to put in-coming parrots on a waiting list. Sometimes the people aren't willing to wait for a spot to open and get rid of the bird another way. This has started another dimension to our program. When someone calls us needing to give up his or her bird,



Judith Hill, Bobo (Caique) and Nelson (Grey)

we spend a great deal of time talking to them. Most often people call that had purchased their bird for all the wrong reasons from a place that didn't educate them. Usually they are experiencing "normal" parrot ownership problems. We offer our other service, which is helping with behaviour modification with the emphasis on owner education. The parrot is acting like a parrot should in captivity, but the person had no idea what was in store. If they are a good home, we work with them to try to fix the situation. We tell them if their bird had a vote, they'd vote not to lose their home. We do ask for donations for this, but often have to do it for free. We love to help. Keeping a flock together is the statistic we are most proud of. The sad thing is by the time most people call us, they are angry and just want the bird gone! They bought a sweet baby and it has become a biting screaming toddler. We find more often than not, that simply getting the bird away from the owner and the situation, the bird stops exhibiting the negative qualities the owner complained about. Besides, what parrot isn't loud?

I would say that with most groups the biggest problem is funding. We need less money not having the expenses of a permanent facility. However we have so much put into vet care, food, toys and cages. We need big funding coming in on a regular basis in order to stay alive. We could be much more efficiently run if we could do this full time, and not have to run our pizza shop. Right now we need it to pay our bills just like many of the organisations. We often have to personally pay for the vet or a new cage for a neglected bird.

The hardest part for me personally is the emotional aspect. We tend to fall in love with the under dogs. Those "perfect" birds get homes fast so we get the privilege of living longer with those that need help. Often they come to us with medical conditions. We don't always discover them right away because they may hide them



A parrot with problem behaviours will need special understanding from its new owner. 'Peter' plucked out all his feathers after his longterm human companion passed away.
Photo: Ray Hales

well. The majority of them seem to be caused by poor diets. We see African Greys (*Psittacus erithacus*) with vitamin deficiencies and poor bowels due to not enough fresh foods. We get Amazons with fatty liver disease. We had a sad scared wild caught Green-cheek Amazon (*Amazona viridigenalis*) come into our lives a couple of years ago. She had been taken care of poorly for 16 years. She had no idea how to be a bird. She lived with us and was developing into a strong confident girl, when she died abruptly from a burst vessel due to arterial sclerosis. We do see a lot of heartache.

Hot topics for debate

There are so many things I could share about running an organisation such as this. It has formed many thoughts I have about parrot ownership that are often hot topics for debate. I spend as much time counselling people as I do handling birds. So with that in mind I'd like to stress a couple of points. If you are looking to purchase or adopt a parrot, get educated! No one person has all the answers. We all should be constantly learning about the care of these magnificent creatures, and be willing to change what we are doing if we discover a healthier way. Get a parrot that fits your family and life, not because you want it to fit a certain mould. Don't expect your bird to be more than it can be. Try to envision the next 30-50 years with this bird. I tease people that they often spend more years with their parrot than their spouse! If you are buying a baby, what kind of breeder are you buying from? Do they allow the parents to teach their chicks to be a confident bird? Do they allow them to fledge? Is it fully weaned? What are the parent's dispositions?

I'd ask breeders to screen who is purchasing their babies. Don't be afraid to question them. I encourage you to not sell to just anyone, and raise only the number you can realistically sell to good homes. If you have a parrot and find yourself in a situation where you have to surrender your bird don't be ashamed and just give it to anyone that calls themselves a rescue group. Interview the organisation. Ask to see the birds they have in their care. Do they have more than they can possibly give quality care for? Look at their contracts. Do they offer on-going relationships with adoption families? Be careful of collectors portraying themselves as a rescue group. Donate funds to the group to help care for the parrot you need to place.

Parrots are highly specialised, exotic animals that are trying to adapt their wild instincts to living in our homes. Let's all try and make it easier for them and give them all the love and understanding we can.

