

PSITTAScene

Magazine of the WORLD PARROT TRUST



Spring 2022



ABOUT THE WPT

Capture for the live-bird trade, habitat loss and other factors put wild parrots at risk. Nearly 30% of all parrot species are considered by IUCN to be at risk of global extinction.

As an international leader in parrot conservation and welfare, the World Parrot Trust works with researchers, in-country organisations, communities and governments to encourage effective solutions that save parrots.

Since 1989 the WPT has grown to become a global force that moves quickly to address urgent issues and support long-term projects. Over that time WPT has led or aided conservation and welfare projects in 43 countries for more than 80 species of parrot.

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CONTENTS



8



11



18

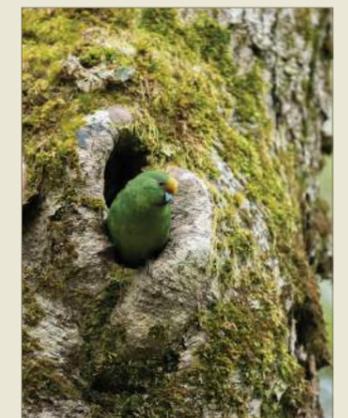
- 4** A Message from... Steve's desk
Steve Milpacher, WPT Operations Director
- 5** More Good News for Grey Parrots!
- 6** Update from Brazil:
Parrot rescues kept busy throughout 2021
- 8** Happy Chicks:
Yellow-chevroned Parakeet rescue
- 10** Spotlight: Zoo Conservation Partner
Lion Country Safari
- 11** Malherbe's Parakeets:
Estimating the population size on offshore islands
- 14** Rewilding Parrots:
The complexities of returning birds to freedom
- 18** Pet Pages:
Your feathered friend's beak
- 22** PsittaNews
*Parrot news and updates
WPT contacts
PsittaScene 2021 index*
- 24** Parrots in the Wild
Red-breasted Parakeet

ON THE COVER

Photo © Stephanie Kerrisk

The Malherbe's or Orange-fronted Parakeet (*Cyanoramphus malherbi*) is a small parrot found only on the South Island and some offshore islets of New Zealand. The species' wild population is very tiny and difficult to count due to its shy nature and mobile habits.

Learn more on **Page 11** in *Malherbe's Parakeets: Estimating the population size on offshore islands*.



a message from...
Steve's desk

As I write this I am reminded of the power of people. One person can be significant in the grand scheme of things but many together can accomplish much. We certainly see it in this issue of the magazine, with many people helping each other to create lasting change for parrots all over the world.

These collaborations are critical, as is seen in the articles Rewilding Parrots: The Complexities of Returning Birds to Freedom, Brazil Parrot Rescues Kept Busy and Happy Chicks: Yellow-chevroned Parakeets Rescued, where parrots that are endangered in the wild, impacted by trade or both are getting help from many different sources for what is becoming an increasingly challenging effort. Critically Endangered Orange-fronted or Malherbe's Parakeets are being protected as a result of dedicated efforts by concerned individuals and groups, and there's some more good news for Grey Parrots as Kenya commits to renewed work to stem the illegal trade in these birds.

And finally, Paradise Park UK's Louise Caddy talks about beaks, the all-important companion to the rest of a bird's anatomy that allows it to eat, preen, climb around and defend nest territories.

We hope you're as uplifted by reading these updates as we are reporting them.



Steve Milpacher
WPT Operations Director

What will be your legacy?

Let your dedication to parrots live on! Leaving a legacy gift to the parrots through your estate may be one of the most fulfilling contributions you will ever make.

Visit our website at parrots.org/legacy or contact an office near you (see page 23.)

Leave a Legacy

Red-masked Conures © Daniel Parent, Getty Images

More Good News for Grey Parrots!

by Rowan Martin, PhD, WPT Africa Programme Director

Kenya's Ministry of Tourism and the Kenya Wildlife Service have announced new steps to address the trade in African Grey Parrots (*Psittacus erithacus*). Investigations by the World Parrot Trust and Global Initiative to End Transnational Organised Crime (GITOC) last year revealed how parrots are illegally bought and sold online in many countries in Africa, and highlighted Kenya as a centre for this trade.

The Kenya Wildlife Service held an amnesty for African Grey Parrots currently held as pets, requiring all owners to register their pet birds during the amnesty period and renew registrations annually.

Working together, WPT and GITOC created an innovative automated monitoring tool to track online trade in African Grey Parrots and other birds. This tool was combined with expert-led monitoring and ground truthing (information that is known to be real or true, provided by direct observation and measurement) to build a picture of trade activity in African Grey Parrots across Africa. During a 6 month period over 450 adverts for African Grey Parrots were detected in Kenya, the highest number for any country in the study. When approached, the sellers reported that they sourced parrots from countries such as the DRC and Ghana. Wild populations of African Grey Parrots are close to extinction in Kenya.

In 2017 African Grey Parrots were categorised as Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species due to collapses in wild populations. In the same year they were also given the highest level of protection under CITES following a campaign by WPT. WPT's Africa Programme works relentlessly to end the trapping of wild African Grey Parrots through a multifaceted approach, including community-based protection of key sites, engagement with tech companies and the air transport sector, advocacy for strong protections by governments and multi-lateral treaties, and ensuring parrots rescued from traffickers get a second chance to fly free.

Read the full report:
tinyurl.com/gitoc-mmfu





Above: A Maroon-bellied Conure chick recovers from an injury to its leg

UPDATE FROM BRAZIL:

Parrot rescues kept busy throughout 2021

UPDATE FROM ANDRÉ SAIDENBERG, PhD, DVM

As we reported in the Summer 2021 issue of PsittaScene, WPT provides ongoing support to three Brazilian partners in their dedicated efforts to save parrots from illegal trade. What follows is a short update from late 2021.

Although we've made great strides in stopping international trade in parrots, in many places poaching remains an ongoing threat. WPT's Brazilian partners ASM Cambaquara, Lins Ecological Farm and the Caatinga Parrot Project were flooded with hundreds of parrots that were confiscated by authorities or brought into the rescues last year.

In Brazil, some species of parrot have two breeding seasons, a situation that can overwhelm a busy rescue centre even more. At ASM Cambaquara, White-eyed Conures (*Psittacara leucophthalmus*) were surrendered in profusion: over 80 were hand-raised and eventually released in the final months of the year. Despite the fact that the centre had mounted an education campaign, which included

lectures at schools, invitations for school children to attend releases, a national bird watching day and the distribution of awareness materials, the total numbers of chicks received was still high. One existing problem that is preventable is that the birds will often nest inside local residents' roof eaves and as a consequence need rescuing. The issue can be easily fixed by closing off the entrances with wire mesh before the breeding season.

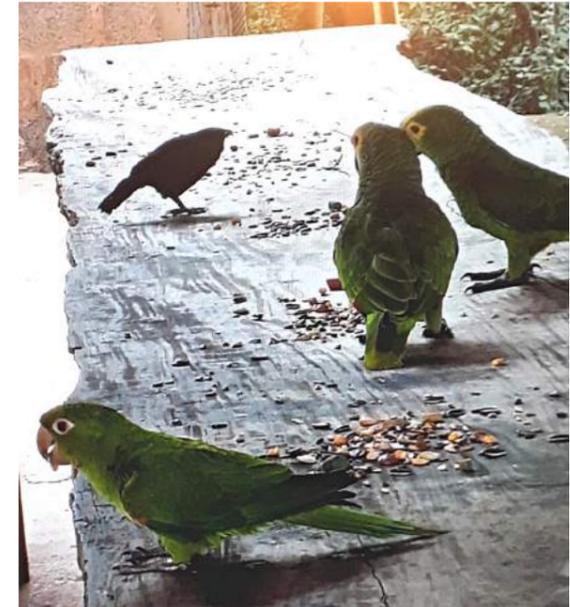
Southern Mealy Amazon (*Amazona farinosa*) chicks also run into difficulties. This year's complement of young hatched earlier due to heavier-than-usual rains. Some of them were not able to accompany their parents and ended up stranded on the ground. These chicks were sent to ASM for handraising and were eventually released.

Out in the caatinga, the rescue and release centre received 330 parrots, mostly Orange-winged Amazons (*Amazona amazonica*) of different ages. These chicks were destined for local trade. Thirty had serious injuries from crop burn (from being fed too-hot formula by trappers), which resulted in them needing surgery. WPT-funded formula, syringes, gloves and an incubator were put into use. An anaesthesia machine was used on an almost-daily basis for the critical cases. Eventually 200 fully recovered to be released, with more to be set free soon.

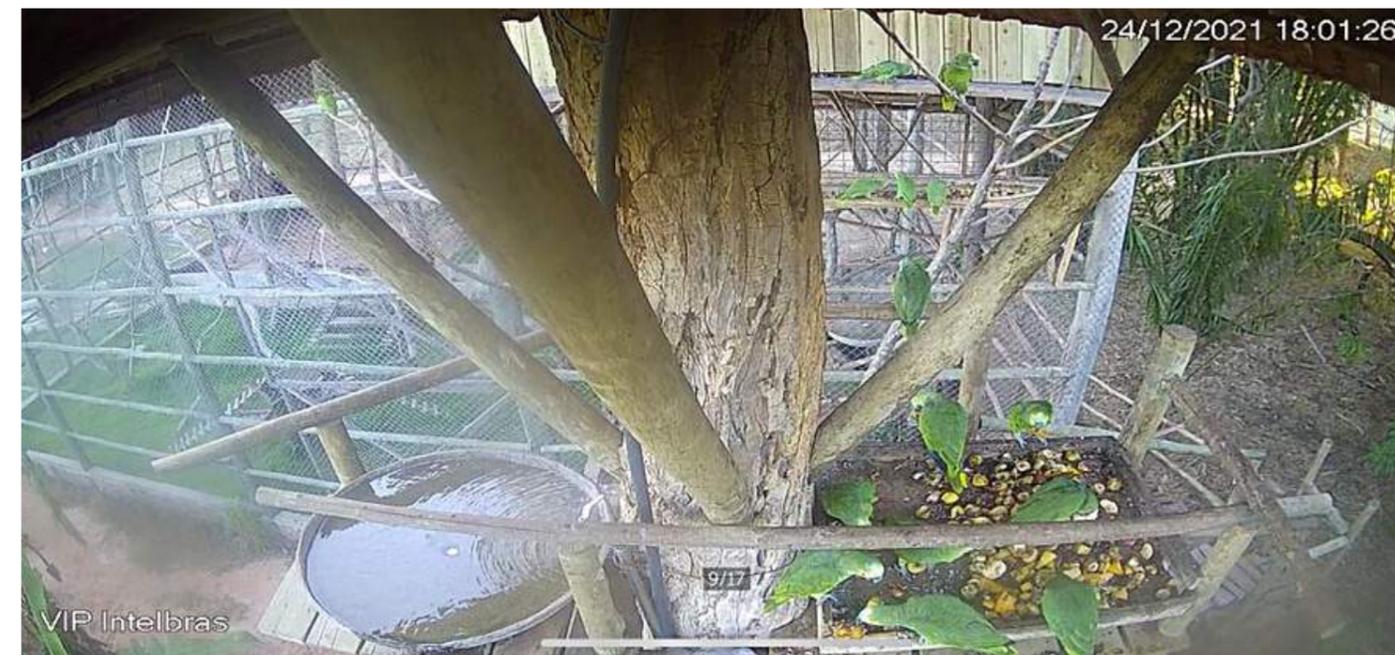
Lins Ecological Farm saw its share of rescues; many of them were Peach-fronted Conures (*Eupsittula aurea*) and White-eyed Conures. While confiscated birds are always a concern, there was some good news as well — local law enforcement and a group of school children planted native trees at Bosque da Kiki (Kiki's Wood), a designated area named for a donor's beloved bird.

By far the most confiscated psittacine is the Blue-fronted Amazon; in total more than 500 *Amazona aestiva* have been confiscated, treated and released by all of the projects combined. For the third year running, two of the released birds have paired up and have now raised chicks in a nest box provided by the farm.

The World Parrot Trust continues to help bolster the efforts of these three facilities so that the toll of trafficking on wild parrots in Brazil is lessened. 📷



Above and below: Released and soon-to-be released Amazons and conures dine at supplemental feeding stations.





HAPPY CHICKS:

Yellow-chevroned Parakeet Rescue

The Beni Department is the second largest in Bolivia, with a territory of 213,564 km² and hosts more than 55% of wildlife species in the country, and is one of the principal places for wildlife trapping.

In August 2021, six Yellow-chevroned Parakeet (*Brotogeris chiriri*) chicks were for sale illegally in the City of the Holy Trinity, “Trinidad”, located in Beni Department, Bolivia, in the Amazon region.



BY MARCELA FRANCO, MVSc, DVM

On August 29th, staff of the Departmental Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources (in Spanish, SEMAyRN) confiscated the chicks from two small boys. The parakeets were taken the next day to the CIESA (Centro de Investigación de Especies Amenazadas or Center for Endangered Species Research), which is the only Wildlife Custody Center in Beni out of 26 wildlife centers. These rescues can be private or public and have the ability to receive confiscated wildlife until relocation or release according to the Competent Environmental Authority.

At CIESA the parakeets, aged approximately 7-15 days, were physically examined by the veterinarians. They weighed between 40 and 60g; all of them were very alert and responsive, and all were growing feathers. So they could grow healthy and strong they were fed psittacine chick formula four times daily in the first week and then three times a day thereafter. The parakeets accepted the food nicely and always were searching for more. Feeding hours were happy and outrageous all the time and it was hard for the staff to not be in contact with them a lot, as the goal was to eventually release them into their natural habitat.

Gradually small pieces of fruit and vegetables were added to their diet until the middle of September when they finally accepted whole fruit. At that point each chick weighed almost 70g.

The rehabilitation process was achieved by introducing different activities like adding fruit and vegetables as naturally presented in the wild, and collecting natural branches from native trees like guava and Totái palms to offer to them. Also, as part of the soft-release protocol, when the chicks started trying to fly they were moved to a bigger enclosure located at the release site. This aviary allowed them to fly any time they wanted and was also useful to reinforce less human contact.

And then... after 73 days... the happy day arrived! On November 10th at 8 a.m. the Yellow-chevroned Parakeets were released into the wild!

As the door was opened they flew out right away, eager to explore the sky and leaving great lessons and feelings to the multi-institutional staff (SEMAyRN, CIESA and WPT) that were part of the process.

This was the first release of psittacines at CIESA. 📍



Top, left: Yellow-chevroned Parakeets received at CIESA. © Priscila Franco
Top, right: Chick being fed with psittacine formula. © Priscila Franco
Middle: Yellow-chevroned Parakeets in pre-release aviary © Antonio J. García Bernal
Bottom, left: Small pieces of fruit and vegetables gradually added to the chicks' diet. © Priscila Franco
Bottom, right: Release day. © Priscila Franco

SPOTLIGHT
Zoo Conservation Partner

Since 1967, WPT supporter Lion Country Safari has been bringing the African safari experience to families who would otherwise not be able to enjoy this type of adventure. Their mission: to be a leader in animal care, conservation, and education to inspire people through connections with wildlife in a fun, family-friendly environment.



Lion Country Safari

The World Parrot Trust contacted **Haley Passeser, Lion Country Safari's Public Relations and Social Media Manager, to learn about the work the park is doing to help wildlife. Here's what she said:**

"The park prides itself on caring for large groups of animals in wide open, natural habitats, while guests are confined to their vehicles. This immersive experience allows visitors to connect with some of the world's most iconic species, while supporting conservation efforts to save them.

"We love creating a special connection between guests and animals, as we do in our Birds and Brushes premium experience, while advancing in situ (in-country) conservation initiatives. Guests create memorable moments through the painting activity, while also

learning how they are contributing to conservation in the wild. We have two Blue-and-yellow Macaws trained to paint — Azul and Ripley. Painting is a voluntary enrichment activity. The birds get excited when they see the brush and easel!

"We started by holding a parrot-safe stick and offering peanuts or sunflower seeds when they moved towards it. Gradually, they began touching the stick and then holding it. We then attached a paintbrush and taught them to touch the brush to a canvas, eventually moving it around.

"Finally, we put non-toxic washable paint on the brush so they can create their masterpieces. Fifty percent of proceeds from painting purchases are donated to WPT, allowing Azul and Ripley to give back to their counterparts in the wild.

"[An overlooked gem] we highly recommend is the lorikeet aviary! Lorikeets are a vibrant and curious species of small parrot native to Australia. They drink nectar, which is available for purchase, so the birds will land on and interact with visitors. They're always good for a few laughs!

"As incredible as parrots are, they are a significant commitment, particularly because they can live upwards of 80 years, generally only bond to a single person and can [seem] as loud as a jet engine. It's a huge responsibility that's not for everyone. Many of our parrots are surrendered pets, so we know very well the repercussions of people not doing their research.

"We always encourage researching any animal before bringing it into the home and weighing the decision of whether that pet is a good fit."



Malherbe's Parakeets:

Estimating the population size on offshore islands

BY LUIS ORTIZ-CATEDRAL, PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE KERRISK

Counting animals and estimating their population sizes are the cornerstones of conservation biology. Without understanding how many individuals are left and where they are located it is nearly impossible to assess their extinction risk. However, some are easier to count than others.

Imagine, for instance, counting the number of trees in a forest remnant or the number of live corals in a reef. While not free of challenges, counting trees and corals is comparatively easier than counting mobile or secretive organisms. Malherbe's Parakeets (*Cyanoramphus malherbi*) — also known as Orange-fronted Parakeet or *kākāriki karaka* in Māori — are small, secretive and mobile, and also rarer and more endangered than many tree and coral species. These parakeets are restricted to beech forests in two national parks in the South Island of New

Zealand: Arthur's Pass and Lake Sumner, where they number less than 200 mature individuals. The continued existence of Malherbe's Parakeets in these forests requires a tremendous effort by staff from the Department of Conservation, which regularly controls introduced predators like stoats and rats, by far the biggest threat to this and many other New Zealand endemics.

Fortunately, since 2005, over 350 captive-bred Malherbe's Parakeets have been reintroduced to offshore predator-free islands



2003 Lion Country Safari Rd. Loxahatchee, Florida 33470 (USA)
Visit their website at: www.lioncountrysafari.com.



and last year, for the first time, to a “mainland island”: the 1700-acre Brook Waimārama sanctuary near Nelson. In New Zealand, a mainland island is a fenced sanctuary where introduced predators are kept out. But what happens after parakeets are released to a predator-free haven? What population sizes can they reach at these sites?

In 2015 and 2016 one of my students, Michael Skirrow, and I had the opportunity to visit three of the four predator-free offshore islands where Malherbe's Parakeets have been reintroduced, Blumine, Chalky and Maud Island, to try to answer that question. Our objective was to estimate the population size of the species at these sites, using a technique that has been very useful to estimate numbers of the closely related Tasman parakeet (*Cyanoramphus cookii*) on Norfolk Island. This technique, called “distance sampling” consists of registering

parakeets at random locations and measuring the exact distance from the observers to the bird.

By accurately registering many encounters and the exact distance from us, we can mathematically derive a detection function and use this to estimate the density of parakeets per area, and their approximate population size. Sounds straightforward, doesn't it? In reality it is a bit tricky. Malherbe's Parakeets are more often heard than seen. On Chalky Island for instance, we heard these parakeets chattering about for four days, but could only measure the distance to our target birds on two occasions.

Chalky Island is one of the most remote temperate islands I have visited. Located in the South West of New Zealand, within the Fiordland National Park, Chalky Island is truly a wild place. The island is densely forested and very humid. At night, the island

was buffeted by strong cold southwesterlies but by mid-morning the place was so still and quiet it was almost eerie. This is the only place where I have surveyed parrots next to sea lions.

On Maud Island, in the Marlborough Sounds, the weather is milder. The vegetation of this island is a mosaic of native coastal forest, grassland and regenerating vegetation. Most of Maud Island was a farm for over 100 years, but since the 1970s more and more native vegetation has grown.

During our visit, after nearly a week of searches, not a single parakeet was heard or seen even though just six years before I had estimated approximately 90 parakeets there. We are not sure if the parakeets were just extra-quiet or whether they have migrated to the nearby mainland.

Fortunately, we had better luck on Blumine Island, also located in the Marlborough Sounds. The vegetation on Blumine is predominantly coastal forest with massive tree-ferns, but it also contains a large patch of beech forest. In five days, we detected 20 Malherbe's Parakeets there.

I must confess it is quite a rush to hear the soft chuckles and chatter of these birds, turn around and see them foraging or perching quietly. On Blumine island we also made some interesting observations including a pair copulating (although we could not locate their nest cavity) and

a group of six parakeets feeding on scale insects (closely related to aphids). After the long hours in the field, and the longer hours crunching data, we estimated that at the time of our surveys Blumine Island was home to approximately 200 Malherbe's Parakeets. The findings of our surveys appeared last year in the New Zealand Journal of Zoology.* In an ideal world, surveys like these conducted every couple of years can tell us whether populations are increasing, decreasing or sitting around a given number.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted every aspect of our lives, and monitoring of endangered species is no exception. Our plans to survey these islands again in 2019-2020 (see 'Malherbe's Parakeet: New Zealand's Winged Gem,' *PsittaScene Winter 2019*) have been postponed but hopefully in the coming months we have an opportunity to give you an update on Blumine Island. Based on our results, this island is a significant stronghold for Malherbe's Parakeets. Perhaps nearby islands with similar vegetation can serve as a sanctuary for the species once introduced predators are successfully eradicated. 📍

Special thanks:

Our work on Maud, Blumine and Chalky Islands has been supported by the Auckland Zoo Conservation Fund, Massey University, Brian Mason Scientific & Technical Trust and the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund. We have also received help from numerous volunteers to whom we extend our thanks. Our gratitude to Stephanie Kerrisk for providing photographs.

*Access the original paper, 'Estimating the population size of Orange-fronted Parakeets (*Cyanoramphus malherbi*) on offshore islands of New Zealand' online at: tinyurl.com/bde9jv6j





The practices of rehabilitation-release and breeding-for-release are proving increasingly successful for restoring parrot populations to areas where they've gone extinct and for returning confiscated birds to the wild.

The World Parrot Trust and its partners have been at the forefront of this critical work for a number of years now, over time collaborating to encourage good practices and provide other support to a number of well-managed programs. Rescue, release and reintroduction projects for parrots are ongoing in Costa Rica, Belize, Bolivia, Mexico, Peru, Honduras, Brazil, Indonesia, Puerto Rico and Africa, with new programs emerging as the need increases.

Returning parrots to the wild sounds easier than it actually is — there are many things to consider and actions to take so it can be done responsibly, to ensure the best outcomes for the parrots and for their conservation.

For example, what if they are far from home?

Birds seized from trade or bred in an endangered species program from out-of-country need special permission to be transported. In

order for a parrot to be returned to its native country it must be accompanied with the appropriate paperwork, from both host and destination countries, in addition to being given health checks and other assessments. International transport of nearly all parrots is governed by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, or CITES, a multi-country treaty created to monitor these activities. The organisation has produced guidelines for the management and transport of live animals seized from trade for member countries to follow.¹

The birds' health and welfare needs are a top priority, and there are infectious diseases that can threaten parrots, other birds and people. Birds that have been in captivity for an extended period, even those under the best of care, may have been exposed to diseases which may not be found in wild bird populations. Releasing a parrot with an undiagnosed illness may endanger wild populations and pose an even greater risk for species that are already under threat for other reasons, therefore, only parrots that have been quarantined and screened for disease should be considered as suitable release candidates. Additionally, diseases such as Avian

Tuberculosis, Avian Influenza type A viruses, Chlamydia and various bacteria are transmissible to humans so it is vital that a quarantine be completed and thorough health checks and blood tests be conducted and signed off by a veterinarian before travel. Lastly, the Live Animal Regulations, a comprehensive manual updated annually, must be consulted to ensure compliance with IATA (International Air Transport Association) regulations.

These directives ensure the safety, welfare and legality of the birds to be transported, as well as the safety of the people handling them. Before the birds travel, however, there must be a place for them to go — a rescue or reintroduction centre accredited by local authorities in their native country if at all possible.

Once the parrots are safely to where they need to be, what comes next?

If the birds are arriving to a new country, they need to be further quarantined, tested and treated if necessary by a veterinarian or other trained staff. Whether they have been transported from country to country or seized from trappers locally, the parrots' immediate physical issues need addressing.



Rescued macaws gather at a feeding station at the Kiwa Centre, UK. © Fiona Butler-Milton

Some of the confiscated birds may have been recently injured, starved or dehydrated; all are likely stressed. Very young chicks need round-the-clock care with handfeeding, supplemental warmth and, if possible, to be together with their contemporaries as a group.

Youngsters that have been taken from nests can also suffer from infections, injury from improper food and/or feeding techniques and other issues that need treatment. Additionally, a common practice among trappers is to cut the primary (flight) feathers of adult birds, which of course curtails their ability to fly and escape. Recovery from this type of treatment can take up to a year.

Once they are all stabilised, settled in and eating well, then the process of building up their strength and socialising with each other begins.

Thankfully, formerly wild or recently trapped birds retain many important skills needed for survival, such as recognizing wild foods and knowing how to interact with others of their species.

Wild parrots have well-developed patterns of behaviour and are able to successfully participate in complex social hierarchies that allow them to interact as a group, which helps them to successfully evade predators, find food and prosper. After months in captivity their primary need is a boost in health and physical strength to get them back to where they once were.

Others require more learning to live in the wild. This is where the period of acclimation or 'soft release' comes in, and it applies to both rescued birds and those set for reintroduction as part of a breeding-

for-release program. Once the birds have physically recovered or, in the case of captive-bred birds are old enough, they are placed into a large aviary for a period of time to begin exercising their muscles and learning to control their flight.

As an example, in Brazil the rehabilitated parrots spend about 40 days before release in a large cage to learn to fly, recognise and locate local foods, and spot and evade predators. Before or just after they enter the flight, however, they need to be easily identifiable so that they can be followed post-release — this can take the form of radio tags and/or leg bands securely and safely attached to the bird. Other measures include identifying an individual bird by its idiosyncrasies, be they behavioural (shy or aggressive) or physical (beak shape/colour, feather patterns). These differences



Top, left: Rescued chicks being tended to at Belize Bird Rescue. © Belize Bird Rescue



Top, right: Freedom! Just-released Maroon-bellied Conoures feed on supplemental fruits in Brazil. © Silvana Davino

can make a released bird easier to locate, providing rescuers and researchers with an important tool to monitor how their charges are faring in the wild.

Equally important is *where* the birds are to be released.

The decision of where to release parrots depends on many factors and must be taken together with a range of participants, including local communities, governments and experts. The IUCN² and CITES have produced guidelines which provide a vital basis for making decisions, ensuring all risks are accounted for, laws followed, and that the benefits to conservation are achieved as much as possible.

The ideal location to release parrots is an area where they were formerly present, but the reasons for their extinction have been addressed.

While some areas may have suitable habitat (enough food and nesting trees), the support of local people and local and national government,

they may simply not be safe enough for the birds to return to — if the area is not protected, any trappers working in the region may return to recapture the birds just released. Other considerations include maintaining the genetic diversity of populations and making certain that parrots are returned to the parts of their range where they came from. This ensures that any adaptations, specific for surviving in the local environment, are not lost. It is not uncommon that all these conditions together are difficult to meet and additionally, there often is an absence of ecological information for many species. Nevertheless, decisions on the management of seized parrots must be made and the appropriate course of action is often a delicate balance in maximising the outcomes for conservation and animal welfare, while managing the very real practical constraints.

Sometimes not all rescued parrots can be returned to freedom due to permanent injury or disease. Even so, the birds that can be saved still

need care for the time they have left. It is important that we provide unreleasable parrots with a secure, healthy and interesting life where possible — the WPT’s Kiwa Centre is a good example of this kind of long-term rescue facility. And an added benefit for conservation: some of the healthy birds, especially if they are endangered in the wild, can be set up to procreate in breeding-for-release programs.

Returning or reintroducing parrots to the wild requires an army of concerned individuals, including international and local not-for-profit organisations, volunteers, law and government officials, veterinarians and rescue staff. The World Parrot Trust supports in-country partners by providing training to government officials, rescue staff and other caregivers in care and management of parrots. We also help with veterinary expertise and funding for infrastructure such as housing, release flights and treatment facilities, as well as tracking devices, veterinary equipment, medication

and hand-feeding formula. WPT’s regional managers also instruct personnel on how to identify correct species and subspecies for returning birds to their home ranges, which is particularly challenging in a country like Indonesia where there are many parrots and their subspecies spread out across a massive archipelago.

On a local level, the WPT’s program managers support NGOs in spreading awareness and inspiring pride and wonder in native wildlife, warning about the harms of trapping and working to encourage birdwatching and ecotourism. Local communities are also made aware when releases happen and often work together to ensure these birds are observed and protected.

We conclude with an inspiring story of rescue, healing and co-existence. In Indonesia there have been examples of communities rescuing parrot chicks from having fallen in nesting trees that have been logged. These local people raised the nestlings without caging or other restraints and the birds grew up healthy and free, with the choice of flying back to the forests or staying near to and being protected by their rescuers. Many of them have chosen to have the best of both worlds. ☐

1. https://cites.org/eng/prog/imp/Transport_of_live_specimens

2. IUCN/SSC (2013). *Guidelines for Reintroductions and Other Conservation Translocations. Version 1.0.* Gland, Switzerland: IUCN Species Survival Commission, viii + 57 pp.



Top: Puerto Rican Amazons supplement their foraging at a station at Rio Abajo. © Tanya Martinez
 Middle: Blue-fronted Amazons are transferred to a large pre-release aviary, Brazil. © Yuri M. Valen
 Bottom: A local man visits a free-flying Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, cared for by the community as a youngster in Indonesia. © Mehd Halaouate

Your Feathered Friends' Beak

A parrot's beak is not just for chewing and eating. It can also be a measure of underlying health issues.



Louise Caddy, Head of Parrots at Paradise Park, UK (home of the World Parrot Trust) examines just how important your bird's beak is in chewing, climbing and showing illness warning signs.

Did you know? The species of a bird will determine its beak shape. For example, birds of prey will have a hooked beak to rip open the flesh of their prey. A parrot's beak is short and curved, giving it the strength to break open even the hardest of fruit and nuts. This versatile appendage enables all the different species of parrot to uniquely adapt to their environment, utilise their habitat and thrive in the most remarkable of circumstances.



An example of their flexibility: The author has tried to break open a macadamia nut with a hammer and failed every time, yet has watched a Hyacinth Macaw simply rotate it in its beak and crack it open within seconds!

A healthy beak should be smooth in appearance with no discolouration, and the upper and lower portions should align.



© Danilo Kusta Salvadores via Getty Images

Parrots use their beak like a third foot. A parrot's beak is not only for eating but has many different functions, like grabbing onto the next branch when climbing or testing how stable a surface is before venturing onto it. But the beak can be a lethal tool if needed. It can be used against another bird whilst defending a territory or protecting young from predators. It even aids in communication, with beak grinding often being a sign of contentment. I used to listen to my Timneh Parrot doing this when she was settling down for the night. Parrots also spend hours constantly preening and rearranging their feathers until they are in the perfect spot; equally they will happily preen a mate during pair bonding, which leads to hopefully successfully breeding.

The beak in health and disease

A parrot's beak is made up of keratin and grows continuously during its lifetime, much like our fingernails do. A normal beak should be smooth in appearance with no discolouration, and the upper and lower beak should align. Healthy birds should also have a noticeable light dusting of powder down covering the beak; this happens because of preening, especially in cockatoos and Grey Parrots. To help maintain it, all birds should be fed a balanced diet specific to the species. A high-quality pellet diet and

seed mix low in sunflower seed should be offered with daily fresh fruit and vegetables, alongside a sprouted seed mix for extra vitamins and minerals. Regular check-ups are important too: in a clinical exam a vet checks a bird's beak for indicators of potential health concerns based on its appearance. For example, diet-related liver disease can lead to overgrowth and abnormal horn development. The liver produces proteins for beak and nail growth, so a deficiency here can cause abnormalities to form. And, ensuring an appropriate balance of vitamins and minerals is essential; a lack of calcium and

What has this got to do with my pet bird? A bird's beak can be affected by many health, dietary, environmental and enrichment factors which all contribute to its function. It is a marker of health in parrots; any abnormalities could indicate problems and conversely, other conditions can signal that the beak isn't being maintained in the right way.



Before (L) and after (R) treatment of a Budgerigar with overgrown beak caused by fatty liver disease.



Scarlet Macaw presenting with extreme overgrown scissor beak, Kiwa Centre UK.



Providing pet parrots with chewing enrichment in the form of natural, untreated wood can help keep their beaks in good condition.

vitamin D can cause a soft rubbery beak, with the result that the bird may not be able to chew properly and maintain the beak's structure.

Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (Pbfd) is a serious virus that destroys the feathers, beak and nails. Signs of this disease include a shiny beak and damage to feathers and claws.

Upper respiratory viruses can cause problems: a nasal discharge



Budgerigar presenting with scaly mites © Socar Myles [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0]

seen on the beak and ridges on the surface are indicators; this is commonly seen when it has become chronic and should be addressed by a vet immediately.

External parasites can also affect beaks and feathers. Species like budgies commonly have mites that can cause damage to the area where the beak grows.

Several different types of mites live permanently on the bird, with others living in the surrounding environment. Feather and scaly mites can be passed to other birds through contact and poor hygiene. You might see them around your bird's face and vent or notice it starting to over-groom or rub itself against things. The skin will become irritated and may become crusty with bald patches becoming obvious over time. It is imperative to maintain a clean environment for your bird to avoid mites causing long-term damage.

Birds can suffer from trauma to the beak as well. A Scarlet Macaw at the Kiwa Centre rescue had an

extreme form of scissor (or cross) beak when it was rescued in 2017. This may have been an injury that occurred in the nest or more likely poor hand rearing practices, such as being constantly fed from one side of the beak so that over time the upper beak deviated away from the lower. In the case of this macaw, I assisted our vet in trimming the beak to a healthier length and the macaw has since been able to maintain it himself due to the daily enrichment he is given at the Kiwa Centre.

Companion birds usually present with problems when their beak is not used enough. Repeated bar rubbing in cages (either due to boredom or routine) can split the beak and cause abnormal wear. You can rectify the problem by providing different enrichment and changing the layout of the cage to reduce the opportunity for rubbing. Most parrots can maintain their beak properly by rubbing off the thickened top layer to shape it; they do this in the wild by utilising rough branches and chewing hard wood.

So it is essential that we encourage companion birds to play with toys and chew bird-safe greenery. There are many types that you can use, including chemical-free buddleia, apple, and willow.

Try introducing your bird to several types (under supervision at first) as birds will prefer different textures. Small birds may want to try some buddleia as it is soft



This lovebird suffered unknown trauma to the beak causing the top portion to become thick and overgrown, which led to deviation of the lower beak. This now requires regular trimming.

and easy to destroy. If you have a larger bird that loves chewing, try some naturally harder oak.

Beak malformation can occur through trauma to the bones of the jaw, usually from fights with other birds. This can happen if parrots are introduced for breeding and are not monitored closely.

Beak deformities can occur in the very young: in these cases, a surgical option can be considered, using a bar placed through the upper beak so it can be gently encouraged back into a natural position as the bird grows. This is usually successful with good results.

Beak trimming must always be done by an experienced, confident person. Birds have blood supply and nerve endings throughout their beaks, so you need to be sure in what you are doing to avoid damage. Never cut or clip the beak as this can result in it cracking. You should always burr the beak; I personally always use a Dremel (a tool for grinding) as it

is powerful enough to quickly file even the toughest of beaks and have multiple different heads for the most awkward of beak shapes.

Depending on how tame your bird is your vet may advise on a mild sedative to enable them to carry out the work. While sedation is not something I would routinely encourage, it may be the safer and less stressful option for your bird.

When it comes to the health of your bird and their beak, I recommend that you always keep an eye on their beak texture, shape and rigidity and report any concerns to your vet. And always provide as much enrichment as possible to encourage chewing to allow them to maintain their beak and as a result, you should have a happy, healthy parrot. ☐

Find more ideas and information on types of enrichment, greenery and plants on the WPT website at: parrots.org/fun



© Ken Griffiths via Getty Images

Census reveals long-term bushfire impact on Kangaroo Island Glossy Black Cockatoos

A recent survey shows that numbers of Glossy Black Cockatoos (*Calyptorhynchus lathami*) have decreased 17 percent compared to the last count in 2020 — the island’s wild population stands at just 377 birds. The tally is conservative and gives a minimum population size, leaving the possibility open that small groups of birds could have been missed. Anecdotal evidence is suggesting that in some areas where large amounts of sheoak woodland was lost to fire, the birds are now having trouble finding food. According to Glossy Black Cockatoo Project officer Karleah Berris, sheoak woods can take as long as 15 to 20 years to produce enough seeds again for the cockatoos.

Read more:
tinyurl.com/4x3rkwp4

Experts warn of ‘biosecurity risk’ at bustling Bali Bird Market

Spread over two city blocks, Bali’s Bird Market in Indonesia currently keeps and sells iguanas, porcupines, pythons from Papua Province, frill-necked lizards, civets, large-eyed owls with clipped wings, parrots, and Critically Endangered Bali Mynahs or Starlings. Most are kept in very poor conditions with many succumbing to stress and disease, and wherever wild animals and people are crowded together there is a risk to human health. Experts say a lack of collaboration between government wildlife departments is allowing illegal trade to thrive.

Read more:
tinyurl.com/ja3bykvw

Citizen scientists to uncover secrets of Gang-gang Cockatoos



© James Rolevink via Getty Images

Scientists are calling on local citizens to help boost knowledge of Gang-gang Cockatoos (*Callocephalon fimbriatum*) and their habitats in New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital

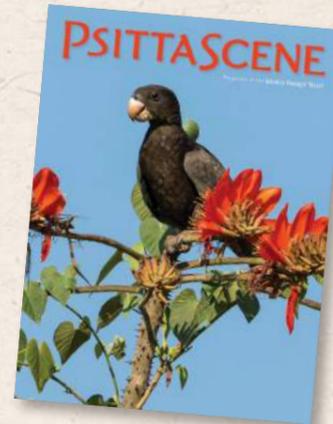
Territory (ACT). The Minister for the Environment Sussan Ley has stated that seven new projects aimed at supporting the Gang-gang’s recovery after the devastating Black Summer bushfires of 2019-2020 will receive funding. The projects will help researchers better understand the threatened cockatoo’s ecology, improve current information and help coordinate field efforts.

Citizen scientists will be asked to get involved by recording their sightings of the cockatoos as well as their observations of what the birds are eating and their nesting hollow behaviours.

Read more:
tinyurl.com/bdhh9rra

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2021 INDEX



33.1
SPRING



33.2
SUMMER

- **Love is in the Air!** WPT research will help protect the smallest of Africa’s parrots
- **Feast for the Senses:** Different ways to enrich parrots’ lives
- **The Curious Sex Lives of Vasa Parrots**
- **Zoo Conservation Partner Spotlight: Woburn Safari Park**
- **Parrot Senses, Part 2:** How psittacines connect with their surroundings
- **Parrots in the Wild: Bourke’s Parakeet**

- **Grey Parrots Fly Free:** Patience pays off in the Congo
- **Cacti and Parrots:** Working with the Yellow-shouldered Amazons of Bonaire
- **Until They Can Fly Free Again: Parrot Rehabilitation in Brazil**
- **A Feast for the Senses, Part 2: Touch and Taste Enrichment**
- **Parrots in the Wild: Black-winged Lovebird**



33.3
AUTUMN



33.4
WINTER

- **Blue-throated Macaw:** The hope of two chicks for the conservation of Gran Mojós
- **Zoo Partner Conservation Spotlight: Tracy Aviary & Botanical Garden**
- **Malawi:** The lovebird journey continues
- **Parrots & Music:** Dancing Cockatoos, Enrichment and Research
- **An Encounter with the Kea**
- **Parrots in the Wild: Australian King Parrot**

- **Calm Amid the Chaos: Belize Bird Rescue**
- **Congo Journey:** Working together to give Grey Parrots a second chance in the DRC
- **The Birds and the Bees: Monitoring the Yellow-shouldered Amazon 2021 breeding season**
- **A Demographer’s Adventures in the Field**
- **Caught in the Web: Untangling Social Media and the Illegal Parrot Trade**
- **Parrots in the Wild: Scarlet Macaw**



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PARROTS IN THE WILD:
RED-BREASTED PARAKEET
(Psittacula alexandri)

The Red-breasted Parakeet nests, often colonially, in cavities or hollow trunks of trees. Its breeding season lasts from December to April in most of its range.

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