

Squawk 'n Talk

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Presidential Perch

Monthly Update from Phyllis Cotton

It was really nice to see such a good turn out at the February meeting. Unfortunately, Dr Jarasek, our speaker had a family emergency and was unable to be there. She has agreed to speak at the March meeting and we are very pleased to have her.

With our annual fair just around the corner, we are looking for volunteers to help in several areas. Please contact me or any member of the board if you have any time to spare. All of the information about the fair & seminar will soon be on our website. We have flyers ready to distribute as well.

You will notice some changes in the fair & seminar this year. We have some great speakers and a catered dinner on Saturday evening with the speakers & vendors. The public may attend the dinner with pre-registration as well.

Trey Shaffer, who wears many hats in the club, is currently working on revising the constitution and bylaws. The changes should be completed and available for viewing soon. Trey is also our editor for the Squawk & Talk. He is always looking for articles to print in the monthly newsletter. If you have an interesting story or informational article you have written, please submit it to Trey for publication. Likewise if you find an article written by someone else that you feel

would be interesting to others as well, please submit the article and the name of the author. We will contact the author for permission to reprint. If you have any birdy recipes you want to share, please submit those as well.

The Gabriel Foundation is holding a fundraiser on June 11th at the Humane Society on Macklind Ave. to raise funds for their facility in Colorado. For information you can go to their website: <http://www.thegabrielfoundation.org>.

I hope to see everyone at the next meeting!



Telegraph Hill - First Look

Mark Bittner

Editor's Note: Mark Bittner will be one of our featured speakers at our All-American Hookbill Fair in August. Mark is the author of *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*, the subject of the current movie of the same name. Here is a brief history of his contact with the birds. Be sure to visit the Fair and meet Mark and get more information.



The city of San Francisco is famous for providing refuge to colorful eccentrics. Of all its refugees, none are quite so colorful or eccentric as a flock of wild cherry-headed conures that flies the city's north waterfront.

I first began seeing these birds in the Spring of 1990 when there were only four. I live in an immense garden on Telegraph Hill, and the parrots would often stop outside my home to eat from some of the trees growing there. By 1993, the size of the flock had increased to 26. I had never been interested in birds, but the parrots fascinated me. They raised so many questions: How did they get here? Were they breeding? How were they managing to survive the cold? And what was all the screaming about?

One day in October of 1993, I set out a large bowl of sunflower seeds on my fire escape for the scrub jays who often came to perch there. A few days later, to my surprise and delight, one of the parrots flew over to check out what the jays were eating. Within a few days I was feeding the entire flock.

and when a moment of quiet occurred would call, "Hello". After a while Mozart would answer "Herro" (being unable to pronounce his "L's"). Larry rewarded this by either answering hello or actually appearing. Gradually the screeching diminished and moments of quiet lengthened with a "herro" sounding once in a while.

Separation from the flock is only one reason your friend may screech, others may be boredom or lack of exercise. For new or prospective "parronts" remember calling and noise goes with parrots and some species are louder than others. Remember to check out the Club library's books on parrot behavior for suggestions on preventing or modifying problems like screeching.

Bylaws Update

Trey Shaffer

There is not much to report on the update of the Constitution and Bylaws. As you may recall we had requested paperwork from the Secretary of State to verify our original articles of incorporation. We did receive those. Time permitting; I will meet/talk with Lynn Ricci, between now, closing the newsletter, and the March meeting. If that does happen, we should have some material for discussion at the meeting.

It is still possible that the first approval vote could come at the March meeting. I will post an update to the home page of the website with late-breaking information.

Mission Statement

Gateway Parrot Club

A not-for-profit organization - Established in 1988

Dedicated to the following goals:

- To bring people together in a friendly atmosphere in the interest of exchanging information on bird care and breeding.
- To create an interest in bird care and breeding through monthly educational programs and annual bird fairs.
- To educate ourselves, and the general public, on the ever-present danger of extinction in the wild.

adopted in the past 2 years, which also includes some cats, dogs & even a pair of Bearded Dragons.

- We have seen a steady increase in people who volunteer with us. Last August, we had a booth at the Fair and it was crowded with volunteers.

We are VERY proud of this organization, especially our wonderful volunteers. If you too are concerned about this issue, we invite you to contact Phyllis or myself to discuss how you might be able to help. We all love our feathered friends, but think about what will happen to them when you are no longer able to care for them. After all, many of these birds will out live us. Please join us in helping to provide a better future for our beloved parrots.

When I'm Calling You-u-u-u

Debby Martin

Mozart, our cockatiel, and I found a very helpful suggestion on a chat room site for an anxious bird that uses a screech as a contact call. Mozart always wants to know where the flock is – after all when he's separated from the flock who knows what predator might sneak out of the woodwork and get him since he's all by himself. So calling to the flock is a natural behavior – but you can work with your bird natural instinct to call and create a dialog you can both live with.

First, find a contact call sound or word that you use when you leave the room. Let's say you say "be back" or whatever sounds natural could be a whistle or a soft aaaaahhhhh sound (as in squaaaaawk! Not as in screaming like someone scared you).

Then, you make the noise, leave the room for say one minute – you know the time frame for when your bird gets worried and start there. Make the sound again, wait another second or two and come back. This is so he can associate the sound with coming back or keeping contact with you. Gradually extend the time period. Eventually you'll only have to do it when you want him to know where you are or find out where he is.

We didn't know about this method and use a slightly different approach. Mozart and his flock (Larry, alpha bird, and Debby, beta bird) use "Hello" to call back and forth to each other. Mozart frequently gets to come out of his cage when he politely calls "Hello" instead of a screech. Mozart would screech when Larry was working in the computer room. Over a period of weeks Larry would ignore the screech

For six months I watched them through a window only three feet away from the bowl. They were extraordinarily entertaining--high-strung, cantankerous, and playful. I kept being drawn back, day after day, for "just one more look" at the amazing show that the flock was staging. As the months passed, I learned to recognize individuals. One day I discovered, quite by accident, that they trusted me enough to allow me to sit out on the fire escape with them. A month later, the first bird took a seed from my hand. Thus began a study and intimate involvement that ended up entirely changing my life.

I've had remarkable luck meeting people who had fed the flock before me. From them I've been able to piece together some of its history. For several years prior to 1987, there had been a solitary male cherry-headed conure flying the area. By March of 1987 this bird began showing up at feeders with a female. Both wore quarantine bands, so they must have been wild-caught, imported birds who either had escaped or been released by their owners. In 1989 this pair began breeding. They continued to breed through at least 1990 and 1991. During this period, two blue-crowned conures joined the flock.

In the fall/winter of 1992-93 a large group of cherry heads, most of them banded, suddenly joined the flock and the population mushroomed to 35. Perhaps the loud flight calls of the existing flock brought in outlying, stray escapees. It's also possible that somewhere in the city a shipping box or aviary broke open. Most of these new birds soon disappeared, and the population dropped by about half. When I first began feeding them, there were six to eight banded flock members. The remaining 18 or so cherry heads were quite possibly all native-born San Franciscans. A female mitred conure joined the flock in the summer of 1995 and has bred with two different cherry head mates. The hybrid babies have turned out to be fertile, and the hybrids have become an important element within the flock. The flock population currently stands at approximately 160.

Because the cherry-headed conure (also known as the red-masked parakeet) is from the hot and dry coastal region of western Ecuador, for me the most puzzling aspect of their survival here was their tolerance of the cold. Although San Francisco's temperatures are relatively moderate, we did experience a rare freeze in December of 1990. The flock came through it apparently without a single casualty. The standard explanation for this is that parrots, like most birds, have a down layer that they can grow thicker if there is a need. But this is not the complete answer. One former member of the flock was an in-the-wild feather plucker. She had only her head, wing and tail feathers. I saw her in the cold and rain in December and January, and she never seemed to suffer. Although she tended to let the down feathers

grow back in the winter months, the growth was spotty. They are tough birds.

For a parrot living in the United States, the real survival issue is getting enough to eat year-round. Since parrots don't migrate, they must gather their food solely from the territory in which they find themselves. All of the parrot flocks that I've learned about live in the artificial ecology of urban or suburban gardens. It's doubtful that they could survive in actual wilderness; there wouldn't be enough food in the winter months. Among the trees and plants from which I've seen them eat are juniper, loquat, pine, blackberry, apple, cotoneaster, strawberry guava, eucalyptus, and pyracantha, as well as a wide variety of buds and blossoms.

One factor in their survival here undoubtedly has been their surreal, exotic presence. People that have attracted the parrots to their feeders have often become intensely devoted to them. And while it is their exotic nature that first attracts, it is the parrot's vivid personality that inspires our devotion.

The most blatant feature of a flock of wild parrots is the incredible amount of noise that they make. It's a noisiness which at times seems (to human beings at least) to spill over into lunacy. They have a wide variety of squawks, screams and calls, a number of which I've come to understand.

There is one that I refer to as "incoming." Whenever they are eating and hear the remote squawking of another parrot flying in, they make a particular trumpet-like call that informs the straggler of their whereabouts. Another sound I recognize is a quiet, questioning cawing sound they make whenever a hawk is in the area. While cawing, they cock their heads to one side and look up nervously at the sky. They have remarkably good vision. It usually takes me quite awhile to spot it, but there will always be a hawk up there, often just a tiny speck soaring around in circles.

I usually know when a feeding is about to end by another distinct call. At some point in a feeding, one of the birds will start up a squawk that I immediately recognize as "let's go, let's go." If leaving is agreeable to the others, they will gradually join in and the squawking will build like a wave until it spikes on a particular high note. The moment they hit this note, the flock abruptly bolts as one, screaming thunderously as they take off. It's a fantastic thrill to ride one of those sound waves.

One of their most amusing vocalizations is the flock scream. It's especially enjoyable when all the birds take part at once. Flock screams will often last as long as a half hour, sometimes more. In their most

for other types of animals in the St Louis area. They too amazed us with their willingness to share their time and experience.

The organization we started is called "Perfectly Precious Rescue and Adoption, Inc". It is incorporated and we are in the process of applying for 501C(3) status, a Federal tax exemption. We take birds to an avian vet and sometimes provide cages, toys etc. We take *all* birds, large and small, healthy or not. We feel the tiniest finch or canary deserves a good home as much as the largest Cockatoo or Macaw. We keep them in foster care for as long as it takes to find a good home. Our fosters are dedicated volunteers scattered throughout the St Louis Metro area.

Some of the points that I would like to stress about us are:

- We take ALL birds, large and small.
- We take birds with "problems". We have had great success placing handicapped birds.
- We keep birds in foster care for as long as it takes.
- We do not pressure people to take a bird that they do not want. When we encounter someone with ambivalent feelings, we advise them against the bird.
- We make decisions based on what is best for the bird. We are not-for-profit and we never make decisions just to make a profit. We are actually in debt more often than we are in the black.
- We take birds for an avian exam and pursue medical treatment advised by our vet. As a matter of fact, we spent over \$7,500.00 in vet bills alone last year. That is not even taking into consideration the cost of cages, toys, extra large carriers, food, full spectrum lighting, and a nebulizer we purchased.
- We do home visits prior to approving an adoption and check all references.
- We don't adopt to breeders. We require a contract that states the adopter is not going to use the bird to breed. We recognize there are already too many unwanted birds.
- We use the ASPCA's search engine for listing our birds. Please go to: www.perfectlyprecious.petfinder.com. If you are interested in seeing some of the birds that we have placed, click on the button that says Click here to see our Happy Tails! This will bring up the animals that we have

lems such as aggression and screaming and how to prevent or reduce these behaviors. The pages on reading parrot body language was fascinating. Anyone venturing into the world of parrots larger than a cockatiel will find this a fascinating book.

The Gateway Parrot Club Library is open to all Club members. Books and videos can be checked out for one month and are due at the next meeting.

Birth of a Rescue

Janet Draper

For quite some while, I have heard people discuss the growing population of neglected and unwanted birds. Many people have seen the need for rescue/adoption; however few have actually done the work to create such an organization. Little wonder. It's an immense undertaking. As parrot owners/lovers, I am sure you have thought about this too.

During the summer/fall of 2002, Gateway Parrot Club members became aware of a confiscation by St Louis City Animal Control. There were 59 parrots in this group. Several of us went down with supplies for them to use. I stayed in very close contact with them. Finally, they let me take the ones that no one else wanted. This included 3 Cockatiels and a Quaker. I took these birds to my home.

I decided to take the birds to an avian vet. Phyllis Cotton and I discussed it over a couple of days and reached the same conclusion. We took the birds to the vet and paid the bills ourselves. One of them was confirmed with psittacosis. Another was egg-bound, and had been so for a long time. We approved surgery to save her – unfortunately she died. Eventually, the bird with psittacosis also died.

This was a very unfortunate situation. However, something very good came out of it. It crystallized our resolve to help abused, neglected and unwanted birds.

Now that we had decided to try to do *something*, we had to determine what shape that commitment would take. It soon became clear a responsible rescue was needed in St Louis. There are some excellent rescues in other parts of the country. We contacted several of them to ask for information and advice. The response from these groups was heart-warming. They selflessly offered any help we needed; and we needed A LOT. We soon found ourselves facing issues that we had never thought of. We also reached out to rescue organizations

intense moments, they often break out into a sound that I call “psychogobble.” It's a squealing, hysterical gobbling that to me sounds like a turkey that has lost its mind. When they psychogobble, one bird can sound like two, two birds like four, and so on.

If noisiness is their most prominent trait, constant activity is a close second. They expend a tremendous amount of energy fighting and playing. Except when napping--and sometimes even then--there seems always to be at least one minor squabble going on somewhere in the flock. Most of the fighting is restrained, but occasionally it can become severe, and they will bloody one another. One of the signs of a sick bird is missing feathers around his neck or eyes where he has been attacked by the others.

People often ask me if I see a pecking order. While some birds are consistently more dominant than others, relationships are complex and shift around quite a bit. There is no strict hierarchical order. And although monogamy is the general rule, it is not universal. I have seen at least one instance of “divorce” and three of woman-stealing.

The parrots spend a lot of time in play. Much of what appears to be fighting is often recreational. It's common to see two birds on the lines going chest to chest and flapping their wings frantically to maintain balance as they joust and scream. They are enthusiastic acrobats too, often hanging upside down from branches, power lines, and each other. More than once I've heard one upside down parrot screaming in pain as another dangled happily by its beak from the first bird's head feathers.

It's this high-strung play that tourists and locals alike find so entertaining. I've seen the birds inspire joy and spontaneous laughter. But there are others who object to the presence of wild exotics. These people are often concerned that they may cause harm to the local native birds. That's a valid concern. However, after twelve years of close study, I haven't seen it. What I have seen is people being re-awakened through the magic of these exotics to the general wonder of the world of birds. For this service, I regard them as honorable ambassadors from nature.

A Friendly Visit

The Martins

A number of our parrots and their “parronts” were invited to visit the St. Louis Hills Retirement Center in February. It was such fun and the residents were thrilled to be able to hold and pet the birds. They have a small aviary and Mary Brown, the activities director, told us this was a favorite spot, but they really wanted to be able to pet or touch a bird. Of course the little aviary finches weren’t amenable to that activity.

A wide variety of birds participated. Claire, the Eclectus; Mozart, the Cockatiel; Pauline, the Parrotlet; Whimmey, Casper and Tallulah, the Cockatoos; Oscar, the African Gray, and Kiwi, the Indian Ringneck, Max the Senegal and Peacy the duck. All were well behaved and the residents were thrilled to be able to pet them or have them stand on their hand.

Several of them did tricks. Dorene Olson, Janet Draper, Phyllis Cotton and Debby and Larry Martin shared a little of our bird’s lives – their diet and what they did during the day and their care in general. We had an opportunity to talk a little about bird rescue and adoption.

Many of the residents expressed their appreciation for our visit and we received a very nice thank you note from Mary Brown offering to make a donation to the club for bird’s needs. The board elected to suggest that the retirement center should make a donation to a bird rescue organization in the name of the Gateway Parrot Club.

Library Project

Christine Kinkade, our librarian, is starting a project to update our Club library. Larry Martin has volunteered to help and will start cataloging our collection. We need to add new books and videos which deal with specific species from a pet owner point of view, and books on behavior problems and training. We plan on highlighting our books at the meetings and in Squawk N Talk. So watch for our library table and check out our new additions!

If you have a suggestion for new materials please let Christine Kinkade know. We also need volunteers to read a book and write a little review. Let Christine or Larry know if you would be willing to give your input.

Pick of the Month

Mozart (Martin) the Cockatiel

Pick of the Month for the Parrot Club Library

It’s March – a windy month – kite month – optimism month that holds the 1st day of spring. New growth – new ideas – new learning! In fact, Mozart wishes to point out that birds have been demonstrating clever skills for a long time. He read in the New York Times Science Section in an article by Sandra Blakeslee that researcher’s report parrots invent syntax and teach other parrots what they know. She also reported that crows in Japan have learned to put walnuts in the road for cars to crack. They wait till the light turns red and traffic stops, then run into the crosswalk and drop the walnut and scurry back to the curb. After the cars have crushed the nuts and the light turns red again they run out and gather their reward. Clever birds!

Mozart felt after reading the article that the skills and wonderful qualities of the cockatiel should also be emphasized – **The Cockatiel** is his “Pick of the Month”! To celebrate cockatiels we have a new addition to the library – “The Cockatiel” by Julie Rach. I believe this is an excellent book for a new cockatiel owner or someone who is considering getting a Cockatiel. Ms. Rach seems to agree with Mozart that the cockatiel with its gentle personality, whistling ability, flexibility and potential long life span makes a very good pet for an individual or family who has not had a bird before.

The book helps the reader work through whether a bird really fits in their lifestyle. It covers a wide range of topics and has delightful pictures. It includes appropriate cage requirements, proper diet and nutrition, cleanliness, and housekeeping issues. We were very happy to see that it also deals with the bird’s emotional needs and important basic training such as “step up.” There is also a very helpful chapter on illness and first aid. It isn’t a book about breeding, but rather how to give your new cockatiel the best possible start and have a friend for life.

Mozart, of course, wants to emphasize he has no behavior problems (hmmmm), but the other new addition may prove helpful to prevent behavior problems or help correct existing ones. It’s a **Guide to a Well-Behaved Parrot** by Mattie Sue Athan. This book has many suggestions for socialization tips, using games such as “I can be a statue”, “Blink Back” and “Peek-a-boo.” It also emphasizes consistent positive reinforcement of “good” behaviors and of course the need for a stimulating environment and exercise. It discussed specific prob-