

Parrot Rehabilitation Journey

I did not have intentions of rescuing parrots from the beginning although I have always loved all animals and would rescue anything in need; however, becoming the director of a parrot rescue never crossed my mind. I attended several seminars of a larger local parrot rescue in my state because I wanted to adopt. I began learning behaviors and educating myself on the different species. I volunteered at a Zoo and one of the keepers needed to find a home for her bird. This larger rescue that I had looked up to would not help her because her bird was “unattractive and unadoptable”. Duncan was plucked; he pulled out his feathers in order to cope with stress and was left with only a few feathers on his wings and tail. He was not tame as he was a wild caught, older bird and the owner was having a baby. So Duncan spent most of the time inside of his cage. He needed a better environment and this “rescue” would not accept him. I began to wonder, where do all the birds go that they turn away? There was no where else for them. That is where I came in.

Due to the amount of homeless domestic parrots in the U.S., I would like to focus on the mistreatment of the Avian Species. Parrots are often forgotten when thinking about abuse; however, abuse does occur with nearly all species that humans keep as pets.

I have personally seen the amount of birds that are abused and to what degree. When I was 14 years old I started The Bird Nerds Rescue/Sanctuary where I became dedicated to the rescue, rehabilitation and adoption of domestic parrots. I created my own website: www.thebirdnerdsrescue.com. I have also have added many educational sources

and other information in order to educate people on the proper care of their companion parrots. I have rescued over 500 birds and have seen abuse in all of its ugly forms.

One of the number one reasons I believe animals, parrots specifically, are abused is due to the owners lacking education about the proper care of the species. Many people place a bird in a cage and if it “fits” those are adequate living conditions for them. That is not the case, parrots are high energy and in the wild they spend their time flying for miles and actively foraging for food. They need large living accommodations.

Approximately 65% of the birds that I take in are abuse cases. Sometimes the owners are unaware that they are abusing and/or neglecting the animal. The owners may lack education on training techniques and instead of using positive reinforcement they use punishment. Parrots are prey animals. They need positive reinforcement and trust; they cannot be dominated, as this triggers the “fight or flight” instinct.

One particular rescue bird really left an impression with me. A 16 year old Umbrella Cockatoo, Tiki, who was locked away in a closet for 8 plus years, he constantly screamed for attention and pulled out his feathers from, frustration, boredom, lack of light, and inadequate cage size. He also suffered from a terrible diet and many other mistreatments. His skin was very dry due to being placed next to a washer and dryer which constantly blew out dry air. His cage was way too small for his species and he was generally lacking the love and attention that Cockatoos and all companion parrots thrive on.

Tiki is on his way to recovery, taking baby steps, but making progress every day. He is no longer trustful of humans for good reason. Tiki was adopted into a wonderful family, he is just learning to step up and enjoy being touched. Tiki, who would have been marked off as “unattractive and unadoptable” with no feathers on his chest, legs, and back has found his happy ending.

Another rescue parrot who I rehabilitated from severe abuse and psychological trauma was Cody, a Severe Macaw of unknown age. Instead of being housed in a proper spacious cage fit for his species, he was forced to reside in a tiny cage, one third of the appropriate size. He had one perch, and as a result he suffered from arthritis in his feet, toes and ankles. In the wild parrots perch on tree limbs of all different diameters, where they are exercising their feet and toes. He had no toys to stimulate his highly intelligent brain. Some parrots have the intelligence of a small child at 5 years of age. The previous owners explained to me how they punished him when he bit someone. Cody was wrapped in a towel and physically abused; he had also been sucked up by the vacuum cleaning hose. He was punished for screaming, the owners would slam metal pots and pans against the cage. Screaming is a natural behavior for parrots, they vocalize to alert the flock of the rising sun, to alert them of food, or a predator. They vocalize at dusk, and many times they vocalize just because.

Cody was punished for doing all of the things his natural instincts were telling him to do. Cody may never trust humans again, even with years of rehabilitation. After

his rescue, I placed him in a large cage with many toys. This was so foreign to Cody he was at first very afraid of the open space and colors of the toys. He began regurgitating on all of his perches and toys. Parrots often regurgitate to express affection; they feed their mates and babies by regurgitating their food.

Cody found his home with a lady who understood his needs and that some birds may be damaged beyond repair. The reason I choose to place Cody into her care, was she understood Cody's needs and she didn't expect anything more from him than what he wanted to give her. If that meant he never wanted to be touched, that is his choice. So often we take away the bird's right to choose.

I work to educate people so situations like this do not happen. Individuals have contacted me from all over the United States seeking behavioral advice for their parrots. I have been quoted by Bird Talk Magazine and they recently published a story of my rescue Macaw, Malachi, in the March 2010 issue. I often try to work with an owner who wants to surrender their bird due to behavioral issues. I offer free consultations to figure out what is causing the behavior and how to correct it using positive reinforcement. On many occasions the behavior is corrected and the bird is able to remain with the family.

I have been called by zoos, colleges, veterinarians, and other rescues answering different questions regarding behaviors and enrichment. I do presentations to educate people about rescue birds, teaching them what different behaviors mean, proper avian diets as well as positive reinforcement training. Showing the public what abuse looks like

and why it is important to do research before buying any pet and understanding what you are getting into.

I have read numerous websites and more than 50 books, one of my favorites being The Second-hand Parrot by Mattie Sue Athan & Dianalee Deter, educating myself on the needs relevant to the species, including: behavioral issues, nutritional needs, illnesses and diseases, physical and psychological trauma. I have created pages on my website dedicated to education. All of the information on my website is based off of experience, as well as, trial and error and advice from other avian specialists.

I specialize in plucking, mutilation and aggressive behaviors. Rescues throughout my state and surrounding areas send me parrots with these behaviors, as I have the most experience with them. An example of one of my techniques to correct a behavioral problem such as plucking is a phonebook. I have discovered that parrots who pluck have sometimes developed a habit. Even after you remove all of the stressors that caused the behavior from the beginning they may still continue to pluck. This is called habitual plucking, I offer objects such as a phone book or a feather duster in order to keep their beak busy “plucking” something other than their feathers. Plucking is usually not just the result of one thing. I must also change cage size, diets and add a variety of toys and perches to get the behavior under control.

Based on what I have seen and the degrees of abuse that I have witnessed, I will continue to rescue parrots and try to make a difference in their lives. I have recently been accepted into a university (fall 2010) with the ultimate goal of becoming an avian veterinarian where I can provide the much needed veterinary care to the avian

community. My future goal for my rescue is to provide a sanctuary for a larger amount of unadoptable birds that may be damaged beyond repair, so they can live out their lives with no fear of abuse or neglect.