

Speaking of...

Parrots

BY JOHN SEDGWICK / Photographs by George Lange



ONE OF FIFTY LUCKY BIRDS WHO LIVE WITH SOTHEBY SENIOR VICE-PRESIDENT ROBERT WOOLLEY IN HIS FIFTH AVENUE APARTMENT, RUFUS (ABOVE) PREFERS PERUSING PAGES TO ENGAGING IN IDLE CHATTER. NATURALLY, THE SEVEN-YEAR-OLD MACAW'S FAVORITE WORD IS "QUIET!"

MARY MCFADDEN'S ZINZAR SOCRATES BIG BUX (OPPOSITE) PERCHES ON A STATUE IN THE LIVING ROOM BUT PREFERS THE KITCHEN, TO WHICH HE DASHES OFF IN SEARCH OF CHEESE. THE TEN-MONTH-OLD COCKATOO ALSO "LOVES TO GO TO RESTAURANTS, AND PARTIES."

These days, parrots must be squawking "Pretty Polly" from coast to coast, for their popularity has never been higher. Celebrity owners include designer Mary McFadden, Martina Navratilova and Robin Williams. Caged birds now rank fourth behind dogs, cats and fish in the domestic pet market, and parrots trail only the far cheaper parakeets and cockatiels as favorites with bird fanciers. Annual sales of parrots are estimated to run as high as \$300 million, and *Bird Talk* magazine, a specialty publication started in 1984, now reaches well over 100,000 subscribers.

The exotic parrot has long been a subject of special fascination. Altogether there are 332 species in the Psittaciformes, or parrot, order, ranging from the tiny "budgie" parakeets and pigeon-sized Amazons to the nineteen-inch-tall cockatoos, and culminating in the splendid and imposing three-foot-tall, cobalt blue hyacinth macaws, so esteemed that retail stores sell them for as much as \$15,000 apiece. Most of these species have by now been bred in captivity, a fact of growing importance as the birds become increasingly scarce in the wild. There are, for example, only 2,500 to 5,000 wild hyacinth macaws left.

Historically, parrots have been found in tropical and subtropical climates around the world, with the greatest concentrations coming from Australia, southern Asia and the Amazon region of South America. The most prominent characteristic of the order, aside from bright plumage, is a hooked beak, which gives the birds a comical expression that is misleading: that beak is capable of

snapping stout branches (not to mention fingers) in two. Parrots also have unusual feet, with two toes pointing forward and two backward, to help them climb. The feet give them an uncertain, wobbling gait, as though they were wearing oversize galoshes. They also have a taste for fruits, nuts and seeds, a penchant that occasionally causes farmers in their native lands to shoot them as pests. Many species mate for life—true lovebirds. But their greatest distinction is undoubtedly their ability to reproduce—and, some argue, actually communicate through—human speech.

In truth, not all parrot species talk, and of those that do, not all members actually will. Of all the species, the African grays, yellow-naped Amazons and double yellow-headed Amazons are the real chatterboxes. But as Pamela Higdon, a former *Bird Talk* editor, points out, "Everyone familiar with parrots has known of grays or napes that only whistle or never utter a sound." Her own sulfur-crested cockatoo, Gandalf, is apparently unaware that cockatoos are supposed to be taciturn; he has a repertoire of sixty phrases that she says he uses "appropriately." Among other things, he says "Night, night" when flipped on his back; and he declares, "You're a good" when looking at his owner.

Parrots have an uncanny ability to imitate human voices: Lewis Fomon of West Palm Beach says that her African gray, Wookie, has her husband down perfectly, and can also duplicate the sound of a ringing telephone. Wookie will ring, then talk in Robert Fomon's harried-businessman voice: "Hello. Yup. Yup." Lewis





has learned to tell the imitation from the real thing now, but there was a time when she was sure she was overhearing her husband on the phone. Wookie also does a pretty good impression of the electronic beep of the couple's microwave—so good that Lewis has more than once dashed into the kitchen wondering what was cooking.

Occasionally, parrots say the wrong thing. Dr. Fairfield Goodale of Brooklyn, Maine, has an Amazon named Roberto whom his children mischievously taught to spout a string of expletives, including a time-honored expression for an act that is anatomically impossible, which Roberto, in his innocence, would cheerfully sing out to all visitors to the Goodale home. All of this was considered quite funny until a four-star general came calling one day and Roberto gave his standard greeting. "Let's just say it amused everyone but the general," says Dr. Goodale.

The talking parrot is undoubtedly a marvel; it is also a scientific puzzle, for experts have yet to agree on precisely how to account for it. Anatomically, the reason is clear enough: the parrot comes equipped with a larynx and syrinx that almost perfectly duplicate the functions of human vocal organs. But why, in evolutionary terms, this should be so remains

obscure. For a long time, parrots were simply dismissed as idiot savants, peculiarly capable of "parroting" human speech for no apparent purpose besides the amusement it brings their owners and themselves.

Recently, Irene Pepperberg, an ethologist (animal-behavior researcher) at Northwestern University, has forced her peers to reconsider the question. For twelve years she has worked with an African gray named Alex, and she has taught him not just to mimic the sounds of human speech in the standard "pretty bird" manner, but actually to use them to communicate.

Pepperberg claims that the reason parrots never learned to communicate before was that no one taught them properly. Conventionally, parrots are taught to speak by standard operant-conditioning techniques: if they produce the right sound on cue, they get a bit of food as a reward. That is, they learn to speak the way certain show-business parrots learn to roller-skate.

Pepperberg went about the task in a different way. Based on the observation that parrots in the wild learn vocalization by watching the interaction of other birds, she had two humans—one acting as teacher, one as the learner/model—demonstrate a behavior in Alex's presence, then switch

roles to show the interactive nature of the behavior. Alex ultimately began to compete with the learner for the intrinsically appropriate reward—for example, when Alex said the word "peg-wood," he would receive a wooden clothespin to chew on; when he said "key," he'd receive a key to scratch himself with. Gradually, Pepperberg taught Alex to identify certain qualities of these objects, such as color, shape and number, as well.

Currently, Alex is capable of asking for eighty different household objects. "Want water," he might say, or "Want grape." He can also identify seven colors and five shapes. Presenting him with a tray holding a blue metal key, a bit of brown cork, some green wool and a strip of red rawhide, Pepperberg asks "What's green?" Alex will say "Wool." If she holds up the rawhide and asks "What's matter?" he'll answer "Hide." Pepperberg believes that this accomplishment should elevate the humble parrot to the ranks of chimpanzees and dolphins in terms of communication.

This reappraisal of parrot intelligence has led Pepperberg to speculate about the utility of their vocalizations in the wild. She notes that indigo macaws exhibit some "sentinel behavior"—standing guard for the flock and then calling out if danger is approaching. It is also possible, she believes, that sound recognition might be necessary in the dense foliage of the jungle, where sight recognition is limited. And she cites a theory posed by German ornithologist Wolfgang Wickler, suggesting that parrot vocalization may be a pair-bonding device by which mates learn a "complex duet"—a kind of private love song.

Whatever the reasons for parrot speech, there is little question that it has contributed mightily to the birds' longtime appeal. Their current popularity, however, can

A MAZON PARROTS

BANDIT AND KILLER, OPPOSITE, DON'T EVER HAVE TO FLY SOUTH: THEY LIVE THERE YEAR-ROUND, IN PALM BEACH, WITH LEWIS FOMON AND HER HUSBAND ROBERT. THE FOMONS ALSO SHARE THEIR SOUTH OCEAN BOULEVARD ESTATE WITH WOOKIE, AN AFRICAN GRAY PARROT.

be traced to the appearance of a talking sulfur-crested cockatoo named Fred on the television series "Baretta" in the late 1970s. But, as Don Bruning, curator of ornithology at the New York Zoological Society, says, that one bird "caused the death of more cockatoos than anything else I can think of," since so many were taken from the wild—and perished while being captured—to meet the rising demand.

This demand continues to fuel the widespread capture and exportation of parrots from the wild, which, along with the sweeping devastation of their native habitats—particularly in the Brazilian and Asian rain forests—has led to the serious depletion of the populations of certain species and to the near elimination of others. Parrots are now one of the most threatened groups of birds. The situation in the Americas is grave: forty-five species (one-third of all the Neotropical parrots) are close to extinction. Unfortunately, scarcity only increases a bird's jeopardy: it raises its value to a trapper. Indeed, rare and exotic birds command such high prices in the U.S., Europe and Japan that illegal trapping and trading flourish.

Birds are fragile creatures; many taken from the wild die before reaching their destination. Insensitive handling is largely to blame, beginning with trapping methods that increase the likelihood of injury or death, and ending with transportation methods that are nothing less than brutal. Dozens of assorted birds, often lacking food or water, may be crammed into one crate, many of them standing in their own excrement. Many succumb to diseases that are exacerbated by shock or stress. Trappers and traders simply allow for the mortality rate, transporting large numbers of birds to increase the number of survivors.

Dozens of countries have either

ROBERTO, AN AMAZON
PARROT, RULES THE ROOST AT HIS MASTER DR.
FAIRFIELD GOODALE'S MAINE RESIDENCE, INSPIRING
CAUTIOUS RESPECT FROM A MENAGERIE
THAT INCLUDES FOUR MINIATURE DONKEYS, THREE
PYGMY GOATS, FOUR DOGS, ELEVEN
SHEEP, A HORSE AND FORTY CANARIES.

imposed severe restrictions on the export of their native birds or, like the United States, have forbidden the practice altogether. More than 100 nations have signed the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), a 1975 treaty that requires special permits to export scarce species, including all but two species of parrot. This has certainly inhibited the international bird trade, but it has by no means rubbed it out.

The importation of certain wild birds to the U.S. is permitted, and there are laws designed to regulate the trade. Due to inadequate customs supervision, however, smuggling remains widespread. TRAFFIC (USA), the World Wildlife Fund's trade-monitoring program, estimates that, of the 250,000 parrots imported to the U.S. each year (more than enter any other country), a third enter illegally.

In the case of endangered species, exporters have doctored CITES documents to misidentify a bird of an endangered species as a common one. And traders have illegally smuggled rare wild birds across the border of a restrictive host country and into such countries as Argentina, Indonesia and Malaysia, where the birds can be exported more or less openly. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that 150,000 birds are smuggled into the U.S. from Mexico annually. Since these birds do not pass through quarantine, they may carry diseases that pose a serious threat to the poultry industry.

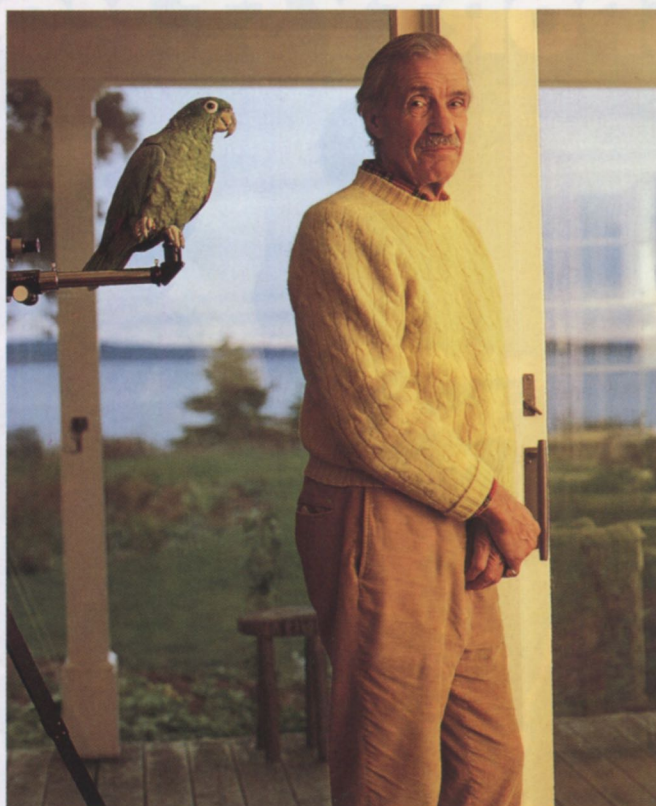
To counter the abuses of the import trade, New York State passed a law in 1984 forbidding the sale of any imported wild bird. But no other states have followed suit, despite considerable lobbying efforts by such organizations as The Humane Society of the United States. Pet store owners and importers have

teamed up to fight the legislation, and organizations like the American Federation of Aviculturists (AFA) have also weighed in against it—chiefly, according to its executive secretary, Laurel Desborough, out of a desire to avoid further bureaucratic regulation.

Many experts believe that this attitude is shortsighted and unrealistic. As Jorgen Thomsen, senior program officer with TRAFFIC (USA), recently stated at an AFA convention, the "continuing demand for wild-caught birds in conjunction with the pet industry threatens the survival of several species in the wild. This is not emotionally charged rhetoric. It is simply fact."

Thomsen went on to say that "it is imperative that aviculturists, the import industry and the AFA embark on an aggressive campaign to increase captive-breeding programs. . . . In conjunction with this effort, it is critical that every attempt is made to conserve remaining wild populations, to ensure that some at least survive for the future. It makes no sense, economic or otherwise, to allow these species to be harvested to the point of commercial and biological extinction." Beyond the struggle over regulations lies one fact that both sides agree on: a hand-raised parrot makes a far better pet than a captured wild bird. Growing up under human care and therefore imprinted on humans, captive-bred birds are far more receptive to human touch than their brethren from the wild. Further, when sold, they are guaranteed to be free from disease, a claim that cannot be made for imported birds.

Because of the cost of raising them from birth, captive-bred birds often sell for about 25 percent more than the imports (though imported birds may well need expensive medical care). Nevertheless, hand-raised birds



are proving so popular that some pet stores are beginning to carry them exclusively. The Boston Pet Center, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is one such establishment. Explains manager Mark Jerome, "We just got tired of dealing with the imports. I'd be pulling the imported birds out of their cases, and I'd find broken feathers, missing toes, cracked beaks and all sorts of health problems. With a captive-bred parrot, you know exactly what you're getting. Each one has perfect feathers, it's healthy, and you can pet him as soon as you pull him out—you don't have to worry that he's going to bite your hand off."

Trade controls may give aviculturists an incentive to increase their efforts at captive breeding. In the 1950s, for example, Australia stopped exporting its parrots; since then, in the U.K.—once one of the leading importers—a healthy population of the most popular Australian species (cockatiels, crimson rosellas and budgerigars) has been captive bred. And techniques for captive breeding even the more delicate parrot species have long been available.

One of the larger breeders of captive-bred parrots in the U.S. is Aves International, which is located in a sprawling bungalow in a dusty canyon overlooking the Pacific somewhere south of Los

Angeles. The firm's owner, Gail Worth, would prefer the public didn't know precisely where, because she has been robbed several times—another unpleasant aspect of the new vogue in parrots. (Her security-consciousness is mild compared with that of others in the field. A major parrot breeding and research facility—the Aviculture Breeding and Research Center, in Florida—run by a former McDonald's franchiser named Richard M. Shubot, is protected by guards carrying semiautomatics.)

With just nine employees, Aves International is, like most parrot farms, essentially a cottage industry. After starting as an importer, Worth began concentrating on captive breeding in 1980 and now produces 400 parrots a year in fifty species, from Amazons to caiques, with particular emphasis on rose-breasted cockatoos, blue-and-gold macaws and Congo African grays. She also occasionally breeds a toucan, but she won't sell one to people who can't prove to her that they have sufficient space to keep it, since toucans require nearly room-size cages. Her prices range from \$150 for a common peach-fronted conure up to \$7,000 for a splendid hyacinth macaw, but most purchases range from \$500 to \$1,000.

Still, Worth is hardly sanguine
(Continued on page 212)

PHOENIX

(Continued from page 211)

ing back to Chicago. "I hate it that you can't get Chinese here at one in the morning; that people are so conservative they think you're roistering if you socialize with a Democrat; that the cultural scene is so lacking, though I realize it's because there aren't enough national corporations or family endowments to pay for a real feast."

Then there's the interminable four-month summer. The entire population talks about it all year long, as if it were a civic issue like growth or smog or mass transit. "'Hot' is too short a word to describe summer in Phoenix/Scottsdale," they groan. "Sure it's dry, but it's a killer." They're not kidding. Normally courteous drivers turn savage; thwarted hikers and tennis players grumble inside air-conditioned buildings; house pets sulk, and everybody who possibly can ditches town for San Diego, La Jolla or the lakes and mountains up north.

Nevertheless, 2 million enraptured people wake up each morning and congratulate themselves that Phoenix/Scottsdale isn't just another formerly nice Sunbelt Elysium gone amok. Chris Cole, a specialist in assembling real estate partnerships, sums up the reasons insightfully. The 38-year-old president of Cole Equities, who hit the multimillion-dollar big-time back in the 1970s by spotting potentially lucrative sites (including the \$100 million property that he is currently developing in the nascent downtown business district), is optimistic about Phoenix/Scottsdale's perennial allure. He says, "People will always want to move here because they can have their cake and eat it too. They love the comfortable climate and spectacular scenery. They like the feeling of living in a frontier city with suburban values. Yet they're not isolated, because we're so close to the business and pleasure centers in California, Colorado and Mexico. In the long run, it's the Valley of the Sun's singular location that draws people and keeps them here. And remember: Our geography is one thing that never will change." □

SPEAKING OF . . . PARROTS

(Continued from page 179)

about the business prospects in a line of work that involves slender profit margins and, since the birds need to be fed daily, no holidays. Like most bird breeders, she is in the business for love. She regards her chicks as her babies. Fertilized eggs are flown in from a partner's breeding farm in Northern California and from Worth's own farm in Southern California, then stored in an incubator in her kitchen. There they are watched over by her pet parrots, which include a cockatoo that sings Honduran Christmas carols, a yellow-naped Amazon that warbles South American folk songs and a blue-and-gold macaw named Mayo that devotedly trundles after Worth wherever she goes.

When the eggs hatch, the chicks are shifted down the hall to a nursery for round-the-clock feedings. As if on an assembly line, they are moved along a shelf as they grow. When they start flying around the room, they are shifted to a larger holding facility outside, where they are weaned and then held until they are shipped out by air freight to pet stores and private buyers around the world.

Given the advantages of captive-bred parrots, it is possible that simple market forces will eliminate imports without the need for sweeping regulations (though not quickly enough to save the wild populations). This would require better education on the part of potential parrot buyers who, often buying on impulse, are frequently swayed by the imported bird's lower price. (The price disparity would presumably lessen as imports decline and the captive-bred market expands.)

With this in mind, it appears likely that domestic breeding farms such as Aves International are the wave of the future, and that parrots will continue to hatch in Gail Worth's kitchen incubator in ever greater numbers. Since the bird farms are generally secretive about their sales figures, all that anyone knows for sure about the captive-bred's percentage of the parrot market is that, as Susan Lieberman of The Humane Society of the United States says, "The trend is toward increasing captive breeding. That's a definite." For the parrots' sake, one has to hope so. □

PLANNED PARROT-HOOD

Parrots are not the easiest pets to keep. They require specialized care and demand a great deal of time and attention—more than many would-be owners are willing or able to give. For this and other reasons, the ASPCA and many other animal welfare organizations do not recommend keeping parrots (budgerigars, cockatiels and lovebirds excepted) as pets.

If you are so enamored of these beautiful birds that you simply must have one or more of your own, it is imperative that you acquire a thorough knowledge of the ins and outs of

parrot ownership. The following guidelines provided by experts in the field will help ensure that the bird of your choice is a pleasure, not a pest.

Buy a captive-bred bird: they are tamer and make better pets. Imported parrots often have been brought into the country illegally and may be diseased, injured or traumatized by the transition from the wild to captivity.

Buy birds only from a dealer you trust: local veterinarians and bird clubs can steer you in the right direction. Beware of a bargain parrot: it may be a problem. A reputable establishment should have clean, well-kept premises and a veterinarian who is available for regular consultations. The dealer should be able to tell you the origin of the birds he or she stocks and guarantee its health for at least ten days. In addition, you should purchase a parrot only from a dealer located a reasonable distance from your home. That way, if your bird becomes ill or if other problems arise, you can easily take it back to the dealer for consultation or return. Within three to five days of purchasing any bird, have an avian veterinarian give it a thorough checkup and a clean bill of health.

Research the personality and habits of the species you are interested in; the ASPCA, zoos and your local Humane Society are good sources of information. Large birds, in particular, have complicated dietary and emotional needs. If deprived of ongoing, consistent companionship, parrots of any size can become depressed and literally waste away, or begin to pluck out their own feathers. Many parrots screech loudly and incessantly—something to consider seriously, not only for your own sake but for the neighbors' as well. Keep in mind that parrots—even healthy, happy ones—tend to wreak a certain amount of destruction on their environments. Remember, these birds have powerful beaks. They toss their food about, shed feathers and—being naturally curious, or perhaps in obedience to a nesting instinct—often hide in drawers or cabinets, or scatter the contents.

Finally, be aware that owning a parrot can be a lifelong commitment. The average lifespan of a large parrot is fifty years.

Some suggested readings:

Bird Talk magazine, P.O. Box 57347, Boulder, CO 80322-7347.

Watchbird, c/o The American Federation of Aviculturists, P.O. Box 56218, Phoenix, AZ 85079-6218.

American Cage Bird, 1 Glamore Court, Smithtown NY 11787. □



Dr. Saul J. Farber and Harvey R. Daniels at a reception held at Kentshire Galleries for benefactors and friends of the Rita & Stanley H. Kaplan Cancer Center of NYU Medical Center.

U.S. SAVINGS BONDS

