

On Banning the Importation of Exotic Birds

by Teresa Gilroy
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Exotic birds. You have seen them sitting on a perch, docile and attentive in the pet shop window, and you have wondered why they do not fly away. Or you have seen them on TV. in a sexy ad for a charge card, or maybe you have admired their brilliant feathers in a photograph. But whenever you see them you know one thing: you have mixed feelings. These animals are neither dog nor cat. They have established no voluntary domestic relationship to human kind. They are birds and in our soul we admire their birthright: flight—which is also to say freedom. This is a profound truth that serves as a most effective ally for the animal lover who argues that they should not be imported into the United States for the pet trade. But this intrinsically honorable protest fails, in its simplistic way, to differentiate between the various levels of people who work with exotic birds and to acknowledge the ongoing threats that exotic birds are presently facing in their own countries due to habitat destruction.

Exotic birds come from all over the globe, each with an astonishing degree of specialization in both color and physicality. Their almost garish color markings have gained them both value to and reverence from man, who has sought them out as intensely as he has other grand animals, such as the tiger or the whale. But birds, tucking themselves deep within unpenetratable rain forests, have never been threatened as have the previously mentioned mammals. They have carried forth their numbers exponentially through ages and ages, becoming as numerous as man, comparatively speaking. The Spanish explorers were astounded by the massive flocks of these flashy birds, the size of which we can only today imagine!¹

We are still busy classifying them and naming them. While bird watching at one time was for kings and daubblers, bird watching today is bird counting. The breeze brings on it the scent of burning from all directions, burning of the jungle for farming and development—progress has arrived and it is merciless in its intentions.

The saddest fact about species extinction is that these animals who find themselves directly in the path of progress also become the victims of profiteering. Their very value lies in their diminishing numbers. As fires are lit at the edge of the jungle there are men whose business it is to precede the carnage, trapping stunned animals and picking through the nests of fallen trees. As long as there is rain forest to be encroached upon and destroyed there will be lots of birds. These animals are brought to town where they are purchased by animal dealers who ship them to quarantine in the country of their destination, where—once released—they are then sold to pet shops or breeders for a goodly profit.² The animal is still wild, but he is healthy and he has embarked on a long journey in search of a home. He might be trained down to a workable tameness, or, if purchased for the purposes of breeding, matched up with one of his kind to produce young. The chick will be hand-fed and later sold as a very valuable “domestically reared” pet. Within the context of their fate in the wild, the above patterns of bird treatment are ideal. But there is another scenario.

Poaching. Poaching of birds is a nasty and cruel business that thrives on avoidance of governmental requirements and charges that can interfere with the balance of profit at the end of the road. In the U.S., imported exotics must be confined in quarantine for thirty days until deemed healthy and free from disease. If the U.S.D.A. finds an imported bird carrying Newcastle's Disease it is promptly destroyed. Although rare, this disease is a virulent and destructive virus that has laid low our poultry industry time and again at a loss of millions of dollars. It is the individual importing the bird that pays for this service and, given the gravity of the reasons for quarantine, there are no other alternatives.³ Except poaching: stuff them in the hubcaps of cars or stuff them wherever possible to get them into the country. The fact that once in the dark a bird does not make a sound is favorable to poachers.

Whether few of the birds brought in by poachers survive the trip is irrelevant. Profits are attractive and one can always find buyers, both aware and unaware that the act of purchasing these animals is no less illegal than smuggling itself. Poaching is cousin to the drug trade and poachers are serious criminals, but you wouldn't know this by the level of punishment assigned to the individuals who—caught in the act—are free to repeat the process within a matter of months.⁴ To those who are responsibly dedicated to the management of wildlife in the best interests of the animal—whether zoo or private breeder—the poacher is the black sheep, the thorn in the side and the ghost association that will not die. Those up in arms over importation of exotic birds in general should be educated as to the two types. It would seem that a reexamination of the punishments legislated for poachers is more in order than a crusade against importation in general.

The simplistic notion that, should we ban all importations of wild exotic birds, those retrieving them from the sweep of the burning jungle would suddenly close up shop is absurd. These animals also are used for such items as dinner and sources of decorative feathers as well as pets within their own borders. Some species are particularly valuable stuffed, and in some cases, the head (in the case of the toucan) can be hung from the wall. We need only to remind ourselves of the American buffalo in order to not fall into a self-righteous denouncement. Again, given the context of their habitat destruction, legal importation of exotic birds is a reasonable affair. The system through which the animals pass could certainly stand some improvement, technologically as well as ethically, and this is the challenge: to begin a dialog that seeks to clarify the minimum handling requirements of wildlife in a mercantile framework. We can examine the entire “bird world” so to speak, from zoos to breeders, from importers to dealers to pet shops and, finally, to the private owner, in order to educate, inform and ultimately improve under-

standing of these magnificent creatures. There is not one among us who endorses the willful destruction of wildlife that some groups believe those involved with the importation of birds would allow. People who, in their well-meaning romanticism, see themselves as the righteous saviours of poor defenseless animals, would dictate strategy to a small group of dedicated individuals who have taken an interest in birds as birds rather than birds as symbols, and who, in the wisdom of undiluted knowledge, see that the future at this rate means extinction for many species.

These same well-intentioned people, aiming specifically at the pet trade (which, like any other business, operates at varying degrees of competence) have taken it upon themselves to judge birds as pets. Their conclusion is that birds make terrible pets. I myself beg to differ. The human animal can sometimes be a miserable guardian. Birds, whether imported or domestically reared, make fantastic pets if, and only if, one has the time, patience and love to condition the animal properly toward harmonious coexistence with man.

A personal vignette might be in order at this point. I have always held a strong aversion to the image, whether real or printed, of a bird in a cage. I have difficulty admiring a person who keeps a pet bird in a tiny cramped cage for weeks or years on end and who then complains because the bird picks his feathers until bare. It would seem to me that assuming care of an animal with wings mandates that all efforts are made to continue giving expression to its intrinsic merit. Even the clipping of wings I consider an unnecessary violation that comes from the dark ages. Birds can live in their own element among man, flying about him like the dog or cat walks. It is possible.

Two years ago, in return for hand feeding some birds for a friend, I was given a baby scarlet macaw to whom I had become attached. This has been the departure point for many small revelations about these animals who continue to fascinate me every day. To witness the unfolding of its stages in development has often reminded me of human stages, and the fallacy of a bird as a cold and withdrawn animal has melted beneath the heat of this bird's example. She is extraordinarily affectionate (as most macaw owners will agree) and she clearly understands the difference between displeasure and praise, displaying a unique personality

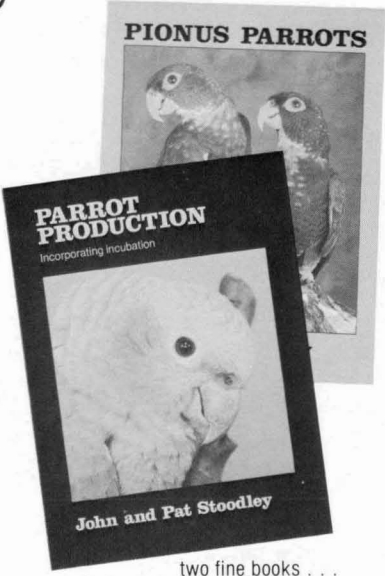
at every turn. She flies freely about from living room to dining room to kitchen, knows her acceptable landing spots and enjoys her involvement in every strange looking human activity. Through this experience my repugnance toward the keeping of birds has transformed itself into concern for their welfare. After training with a professional, I will be ready to free-fly my bird and, as in falconry, my hard work will be repaid in the joy of knowing I have not compromised the dignity of an animal built to fly. My point is, birds can be much more than just a parrot in the window.

We cannot allow the soul-stirring symbolic image of birds to interfere with their survival on earth. Those who would legislate the complete banning of legal importations into the U.S. are blindly subscribing to an irresponsible act. There are individuals in our nation today who have developed successful breeding operations that are phenomenal in one regard—they are private and have sprung up previous to extinction—rather than desperately after the fact. Without continued freedom to acquire more of the ever-threatened exotics, this healthy foresight will be demolished. Those who would ban importation are invited to witness extinction on their TV sets, and balance their pleasure for having saved these animals from the over-exaggerated terrors of their trip to the United States, against the obvious implications for the future. In the future it will be healthy private collections that will be instrumental in reintroducing species back into their environment when the smoke has cleared.⁶

Where there is emotion there is no thought and no reflection. It is important that both sides examine the issue, taking note of details that go beyond mere conjecture or pride, making facts, figures and real knowledge design the game plan. Credentials must be in order before this slightly evangelistic movement capitalizes on a present national hysteria about animals and how they are treated. The accomplishments of many must not be amended because of the excesses or ineptitudes of the few.

FOOTNOTES

1. Museum of Natural History, New York City, New York.
2. Gerald Jennings, Jr. (President and founding father: American Federation of Aviculture).
3. Gerald Jennings, Jr.
4. Smithsonian Magazine, March 1985.
5. Photograph from traveler to South America, Roger Marquette, Tucson, Arizona (breeder of toucans).
6. Gerald Jennings, Jr. ●



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