

# EARTHQUAKE!

## How Our Birds Reacted

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One does not expect catastrophes to occur and certainly one is not truly prepared when it actually becomes a reality. This story is, on one hand, about pet birds which are handled every day belonging to Yvonne and second, a large group of breeding birds belonging to Dale. The combined collection includes over 30 species of parrots, seven species of soft-bills, and one non-native bird of prey. The following shows the reaction and recovery during and since the January 17th Northridge earthquake. Neither of us ever considered such a cataclysmic disaster would occur in our lives.

At 4:31 a.m., we were rudely awakened by the bed violently rocking back and forth, all four posts blasted simultaneously off the floor. There was no warning — when the quake started up it was already shifting the earth so much we couldn't have walked outside. The only way was to crawl, which was what survivors of the Northridge Apartments did, where just under 20 persons were killed or suffocated when the three stories collapsed.

The earth was shaking at such a force it created a monstrous vehement roar outside, analogous to a lion's roar over a microphone, inciting ruination along with an extremely high velocity of wind. To this day, we believe what we heard was the earth's labored protest to that horribly rude interruption. The second I woke up to this noise and unnerving rocking bed, it reminded me of the awfully scary and realistic movie, "The Exorcist." The next second, Dale advised it was an earthquake, which seemed to lessen the severity of it all. We just hung on as if we were riding a bucking bronco.

Dale's home is within 13 miles of the epicenter. Seismologists think the new fault line quake was, in reality, two

earthquakes which occurred at the same time, one being the normal horizontal motion, the other a vertical thrust, thus the reason for the bed being airborne.

Searching our way through the dark for a light source, our legs collided with open drawers, our feet shuffled through broken glass. Books and other objects from shelves cluttered the floor. Dressers in bedrooms sailed across the floor; floor lamps zipped to the opposite end of the rooms and exploded when they hit the wall. We'd recently purchased some opal jewelry in Australia. One of the stones in a necklace shattered from the thrust of being thrown upward during the quake. It was lying in a drawer with plastic combs and curlers.

That day, long lines formed outside supermarkets, trying to force merchants to let them inside to purchase some food and bottled water. Many storefronts and their merchandise had collapsed and immediate warnings that looting would not be tolerated were put over the air waves. Several stores did allow "chaperoned" shopping excursions by flashlights later that day. Some stores were price gouging. They were selling a gallon of water for over \$6 and baby formula for \$8. The radio stations, which were our only contact with the outside world (if you were lucky enough to have batteries), quickly put an end to the gouging by chastising them on the air and requesting people boycott them — at the time and after other stores opened.

The day after the Northridge earthquake, aftershocks numbered over 100 within a 25-hour period. Surprisingly, the pet birds, which are on the back porch, were stone silent during the earth's ghastly shifting. Of course, there was no way we could distin-

guish or have heard any bird noises because of the loud noise created by the earthquake. After the 30 some seconds of the quake, there was a second or two of silence, then the screaming began to be heard from the birds. To them, it must have seemed like a violent entity shook their cages in the dark. The macaws were flying into the sides of their cages, cockatoos screeching with unknown fear, toucans hitting the floor of their cage and bouncing back up to the sides. Obviously, all electricity and other utilities were down. The moment we located a flashlight and went in to check on the birds, we were greeted by blood everywhere. A Crimson Rosella was on her back, in too much shock to upright herself at the moment. Some cockatiels were brought into the bird nursery to keep as warm as possible — they wouldn't quit thrashing. Even the careful movement of their cages freaked them out.

Knowing that aftershocks were on the way, we considered letting the thrashing birds out of their cages. But we didn't because it would have been worse to have a light fixture or a large cage fall on them. They were all in a frenzied state and we could not calm them.

All of the birds had terror in their eyes. It's pathetic when you can't tell your beloved pets they'll be all right and that other temblors would soon come that hopefully wouldn't be as bad. Many birds had hit their heads on the inside of their cages, bloodying them up. Most blood came from wing feathers crashing into the cage as the birds' natural instinct told them to fly away from the danger. Many blood feathers were found on the ground that morning. Thank God nobody bled to death.

Because these birds appeared to be okay (with the exception of being scared out of their minds), we left them with a candle in their room. We immediately went down the hillside to check on Dale's breeder birds. Several pairs were sitting on eggs and would not go near their nestbox for several subsequent days. Many of the eggs were destroyed from the actual shaking of the earthquake itself as they hit the sides of the nestboxes. Others were scrambled as the parent birds tried desperately to climb out of their nestboxes. It was also discouraging as this was the first time for two pairs to

lay eggs. These included a Cape and Meyer's Parrot.

The fertile eggs that were not broken were eventually lost because we did not have a generator to power the artificial incubator. Dale has allowed his birds to incubate and raise their babies for the first two weeks.

Within six weeks from this disaster, Amazons and Rose-breasted Cockatoos should begin laying. We are hoping they will recover from this hair-raising (or feather-raising) experience and go to nest. Dale lost many future valuable chicks from this disaster, just as other breeders in this area did. But Dale is a very positively-oriented man and did not let it depress him (or didn't dwell on it — it was obviously very upsetting). He was ready to move forward and count his blessings that there were no immediate fatalities to the breeders.

In searching through Dale's aviaries, feathers were everywhere from birds losing them in a fright molt and being tossed back and forth in the cages. The earthquake shook and jolted many of the flight cages to the ground, one of which was a pair of African Grays that produced an average of nine-plus chicks annually. The cage door was forced open during the fall, allowing the birds to escape. We could not locate this pair of birds in the barn. There was nothing we could do until the sun began to rise. We returned to the house, hoping there would be no fierce temblor to spook the birds further (or scare me! Dale thinks "earthquakes are exciting" — a true native Californian!).

At sunrise, we searched three hours on foot for the missing pair of grays. Approximately one-half mile away, Dale spotted a small white face which moved near the ground. He quickly ran toward the bird, with a net high in the air. The gray's nail had become stuck inside a small branch which caused her to become entangled in the sagebrush. This made her escape impossible. We were very fortunate to have located her before a predator did. Other searches for the male have been to no avail. Grays do not bond strongly with their mates, so expectations of his return when he hears "her" would be futile (many times you can bring back an escaped bird with one of its kind, especially if they were bonded). Not a day goes by, however, that we don't visually

search for this bird as we drive through the canyon.

The majority of parrots bond strongly to their mates. For example, Tom and Kathleen Baker's ceiling fell on them during the earthquake. At the same time, one of their breeding Green-cheeked Conures escaped. It came back to its mate that day and they were able to retrieve it. An interesting thing occurred during one of the aftershocks a couple days later. Tom actually witnessed his yard sink several inches into the Earth. He said it was a "poof" sound and the neighborhood dropped in a second.

In a natural disaster, almost always the power is shut down and water sources become polluted. Various gas line explosions (some with water mains also breaking simultaneously) created the necessity to shut them down if they weren't already.

Not knowing how many days it would be before the electricity was restored, we didn't want to use up much of the well water which flowed from the storage tank by gravity. The City of Los Angeles advised everyone to boil their water before drinking it, or add eight drops of chlorine bleach per gallon of water. One could not get ice in restaurants the following couple weeks, as they were saving their water for drinking.

Another couple that lives nearer the fault lost a majority of the water out of their in-ground swimming pool. A great wave created by the quake forced the water out, and moved their children's sandbox and other items 12 feet. To a smaller degree, the same thing happened with the birds' water bowls. So no washing of bowls or pouring out of remaining water the next couple days occurred, as we had to ration the water supply.

One loses a great sense of security in the home environment during an earthquake. It's necessary for us to impose a severe test of spiritual strength and courage at a time like this, especially when attempting to calm intelligent birds. They are very capable of sensing our fear, and their own. Dale's Spectacled Owl didn't seem to be bothered by the earthquake at all, but Dale says owls have a relatively small brain and that it is their eyes that make them look wise.

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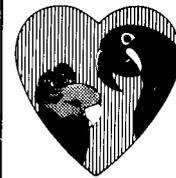
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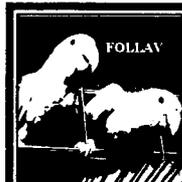
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your home. And all of a sudden you're humbled by a fatalistic act of God . . . the birds obviously felt this way, too, as their cage was no longer a safe and peaceful haven. We observed this when the pet birds would not willingly return to their cage after being let outside to play. Too, the breeders would not go near their nestbox where they spent the majority of every day. A great number of people felt the same way . . . they were afraid to return to their homes after the earthquake, even though they had minimal damage.

The first few evenings the pet macaws were screaming and very stressed in their cage, yet while they were playing in the backyard aviary they seemed fairly relaxed. We saw breeding parrots we *never* see as they are always in the nestbox, but due to their fear of returning to their nest, they were outside their box the first few days after the quake.

We were told by Cal Tech to expect another aftershock within a two-week period, close to the 6.6 magnitude of the original quake. The day of the earthquake, we had two aftershocks which registered 5.5 on the Richter scale; the difference of these two measurements is great. There was one pretty strong temblor approximately 24 hours after the original quake, but mostly there were mild ones through the night. It's more scary when they come at night.

Even though the continuing trembling of the earth is minimal (weeks later at this writing) and lasts only a few seconds, it will not let the birds settle down. Every now and then we get a pretty strong aftershock that lasts awhile. Ten days after the earthquake, we had two 4. and 5. temblors that lasted perhaps 30 seconds. The birds bounce around in their cages at the slightest movement. Even readjusting one of the pet birds' cage, it reminds them of the earthquake. We grab onto the nearest thing, in case it gets worse. Sometimes these temblors are like a ride at a theme park, building up thrust and energy within seconds before blasting away.

By observing many animals, it has been noted that they seem capable of predicting natural disasters prior to them happening. One day we did not receive any temblors and the birds were fairly restful and serene. The next day, the pet macaws were very

nervous and showed stress. We wondered if there was another bad temblor on the way while discussing the birds' behavior. That night, we had two pretty bad shakes, proving this theory.

Most birds are still fearful. Macaws seem to have been affected by it the most. Very few birds ate anything that first day. The macaws didn't eat for three and a half days. They wouldn't even touch sunflower seed. We bribed them with nuts just to get them to start eating. They spent most of the first few days clutched onto the sides of their cages screaming. Normally they spend their time on the back perch and only come to the front of the flights to eat. Grays appeared to be even more frightened the day following the earthquake. Pairs normally found in their nest could be seen together in a top corner, or even hanging from the top wire.

One eclectus hen returned to its nest as a chick had hatched; however, it was not fed or kept warm. We tried to carefully monitor nests the next few days.

A couple of our birds hit their heads so hard on their cage the morning of the earthquake, they were suffering severe trauma. One toucan and an Amazon, in particular, stumble around and act as if they've had a stroke. Dale has seen this occur several times before and some of these birds recover within a few months.

We count our blessings as we realize the extent of harm and damage could have been much greater. Dale's house must be sitting on a huge rock, as others in the canyon sustained far greater damage. Though the earthquake death toll was nothing compared to the deaths occurring during the record cold wave in other parts of the country, the earthquake itself has certainly inconvenienced thousands for months to come. Some major roads were still closed even a month later. Bridges make you feel uncertain going over or under them, when you notice the filled gaps and lengthy cracks in them. Expansion gaps deliberately left in freeway overpasses (usually one inch) have split to several inches wide. Overpasses are suspended in the air with huge sections missing in them. One of the mountains here was raised 15 feet. Thousands of people are still homeless. Even businesses are still closed —

some reopened, starting from scratch as all the contents were demolished.

By March 4th, approximately a month and a half after the earthquake, it is surprising how quickly southern California has begun to recover. This is especially true as roads and many buildings are being restored. Often construction and repairs are done on a 24-hour basis.

Although it is too early to estimate, a few pairs of birds have begun to lay in March, including cockatoos, Amazons and Jardines. The pet birds are back to normal, enjoying their winter baths in the sunshine.

Every part of the country seems to have its natural disasters. This is the second tragedy to happen to captive birds in California in the past six months. The other being, of course, the horrendous fires. At that time, more birds died of inhaling toxins from burned PVC and other plastics than smoke inhalation. It must be extremely difficult for all the aviculturists who lost their collections of birds (and there were many) to think of or to discuss their tragedy. It has been very difficult for us to write about the earthquake. We actually had to leave the word processor a few times and come back to it, as we got goose bumps all over us.

We will never know the extent of damage to our birds and the numbers of babies that will never be because of the distress this has dealt the birds. It has been a very humbling experience, but one that is sure to make us all stronger, even the birds.

Petroleum geologists claim that thrust faults and the folds they form are excellent traps for gas and oil. Maybe instead of purchasing softbills, we should invest in oil rigs (only kidding)!

To all Yvonne's friends and family back home in Missouri who thought she and the birds should have hopped on the first plane *out* of California, we have this to say. Remember where the worst earthquake in the continental U.S. was? It was, comparatively, an 8. quake, which would be 85 times worse than what we had. It was the New Madrid fault in southern Missouri, 1821. It changed the course of the Mississippi/Missouri Rivers forever!

One always thinks disasters will happen to other people but this time it happened to us. ●