

# Politics, Animal Rights, Fear and Ignorance: A Recipe For Extinction

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Imagine how flabbergasted I was to see an entire basement full of cages containing one species of conure, a small parrot-like bird indigenous to Central and South America. There were, literally, hundreds. Pairs, singles and colony cages of colorful yellow and green birds that appeared to be the relatively common variety called Jenday Conures. Having been sworn to secrecy before I was even allowed to enter the aviary, I could not imagine why this breeder wanted to keep a group of Jenday Conures secret.

It all started on one of those kinds of nights when you expected something to go wrong. The phone rang. "Figures," I said. A lawyer/bird breeder friend of mine was calling with a problem. "Here I go again," I mused.

It seems that he had been contacted by a man in his seventies who had heard through friends about this lawyer's interest in laws relating to exotic birds. The lawyer explained that this man was concerned that his birds be cared for, protected and not split up "after he was gone," "Not me," I thought.

The lawyer had been sworn to secrecy (confidentiality I believe lawyers call it) by his client. After talking with his client, he told him that what he needed was not a lawyer, but a reliable aviculturist, someone who was dedicated to birds and had the experience and facilities to care for these birds. "That's me," I laughed, "no money, old reliable."

The old man agreed the lawyer could call me in as a consultant as long as the lawyer promised him that I too would keep secret everything I heard and saw.

I waded through the almost intolerable screaming that was emanating from the breeding area. As I approached the cages, I was stricken by the massive size of these Jenday Conures. Coloring was off. I concluded that they must be some kind of cross-breed – a hybrid. That

might explain the sworn secrecy. The old man stood there beside me with a grin on his face that only magnified my confusion. I moved closer to take a stab at identifying the mysterious birds. Suddenly I felt the blood drain from my head and the skin crawl on my back as I asked, "Are these what I think they are?" The old man laughingly replied with, "That depends. They are, if you think they're Carolina Parakeets." I was speechless, in shock. They were supposed to be "extinct." The man took my arm and led me upstairs.

After returning upstairs where we could talk, my mind was reeling with questions that had to be asked. "How could this be?" "Where did they come from?" "Who...?" I was groping for the right words, the right question. Not knowing what to do next, I asked for a glass of water to buy time to collect my thoughts. The man showed me where to sit and left the room. I drifted into another dimension.

The Carolina Parakeet, the only species of parrot native solely to the United States, became extinct in 1918 when the last member of the species, a captive-bred bird, died in the Cincinnati Zoo. Extinct – extinction is forever?

At one time the Carolina Parakeet had "blackened the skies" of mid-Atlantic America. It was hunted and ruthlessly pursued by farmers as a crop pest. Even naturalists hunted and killed it to study it. But zoos and aviculturists, those who keep and breed birds, didn't keep it or breed it so that it would be preserved. After all, who would have ever thought – extinction! Oh, yes, and our government doesn't allow people to keep birds native to the United States and, although gregarious, they were not to be kept as pets either. There was no interest in breeding or protecting it. They were a problem, a pest, and always would be. That is, until it was too late.

The old man interrupted me and

offered the story of their existence. It appears that his father was one of the very few people who was interested in breeding birds as a hobby way back when. "He started before I was born." Few parrots were available to the hobbyist in those days so his father and a couple of buddies began to trap Carolina Parakeets from the nearby orchards that once surrounded their property. "Why not? If we could shoot 'em, why not trap 'em and keep 'em." His story was so fascinating that I could hardly wait for the next sentence. It was like reliving an era that I could have only read about.

From his story, I gathered that his father and one of his father's friends had managed to trap and cage about 25 wild Carolina Parakeets in the very early 1900s. Knowing that my newly-found friend was in his '70s, "it works," I perceived. As a young boy, he and his brother were charged with the feeding and maintenance of this group of birds, but he was warned, from the earliest time he could remember, that no one could ever know. At first, the birds were set up in one huge flight cage with several nesting boxes provided for the hens to breed. He claims that for many years, eggs were laid, but any chicks that did manage to hatch were killed by other members of the colony. Mortality in the adult birds was very low and he could only recall ever having lost three birds during those first years of keeping them.

He claimed that the other friend of his father who had also maintained a colony of these birds gave the other group of birds to the old man's brother. His brother lived close by. Having seen the impossible for myself, I believed him. He then told me he had received the lawyer's name from a local veterinarian who knew of this lawyer's work on bird issues and on aviculturists' rights issues over the years and trusted him. However, not knowing anything

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about me, he was concerned about whether I would be the best person to continue their work with these birds. He told me that he trusted me, but needed to know more. Flattered, but unsure, I continued to question him about the establishment of the birds themselves.

He told me that, after his father died, he and his brother decided to try to separate the breeding pairs from the remainder of the colony. In order to identify the pairs, he put different colors of wet paint around the entrance hole to each of the nests. When the hen entered the nest, she was marked on the breast by the paint. The male, who often fed the female in the nest, also brushed against this wet paint which provided a visual clue as to which birds were pair-bonded with each other. He then removed the pair from the cage and set them up with their own cage and nest-box. This is how the first successful breedings took place. As we talked more, he cleverly elicited from me the history of my involvement with birds, especially conures. I even told him about a book I had written about breeding birds which enjoyed a good amount of success in avicultural circles and from which I had made no money. It was upon that revelation that he said now he trusted me to do what was best for his birds.

Of the original 25 birds in his colony, twenty-two lived to maturity. Ten pairs were eventually taken from the colony to be set up individually. His brother's flock enjoyed similar success. According to his story, these 10 pairs would each produce three to five chicks each year and would usually raise them to independence. There was a visual difference between the fledglings and the adults. The famous Audubon print of the Carolina Parakeets flashed through my mind. The young birds were mostly green and slowly developed the yellow and orange of the head. This allowed him to remove the young each year without disrupting the breeding pairs. The young birds were placed in the colony cage and he would determine new pairs in the same way as he did originally. As the mates of the breeding pairs died, he would place the single breeders back into the flight cage to allow them to re-pair if they so desired. He estimated that some of the original birds lived to be about 28 or 30 years of age before they died. He and his brother often swapped birds for those who could not find mates within their own

collections.

I was so amazed at what was happening right before my eyes that I could not come up with any additional intelligent questions to ask. We visited his brother who had similar stories to tell, and he showed me a collection of about one hundred more birds. In the following few days, we counted the birds and determined that the total number was about 256 birds between the two of them. In the nestboxes there were eggs and chicks that we did not count. Not exactly sure what to do about all of this, and not sure exactly how legal these birds were, I told him that he was sitting on a potential national treasure. I convinced him to let me call the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ask some "hypothetical" questions.

As it turns out, the Carolina Parakeet was never placed on the U.S. Endangered Species List due to the fact that it is extinct.

"Fish and Wildlife Service," the voice on the other end of the phone said. I asked for someone who handled endangered species questions. I asked the person on the phone, "What rules would apply if a bird believed to have become extinct over fifty years ago was not extinct and was still a living species?" He could not answer me on that point, but made it perfectly clear that, if the species is extinct, no federal laws applied to it whatsoever.

That day I again visited my elderly friend. I explained, "We need to do what is right." But just exactly what was that? Here, right in front of my face, was the rebirth of an extinct species. The world had to know about it. Surely the government and the scientific community would do the right thing. Continued management of the existing populations by responsible aviculturists, "me", with an eye to reintroduction of the species into its former habitat from a part of the offspring. However, the main population must be maintained and preserved by aviculture; otherwise, the risk of disaster was too great. Ornithologists, conservationists, aviculturists, and many others would want to study and work with this bird – so I thought. I had to start somewhere, so I received permission from my friend to tell the ornithological association of the birds' existence first.

Of course, the ornithological association laughed at me and told me that it was obviously a look-a-like hybrid that I was dealing with. When I told them

the story of how these birds came to be preserved over the past 80 years, they refused to believe it. After much persistence, they agreed to "send a man over" to look at them, probably to placate me.

We met the representative from the ornithological association the next day. He arrived late, camera in hand, with a smug story about how often people claim to have seen a Carolina Parakeet or Dodo or Passenger Pigeon, all extinct. He had a real attitude. I immediately told him that I had not claimed to see only one, but hundreds, and I planned to show them all to him. Reluctantly he entered the basement where the birds were being kept. His eyes grew as big as dinner plates as he began to snap off shots on his camera. His questions were exactly like mine. How? What? Where?, etc., etc. He left that day as if he had a very important message he had to deliver before the close of business, and deliver he did. My telephone was ringing off the hook within the hour.

At first, the people who asked to see the birds were genuinely interested in observing them and discussing their future preservation and protection. Slowly the word got out. Federal agents came, bird breeders called, the zoo system wanted to send over an expert. In good faith, we allowed anyone representing a genuine interest to visit. *National Geographic* wanted to do an entire show on captive breeding and the preservation of an extinct species.

However, the genuine excitement, enthusiasm and interest in cooperation quickly turned. It seemed like everyone in the world was suddenly concerned about the well-being of a colony of birds that had become extinct in spite of the fact that it had thrived, left alone in its current environment, for over 80 years. Humane groups printed articles that claimed, "The last Carolina Parakeets were being kept in a dark prison of death." Some animal rights groups were writing letters to try and have the colony confiscated by the government. Other animal rights advocates demanded that the Federal Government remove the birds for distribution to experienced zoos around the country. Eighty plus years of success, thriving and preservation from extinction meant nothing. Twenty animal rights, conservation and humane groups formed an alliance, sued the Fish and Wildlife Service and the owner to require the Fish and Wildlife Service to

confiscate the birds and to enjoin the elderly gentleman from removing them from his premises until the suit for confiscation was decided. Fish and Wildlife agents were stationed outside the homes of the man and his brother as a "precaution!"

The pressure from the many groups forced the old man to make a decision on the disposition of the birds. He had preserved these birds for posterity in hopes of reintroducing them into the wild once, he said, the proper wildlife protection laws were in place and private interest groups were not seeking to force their own agendas down everyone's throat. "Too soon," he lamented. A meeting was called at the Department of the Interior to discuss entering into an agreement with the government for the ultimate goal of the reintroduction of a large group into the forests of western Georgia and rural South Carolina. This is the one area of the habitat that could still support the birds and provide them with the food sources and nesting sites that would be necessary for survival. The meeting was set for Friday, September 28th in Washington, DC. Everyone attended.

Each group that turned out for the meeting wanted a say in determining the fate of the last remaining Carolina Parakeets on earth. Congressional staff also attended this meeting which was hosted by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. A total of 173 people wanted to present their opinion about what should be done with the birds. The USDA sent a number of representatives, as well as every animal rights group I had ever heard of. Farm Bureau representatives, foreign diplomats, the Lieutenant Governor of Georgia, Chiefs of each of the Office of Management Authority, Division of Law Enforcement and Office of Scientific Authority of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, ornithologists, bird breeders, zoo curators, representatives from prestigious animal parks, and a few foreign animal rights organizations were present. The press was calling it, "The Most Highly Attended Government Meeting of the Century." The decades of success of my new found friend's family were lost in the "process."

When the meeting was called to order, the line up of speakers began. Most offered simple remedies like splitting up the birds and placing them

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with zoos. Some of the more off-the-wall groups decided that the colony was inbred and should be destroyed, while others seemed genuinely concerned about doing the right thing. The "bottom line," however it was stated, was that these birds belonged to the old man and his brother and no one really had the right to make his decision for him. Almost three days after the meeting, the word came down from Congress. Congress decided that unless the courts determined the law was different, the "bottom line" was that the birds were owned by the old man and his brother and it was their decision. The spokesman for Congress said, "If this man could keep these birds alive and breed them for over 80 years, he is surely qualified to determine their fate. It was his decision."

Several weeks went by before the announcement was made. Congress was the first to hear, followed closely by the press. A decision had been made by the family to make a number of birds available for reintroduction back into the wild of Georgia and South Carolina. The continuing survival of the population would be

ensured by placing groups of breeding birds with select zoos and private aviculturists experienced with similar species. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, American Zoological Association, the Ornithological Union and the American Federation of Aviculture would form an oversight board.

Newspaper headlines read, "Rightful Owner of Carolina Parakeets Donates Them To The United States Citizens." The Oversight Board was assigned the task of developing the release program. A soft release was agreed upon, which meant that the birds would be provided with large aviaries, food and water in the wild. They could slowly adapt to the wild and return at any time to feed in the security of their old aviaries. It seemed a rather logical, if not perfect, approach to the situation. The main colony would be divided into large breeding groups and slowly distributed to qualified aviculturists and zoological facilities.

Not a week went by before the animal rights groups along with the USDA, the State of Georgia and the Farmer's Union filed a formal complaint with the Congress. To the great shock of many,

it seemed that they did not believe that a feral (wild) population of crop pests should be reintroduced into the wild of any state in this country. This was their position despite the fact that the birds had lived there long before any of the present farmers did. No one, except the aviculturists, the ornithological association and the Fish and Wildlife Service, wanted them released. The fight became heated. Arguments aired in every newspaper and on every television and radio station across the country. Many could not believe the way people were acting over this. We suddenly had a second chance with a species that we had completely annihilated. The conservation and scientific communities shied away from the now seemingly doomed program. This beautiful, extinct – but now living – species was becoming a pariah, let alone a political chess pawn.

The issue became so explosive that Congress washed their hands of it. They issued a formal document that gave the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service total responsibility for the situation.

Then an incredible thing happened. An attorney for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service filed an affidavit in the legal proceedings. It was alleged by the Fish and Wildlife Service and supported by expert statements from individuals in the conservation, ornithological, scientific and zoological communities that the birds, regardless of the fact that they were all bred in captivity in the United States, were species indigenous to the United States and could not be held in private hands. They alleged fear for their security – a euphemism that they might disappear from the old man's home. With the assistance of lawyers for animal rights groups, they found the right judge – and the court agreed, after all it was only a "temporary order" – a confiscation order was issued for all the birds, babies and eggs.

The confiscation was immediate. Government teams had been standing by. The old man, his wife and brother bowed their heads, nodded from side to side and wept.

The birds were removed from their breeding aviaries and placed in a zoo in the northeast which professed that it was only institution in close proximity to the birds with the experience and facilities to care for them. Federal funding was established to house and feed them, but the original pairs were not kept together because the confiscation was done in such a rush. Fertile eggs were



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broken. Some babies were lost. A large number of the birds died shortly after the move due to the stress from the sudden environmental and dietary changes.

The Carolina Parakeet was promptly proposed by the Department of the Interior to be added to the United States Endangered Species List, the Migratory Bird Act, and the Convention in International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna. Two zoos were given small groups to display to the American Public. Breeding programs were encouraged, but few were set up. Zoo budget constraints and space limitations were cited. The government was asked for funding for breeding programs. None could be found. Animal rights, humane, conservation and ornithological groups were asked to fund the breeding programs. All of a sudden their funding had dried up. The old man died before he could see his birds flying free in the wilds of North America. His intentions were good, but the system did not allow for common sense or the very thing for which he had preserved the birds or which he believed would be best for the birds themselves.

Over the course of the next few years, sporadic breeding took place with the remaining birds, but many more died from stress, old age and health problems. One large group was exposed to salmonella, others succumbed to bacterial and viral infections to which they were exposed due to their proximity with other varieties of birds. It seems that in their over 80 years of care with my former friend's family, health problems were minimized due to the fact that they were never exposed to either other birds or people who were exposed to other birds. Prior to removal from their protectors of 80 years, there was little sickness other than due to natural causes. The zoo system tried to encourage the participation of the private sector, but with the suit still pending and the government proposed extensive paperwork, reporting and bureaucracy, no one came forward. The lawsuit lingered. There were too many difficult issues.

Quite ironically, on September 28, a scant few years to the day after the first Carolina Parakeet hearing, the last Carolina Parakeet died again – maybe. Strike two for a system that allows the charismatic and well-funded voice of the inexperienced, fear merchants, ignorant and misguided to influence its

politics and the lives of its constituents.

Epilogue:

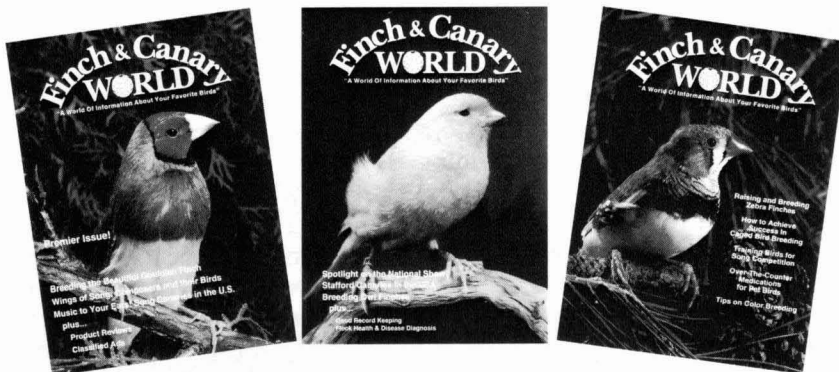
Parts, although not all, of this story are true. You figure out which ones. However, there is a very real possibility that it could happen exactly as written. Other species of beautiful, intelligent birds in foreign countries are being hunted as pests and their habitats are being destroyed. Laws and regulations too numerous to imagine govern the captive breeding potential for these birds. Some foreign countries which condone the destruction of these birds or

their habitats, ironically, do not allow the very birds which are ruthlessly hunted to be exported for breeding or companion animals. Surprisingly, this position is supported by some animal rights and humane groups. Here in the United States, politics and egomania often take priority over genuine issues. Our system has been abused to the point where it no longer works in the way in which it was designed. Democracy has been morally corrupted allowing personal agendas to become the rule, rather than the exception. We hope *that* is not forever. ➤

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