

AFA Goes to Parrot Festival

By Georgia Hayes

Photos by Dennis King



Above: Parrot festival vendor hall.

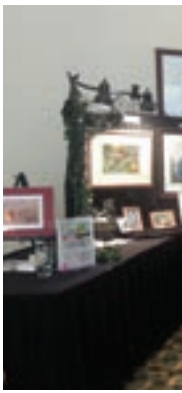
Left: Melanie Allen lights up the pirate party.

Every year, the last full weekend in January, the National Parrot Rescue and Preservation Foundation (NPRPF) throw their annual festival, a huge parrot social, at the Doubletree Inn near the IAH airport in Houston, Texas. So every January snowbirds and sometimes even the birds they keep head south to be entertained and to learn more about the wide world of Aviculture. The festival is an all-inclusive gathering of pet owners, rescue and sanctuary owners, businesses, breeders, conservationists, veterinarians, food and cage manufacturers, pet store owners, and more. Toy makers abound and the raffle is a sight to behold, stretching over six or eight rows of tables throughout a giant hotel ballroom. This raffle is replenished daily at about 4 PM as the winners gather their loot and head back to their rooms. A three day raffle is located onsite as well. Larger items or items of greater value are placed on the three day raffle, but the tickets are all the same price at \$1 each or 25 for \$20.

The raffle may be the big draw for some, but for others it is the camaraderie and the chance to meet up with old friends, or to make new ones. For the vendors, it's a chance to put a face to the products we all see in the industry magazines or online, and a face to face chance to ask questions about them. Also present

are folks who are actively involved with the conservation of many parrot species in the wild. That provides a very unique opportunity to ask the questions that have always plagued us about our birds. Between the behavior consultants, the product vendors, the nonprofit organizations, the conservation biologists, the veterinarians, enrichment specialists, and all the other aviculturists present, no one ever walks away from Parrot Festival feeling unsatisfied.

The AFA has been attending Parrot Festival for the past five years. It is our chance to exchange ideas with the rescue folks and to talk to the many diverse specialists in aviculture; and there are many AFA members in attendance who we can brainstorm with too. The AFA Watchbird Journal has won several publication awards and is one of our common communication tools. All facets of the industry are invited to submit articles and advertise in this popular publication. So at Parrot Festival, when we meet someone who does something really interesting in aviculture or conservation, we try to solicit an article or two as well. All in all, Parrot Festival is a great place to “get some business done”, or to pick up the AFA tee shirt you missed, or the coffee mug with your favorite bird on it.



L to R: Matt Baird, Robin Shewokis, Steve Duncan, Lyrae Perry's art display, Another happy raffle winner, Round table discussion.

So what did you miss this year by not attending Parrot Festival? Take a look at the list of featured speakers from this past festival for one: Matt Baird, Nyla Copp, Steve Duncan, Rebecca O'Connor, Barbara Heidenreich, Caroline Efstathion, Rick Weigel, Carlos Bonilla Ruz, Claudia Cinta Magallon, and April Blazich. If you had been there with the rest of us, you would have heard fascinating talks on the conservation of the Military Macaw in Mexico, use of insecticides around your birds, perfectly training the imperfect parrot, Australian aviculture, the wild parrots in Southern California, growing and gathering plants and seeds for you and your birds, undesirable sexual behavior in Kakapo, a brief history of parrots, and more. Some of the most important communication takes place face to face with the speakers, usually in the vendor hall or social rooms.

You probably missed the party on Friday night where Robin Shewokis and Melanie Allen dressed up like wenches and pirates and took us through a game that had everyone on their feet screaming and yelling for doubloons (Debbie Goodrich screamed the loudest). The Friday night party was a huge success. Robin secretly split all the couples up and made them sit on different teams. Then the slide show began quizzing the audience about their avicultural experiences. Prizes were bleak, but the fake gold coins, flung perilously around the room by Melanie Allen, became the collectible loot.

Then Saturday began the search game where you were given a sheet of tough questions and had to ask all the vendors, staff and attendees for the answers. Even Google didn't know all the answers. Some of the questions were really tough and there was

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no way you could get the answer without going to the source. I understand next year's search game will include cheating, bribes and even a liar or two. That should make completing the questions more challenging. Thankfully at 6:30 PM cocktail hour began, and it helped to usher in the big Parrot Festival banquet and auction. The night ended rather late, but that did not stop some of the die-hards from continuing into the wee hours of the morn (rumor has it Andy Sanford's room was full till about 2 AM).

By Sunday everyone was familiar with just about everyone else in attendance. At the very least, bribing each other for answers to the secret questions had us all talking to each other. The speaker slate finished with a question and answer session comprised of all the speakers and invited guests, always popular with festival attendees. Late Sunday afternoon the festival begins to come to a close, so we had to run back to all the vendors to buy up the things we had put off till the last minute. People were dragging perches, cages, toys, shirts, artwork, and other bootie down the center isle and off to their rooms. Before you knew it, the day was shot and the vendor booths began to close up. This marked the time for the big three day raffle and the pirate's chest giveaway.

After the raffles, the pirate chest of bootie is given to the person who's correctly completed treasure map is drawn from all the returned maps. The chest is a main attraction at Parrot Festival, as it is chock full of products donated by the vendors and exhibitors.

Parrot Festival is the annual fund raiser for NPRPF. The funds raised provide health care for fostered parrots, a scholarship

donation for a Texas A&M University avian vet student, as well as help for other rehoming organizations or disaster relief when needed and various conservation projects.

Parrot Festival successfully brings all branches of the avian community together to help improve understanding and communication. What better way to advance aviculture for all of us and the birds we care about.



Above: Parrot toys abound.
Left: Caroline Efstathion, MS

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