

Personality...

or

The Trouble with Harry

by Sherry Rind
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Whenever people ask me to recommend a good place to buy an exotic bird, I urge them to contact local breeders through one of the Puget Sound area bird clubs. Generally I do not recommend pet stores. Why? In the first place, a buyer who wants to shop at a pet store will find a responsible one through the bird club. In the second place, too many pet stores sell wild-caught birds without regard to whether or not those birds will become good pets.

When I was a child I fell in love with parrots after meeting only two. Both, belonging to the families of friends, were kept in cages full-time. One was a double yellow head; the other might have been a greencheek. I was warned to keep my fingers away from the cages, to watch from a distance. And watch I did. I loved their movements, their expressions, their color. Yet I could have no interaction with them nor could they with any other living creature. They were wild-caught Amazons that had "turned vicious" or that their owners had given up training. Such birds often live short lives, their health run down by malnutrition, lack of exercise, and unclean conditions. Often they are sold and resold to unsuspecting novices.

Both my male greencheeks proved to be unsatisfactory pets. My first was a gift purchased from a nearby pet store. He is still one of the handsomest greencheeks I have ever seen, without the chunkiness of some with his colors bright and of high contrast. He keeps his feathers sleek and shiny. I named him Pico.

A check-up two days after he arrived revealed that Pico had an upper respiratory infection. The pet shop refused to take any responsibility (I never shopped there again and I still warn people against that place). Pico's first ten days of contact

with me consisted of his having to be caught and wrapped in a towel while I forced antibiotics down his throat. I have heard that some birds respond well to this process and at the end of it are accustomed to being handled. But Pico was, and is, a shy bird. Despite the gentlest handling and months of careful training, he never lost his fear of people.

He learned to step onto my hand and I could carry him around the house. He never bit. But he cowered down every time I approached his cage. All he wanted was the company of another bird and he said so every morning and evening. Who would be happy with a pet so obviously unhappy?

My solution was to buy another of the same species. I found Pedro in a pet shop that did not normally sell birds other than budgies and cockatiels. They were selling him for a friend whose wife did not like him. He, too, was wild-caught but younger than Pico. I wanted Pedro for his friendliness. In the pet shop he was kept in a cage high up and away from people but he stepped down to see whoever approached his cage — unless he was eating a grape which, of course, would take precedence over any mere human being.

When I introduced Pico and Pedro after a period of quarantine, Pico immediately shut up and has barely uttered a sound since. Now the only way I can get my birds to do Amazon flock calls in the morning is to talk very excitedly to them for several minutes, and it is extremely difficult for me to get that excited in the morning. After getting them all riled up, I leave. If they are in the mood, one or two will utter the ear shattering, spine breaking sound that I love. (Some people will do anything to rouse a lazy spouse in the morning.)

Pedro, it turned out, was too

friendly and fearless. He is a biter and the more mature he got, the more he bit. Articles and books tell me this is often characteristic of Amazons. Pedro, then, was only being a healthily aggressive male; but he was too unpredictable to remain a pet. He could easily have ended up like the parrots I knew in childhood.

To me, the solution was obvious. My birds needed mates. Unfortunately, some people in the same situation sell the bird to some other poor sucker or keep it for show, like a potted plant. People who continue to foist birds like Pico and Pedro on an unsuspecting public only provide ammunition to those who seek to institute laws like the infamous New York bird law. Such birds should only be sold to breeders. If all bird owners joined the AFA and their local bird clubs, they would know this!

I do not mean to say that no wild-caught bird becomes a good pet. My search for mates netted me a mail order bride whom I named Pita, to the dismay of my vet and his record keeping system. Her month of quarantine became several months because I enjoyed her company so much. She was, and is, the nicest, gentlest, sweetest bird I have ever met, including hand-raised birds. She tamed readily, greeted me with crooning noises, loved to have me scratch her head, never bit, and appreciated all my cooking. I, who disdain baby talk for both animals and babies, found myself addressing her as "Sweetie-bird." Handing her over to Pico definitely cost me some heartache.

Not long ago I encountered a situation in which an "unsuitable" pet had the good fortune to live with a suitable owner. Similar in personality to Pico and even more lugubrious, Harry is a wild-caught greencheek. For all his bright red, blue, and green feathering, Harry is a colorless bird. During his morning active period, he climbs up to his cage top perch and stretches his wings. Then he rests. Watching him is truly, as my husband unfairly claims about my Amazons, like watching paint dry.

I took care of Harry for a month while his owner, Irene, was out of town. She had been worried about him because he spent all day alone in her apartment while she worked long hours. She talked to him and scratched his head in the morning, then he was on his own. She thought he would be happy in my house with

other birds, a dog, a baby, and day long action.

Irene told me that Harry is a little slow to warm up to people, so I should go slowly when accustoming him to me. He would step onto a person's hand and go for a walk around the house but he startled easily and did not like going far from his cage or stand. He liked to be scratched on the head. He was a picky eater. She had spent a year offering him broccoli before he ate any and now it was about the only vegetable he would eat.

Now you will start to see why Harry is a lucky bird. We all know some birds take a very long time to try a new food but how many of us really, truly, keep trying, especially with a bird that shows little activity or emotional attachment? Irene did. Not only did she offer the broccoli nearly every day; she also steamed it for him. He liked it better that way. She also managed to introduce him to dog biscuits, the most expensive variety.

When Harry came to me, I looked

forward to the challenge of getting him to eat my corn-beans-rice mix and/or pellets. I used the same methods I had used on other birds but was not successful. In my house Harry would not even eat his broccoli. Maybe I did not cook it right?

Harry's routine was to climb out of his cage in the morning and spend time on an outer perch. Irene told me Harry easily climbed up but did not know how to get back down. A person would have to put him back inside the cage. Not a creative thinker, Harry. In my house Harry soon learned to climb down by the simple expedient of having him on the perch, the food in the cage, and me in another room taking care of other critters.

Harry stayed in my study. He had my company every morning and could listen to household sounds the rest of the day without having the main traffic right in front of his cage. I gave him the foods Irene gave him. I spoke nicely to him and let him get used to me slowly. Still, Harry was not happy. He did not eat well. If a

parrot could look sad, he did. Irene and I had to conclude that he preferred the peace and quiet of his home to the noise and activity of my house. He was happy sitting around doing nothing.

How many people want a bird like that? How many people would give him the patience and devotion Irene gives him? Both quiet, gentle types, they are well suited. Irene bought Harry from a pet shop whose owners spent time talking with her about herself, her work, the kind of person she was, the kind of bird she wanted. Then they recommended Harry. Unfortunately, that pet shop is no longer in business.

These bird stories have happy endings but you need only read the Birds for Sale listings in a newspaper's classified ads to know that many do not. You can be sure most of the exotic birds listed were not domestically raised. Nor were their personalities screened for appropriateness as pets before they were sold from pet stores. In too many cases a bird in the hand is actually a pig in a poke. ●

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