

# Macaws as Teaching Assistants at the Washington Zoological Park

by Lynne Page  
Olympia, Washington

Everyone who cares about birds is one day driven to become an educator encouraging others to value the wondrous nature of birds, to understand the importance of conservation to protect birds in the wild, and to appreciate the needs of birds in captivity. The Washington Zoological Park in Issaquah, Washington, is dedicated to teaching these very lessons. The instruction is unforgettable, thanks in large part to the zoo's impressive teaching assistants, the macaws.

Unlike many zoos, the Washington Zoological Park (WZP) is primarily a teaching institution. Every visitor receives personal attention and guidance from the network of docents who relate information about the animals and environmental values and answer questions. This emphasis on education is not surprising as the zoo was founded in 1972 as a teaching laboratory for a neighboring private

school. Now the zoo is governed by the Zoological Society of Washington. Funding is from society memberships, donations, zoo admissions and fundraising. No government funds or tax money is received and the staff is largely devoted volunteers.

The Director of the Washington Zoological Park, Peter Rittler, identifies two distinct aims within the zoo's mission to increase public knowledge of psittacines. The first aim is to enhance the public's understanding and appreciation of parrots in the wild as well as the effect of humanity's activities on the birds. Visitors to the zoo may arrive never having heard of the Hyacinthine Macaw or having seen only a picture of this largest of all macaws. Before leaving, they will meet Payaso, a young Hyacinthine who loves to be held and may be

caught napping with one foot clutching a few wing feathers as a "security blanket." Now Payaso's "students" will be touched more deeply when they learn that Hyacinthine Macaws are endangered. Perhaps they will even take specific action to help protect the species and its habitat.

The second aim of the zoo's educational efforts regarding psittacines is to improve the care of parrots in captivity, a concern rarely addressed by other zoos. In common with other zoological institutions, the Washington Zoological Park does discourage the keeping of pet parrots. Mr. Rittler expresses this view by saying the birds remain wild animals and, as children of the wild, belong in their native habitats. The WZP parts company with most other zoos by going beyond that fundamental principle to recognize that parrots have been kept as pets throughout history, are now kept in large numbers, and will continue to be prized as pets.

Believing that all birds, wild and captive, deserve a high quality of life, the zoo governors seek to improve the care of pet birds through education. An exhibit is being built to present nutritional guidelines for feeding pet parrots and to display examples of minimum housing. By making realistic suggestions, the zoo staff hopes to encourage pet owners to upgrade each aspect of their birds' care. For example, Mr. Rittler notes it would be ineffective to ask every pet owner to provide the ideal accommodation of a large aviary for each bird. People who care about their birds but have underestimated their needs may, however, be motivated by this exhibit to buy a considerably larger cage.

Four years ago, the zoo realized it could best accomplish its two-pronged educational mission as to psittacines by specializing in one genus. Macaws were chosen to represent all parrots because of their beauty and intelligence and because people

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unfamiliar with birds easily learn to identify macaws.

When the decision to specialize was made, other parrots already resided at the zoo, including African Grey Parrots, a Moluccan Cockatoo, and Double Yellow-headed Amazons, two of which are of the Tres Marias subspecies. Mr. Rittler vows that all these birds have a permanent home at the WZP because "they are as much a part of us as our arms, or legs, or noses." Watching him walk through the grounds, this is easy to believe, as each parrot reaches out to him for a treat or caress.

Director Rittler points out that this focus on macaws is highly unusual among zoos. One reason may be that some zoos choose not to maintain birds well represented in captivity. The WZP collection includes macaws common as pets (such as the Blue and Gold Macaw and Scarlet Macaw) as well as less common ones (such as the Hyacinthine and Red-fronted). The WZP's immediate goal is to have all but the rarest macaws, such as the Lear's. Some day Mr. Rittler hopes to include even the rarest species in the zoo's collection. Currently, the zoo has Hahn's, Illiger's, Yellow-collared, Red-fronted, Military, Blue and Gold, Scarlet, Green-winged, and Hyacinthine Macaws. Because the intent is to educate people about all macaws, and all these species exist in the wild, the view of the zoo's governors is that it is irrelevant that large populations of some of these species exist in captivity. As a result, the zoo now has the largest macaw collection on the West Coast between the Canadian border and the San Diego Zoo, and expects one day to have the most complete macaw collection in the country. Before that day comes, the zoo may well have one of the largest macaw signs in the nation. Soon to be erected, the sign will identify all macaw species, give a capsule description, and state the status in the wild of each species (threatened or endangered, for instance).

In regard to the care of captive birds, part of the zoo's teaching is by example. The zoo has a manual setting out in detail the institution's methods for meeting the three basic needs of birds in captivity: nutrition, sanitation, and activity. The diet is a carefully planned mix of pellets, large nuts, vegetables and fruit. (The zoo grows some of its

own produce, including apples.) By following the manual, every staff member knows exactly what the birds are to be fed each day. (If it's Tuesday, it must be yams.) If an idea for improvement is proposed, the manual must be changed before the innovation is instituted. This way, the manual always reflects actual practice so no one need guess what was done the day before. The same attention to detail is evident in the sanitation protocols.

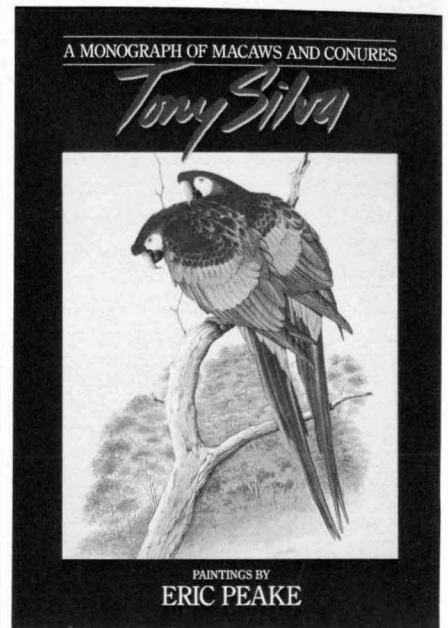
None of the information regarding the zoo's procedure for bird care is secret. Mr. Rittler states emphatically that there should be no place for secrets when the birds can benefit from the sharing of information.

The housing of the parrots falls into two categories, one for the paired "exhibit" birds and one for the unpaired "show" birds. The "exhibit" birds are housed in single pairs in indoor/outdoor enclosures. The indoor sections have automatically controlled light and heat to keep the birds comfortable year around. The zoo staff does not believe birds should be subjected to extreme temperatures even though they may be able to survive such conditions. The interior floors are covered with clean paper changed daily. The wood perches, indoor and out, are soft untreated pine to promote chewing. Because wood is difficult to disinfect effectively, all wood perches are replaced twice a week. (Super chewers may get new perches even more often.)

The zoo does not emphasize breeding of the parrots as it is a teaching facility whose aim is to save wild populations through education rather than to increase captive populations. Nonetheless, the paired birds are provided all they need to breed if they choose to do so. Several pairs do produce young regularly, while living in full view of the public.

Before the decision to specialize in macaws was made, the zoo performed a fascinating experiment in colony breeding Moluccan Cockatoos. The experiment demonstrated that the nearly miraculous may be achieved when effort, resources and creativity are directed toward meeting the needs of captive birds. Unfortunately, it also demonstrated that a factor which seems minor to humans may undo such achievement.

The zoo staff began the colony-



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breeding effort by releasing a flock of Moluccan Cockatoos into a large indoor/outdoor aviary, allowing the birds to choose their own mates. After the birds had paired up, the staff selected the three best pairs and removed the others. (In retrospect, the staff now believes this was an error. Keeping five or six pairs would have allowed the colony to suffer the loss of a pair or two and still survive as a colony.)

The six birds were then kept together in the spacious habitat for six years, without nest boxes. During this time, the pairs became well bonded and the flock was harmonious.

The flock was then moved to an aviary with a "nesting condominium." This second aviary consisted of a common outdoor flight and an indoor area divided into three sections. Each indoor section had an opening to the common area with a sliding door which could be opened or closed from outside the aviary. Each section, or "condo," also had perches, food and water bowls and a nest box. One pair was placed into each indoor "condo," with the doors to the outdoor common area closed. The birds were then allowed access to the common area one pair at a time. While one pair was allowed freedom to explore the outdoor flight and return to its inner "condo," the other two pairs were closed into their indoor sections. This trained each pair to return to its specific unit of the "condo." For about six months, this training routine was followed.

After several months, the time came to release all three pairs simultaneously. As the staff had hoped, the flock interacted peacefully and each pair returned to its own nesting "condo" without disturbing the others. The pairs did not fight with each other and no male attacked his mate as too often happens with captive cockatoos. The plan for colony breeding Moluccan Cockatoos was on schedule and proceeding smoothly.

At this point, the zoo accepted the donation of a beautiful handraised Moluccan youngster who, sadly, was a neurotic screamer. They housed the bird well away from the colony, out of sight of the established flock.

Unfortunately, the sound of the screaming young cockatoo could not be kept from the other birds. Immediately the flock became nervous and

fighting soon broke out. One of the birds had to be removed when it suffered a toe injury inflicted by a flock member. After two days of treatment, the injured bird was sufficiently recovered to be returned to the flock. To the shock and disappointment of the staff, the flock would not accept the bird. Within a few days, another bird was injured and again could not be returned after treatment. The peaceful colony had disintegrated.

All three pairs were sent to other institutions where each bred within months.

The result of years of work was unraveled by the screams of one unhappy bird. That bird, by the way, is now the only cockatoo held by the Washington Zoological Park. He has become a well-adjusted and much beloved member of the zoo family.

This cockatoo has joined the zoo's "show" birds, unpaired birds who are placed during the day where visitors can have close encounters with the parrots. Some of these birds are housed in eye-level cages, while others stay on open perches. These birds' wings are clipped, but a zoo staff member stays in attendance at all times for the safety of the birds and the visitors. Of course, each parrot demands a share of this lucky staff member's attention. The open perches, designed by zoo staff, rotate around an anchored center pole so they can be adjusted to supply more or less sun to the birds as conditions warrant. At night, all of the "show" birds sleep in cages inside rooms set aside for them.

Soon at last some of these "show" birds will be earning the title. A small stage is being built for these birds to perform. As with all other zoo projects, the goal is education. The aim of the show will be to increase the public appreciation of the intelligence and physical abilities of parrots. This will be another way for the zoo to demonstrate the appropriateness of the parrots' nickname, "The Flying Primates." Like primates, parrots must be mentally and physically active to be healthy, so the show will also be planned to provide entertainment for the birds, as well as the audience.

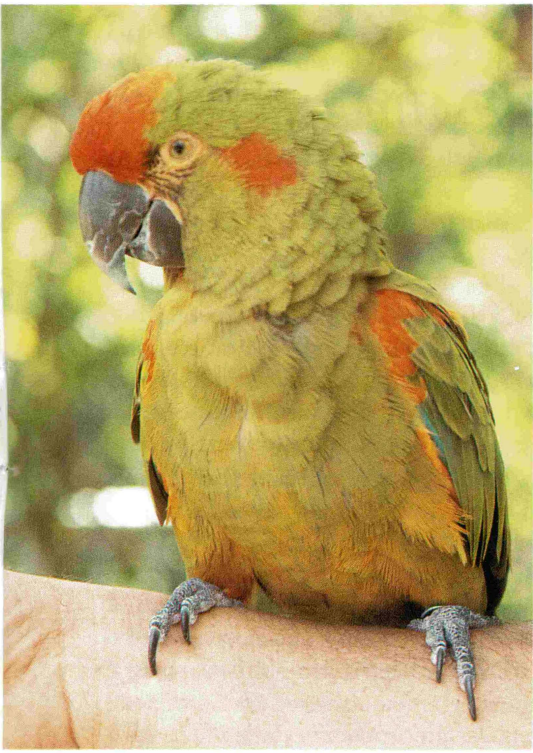
In addition to this small stage for the bird shows, the zoo will soon have a larger 260-seat open-air wildlife theater for its many educational programs. People who wish to become volun-

teers, or who are simply deeply curious about zookeeping, may attend four- or six-week sessions of the "Zoo School." Those with a specific interest may choose individual lectures from an intriguing menu of subjects such as "All About Feathers," "Guenons, the Old World Monkeys," "World of Macaws," and "What is Veterinary Medicine?"

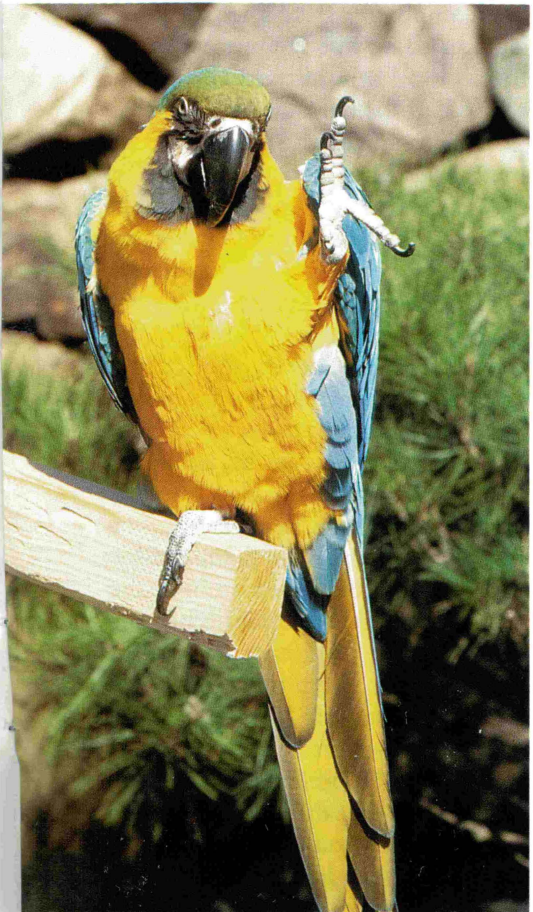
Zoo visitors who are motivated by the zoo's teachings to take better care of their own pets will want to visit the Zoological Society of Washington store on their way out. Members can buy, at cost, premium quality food for a variety of pets from dogs to parrots, as well as disinfectants, vitamins, toys, cages and more. The zoo makes no profit on the store, which is staffed by volunteers. The purpose of the enterprise is simply to encourage people who might have a limited budget to give their pets the best.

The zoo constantly strives also to provide the best for the animals in its own care. While justifiably proud of its present housing, the zoo plans to build new habitats as innovations come to light and more funding is available. Projects for next year include the construction of a huge aviary in which a colony of macaws will spend all but the winter months. (The birds will be moved to more protective enclosures for the cold, stormy season.) This aviary will be designed to allow visitors to experience the glory of macaws in full flight. A second special aviary is also planned for Hyacinthine Macaws.

While the macaws alone are worth more than the admission price to bird-loving visitors, parrots are not the only birds in the zoo. There is also an impressive variety of pheasants, swans, diving and perching ducks, ratites, geese (including the Hawaiian Nene, saved from extinction by captive breeding), and cranes. Mr. Rittler points out that most African Crowned Cranes seen in zoos have been pinioned (surgically rendered permanently flightless) so they can be allowed to wander or be kept in roofless pens. The Washington Zoological Park's flock of fully-flighted African Crowned Cranes exhibits behavior very different from that of pinioned birds. With their wings intact, the cranes are able to perform their attention-getting courting behaviors, as they would in the wild.



This lovely female Red-fronted Macaw is a favorite of the zoo's docents.



Blue and Gold Macaw Chiquita has developed a unique beauty queen-style wave which she bestows on all visitors. The zoo wants to include all macaws in its collection, even those commonly kept as pets, such as the Blue and Gold exemplified by Chiquita.

In addition to the birds, the zoo is home to a number of hooved animals (Siberian Reindeer, Lowland Nyala, Alpaca, Formosan Sika, and Mediterranean Mouflon), Guenons (a type of primate) and felines, including cougars. The zoo will soon complete a nursery and the related facilities allowing it to offer refuge to 16 orphaned or injured cougars unable to be returned to the wild.

To complete its ambitious projects, the Washington Zoological Park always welcomes monetary donations and applications for membership in the Zoological Society of Washington. The zoo must decline most offers of birds, but will consider accepting certain macaws: Hahn's, Illiger's, Red-fronted, Military, Blue-throated, Buffon's, Hyacinthine, Red-bellied, Lear's and Glaucous. Mr. Rittler assures potential donors that accepted birds will receive the best of care. Anyone wishing more information about making a donation or becoming a member of the Society may write to: Mr. Peter A. Rittler, Washington Zoological Park, 19525 S. E. 54th, Issaquah, WA 98027. ●



Payaso, a young Hyacinthine Macaw, gives visitors a close encounter with an endangered species.

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