

Your Birds And Your Money Where Should They Go?

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Twenty years ago there were no rescue centers or sanctuaries for captive psittacine birds in the United States. When someone grew tired of their birds or simply could not keep the birds any longer they were sold or taken in by kind souls, who did their best to care for the birds without expecting financial remuneration. About 10 years ago parrot rescue centers and sanctuaries began appearing all over the United States. Many became 501(c) (3) charities. At first I was delighted for the homeless birds and even made donations to these organizations. However, my delight was soon replaced by cautious skepticism when I was approached by a sanctuary looking for donations and my endorsement. It quickly became obvious that they were breeding birds for profit and were using their charitable organization status as a way to increase their earnings. When I asked for a financial report they refused, even though all 501(c) (3) charities must provide a financial report when it is requested. From that point forward, I told all the parrot rescue organizations and sanctuaries that approached me for donations that, I would not be making any monetary contributions until they set some standards and established certified facilities. One good attempt at certification was made and failed and another attempt has not produced what I consider acceptable results.

Most rescues and sanctuaries are born out of a great love for birds and good intentions. Although, the ideals are lofty the ability to carry them out is almost always lacking. The usual scenario is that a couple wants a parrot or has just acquired one or two birds. They develop a reputation in their area as the "bird people." Soon they are offered other peoples' unwanted birds and the population in their home increases. Eventually the size of the flock is so large and the rescuers are so understaffed that, the birds need to be rescued from the rescuers. Bird keepers overall seem to have a collection mentality and an even greater tendency toward animal hoarding than other animal lovers. I seldom meet people with one bird. Those who keep birds as companions normally have at least four birds. It is not unusual for them to have 15 or more. Breeders with fewer than 100 birds are considered to have very small aviaries. Rescue centers often have 300 or more birds and one full time person trying to care for all the birds.

It is regrettable that many rescue centers and sanctu-

aries come about by accident. There is a failure to develop a plan for the future during their conception. There is no doubt that rescue centers and sanctuaries are needed. Some birds simply do not make good companions or good breeding birds. Although, some birds with major behavioral issues can be rehabilitated, yet this will require extraordinary patience, knowledge, and perhaps years of commitment. Birds that are too old to breed and individuals that are known to kill and mutilate their mates are not welcomed in most aviaries. Many species are so commonly bred that breeders often have an abundance of a particular species and taking on more would be a burden for them. Yet, these birds exist and they deserve to live a comfortable life.

We realize that due to the longevity of the species we keep, there is likelihood that our birds will outlive us. If we are responsible then we are contemplating what will become of our birds when we can no longer care for them. If we are expecting a certain standard of care for our birds then it is unreasonable to expect anyone to provide this service for free. Controlling the care of our birds when we have become feeble or have passed away may seem impossible. Provisions should be made for, food, veterinary examinations, toys, and housing. These arrangements must be made while we are still healthy.

When searching for the correct person or facility for your birds consider the following:

There are sanctuaries that keep birds without the intentions of ever placing the bird in a home as a pet. If your birds are elderly or handicapped, if you want to be certain that the flock is kept together or you have one very crabby bird, then a sanctuary may be the right place for your birds. If your birds crave human interaction then consider placing your birds with a friend, relative, or a rescue/adoption organization that will re-home your birds. The rescue organization you choose should have a good reputation and should assure you that they will periodically check on your birds. Ask them how many birds they have placed and what the success rate is for the birds they have re-homed. Find out how they determine who will be allowed to adopt birds from them and what criteria they use to determine if the adoption has been successful. If an adoption has failed what protocols do they use to retrieve the birds and what will be done with the birds at this point? These rescue/adoption

services may be provide by local bird clubs.

If your birds are young, healthy, and rare or show a strong desire to procreate then consider a reputable breeder. Breeders should be evaluated with the same careful scrutiny that you would apply to a rescue organization or a sanctuary. Ask for references and talk to the breeder's veterinarian. If your bird is rare, the breeder should have succeeded in breeding that species or a very similar species. Is the facility clean? Are the flights large and roomy? Will the birds be provided with a nutritious diet? How will the chicks be reared and what will become of them? What will become of your bonded or proven pairs if their mates die? If your single bird is paired what will happen if your bird's mate dies? If your single birds will not pair bond, what will become of your birds?

The primary goal of all rescues or sanctuaries should be to provide a healthy atmosphere for all their charges. Therefore, their first objective should be to build a state-of-the-art quarantine facility. In recent times more than one rescue center has allegedly suffered major outbreaks of fatal and contagious diseases. Anyone acquiring a new bird has a responsibility to quarantine. Quarantine is an even greater responsibility for those who have been entrusted with someone's dear lifetime companion. As people grow older and cannot care for their birds, they place these birds with others that they feel will cherish their birds. A lack of quarantine and good medical upkeep violates this trust. Do not leave your birds with anyone who is not providing adequate quarantine.

It is unwise to leave your birds with anyone without seeing their facility. It is important that the facility is clean and that the birds they keep appear healthy and hopefully happy. When researching a sanctuary ask for references and check out the references. The facility should have at least two veterinarians, so that one of the

veterinarians will be available in an emergency. Sanctuaries need a large staff due to the nature of the birds in there care. I recommend two resident full-time care givers and one part-time worker if there are 30 birds or less. Additional part time personnel will be required in larger sanctuaries so that the ratio of birds to part-time workers is never more than 30 to 1.

When interviewing the people who will care for your birds, make certain that they are knowledgeable about the species of birds you have. They should be aware of and able to satisfy the different requirements of each species they keep. A solid background and knowledge about handling behavioral problems is essential. An evacuation plan in the event of a disaster is imperative. They should know the signs of illness and how to detect them. During this interview they should never dismiss your concerns. You must feel confident that they will continue their avian education and stay current on all new developments in avian medical care and diet. If they are attending conventions and lectures on a regular basis, then at least you will know that they are interested in maintaining their education in avian matters.

Another question to ask is the extent to which they will go to save a bird at the facility. When will they decide that no more money can be spent on an individual? Sad as it may be, there must be a cutoff point to prevent the organization from going bankrupt and keep all the other birds from suffering due to the condition of one individual. Hopefully you will have made financial arrangements for your birds and outlined how much money will be spent on each individual.

Each and every one of us realizes that we will not live forever, even if on some level we deny our mortality. However, many of us do not realize that we may burn out doing exactly what we love. Consequently, many rescue facilities do not have a plan for the possibility that they may not be able to carry

on. Any place that takes in birds must have plans for the eventuality that the main proprietor will die or become unable to maintain the facility. If your birds are important to you, you will ask about the continuing operation of the facility when the founders are no longer able to continue with their work. The founders must have a vision for the continuation of their sanctuary. Ask to see a financial statement from any 501 (c) (3) charity.

Caring for birds can be costly. If you want to insure that they will be properly cared for according to your wishes you must make arrangements to provide financially for your birds. If possible, consult with a lawyer who specializes in pets and estates. Your will may not be executed precisely as you stipulated. It is possible for a judge to overturn your will at the insistence of family members who feel that you are eccentric or incompetent and the money left for your birds is extravagant. If you

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keep records that clearly indicate how much money you have spent on feeding, housing, providing toys, and veterinary care, it will be more difficult for anyone to claim that you are providing your bird with unreasonable and extravagant financial support. Money should be disbursed to the care giver on a monthly or weekly basis and not in a single large sum. A third party must periodically check on your birds to ascertain that your money is being spent according to your wishes. All birds should be identifiable, perhaps by a microchip, and medical records should be sent to the third party. Additional funds should be made available if they are needed. In the event that your bird dies, the establishment should not continue to receive money for that bird. Unethical persons may take very poor care of the birds, hoping the birds will die so that they can collect the entire inheritance. Any remaining funds should be donated to another worthy charity or project. Have a plan B for your birds. If the third party were to find that the establishment is no longer maintaining their original high standards then your birds can be quickly transferred to another location. You should have more than one place in mind for your birds.

It is unpleasant and disturbing to think about dying or becoming so feeble that we can no longer care for our birds. Yet, this is a reality we must all deal with or else we will have no control over what happens to our birds and our birds will be the ones to suffer. At this time there are very few establishments that meet the criteria I have outlined.

Changes will take place if we express our desires and are insistent. By bringing these issues into the light, good people with solid gold hearts will listen and try to create the right situation for all birds that may lose their homes. ❖

Photo by Sheldon Dingle



At the 2004 Convention, Dr. Benny Gallaway, left, thanked Dave Salmon, representative of the Masuri company, for supporting the American Federation of Aviculture.