

Celebrating the Love of Flight

Story by Daniel Sigmon, Photographs by Jorge Prato

Parrot Festival comes but once a year, so says the publicity for the 11th annual convention at the DoubleTree Hotel near the Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston, Texas. The conference is always held on the last full weekend of January, which happened to be Jan. 28–30 this year. What began just a few years ago under a tent outside during a rare cold snap has become rich conference hosting speakers from all over the world. The Parrot Festival is truly unique because of its eclectic blend of speakers. It has become the one place that mixes voices from all walks including: breeders, conservationists, rescue organizations, behaviorists, veterinarians, researchers, animal trainers, nutritionists, and pet industry powerhouses like Rolf C. Hagen. It's a little bit of AFA, ASA, AAV, and a bird mart all rolled into one. No birds are for sale or on display, only products and the like.

Speakers for the 2011 Parrot Festival included: Dr. Jeleen Briscoe, VMD, ABVP (Avian); the Rev. LoraKim Joyner, DVM; Barbara Heidenreich, animal trainer; Dr. Susan Clubb, ABVP (Avian); Kashmir Csaky, behaviorist and breeder; Dr. Walt Frey, breeder; Nancy Speed, breeder; David N. Phalen, DVM, Ph.D., ABVP (Avian); M. Scott Echols, DVM, ABVP (Avian); Natalie Antinoff, DVM, ABVP (Avian); Rick Jordan, aviculturist; and Matt Schmit, of the Houston Zoo. They were joined by 38 vendors which ranged from toy makers and pet industry representatives to jewelry makers. The conference sponsor this year was KAYTEE.

Activity at the hotel began on the afternoon of Thursday, Jan. 27. National Parrot Rescue and Preservation Foundation (NPRPF) members, volunteers and vendors arrived to decorate and set up. By the end of the evening the hotel lobby and convention center had been transformed into Parrot Central.

Friday began with a presentation by Dr. Jeleen Briscoe. Dr. Briscoe is a Veterinary Medical Officer/Avian Specialist for the Animal Care Emergency Programs of the USDA/APHIS. She has been making the rounds to all the bird conferences over the last year. She seeks dialogue and input from all parties interested in birds as the United States government begins the regulation creation phase of implementing the Animal Welfare Act. Dr. Briscoe has graciously faced skeptical audiences, and she understands the trepidation that many feel with the encroachment of government into aviculture. Ultimately she seeks a dialogue so the regulations will end up being fair to all parties,

and the agency understands that it is not creating regulations that would cause the interested parties to be overwhelmed or overburdened. She seeks practical guidance in constructing the rules with which we will all eventually have to live.

Following Dr. Briscoe, the "All About Parrots" panel discussion convened. This is one of the most interesting and enlightening pleasures of every Parrot Festival. All the presenters speaking at the conference are assembled in one panel to answer questions from the attendees—anything goes. Questions are submitted in writing to a moderator, who then organizes and poses them to the panel. Some questions are directed at specific individuals, but everyone on the panel is allowed to contribute to the discussion. This often leads to very detailed and revealing answers from the panel members. There have been moments of insightful connections between different points of view that have surprised and enriched panelists and attendees alike.

After lunch, the proceedings continued with a talk from the Rev. LoraKim Joyner titled, "Human Dimensions of Parrot Conservation." After engaging in parrot conservation as a veterinarian and human support consultant for a span of 25 years in Mesoamerica, most notably in Guatemala, she assembled a tool kit that provides a wide variety of resources that conservation teams may utilize to support the necessary human dimensions of their work. She provided an overview of these resources as applied to specific ongoing parrot conservation efforts so that participants may choose strategies that address issues in their conservation projects. These strategies answer questions regarding why the human equation is so important in conservation projects and how the many factors of human life such as religion, world view, and spirituality come to play long before concrete actions can be taken toward conservation.

The afternoon continued with Barbara Heidenreich. Ms. Heidenreich has made a career of assisting people in making their avian relationships a success. In her talk, "A Good Start to A Good Bird: Raising and Training a Great Companion Parrot," Ms. Heidenreich takes on the question of Parrots and appropriateness. One of the most overly stated/under substantiated claims for years now is that parrots aren't appropriate pets. They are said to be too difficult for which to care and are deprived of a good and happy life because of their proximity to their human companions. Ms. Heidenreich takes this notion head-on. She details the critical developmental periods of a bird's life and how steps taken during this time can go far toward improving our relationships with our birds. She also focuses on telling the difference between cute, critical, and core behaviors and

how we can use and reinforce each of the different types to improve the relationships between our avian friends and ourselves. She then details ways to prevent problem behaviors and concludes that whether having benefited from good handling and training early on or not, every bird has the potential to be a

loving, lifelong companion and “Good biiiiird!”

Presentations for Friday concluded with “Feather Damaging Behavior: It’s more than just Plucking,” by Dr. Susan Clubb. Dr. Clubb’s lecture shed light on the complexity of feather damaging behavior (FDB) and its multiple causes. Too often people

conclude that FDB is simply the result of a bird that is having emotional trauma and its existence is used as damaging ammunition against the pet bird trade. In her lecture, Dr. Clubb not only details causes for feather damaging that are non-psychogenic but also shows pictures of wild birds that are demonstrating feather damaging behaviors. She demonstrates how, through the careful use of paired skin/feather biopsies, inflammatory skin disease (ISD) can be a major factor in the onset of FDB. She shows that when ISD is causal in FDB cases successful therapy can include the introduction of an anti-inflammatory diet. This can be achieved through changes in the birds’ actual diet via pellets and the

supplementation of cooked and fresh foods; or through supplementation with herbal antioxidants and/or Omega 3, 6, and 9 fatty acids. She also notes that the application of antihistamines and proper bathing can help in circumstances where ISD has become an issue.

After the presentations and a break for dinner and shopping, the Party in Parrot-dise ensued in high style with everyone sporting their best parrot-wear and enjoying a drink or two while raising money for NPRPF. Also during that hour The Quaker Parakeet Society (QPS), held its annual business meeting. At the conclusion of business a discussion regarding the international parrot count, wild Quaker populations, and

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the ramifications they could have on the future of aviculture occurred. Contributing to the discussion were members of the QPS as well as Rick Jordan, an outspoken opponent of the parrot count and wild Quakers, Daniel Sigmon, a researcher and lecturer on the naturalized Quaker populations in the United States, and Dr. Jeleen Briscoe of the USDA.

The first lecture of Saturday morning was "Understanding Reinforcement and Punishment," by Kashmir Csaky. Working with birds and behavior has come a long way since imported birds were thought to need to be "broken" like broncos. As more parrots became pets people began looking for less harsh methods of interacting with their animals. In her talk, Ms. Csaky, discussed the methods and terminology of positive reinforcement and punishment and the misunderstandings that often accompany them. She made points to differentiate "normal" and "natural" behaviors. Instruction in functional analytical approaches and the practical applications of reinforcement and punishment were

discussed at length. It was pointed out that, while pet owners often understand the rudiments of reinforcement and punishment, they lack the understanding to use the practices to their greatest extent. She helped present methods and strategies to educate the average pet bird owner.

Following Ms. Csaky, Dr. Walt Frey gave a lighthearted lecture complete with many pictures of his own aviaries and his methods of husbandry entitled, "Good Habits Lead to Happy Parrots: Planted and Enriched Aviaries." Dr. Frey emphasized the importance of practicality and creativity in constructing aviaries, using readily available plants and materials. He covered issues concerning the decision to flock or not to flock as well as the flight-breeder aviary as a possible solution for long term flock maintenance.

The keynote lecture of the conference was given by Ms. Nancy Speed. The focus species for the conference was the Caique, which Ms. Speed has much experience breeding. Her lecture included pictures of her own aviaries and demonstrations of her techniques

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and history with Caiques. She emphasized the need for experience when breeding Caiques because they can be one of the more tricky species to hand feed from Day 1. Several pictures of stunted birds were shown, and methods for preventing stunting were delineated. Ms. Speed described the wonderful qualities of the Caique that made it such a delightful pet and made the difficulty of raising them all the more worthwhile.

Dr. David Phalen, a long-time supporter of the NPRPF mission and veterinary consultant for its rescue before he moved to Australia, followed Nancy Speed. His first of two presentations at this conference was basically a review of his activities at the Sydney Wildlife Health and Conservation Centre (WHCC) in



Rudy Dunham, treasurer of Houston Avicultural Association, admires the Vendor Hall.

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Australia. The WHCC has many missions. Its Avian Reptile and Exotic Pet Hospital provides state-of-the-art referral and primary care to nontraditional pet species, including birds, reptiles, ferrets, rabbits, rodents, fish and zoo animals in a purpose-built free-standing hospital. In 2010, the hospital saw nearly 1,900 client owned animals. The hospital also receives injured and sick wildlife from local wildlife rehabilitation organizations and the general public. More than 300 wild birds, reptiles and mammals were submitted to the hospital for care in 2010. In addition to its veterinary obligations the staff and faculty of WHCC have contributed to many research projects ranging from the Carnaby's cockatoo to the

wombat and the Koala.

Saturday's presentations finished with Dr. Echols on the topic of avian enrichment. In his lecture he explained that the science of enrichment has come a long way and has become a hot topic as the welfare of many captive animals is being carefully evaluated. His presentation was an abbreviated version of a lecture lab designed to help caretakers better understand how to develop effective enrichment protocols for captive birds.

Following Dr. Echols' lecture and a break for shopping the cocktail hour began with many enjoying offerings from the cash bar as a prelude to the conference banquet and gala. A wonderful meal was enjoyed by all and at the conclusion of the meal



Dr. David Phalen, of Australia, addresses the audience at the roundtable discussion after the conference.

there was an awards presentation. The Kathy Herald Volunteer Award was presented to Midge Gorman, Adoption and Rescue Director (NPRPF); Cheryl Rose, Festival Director (NPRPF); and Diane Starnes, former board

member and current advisory board member (NPRPF). The George Award, named for the Scarlet Macaw that was the festival's mascot before he passed, was awarded to Dean Chaney, Jan Chaney, Calvin Embry, Carol Garcia, Tammy

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German and Georgia Hayes. A new presidential award, the Step-Up Award, was presented to Noreen Arleth, Verleen Henry, Alice Ingram, Nancy Marbach, Laura Rice, Andy Sanford, Chris Simmons, Daniel Sigmon, and Jamie Whittaker. Silent auction winners were announced and a live auction was held to conclude the evening raising money once again for NPRPF.



Above, Rick Jordan and Barbara Heidenreich. At right, the author with Bernie Carrico.



The final day of the conference began with a talk by Dr. Natalie Antinoff. Her lecture, entitled, "When is a Feather Picker NOT a Feather Picker?" explored the complex issue of feather destructive behavior and its many potential medical etiologies. She offered potential medical causes for feather destructive behaviors, and what

veterinarians may be able to offer to diagnose and treat them. She used cases from her own practice as examples of how one should proceed when making such difficult diagnoses. Potential causalities that were discussed were kidney disease, gastrointestinal disease, cardiac disease/vascular

disease/hypertension, infectious disease, dermatologic disease, trauma, and cancer. Dr. Phalen's second talk was the tent pole for the morning lectures. In this lecture, "Australian Parrots: Can We Save Them All," he discussed the difficult issues surrounding the conservation

of wild parrots in Australia. Urbanization, farmland conversion, agricultural practices, competition for water, habitat fragmentation, alterations in fire regimes, invasive species, introduced diseases and climate change have all impacted Australia's parrots, many species of which



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are now experiencing decline. His presentation provided an overview of the status of Australian parrots and used the examples of the golden-shouldered parrot, the orange-bellied parrot, and the Caraby's black cockatoo to illustrate the challenges that are faced in attempts to keep endangered parrots from extinction.

Rick Jordan's talk, "Aviculture: Is there a future?" concluded the morning lectures. In his presentation, Mr. Jordan delivered a sort of "state of the union for aviculture," citing recent declines in the numbers of breeders and the quickly disappearing species that were once very common within aviculture. He gave examples of changes that he sees on the horizon and the consequences of our current practices over

the next 20 to 50 years if things don't change soon.

He admonished the different factions within aviculture (breeders, pet owners, rescue organizations, animal rights activists, toy makers, food makers, pet product companies, veterinarians, scientists, conservationists, etc.) to stop bashing each other and begin a dialogue before it is too late. Since wild importation ceased in 1992, new breeding stock has been next-to-impossible to acquire. He stressed that it is up to us to manage what we have to create a brighter future for the next generation. He concluded his lecture by praising the young people in the audience and offering to buy them membership in AFA as a way of setting the example for the future. Thunderous

applause ended the morning session.

The final lecture of the conference was given by Matt Schmit of the Houston Zoo. His talk, "Pest Control for the Aviary," was geared mostly to breeders with outdoor aviaries although he allowed that many of the strategies he presented could be used by breeders with indoor aviaries. He introduced the attendees to the concept of Integrated Pest Management and its application to the aviary and included suggestions for dealing with many common pests including: mosquitoes, flies, cockroaches, ants, mice, rats, squirrels, raccoons, opossums, foxes, skunks and snakes.

After the conclusion of Mr. Schmit's lecture followed the shopping "happy hour," giving

everyone a last chance to shop and after that the "Parrot Festival's Famous "Texas-Size" Raffle. Each day of the convention at the close of the day a raffle is drawn and prizes given away, but the final day includes larger items for which tickets are accepted for the entire duration of the conference. One lucky winner received a \$400 shopping spree courtesy of *Bird Talk Magazine*.

As the sun set on the mild afternoon of Jan. 30, Parrot Festival 2011 came to a quiet close. Friends old and new from all over the world said goodbye for another year. The lobby and parking lot slowly emptied until all that was left was the NPRPF caravan. The sun slipped below the horizon leaving Parrot Festival 2011 to the ages.

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Structure and Function of the Avian Respiratory System

Tony Pittman
The Slender-Billed Curlew in the Wild and in the Aviary

Robert R. Gabel, United States Fish & Wildlife Service
Update on U.S. Regulations Pertaining to Import and Export of Birds

Jean Dubach, Ph.D.
Who's My Daddy? How Genetic Analysis Can Answer Basic Questions

Sharman Hoppes, DVM
Update on Proventricular Dilatation Disease

Stewart Metz and Bonnie Zimmerman
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Mark Sargent
The Blue-headed Pionus Parrot - An Avicultural Perspective

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A Holistic Approach to Managing Crop Disorders

Daniel Sigmon and Heidi Good, PhD
Naturalized Quaker Parrots, The Carolina Conure and Reconciliation Ecology

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