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## **A Bird in the House: An Anthropological Perspective on Companion Parrots**

### ABSTRACT

Although companion birds are the third most-common animal companion—after dogs and cats—in U.S. households, few anthropological publications focus on them. This study examines the role of companion parrots in American households. The study combines a literature review with the results of a survey of bird owners and participant observation. The study uses the resulting qualitative and quantitative data in addressing the social dynamics of companion parrot ownership in the household. The data support the impression that companion parrots increasingly are being considered family members, or “Fids” (“Feathered Kids”), thus following current trends in American society that accord companion animals in general a greater investment in time, money, and emotion. However, the general public is not well informed about the complexities of captive parrot care, and psittacine well-being is an important concern.

Parrots amaze and endear us with their “human-like” qualities (Barber, 1993) including the ability, when taught words in context, to use human language meaningfully (Pepperberg, 1999). They entrance us with their beauty, their playful antics, and their desire to interact and bond with their human flock mates. As symbols of status and the exotic, parrots may serve as luxury items and advertising icons. However, to those who love and appreciate parrots for their

companionship in their homes, they become children. Despite the fact that birds are the third most common animal companions, scant attention has been paid to birds in the anthrozoological literature. This study examines the role of companion parrots in American households.

Anthropologists, with their holistic perspective on human cultures, have traditionally examined the human-animal relationship, albeit from an anthropocentric perspective (Noske, 1993). Although many of these studies focus on preindustrial societies, anthropologists are increasingly considering the role of animals in industrial Western societies (Mullin, 1999). However, few of these studies concern companion animals,<sup>2</sup> and none consider companion birds, a topic largely ignored by social scientists.

## **Methods**

This study combines a review of the anthrozoological and avicultural literature on human-parrot relations with the results of an electronic survey that was circulated over the Internet and answered by companion parrot owners. I use the household as the unit of analysis, since family structure is both dynamic (Aldous, 1978) and diverse (Albert & Bulcroft, 1987). The survey consists of 25 questions related to quality of life associated with the benefits of avian companionship; routine care (including diet, grooming, quality time interacting with birds, and cage cleaning); level of veterinary care; membership in bird clubs; number of publications owned on parrot care; and an essay on why avian companionship is important. This article concentrates on the qualitative analysis of the essay question, although other data from the survey are included.

## **The Pet Trade and Current Status of Parrots in the Wild**

Parrots are greatly threatened in the wild today, due in large part to habitat destruction and poaching for the illicit pet trade (Low, 2002, pp. 12-14). All members of the taxonomic order Psittaciformes (parrots), except for cockatiels and budgerigars (the latter commonly known in the United States as "parakeets"), are protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Thus, most parrots cannot be legally imported or exported without proper documentation issued by CITES authorities. In

an effort to strengthen CITES legislation, the U.S. Congress passed the Wild Bird Conservation Act (WBCA) of 1992.<sup>3</sup> Under the WBCA, none of the exotic birds protected by CITES can be legally imported into the U.S. without a special permit (Phillips, 1998, p. 32).

Parrots currently in the legal U.S. pet trade come from four sources: (a) importation of wild caught parrots prior to 1992; (b) parrots who have been imported by special permits since 1992; (c) descendants of wild caught birds raised in captivity; and (d) wild populations exempt from CITES regulations. Despite the great number of parrots who currently are raised domestically for the legitimate pet trade, poaching and smuggling of parrots continue, often with tragic results. Mortality rates during shipping are very high (Low, 2002, p. 12), and those birds who survive the trip may introduce diseases to established captive populations.<sup>4</sup>

### **Companion Parrots in Anthrozoological Literature**

Compared to the abundance of studies concerned with cats and dogs, there are few studies of birds as companion or therapy animals, despite the fact that birds rank as the third-most important companion animal. One may suspect a general bias against birds, despite their apparent popularity.

Birds are not mammals, nor have they been neotenized through selective breeding like dogs (Lawrence, 1986). Barber (1993, pp. 104-117) suggests that people tend to misunderstand birds because they evaluate them as a group, rather than viewing them as individuals. Although warm-blooded, birds have feathers—instead of fur—and wings that allow them to transcend heaven and earth. Consequently, they are foreign and alien beings.

Jeanette Thomas, director of Western Illinois University's graduate program in zoo and aquaria studies, counseled students in a spring 2003 guest lecture to my Anthrozoology class on how to succeed in finding a job upon graduation. She suggested that they work with birds or other "less-charismatic" animals in order to become established. Mullan and Marvin (1999, p. 73) comment on the cross-cultural "negative exhibition value" of birds at zoos: "If we look at the negative cases first, it seems generally true that birds do not excite much interest or hold visitors' attention for very long. People just do not seem to be able to relate to birds."<sup>5</sup> Mammals have far greater exhibition

value, particularly if they can be easily anthropomorphized (Mullan and Marvin, 1999, p. 74).

Evidence that some people perceive birds as an undesirable companion comes from discussion with my spring 2003 Anthrozoology class. T. VanMeenen (personal communication April 23, 2003) suggests that because bird care is not well understood by the general population, many people, during their childhoods, experienced the premature deaths of their birds. Further, B. Thompson (personal communication, April 27, 2003), states: "If you pay attention to popular culture there seems to be a tendency to portray rather eccentric people as either having an unusual number of cats or one (or more) talking birds." In addition, some people have developed phobias toward birds, possibly due to misunderstanding bird behavior or from watching Alfred Hitchcock's horror film, *The Birds* (R. Whiteman, personal communication, April 29, 2003).

The misperceptions regarding the companionship quality of birds likely derives from people who have little or no actual experience with birds or people who have had bad relationships with birds as a result of poor socialization, miscommunication, and misunderstanding.

The avian references that I encountered in my literature review number fewer than a dozen. Most of these deal with the benefits of aviaries or aviculture in institutional settings (Holcomb, et al., 1997; Ismail, 1998; Schuler, 2001), or in the homes of the elderly (Mugford & M'Comisky, 1975; Olbrich & Bergler, 1977). Altman (1988), and Beck and Katcher (1989) also have made brief but informative contributions. However, none of these studies are based on participant observation, and the researchers generally reflect a limited knowledge of companion birds and the related avian subculture.

Loughlin and Dowrick (1987) assume, "Given most pet birds are kept in cages, it was not surprising that the bird's ability to fly and how its feathers feel were considered unimportant to bird owners in our study" (p. 171). Although flight is not the reason most people appear to include parrots in their lives, most people who are knowledgeable about parrot behavior interact with their parrots on a daily basis. I am a member and moderator of the Quaker Parakeet (OP) List and vice-president of the Society, all of whose members allow their parrots supervised time out of their cages. Some also allow their birds free flight in their homes or aviaries. In addition, all have physical contact with their birds. "No matter what kind of emotional bond

people have with their pets, touch is an essential part of that relationship” (Beck & Katcher, 1996, p. 84). According to my survey, physical contact rated ninth in frequency in regard to the most important ways that avian companionship enhances their lives ( $n = 11$ ; 10%).

Ismail (1998) and Schuler (2001) report the preliminary success of an avicultural program in Pollsmoor Prison, Cape Town, South Africa. Having the responsibility and care of hand-raising young birds to be sold to the public apparently has positively influenced “rapists, robbers and killers.” In an early study by Mugford and M’Comisky (1975), the apparent power of avian companionship was demonstrated when a group of senior citizens were given either a begonia or a budgerigar (“parakeet” in the United States). Avian companionship positively changed the attitudes of the parrot recipients, while those who received potted plants demonstrated no change. However, although widely cited, this study has been criticized for its small sample size (Rowan & Thayer, 2000, p. xxix). Birds receive only one reference in the index to Fine (2000, pp. 216, 476), where Granger and Kogan (2000, p. 216) devote a single brief paragraph to birds in animal-assisted therapy settings, despite the fact that “a variety of birds have been used in wide-ranging settings to alleviate depression and provide an impetus for social interaction.”

Psychological studies focus on the personality of bird owners or the therapeutic advantages of pet bird ownership. Kidd, et al. (1983) consider the personality of bird owners and conclude, that compared to horse, snake, and turtle owners, bird owners scored higher on the Affiliation, Nurturance, and Nurturant Parent scales. Further, bird owners were “contented, courteous, expressive, nurturant, and unpretentious” and, in general, were “social and altruistic.” In a survey of 80 bird owners in Alaska, Loughlin and Dowrick (1987, p. 169) concluded that the psychological needs most often fulfilled by bird ownership are “social, esteem, and cognitive,” with the social needs dominating and that avian companionship satisfies the same needs filled by the companionship of dogs and cats (p. 171). A study by Kidd and Kidd (1998, 1999) is of particular interest as it is comparable to the current study.<sup>6</sup> The Kidds interviewed 100 bird owners, asking, among other questions, what the participants enjoyed most about bird ownership.<sup>7</sup> The responses to the latter question may be compared and contrasted to the results of my electronic survey in which I posed essentially the same question.

## **Survey of Parrot Owners**

As a companion parrot owner and member of a vast Internet community of parrot enthusiasts, I have access to the emic or “native” perspective of the “subculture” represented by parrot owners.<sup>8</sup> Anthropologists and, more recently, sociologists attempt to achieve the emic perspective through immersion, as participant observers, in the culture being studied. The Internet allows parrot enthusiasts to connect with others to share information and experiences. As a participant observer on one Internet avian interest group dedicated to a single parrot species, I have had many opportunities to observe that people enjoy talking about their birds.<sup>9</sup> Further, an interest in parrots provides membership in a fictive family encouraging dialogue that may lead to a wide variety of nonavian topics: grief at the loss of a human or nonhuman family member, flirting, and fellowship. Some of these cyber relationships lead to the establishment of face-to-face social connections.

To initiate my survey of companion parrot owners, I posted a request to the Internet list, the QP List to which I belong. In addition, my request was cross-posted to other avian interest groups. In my message, I outlined the purpose of my research, my university affiliation, and the promise of anonymity to all participants. Parrot owners responded, asking for copies of the survey (Anderson, 2001), which they completed and sent back to me, either through e-mail or through the postal service. The research discussed here includes analysis of the 114 surveys and focuses on the results of responses to the essay question regarding what people find most rewarding about avian companionship. Although there is the potential for much additional discussion based on the survey results, I focus on the qualitative data recorded in the essay responses.

## **Demographic Profile of Bird Owners**

Although a range of ages is represented, the typical bird owner responding to my survey is female, married, in the 41 to 50 age range,<sup>10</sup> and has owned birds for five years or more. Ninety-three % (106) of the 114 respondents fall in the age range from 21 to 70 years. Eighty-eight % (100) of the respondents are female, while only 11% (13) are male. The majority, 67% (76), of all respondents are married. Seventeen % (19) are single; 12% (14) divorced; 1%

(1) widowed, and 2% (2) in domestic partnerships. Four % (5) did not respond to the question.

The sex ratio is skewed toward females, compared to the Kidd and Kidd (1998) study, which represents a deliberate attempt to establish gender parity. Because Kidd and Kidd found no statistical difference between the responses of males and females, they combined their data. Because I was able to entice few male parrot owners to respond, my data also are combined.

The bird owners who participated in my survey are a relatively specialized group of individuals who have access to the Internet and generally are well informed and passionately interested in their parrots. Therefore, they hardly can be considered representative of the American population. However, they are part of a larger and dynamic group of people who are concerned about psittacine care. As Blanchard (2003, p. 1) states, "A whole world full of generous, educated parrot caregivers has come into existence."

### **Response to Essay Question**

The essay area of the survey provided an opportunity for people to tell stories about their birds and describe how avian companionship is rewarding. Only 8 out of 114 (7%) survey respondents failed to answer the essay. Most owners enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to discuss their parrots, much as parents enjoy discussing their human children.

The responses are variable, although certain trends are represented (Table 1). The top 10 responses are, in descending order, "Love/Unconditional love" (41); "Birds as family/children/Fids"<sup>11</sup> (40); "Talking" ability (33); "Companionship" (31); "Intelligence" (29), "Make Owner Laugh" (28); "Provides Joy" (24); "Interactive" (15); "Physical Contact" (11); and "Personality" (11).

These results contrast with the Kidd and Kidd (1998, p. 134) study, where Companionship (38) was the most common response, followed by "Talking" (28), "Entertainment" (22), "Getting Love from Them," (7); "Feeling Relaxed with Them" (4); "Cuddling Them" (4); "Their Cheerfulness" (3); "Tricks" (3); and "Intelligence" (2).

The two samples are compared in Table 2. I have eliminated the responses that are unique to either sample (Kidd & Kidd, 1998): ("Singing" [14];

**Table 1. What People Enjoy Most about Avian Companionship**

Current study ( <i>n</i> = 106)		
Response	f	%
Love/unconditional love	41	39
“Fid”/Family member	40	38
Talking	33	31
Companionship	31	29
Intelligence	29	27
Make owner laugh	28	26
Provide joy	24	23
Physical contact	11	10
Personality	11	10
Superior to other pets	10	9
Mood enhancer	9	8
Calming (for owner)	8	8
Happy to see owner	8	8
Life-saver	8	8
Play games	7	7
Intuitive/understands owner	6	6

“Friendliness” [10]; and “Watching Them” [9]. Current study: “Family/Fid” [40]; “Life-Saver” [8]; and “Intuitive/Understands Owner” [6]). Generally, the responses are similar to those made by the participants in my study, although priorities are reordered. Kidd and Kidd, however, do not discuss the categorization of birds as fictive family members. In my study, the classification of birds as family members was second by only one response, and is thus very important to the bird owners that participated in my survey. “Love/Unconditional Love” (41) was the most important quality to my bird owners, although it ranked a weak fourth in the Kidd sample. “Talking,” the second-most important characteristic in the Kidd study was the third-most common answer in the current study. Apart from these notable differences, the remaining responses are similar.

### **People and Their “Fids”: Avian Family Members**

Forty respondents to my survey clearly perceive their birds as family members, not a quality mentioned in the Kidd and Kidd (1998) or Loughlin and

**Table 2. What People Enjoy Most about Avian Companionship:  
Comparison of Samples**

Kidd & Kidd 1989 ( <i>n</i> = 100)			Current study ( <i>n</i> = 106)		
Response	f	%	Response	f	%
Companionship	38	38	Companionship	31	30
Talking	28	28	Talking	33	31
Entertainment	22	22	Make owner laugh	28	27
Getting love from them	7	7	Love/unconditional love	41	39
Feeling relaxed with them	4	4	Calm owner	8	8
Cuddling them	4	4	Physical contact	11	10
Their cheerfulness	3	3	Mood enhancer/ Happy to see owner	17	17
Tricks	3	3	Play games	7	7
Intelligence	2	2	Intelligence	29	28

\* All subjects from either study gave more than one answer; males and females combined.

Kidd categories not represented in current study: Singing (14/14%, Friendliness 10/10%, Watching them 9/9%)

Categories from current study not represented in Kidd & Kidd study: Family/"Fid" (40/38%), Life-saver (8/8%), & Intuitive/understands owner's feelings (6/6%)

Dowrick (1987) studies. Do the differences between the studies reflect differences in sample constituency, differences in method, or perhaps temporal differences? Although the Kidd and Kidd data indicate that their bird owners are fond of their birds, there is no mention of birds as family members.

That many pet owners treat their pets as a special class of fictive kin is not unusual (Arluke & Sanders, 1996, p. 68; Beck & Katcher, 1996, pp. 40-62; Serpell, 1996, pp. 78-79). For some individuals, pets are the only family they know and may be powerful allies in battling depression and loneliness (Allen, 2001). Pets have a special designation, not just as family members, but also as eternal children Beck and Katcher (p. 42) and Arluke and Sanders (1996, p. 68) observe that veterinary clients commonly refer to themselves as "Mommy" or "Dad" and speak of their dogs as "children." My avian veterinarian also

indulges this construct in labeling my parrot's medical file with his "first" name and my surname—as if he were my human child. Further, after one examination, the vet placed the ruffled parrot on the table and told him, "Go to Mom!" Which he promptly did!

Thus, it is not surprising that my survey respondents consider their birds to be family members. In addition, QP List members frequently describe their parrots as Fids or Feathered kids. In addition, avian veterinarian Harris (1989, p. 1517) comments on the deep feelings that his clients have for their birds—"He's like a child to me," or "My wife would die if anything ever happens to him."

Indeed, some of the respondents to the survey describe their parrots as substitutes for human children, either because they cannot, or have chosen not to, have children or because their children have grown and left the proverbial nest:

We discovered early on that a bird was as devoted and loving a pet as a dog or cat and, actually, now feel birds are even more so. As far as the most important thing, I guess it would be that caring for them fulfills the need to nurture once the kids are grown and gone. They enrich our lives because they are always there ready to be your buddy. They will sit and talk with you anytime, anyplace, not only in real words, but with their own unique sounds and clucks and body language. Of course, having a pet that yells, "Daddy's home!" when you walk in the door or says "Good morning!" when you open the drapes is quite a significant event too. They are a life-time commitment much as your children are and they require your devotion as well as give theirs. (Survey Response No. 100)

Human-avian interaction is no less rewarding for humans than interaction with cats and dogs and, for some individuals, may be even more so. The amount of time and money Americans invest in all their pets, pet food, and pet care is currently increasing, despite current doubtful economic conditions: "Pet parents will consistently spend on their pets despite a tougher economic environment."<sup>12</sup> Why are pets so important, and why do many of us embrace them into our families?

Anthropologists have long recognized that a single definition for the term, "family," was neither accurate nor useful (Geertz, 1965, p. 40; Stephens, 1963).

The American family is both dynamic (cyclical) and diverse, rarely resembling the nuclear family that is purportedly the ideal of Western society. With escalating divorce rates, single parenting, co-habiting, delayed age of marriage, and same sex partnerships, there is a great diversity of family forms. Further, many women either defer or decide to forego motherhood (Hird & Abshoff, 2000). Although other industrial nations have experienced similar changes, nowhere have they been as dramatic as in the United States (Skolnick & Skolnick, 1999, p. 1). Further, the increased life expectancy and changing age structure of the population have produced a greater number of empty nesters and widowed people than before (Albert & Bulcroft, 1987, p. 10). Therefore, the household, instead of the family, is a more accurate unit of study.

Albert and Bulcroft (1987, p. 13) find that empty nesters are the least likely to acquire pets. In contrast, this was the age group that seemed most likely to have birds and be most fond of them in my study. The typical bird owner responding to my survey is female, married, and in the age range 41 to 50, the time when their children have likely grown and left the proverbial nest. Albert and Bulcroft (p. 13) also find that people without children in their homes feel closer to their pets than do those who have resident human children, a conclusion consistent with my study.<sup>13</sup>

Although I did not use an attachment scale, the survey did include a question asking participants whether avian companionship had increased their quality of life. No one responded negatively, and only 5% (6) said that bird ownership had only somewhat enhanced their quality of life. More than half, 62% (71), answered that bird ownership had significantly enhanced their quality of life, while 33% (37) indicated that it has increased their quality of life quite a bit. Thus, 95% (108) agree that avian companionship enhances their quality of life. Further, in response to the essay question—“What do you find most rewarding about avian companionship?”—“Love/unconditional love” (41) was the most common answer, followed closely by “Birds as family members” (40). In addition, a majority of the companion parrot owners have given up products or activities that produce harmful fumes (smoking cigarettes and using nonstick cookware and harsh household cleaners) to guarantee their birds’ safety.

Further, 66% (75) of respondents take their parrots to a qualified avian veterinarian for annual or semi-annual “well bird checkups,” and about 46%

(52) spend more than 3 hours daily interacting (talking to/playing) with their birds.<sup>14</sup> These bird owners also appear to be rather well informed as 35% (40) owned four or more publications on parrot care<sup>15</sup>, and approximately half (54; 47.4%) belong to at least one interest (bird club or bird conservation) organization. Further, one companion parrot owner responded, "There is an attachment to the birds that closely resembles a parent/child relationship" (Survey 122). Thus, these bird owners appear to be rather attached to their avian companions.

Why is there a need to categorize our companion animals as family members? According to Mullin (1999, p. 10), many people use animals like consumer goods in constructing personal identities while investing emotionally in their pets as family members. As Arluke and Sanders (1996) point out, humans tend to make sense of other species by assigning them a cultural identity. "Thus, 'Being' an animal in modern societies may be less a matter of biology than it is an issue of human culture and consciousness p. 9)."

## **Parrots in Captivity**

Most parrots today, sold in the United States in the pet trade, were born in captivity and never have known the wild. However, parrots, apart perhaps from the budgerigar and the cockatiel, retain many of the instinctive fright and flight impulses that are adaptive to survival in their natural habitats. They also retain all their sexual urges and the needs to court, nest build, and forage. Consequently, those who care for parrots need to learn how to provide their avian companions the best possible lives in captivity.

Parrots require companionship (avian or human), a balanced diet, fresh air, sunshine (preferably) or full spectrum lighting, environmental enrichment, and exercise.<sup>16</sup> Parrots also require environmental enrichment in the form of a variety of toys and perches that may be chewed up and destroyed. Toys may serve as surrogate mates or enemies and thus provide interest and exercise.

The cage should be a haven, not a prison, for any caged bird and should be well designed and large enough to facilitate exercise (wing flapping), climbing, play, and easy cleaning. The cage paper should be changed at least daily, and the entire cage should be scrubbed out every 2-4 weeks. Athan and Deter (2002, pp. 29, 30) view an improper cage as the root of many behavioral prob-

lems contributing to the reason why many parrots lose their homes.<sup>17</sup> Further, a separate small cage for sleep and or travel is recommended (K. Welle, personal communication, October 21, 1999). It is important to have at least two cages, as parrots need a familiar place to stay during periodic intensive cleaning of their large cage.

A positive trend seen today is that many parrot owners recognize the importance of time spent out of the cage visiting new locations, instead of leaving the birds, like exotic houseplants, bound to one place. For example:

Our birds are not cage creatures, but interact with us on a regular basis. They are where we are in the house. They watch TV with us, eat with us, [and] are at the table for large family gatherings (What would Thanksgiving be without our macaw FREDDI, saying 'Mumm good cracker!' as she scarfs down turkey and dressing.) They sleep in our rooms when we are asleep. (Survey 59)

Whether to trim a captive parrot's wings is a matter of great controversy. Some argue that birds should be left fully flighted because it is unnatural for birds to be deprived of flight. However, birds in captivity are in artificial environments where there are many potential dangers, and the consequences of allowing an untrained bird free flight in the home can be devastating.

Birds have been known to fly into walls, windows, mirrors, ceiling fans, open toilets and other receptacles of water, boiling pots of water or oil, or into the clutches of the family dog or cat.<sup>18</sup> In most cases these accidents are fatal. Birds also have accidentally flown away.<sup>19</sup> Whether the bird is ever recovered depends on the owner and luck. Companion parrots are extremely vulnerable to predators when lost, and domestically reared parrots probably do not have sufficient survival skills to live on their own in an alien climate.

On the other hand, Low (1999, pp. 116-121), British aviculturist and writer, is firmly against wing trimming. She considers wing trimming to: (a) damage parrots physically and psychologically; (b) lead to injury as a result of falling; (c) lead to infection or tumors; and (d) contribute to feather-plucking, especially in sensitive species such as the grey parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*) (Low, p. 117).<sup>20</sup> With proper wing trimming and knowledge of the special needs of each species, however, these problems can be avoided. Wing trimming will no doubt remain a controversial issue, however, and whether to

trim a companion parrot's primary feathers depends on the individual situation (Blanchard, 1999, pp. 50-51). Eighty-five % (97) of my survey respondents trim their birds' flight feathers.

Another crucial fact that those who care for captive parrots must know is that they are extremely sensitive to environmental pollutants. Birds have more efficient lungs than any other animal; therefore, they are more susceptible to airborne contaminants.<sup>21</sup> Eighty-two % (94) of bird owners surveyed answered that they have made radical lifestyle changes to accommodate the health and safety of their avian companions. These changes include rejection of nonstick cookware (e.g., Teflon™),<sup>22</sup> scented candles, air fresheners, cigarettes, household cleaners with strong fumes, and other airborne substances that potentially are fatally toxic to birds. Eight % (9) indicated that they had made substantial changes (given up either nonstick cookware, scented candles, or cigarettes) for their birds. Only 7% (8) of individuals made no lifestyle changes to accommodate their birds' well being, and 2.63% (3) did not respond to the question.

### **Parrots: Subjects or Objects?**

Animals in Western society commonly are treated as nonsentient objects to be exploited. This worldview contrasts to that of many small-scale, pre-industrial societies, in which animals may be exploited for their meat but are considered to have souls and personalities and to have been past members of human society (Nelson, 1983, p. 20). Further, animals in these cultures are often considered to have played key roles in the creation of the world and its inhabitants, and may also be totemic ancestors. Thus, with their ancient wisdom, animals have important information to share with humans (Lawrence, 1986, p. 47).

In Western capitalist society, however, animals, including parrots, are consumer goods to be bought, sold and disposed of as the owner sees fit. Some people see parrots as merely decorative. Author and pet care columnist Spadafori (Spadafori & Speer, 1999) describes her experience interviewing a noted interior designer:

“And here,” he said waving his arm at one wall, “I see an aviary. Those blue parrots . . . what do you call them . . . macaws? Perfect colors!”

Even the suggestion that birds are “things” to enhance the décor of a room reveals a great deal of ignorance about the nature of these intelligent pets. Unfortunately, the designer’s views are not uncommon. Too many people see birds as little more than a beautiful, colorful addition to a room, a low-maintenance pet you just set on a perch and be done with (pp. 241, 242).

Do parrot owners attribute agency to their companion parrots? As a participant observer in a parrot Internet group, I have noted a belief common to caring parrot owners regarding the purchase of a new parrot. When one goes to the breeder or pet shop to buy a bird, it is the parrot who selects the owner, rather than the owner selecting the parrot.<sup>23</sup>

Further, there are cases where parrots have performed heroic acts instrumental to saving the lives of their humans or others (Rothrock, 1999). Some parrots have also been attributed with being able to communicate with the dead or even help solve crimes (Krywicky, 2000).

Parrots thus are considered individuals with distinct personalities, and most are demanding occupants of the household. Consequently, many parrot owners affectionately refer to themselves as “parrot slaves” or “[Insert your species here] slaves.” Many Q P List members frequently refer to themselves as “being owned” by their parrots rather than being owners of parrots. Biologist and ornithologist, Burger (2001) describes how living with Tiko, a “pre-owned” Amazon parrot, has transformed her life.

Living with a parrot profoundly changes the lives of most people. Many people improve their own diets through the introduction of fresh, organic vegetables and fruits for their parrots. One survey respondent described the power of the human-avian bond: When she and her husband separated in contemplation of divorce, it was their parrots who brought them back together.<sup>24</sup> The same person considers her parrots such important members of the household that one played a key role in mate selection for her daughter:

When our daughter was in college and beginning to date seriously, the young man had to pass the ‘Freddi’ [macaw] test. He didn’t know it of course. If the bird didn’t like him and he didn’t show even a possibility of liking the bird he was a washout. When I came home one day to hear our present son-in-law cooing to Freddi while [my daughter] was purportedly in the bathroom (but listening to the interaction) I knew he was the one.

Our daughter never withheld the fact that Freddi would be coming to live with her and her family if something happened to her dad and me. Her children are now taught respect for the birds and they are beginning to interact with them. (Survey 59)

Parrots may be both subjects and objects, depending on the individual perception of the owner. The keeping of animals as pets depends on dominance, and Tuan (1984, p. 5) convincingly argues that affection is possible only in relationships of inequality. Parrots did not choose to give up their freedom to become pets or part of successive generations of domestic breeding programs where they are seldom allowed to choose their mates, particularly if the breeder is selecting for color.

The selective breeding for color mutations, or those colors rarely found in nature, demeans the natural color of the parrot (Anderson, n.d.). When describing her ringneck parakeet to a breeder, a friend of mine was asked the bird's color. When she responded, "Green," the breeder, said in a disappointed tone, "Oh, it's just run of the mill." Color mutations of quaker and ringneck parrots, for example, are sold for at least two to three times the price of a normal green bird, and birds of very rare color may sell for several thousand dollars each. Thus, the natural color, a key part of the species' adaptation, is dismissed as ordinary, and the bird is devalued and trivialized. Avian veterinarian, K. Welle (personal communication, March 22, 2003), is concerned about the health consequences of color breeding, as well as its potentially detrimental effect on conservation of parrot species.

## **Parrots Are not for Everyone**

Parrot rescue organizations are becoming more common and more urgently needed because of the tendency of many to purchase parrots impulsively without any prior knowledge of their great intelligence, lifespan, or dietary and psychological needs (<http://www.parrotchronicles.com/spring2001>). Easily bored, frustrated parrots may begin screaming for attention. Without the proper diet, amount of sleep (10-12 hours daily), and environmental enrichment, parrots eventually may turn to neurotic self-stimulating behaviors such as feather picking and even self-mutilation (Van Hoek & Ten Cate, 1998). The latter is a serious condition that, when left untreated, may result in the eventual death of the parrot from infection or blood loss. Considering

some species, given proper care, may live for 50 years or more, parrot ownership should be a lifelong commitment (Sweat, 2001). Unfortunately, most captive parrots will be shuttled through three or more homes in their lifetimes because of a misunderstanding of their complex needs (Sweat, 1999). As Low (1999, p. 6) states, parrots are probably the most misunderstood of companion animals.

Proper care of parrots is expensive, complicated and relatively time-consuming (Anderson, et al., 2003). Thirty-four % (39) of my survey respondents spend more than \$1,000 annually on their parrots.<sup>25</sup> However, researchers such as Loughlin and Dowrick (1987), mistakenly suggest that parrots are low maintenance:

Because avian companions appear to fill many of the same human needs as dogs and cats, they may prove to be an excellent choice for those individuals who desire animal companionship but for whom dog or cat ownership is not feasible, for those who have limited living space, mobility, or financial resources. (p. 171)

This statement reflects an uninformed attitude about birds and a lack of concern for their needs. In fact, none of the anthrozoological resources reviewed above considered the welfare of the birds as an important consideration. Providing proper cages, toys, diet, and veterinary care can be costly (Anderson, et al., 2003). In addition, the environment inside the home must be monitored to prevent fatal toxicity from pollutants.

Recent major advancements in avian medicine can significantly improve the quality and length of life for companion parrots, but locating an avian veterinarian can be difficult if one does not live in or near a major city. The general practice veterinarian knows relatively little about avian physiology or exotic birds, which is why it is crucial to find an avian veterinarian (Welle, 2002).

Birds are adept at hiding illness until it is well advanced, since any sign of weakness is invitation to being ostracized from the flock or attacked by predators. Therefore, only veterinary examination and diagnostic tests can detect subclinical illness. Because an annual checkup may cost up to \$300, it is recommended that parrot owners budget at least \$360 a year for routine vet bills (Sweat, 2003, p. 55). Vet care for a chronically ill or geriatric parrot may

range from \$225 to \$450 annually (Sweat, p. 55), and a catastrophic illness or injury can lead to vet bills totaling thousands of dollars (Thornton, 2003).

Seniors or others with limited incomes may face very difficult decisions regarding the wellness of their avian companions. Further, parrot owners with physical disabilities may have difficulty maintaining the cage and obtaining the proper food<sup>26</sup> or veterinary care. In addition, parrot owners should make formal plans for their parrots in the event that they die, as many species, given proper care, will out live their owners (Sweat, 1999). Anyone considering getting a parrot should first read Low (1999, pp. 7-14), and Thomas (2000, pp. 246-253), "Birds are very difficult pets indeed, and parrots are among the most difficult." Those planning to include a parrot in their lives should devote as much time as possible to researching their requirements and finding a qualified avian veterinarian before bringing a parrot home.

## **Conclusion**

The study of companion parrots and the human-avian bond is an area that provides a great opportunity for future research because, to date, relatively few studies have been completed. A survey of the literature on avian companionship reveals a limited knowledge of parrots, and it is suggested that future researchers can productively learn about parrots and the avian subculture through participant observation.<sup>27</sup> Avian companionship is similar qualitatively to that provided by cats and dogs and is very important to those who consider parrots family members. However, the proper care of parrots is more complicated and relatively costly because they have special dietary, psychological, and social needs. Further, because of the longevity of many species, companion parrot owners must provide for them in case the parrot outlives the owner.

The bird owners in this study tend to categorize their avian companions as fictive family members or Fids, Feathered Kids, and to consider them as fulfilling important roles in the household. Thus, parrots, like other companion animals, become part of the social selves of their owners and integral members of their households. However, the public knows relatively little about the proper care of birds, and—to the detriment of the birds—many popular myths about parrot care persist.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Correspondence should be addressed to Patricia K. Anderson, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Western Illinois University,<sup>1</sup> University Circle, Macomb, IL 61455-1390. E-mail: [PK-Anderson@wiu.edu](mailto:PK-Anderson@wiu.edu). This article is dedicated to the memory of OTIS, the author's Quaker Parrot.
- <sup>2</sup> Lawrence, for example, analyzes the role of the horse in rodeo (1982), and in American thought (Lawrence 1985, 1989) as well as the symbolic importance of wild birds (1990; 1997). Cartmill (1993) and Nelson (1997) both examine hunting, albeit from different perspectives, and Mullan and Marvin (1987) examine zoos, while Thu and Durrenberger (1998) consider the social and environmental consequences of factory farming. Sabloff (2001:53-84), however, is among the few anthropologists who consider the domestic sphere. In a recent assessment of anthropology's place among Human-Animal Studies, Mullin (2002, 387), however, states, "Animal Studies still is largely unknown among anthropologists."
- <sup>3</sup> Europe has yet to follow the USA in this regard and Low (2002, p. 12) laments the fact that "In Europe we are not yet civilized enough to follow the example set by the USA in 1993 when the Wild Bird Conservation Act became law."
- <sup>4</sup> Purchase of a parrot should only be from a reputable breeder or pet store where all animals are well treated. Better yet, adopt a pre-owned bird from a shelter. Education should be a crucial first step in making the commitment to spending your life with an animal that, although raised in captivity, still retains some of its wild instincts, and complex social and dietary needs related to its natural adaptation.
- <sup>5</sup> "If it is difficult for people to relate to or take more than a passing interest in birds it is even more difficult to persuade them to take an interest in fish. Fish are completely 'other', and live in a totally alien environment" (Mullan and Marvin, 1999, pp. 73-74).
- <sup>6</sup> I was unfamiliar with the Kidd and Kidd study before I did my research or I might have tried to tailor my questionnaire to address the same questions that they did.
- <sup>7</sup> The questions asked included age, sex, marital status, number of children and ages, childhood experiences with bird ownership, the number, species, and length of time of birds currently owned, and whether or not they also owned other animals.
- <sup>8</sup> As a participant observer in the world of bird ownership, I have a different perspective on avian companionship than do the researchers discussed above. For example, I have discerned the following inaccurate assumptions about birds and bird ownership. Kidd and Kidd, and likewise Beck and Katcher, for example, are uncertain as to what constitutes a parrot when they list "parrot" separately from budgerigar, lovebird, cockatiel, amazon, and macaw, all of which are classified under the order Psittaciformes (parrots): "They owned a total of 29 birds: 8 budgerigars,

7 cockatiels, 4 lovebirds, 7 parrots, 1 macaw, 1 conure, and 1 duck" (Beck and Katcher, 1989, 152). And: "The birds owned were 66 cockatiels, 53 parakeets, 55 finches, 27 budgerigars, 21 canaries, 39 parrots, 13 cockatoos, 12 love birds, 11 pigeons, 2 macaws, 2 raptors, 2 owls, 1 dove, and 1 raven" (Kidd and Kidd, 1998, p. 135). Of further confusion is the fact that owls are raptors, and in the U.S. budgerigars are more commonly known as parakeets, even though the designation 'parakeet' has wider application.

- <sup>9</sup> I joined the Quaker Parakeet List in September of 1999 and remain an active member.
- <sup>10</sup> The distribution of ages is as follows: Age 21-30 ( $n = 19$ ); age 31-40 ( $n = 20$ ); age 41-50 ( $n = 40$ ); age 51-60 ( $n = 19$ ); age 61-70 ( $n = 10$ ); and age 71-80 ( $n = 1$ ). Five of the 114 participants did not respond to this question.
- <sup>11</sup> "Fid" is a term invented by unknown bird owners and is commonly used to describe their "feathered children," or "fildren," as some prefer. Furry children are sometimes referred to as "Furds."
- <sup>12</sup> Stated Johnson Rice analyst David Mann, cited by Reuters, "Pet Supply Stores Lap up Growth." *Chicago Tribune*, January 27, 2003, section 4, page 6.
- <sup>13</sup> In one case, a respondent actually stated that she likes the birds better than her own kids. "But don't tell them that!"
- <sup>14</sup> Quality Time: How much time per day do you spend interacting (talking to/playing) with your bird(s)? Answers: < 1 hour (1; 0.88%); about one hour (12; 10.53%); about two hours (21; 18.42%); about three hours (28; 24.56%); and over three hours (52; 45.61%).
- <sup>15</sup> Number of avian publications owned: none (11; 9.7%); one (30; 26.3%); two (19; 16.7%); three (14; 12.3%); and four or more (40; 35%).
- <sup>16</sup> In a presentation to the Gateway Parrot Club, St. Louis, Mo, April 5-7, 2002, Dr. Branson Ritchie, DVM, ABVP Dipl. (Avian) (2002), suggested that bird owners construct neighborhood flights where they can safely take their parrots to exercise, similar to neighborhood dog parks that are becoming common in the urban United States.
- <sup>17</sup> My parrot has both a large cage for daytime, as well as a smaller cage for travel and sleep. He has free access to his play gym and the back of the living room sofa when we are home, but spends at least half his time in either of his cages, doors open, playing with toys, grooming, napping, eating, drinking, or engaging in other activities. His former owners, who did not understand his needs, confined him to a cage where he screamed for attention, which we suspect was answered by punishment. After five years in his current home he has lost his fear aggression and appears fairly well adjusted.

- <sup>18</sup> As observed in reading sad posts to the Quaker Parakeet List over the years.
- <sup>19</sup> After experiencing first-hand a flyaway and recovery, my parrot's wings have been maintained trimmed since October, 1999. Although I asked my avian veterinarian to trim Otis' wings with great trepidation, I have never experienced any of the problems mentioned by Low (1999, p. 117), but this is due to a proper wing trim. Otis has never fallen, developed tumors, or exhibited a change in any other activities, apart from a lack of flight. I was greatly concerned that he would become depressed, but it did not seem to bother him at all. In fact, each year he is with us he seems to become ever more adjusted and happy and forgetful of his previous sad life. When trimming a bird's wings for the first time, one must first place the bird on the floor, so that they learn their limitations without harming themselves; otherwise they may fall and hurt themselves. Otis' wings are currently growing out so that he can better exercise. We now live in a more secure environment where it is less likely that he will accidentally be frightened into flying away as he was before.
- <sup>20</sup> See Blanchard (1999:50-55) for an interesting discussion on the pros and cons of wing trimming and how to do it correctly.
- <sup>21</sup> See Gallerstein (1994) and the following websites for potential avian hazards:  
<http://www.parrotparrot.com/birdhealth/alerts.htm>  
<http://petbirdreport.com/dangers.shtml>  
<http://exoticpetvet.net/avian/topten.html>
- <sup>22</sup> "‘Teflon Toxicity’ or Polymer Fume Fever: Polytetrafluorethylene (PTFE) is a synthetic polymer used as a nonstick surface in cookware. The brand names Teflon, Silverstone, and T-Fal are the best known but PTFE-coated products are also manufactured under other trade names." [When these products are overheated] "Birds kept in areas close to the kitchen will usually die very shortly after breathing the fumes. Even birds kept in another room are at great risk" (Gallerstein 1994:177-178).
- <sup>23</sup> "Choosing a slightly older bird requires more patience and time in many instances. Occasionally the bird will pick a person right away. While this is usually a good situation for someone looking for a parrot, it cannot be expected. In many cases the bird needs a chance to decide how it feels about the human. The advantage to selecting a bird at this age is that its inherent personality is more readily observed" (Athans, 1999, p. 12).
- <sup>24</sup> "Over ten years ago my husband and I had some serious marriage problems. We separated and spent over two years apart. The birds would go from the house to my husband's apartment and yell and scream for "MOM." At home they would want "DON." We never could agree on who would take them if we divorced.

Finally, it was clear the birds thought of us a unit and that we had to be. Funny, I know, but it was the birds that made us concentrate on solving the other issues in life so that we could be together again" (Survey 59).

- <sup>25</sup> Yearly expense on parrots: \$100 or less (2); \$200-300 (12); \$300-400 (13); \$400-500 (16); \$500-1,000 (32); and more than \$1,000 (39).
- <sup>26</sup> A formulated diet is recommended for all captive birds, as birdseed is nutritionally poor and very high in fat (Kenneth Welle, DVM, personal communication August 7, 2003). Formulated diets may come in powder, crumbles or pellets, and are superior to mixed diets that include seed, since when fed free choice, the birds will pick out the seeds and leave the more nutritionally balanced food behind. Brand names of formulated diets include Lafeber, Roudybush, Harrisons, Zupreem, and Kaytee and are available through the Internet or in large chains such as PetSmart. Follow your avian veterinarian's recommendations regarding conversion to a formulated diet, since some birds are difficult to convert and their weight must be closely monitored to make certain that they do not starve.
- <sup>27</sup> For example, see the study conducted by Rebecca Cassidy (2002) of the culture of thoroughbred breeding and racing in an English community.

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