



She embodied all the magic and the misery of modern parrots.

Sofia popped off her perch, climbed up my arm, and leaned into my face. A Moluccan cockatoo, among the world's most stunning birds, Sofia's most distinctive feature is her huge round head—big, white, and inviting as a fluffy pillow. She fanned her crest in a spectacular blush of pink, coral, and salmon.

I looked into Sofia's black eyes and held her close. As she dropped her head and burrowed in tight, I was overcome by the intimacy of the moment, like cuddling a baby.

"They can really turn on the charm," says Betsy Lott, smiling.

That combination of beauty and charm has helped make parrots like Sofia the fourth most popular pet in America—behind only dogs, cats, and the ubiquitous freshwater fishes.

But there's a dark side to our passion for parrots, and Sofia embodied that too. Once an elegant bird in white feathers, she's now a tattered beauty, her feathers ragged and her chest plucked bare, showing a big patch of wrinkled pewter gray skin.

Sofia's good friend and perch mate, Mango, wears a cone-shaped collar to keep her from even more aggressive self-mutilation. Only captive parrots pluck and wound themselves like this.

The owners of these parrots finally gave up on them and placed them in Mollywood, Lott's home-based organization for surrendered parrots. (The name refers to Moluccan cockatoos, one of the most spectacular—and difficult to care for—of all parrot species.) They're two of about 350 parrots she and her husband tend to just outside of Bellingham, Wash., near the Canadian border.

"I get calls every day from people looking to dump their parrots," Lott says.

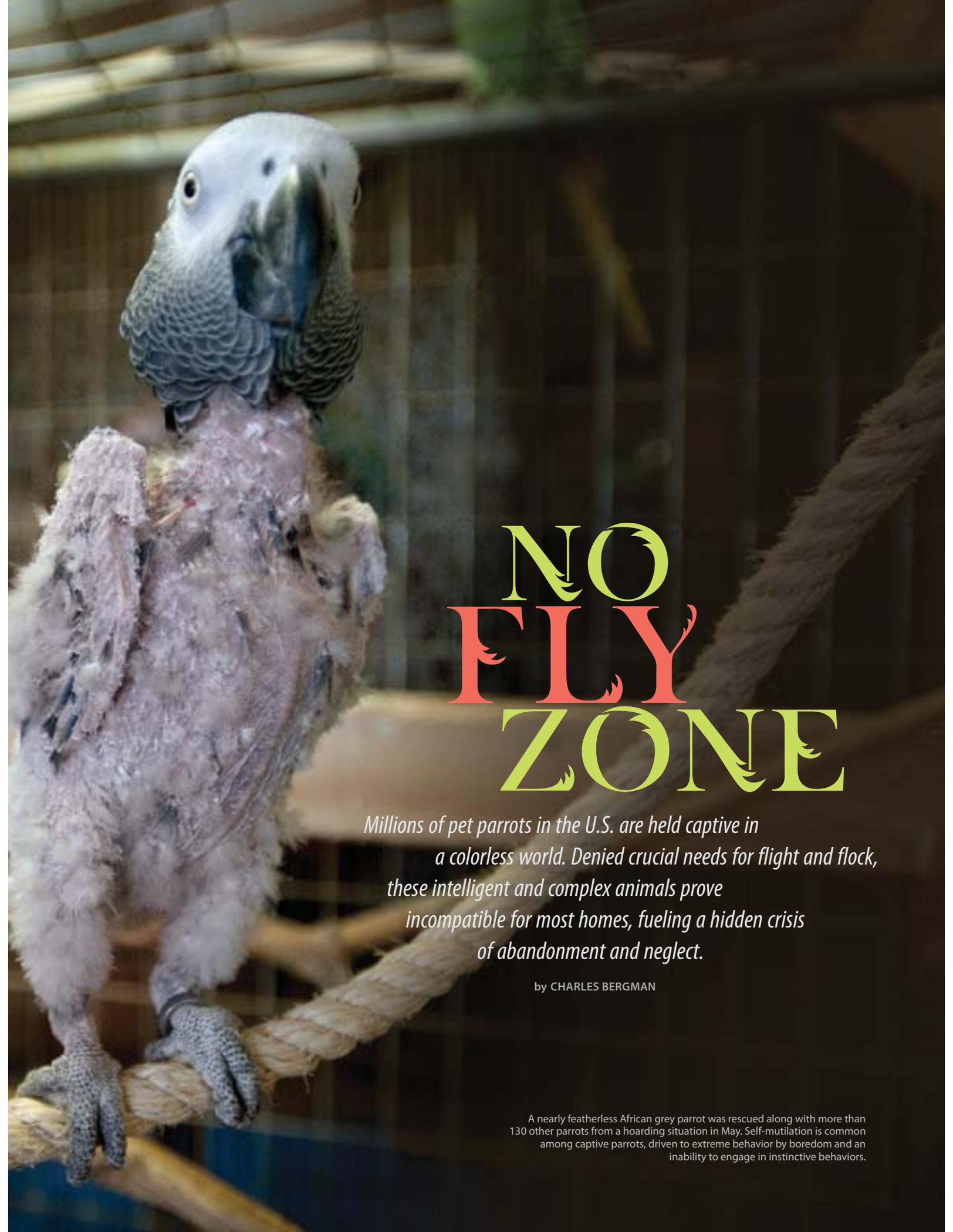
Sofia and Mango represent a category of parrot that's grown over the last 20 years: the unwanted, abandoned, and disposable bird. In 1992, the Wild Bird Conservation Act made it illegal to import most wild-caught parrots into the United States. While a victory for wildlife conservation, it fueled a captive breeding boom of unprecedented proportions.

For an animal as emotionally complex as a chimpanzee or dolphin, captivity presents an unimaginably bleak existence.

Once, parrots were icons of the tropical good life. Now they have morphed into figures of increasing controversy and crisis. The truth is,

most pet parrots are only a few generations removed from the wild, and few owners are prepared to fulfill even their most basic instincts: flying, flocking, and finding mates. These highly social creatures are usually kept alone and rarely allowed to fly—many parrots' wings are clipped. Often their relatively small cages have little in the way of stimulation and "enrichment," or toys. For an animal as emotionally complex as a chimpanzee or dolphin, it amounts to an unimaginably bleak existence. In fact, parrot advocate Mira Tweti estimates that some 75 percent of birds "live a life of abuse or neglect."

With no outlet for the chronic frustration of living in an environment expressly unsuited to them, these intelligent creatures often develop destructive behaviors like screaming, aggression to their owners, and the self-mutilation that Sofia and Mango have displayed.

A photograph of a featherless African grey parrot perched on a thick, light-colored rope. The parrot's head is turned slightly to the left, showing its characteristic grey and white patterned feathers on its face and neck. Its body is mostly bald, with some sparse, downy feathers remaining. The background is dark and out of focus, showing wooden beams and other ropes, suggesting an indoor aviary or enclosure.

NO FLY ZONE

Millions of pet parrots in the U.S. are held captive in a colorless world. Denied crucial needs for flight and flock, these intelligent and complex animals prove incompatible for most homes, fueling a hidden crisis of abandonment and neglect.

by CHARLES BERGMAN

A nearly featherless African grey parrot was rescued along with more than 130 other parrots from a hoarding situation in May. Self-mutilation is common among captive parrots, driven to extreme behavior by boredom and an inability to engage in instinctive behaviors.



Understandably, all of this takes a toll on birds' owners. Often the human caretakers feel out of their depth, similarly frustrated, and even guilty about the daily trial of living with an animal who is traumatized and psychologically damaged—and who may outlive them by decades.

Some resort to confining their birds to the closet, basement, or garage, where the dark silences them and hides the mess. Other owners simply unload their high-maintenance charges with friends or family members (many parrots pass through multiple homes in their lifetimes) or at places like Mollywood, which have sprouted up like mushrooms in response to the fallout. "People just don't realize what they're getting into," Lott says.

This is the paradox of parrots. We love them for being like us, for talking like us, and for bonding with us. But then we find ourselves unprepared for the challenges they present in our busy lives.

The problem is so large that Tweti, Lott and other rescuers, and organizations such as The HSUS don't recommend parrots as pets in the first place. Because they are so long-lived, there will likely be a need for responsible, carefully vetted home care for many birds for many years. But the best situation for most, these groups maintain, is an accredited sanctuary environment.

Sofia nudges me with her head, and I rub the back of her neck. She's one of many such parrots—literally hundreds—I've met in rescues and sanctuaries around the country. They became my inspiration to try to figure out what's really happening to their kind and what that means for our rapidly changing relationship. What is clear is that there's misery in parrot land.

While I soak up the love from Sofia, several other parrots in the

house start screaming. I can barely hear Lott.

"These parrots are like people—like children," she says. "It's like adopting a 2-year-old special needs child. One that will never grow up."

NO LIFE FOR A BIRD

Crammed into cages at Howard Voren's Florida breeding facility (right), young conures will soon enter the pet trade, most doomed to lives of separation from their own kind. In their native South American habitat (left), sun conures fly among perches of their choosing, forming groups of up to 30 individuals.

Parrots make people crazy. For some they become a kind of addiction. Other animals command similarly devoted constituencies. What's unique about parrots, though, is how contentious parrot people can be—about topics ranging from the basics (how many captive parrots are in the pet trade) to the more understandably debated: what parrots need, the scope of the problems they face, even whether there's a problem at all. The fiercest battles are among self-professed parrot lovers.

There are about 350 species of parrots—the psittacines, a sprawling group of birds that includes huge macaws and cockatoos, Amazons and African grey parrots, conures, and smaller cockatiels and budgies (sometimes known as parakeets). Nearly a third of the species are endangered or threatened in the wild, in large measure because we've wanted them for pets.

But despite their popularity, it is difficult to get uncontested, reliable statistics about captive parrots in the U.S.

For example, while a 2012 survey by the American Veterinary Medical Association found about 8.3 million birds in 3.7 million homes, a 2010 survey by the American Pet Products Association found nearly twice that number: 16.2 million birds

in 5.7 million U.S. homes.

Neither survey counted parrots in sanctuaries, shelters, breeding facilities, and zoos, likely numbering millions more. But every rescuer I spoke with testifies to a growing problem that has yet to be quantified.

Karen Windsor and Marc Johnson run Foster Parrots in Rhode Island, one of the oldest captive parrot sanctuaries in the country. “We’re experiencing a failure of parrots as pets,” says Windsor. “Every sanctuary turns down birds every day. You hear every reason and excuse from owners. You bet it’s a crisis.”

Denise Kelly, president of the Avian Welfare Coalition—an advocacy group based in New York City—points out that the industry is largely unregulated and statistics are matters of speculation. “I have witnessed the growing problem of unwanted parrots,” she says. “Here’s what we know. We’re experiencing a hidden crisis of parrot ownership. All these unwanted birds need advocates.”

Tweti, author of *Of Parrots and People* and an expert on parrot welfare, predicts a “tsunami of unwanted, disposable parrots” yet to come from the millions of sales over the last three decades, since parrots often live as long as people.

My own anecdotal evidence also hinted at the scope of the problem. In western Washington, where I live, it took little effort to find five organizations that accept surrendered parrots:

- Mollywood Avian Sanctuary, Bellingham: 350 parrots
- Cockatoo Rescue and Sanctuary, Stanwood: 450
- Macaw Rescue and Sanctuary, Carnation: 300
- Zazu’s House, Woodinville: 150
- Good Fox Birdie Haven, Auburn: 80

This totals 1,330 abandoned, relinquished, or otherwise homeless parrots in one state, actually in just half of one state.

How many smart, sensitive, wounded birds does it take to make a crisis? Clearly these “little people”—a common epithet for them—are suffering. Each of these birds has her own sad story. Each abandoned and neglected parrot is a tragedy. James Gilardi, a biologist and executive director of the World Parrot Trust conservation group, says he wouldn’t describe parrot relinquishment as a crisis—“we’re talking about maybe less than 1 percent of parrots getting rehomed”—but he doesn’t dispute that captive birds suffer. “It’s rare to encounter a bird in captivity in this country that does not need better care. It’s a horrible situation that most birds live in.”

The contours of this controversy are often mapped as sanctuary people versus breeders. To try to get to the bottom of the matter, I visited one of the most famous—and according to some, notorious—parrot breeders in the country: Howard Voren.

Now in his mid-60s

and nearing retirement, Voren has sensitive pink skin, his hair is gray and thinning, and his eyes are piercingly smart. I met him at his home in Loxahatchee, Fla.—once the

BYE, BYE, BABY

Taken from their parents just after birth, baby conures at Howard Voren’s breeding facility spend their early days in storage containers. Such orphaning is typical in the captive breeding industry—and psychologically damaging, according to some; wild babies spend months in constant contact with their parents.

“These parrots have no life besides food and a nest box. They’re breeding machines. It’s no life for a thinking animal.”

— PAUL REILLO, RARE SPECIES CONSERVATORY FOUNDATION

epicenter of the U.S. parrot business—where his 10-acre breeding facility is hidden behind fences on the outskirts of Palm Beach. Voren has been a national leader in captive breeding for more than three decades. He was a top importer of wild-caught parrots when it was legal, and he developed many of the breeding techniques that made mass produc-

tion of parrots possible and profitable. And he’s an outspoken partisan in the parrot wars. Crisis? “That’s just a bunch of fat ladies in polyester suits who call themselves animal behaviorists,” he says. “I call them ARFs—Animal Rights Fanatics.”

I wanted to learn from Voren how commercial breeders produce their chicks, how the birds are treated in the process, and how he feels about his animals. He has a large personality, leaning in close to make his points. I was surprised to learn that he sees himself as the misunderstood, slightly alienated hero of parrot conservation.

“I’m the pioneer,” he says. “I wrote the book on hand-rearing and hand-feeding of parrots. I showed how to mass-produce them, how to do it. It’s always the pioneers who take all the arrows.”

He began his business more than 30 years ago when he went to Honduras and South America with a copy of Forshaw’s *Parrots of the World*. “It was my shopping list,” he says. “Once I brought in 500 yellow-naped Amazons. I brought in probably the largest shipment of hyacinth macaws to the United States. My memory is 50.” Voren sold the macaws for \$20,000 per pair (legal then) and used the money to set up shop, importing other birds to supply the breeding stock.

Since then, Voren says he has produced about 30,000 parrots—1,000 per year.

I ask him about Tweti’s characterization that virtually all parrot breeding facilities are parrot mills.



He objects vehemently.

“There are some sketchy breeders,” he tells me. “They may have parrots in deplorable conditions. There’s lots of backyard breeders, hobbyists. But they all go out of business. The nature of parrots won’t allow it. Parrots in mills will die. If you run a facility that’s awful, the parrots won’t reproduce. Those breeders will go by the wayside. As Charlton Heston said, ‘Egypt was not built by starving slaves.’”

I wondered if he realized that he’d just compared his breeding parrots to slaves.

After several hours of talking, Voren shows me his facilities.

Out back, we walk through long rows of hundreds of cages, wire rectangles elevated off the ground. Each cage is perhaps 3 x 3 x 4 feet (large by some standards) and holds a breeding pair. No toys. No distractions. On the wooden back of the nest box in each cage, inky notes track every egg laid that season. The eggs are removed as they are laid. The babies never see their parents: Voren experimented with real chickens as brooding birds but found it more efficient to invent an “artificial chicken” device to heat and hatch the eggs.

Voren tells me his goal is to be able to completely control the birds and their breeding process. “If I’m successful, I can make them breed whenever I want or turn them off with a snap of the finger.”

“Do you have personal relationships with your parrots?” I ask.

“I’m a capitalist,” he says. “I’m in business. No personal relationship with the parrots.” He pauses. “That maybe gives the wrong impression. It’s just that you can’t have a personal relationship with 1,500 adult birds.”

The old breeder parrots are sold at auction. “When a pair reaches the end of their productivity, they go to a broker,” he says, “to be sold to other breeders. Only not with my name on them.”

We enter a room in a long, low building. It’s windowless. A woman from Honduras is working with baby parrots inside, feeding them, I think. This is where the hatched birds come to be raised and weaned, where they learn to feed themselves.

Stacked wire cages line two of the walls. They are full of green nanday and fiery-orange sun conures—small long-tailed parrots originally from South America. They’re increasingly popular as the market for larger birds declines.

GROUNDING FOR LIFE

A mealy Amazon parrot—a type of bird sold for \$800 or more online—takes flight in Ecuador. In the wild, freedom to fly enables foraging, finding mates, establishing nest sites, and escaping from predators. In captivity, even the largest cage can leave parrots yearning for wide open sky.

“We’re experiencing a hidden crisis of parrot ownership. All these unwanted birds need advocates.”

— DENISE KELLY,
AVIAN WELFARE COALITION

From a bank of shelves, Voren pulls out one of many plastic storage containers, the kind you can buy at Home Depot. He opens the top, revealing 16 baby conures, some nearly covered in green feathers, others still mostly naked. They stand in a layer of wood shavings and sawdust,

craning to look up at me. Voren is proud of them, likening the container to their early life in a hole in a tree in the forest.

Voren says he feels no moral dilemma about any part of his operation. On the contrary, he believes it contributes to conservation, since by knowing parrots in the home we’ll be motivated to save parrots in the wild. (Many advocates feel otherwise, noting it’s the pet trade that contributed to wild birds’ decline.)

Is it a parrot mill? Certainly the whole point is to pump out large numbers of baby parrots. Some call this system “poultry farming.”

Population biologist Paul Reillo, founder of the Rare Species Conservatory Foundation and expert on the endangered imperial parrot on the Caribbean island of Dominica, put it this way: “The factory farming of parrots is a form of engineering and selection. I have a lot of respect for Howard’s technical innovations. We’ve learned a lot from him. But these parrots have no life besides food and a nest box. They’re breeding machines. It’s no life for a thinking animal.”

The image of the baby parrots in the plastic storage boxes has stayed with me. They were not so much parrots as products. Not so much babies as profits with feathers.



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