

versions of Black Beauty Ranch. Name just about any animal or any kind of abuse, and somewhere there are people devoted to bringing shelter and relief. And different though they are, in their focus and their means, they are each called to the same kind and noble work, which in practice usually involves cleaning up after careless, selfish, or malicious people.

It's not just good work, it's hard work. And it takes a special kind of person to do it—guys like Matt Smith of the Central Virginia Parrot Sanctuary. It was a beautiful spring day when I stopped by to see Matt in May 2009. When I climbed the steps of a white-fronted colonial house, I knew I had the right place because I could hear the ear-piercing screeches of parrots inside. Before long, Matt, a clean-cut thirty-two-year-old with a winning manner, greeted me. Matt runs one of a handful of sanctuaries devoted to rescuing, rehabilitating, and if possible adopting out, these strikingly intelligent, demanding, and long-lived birds.

Matt's youth is an asset in his chosen field. It's a young man's job to race around to care for dozens of parrots, build the enclosures they need, and give them the attention they deserve. If Matt lives into his eighties, many of his birds will still be with him. And the younger birds in his care will likely outlive him.

Matt told me people rarely know what they are getting into when they acquire a parrot. The data support that claim. Most birds have five to ten homes before they die, meaning that most of them experience a never-ending cycle of loss and separation from their owners.

As we walked out back, into the open-air aviaries, Matt asked me to hold out my left arm while a cockatoo named Callie stepped onto it. She was a large bird with a beautiful gorgeous head, thick with colorful feathers that would make any mother bird proud. But Callie had no feathers below the neck. She had plucked out every last one—leaving only little bumps across her bare, sickly-looking body. Animals always look so small and frail without their fur or

feathers. All that was left of this poor creature's glorious plumage were the feathers she couldn't reach and pull out.

Callie's previous owner had trouble coping with the noise and the persistence of the cockatoo, and his solution was to sequester her in a room where she was alone almost all of the time. In the wild, the birds live in flocks, fly for miles every day, and spend time breaking open nuts and other food with their powerful beaks. She had none of that stimulation in this man's home—she was effectively in solitary confinement. With the downturn in the economy in 2008, he needed extra income and had to rent out his spare room—and that spelled eviction for Callie. It came to a better end than many other such stories, and at least her owner sought out a good sanctuary and found Matt Smith. Callie did not come with a dowry, only with a lot of problems, leaving Matt with the responsibility of indefinite care for a troubled creature.

"Some birds can come from great homes and pluck," Matt told me. "Other birds come out of outright abuse and do not pluck. But what we do know is that feather plucking does not exist in the wild." In captivity, 30 to 40 percent of parrots pluck their own feathers.

Matt said the best he can do is try to replicate the birds' wild habitat as much as possible to minimize self-destructive behavior. Branches, ropes, flocks, and flight can improve the situation and provide some needed stimulation. But sometimes the birds are just traumatized. And he says that the dreadful disorder just beyond plucking is self-mutilation. "They tear into themselves. The muscle is exposed and bloody. We can use a collar, and then try to bring them a better life."

The numbers are depressing. Matt estimates that between parrots and the passerines, there may be fifty million birds in captivity in the United States, a much higher number than industry surveys indicate. Mira Tweti provides a similar estimate in *Parrots and People*, her indictment of the captive bird trade. She notes that many of the

older birds in people's homes were captured from the wild and imported to the United States for the pet trade.

Young birds are typically captive-bred, because of the restrictions of the Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992, which forbade the importation of wild-caught birds. This law unintentionally gave rise to an enormous industry of "bird mills"—the equivalent of high-volume breeding operations for dogs, or puppy mills—where birds are kept by the hundreds in overcrowded and permanently dark sheds, caged until they are removed for sale. It is pathetic, Matt told me, to see these extraordinarily intelligent birds locked in such squalid environments.

"There is no escaping the intelligence," as Matt put it. "Rescuers and sanctuary folks can use the research on their intelligence as a call to protect them, but the pet trade uses that same research to promote their ownership as pets. To realize how smart a bird is, all you have to do is live with one. Eventually, most people will realize how wrong it is to keep them in captivity. A lot of people feel guilty—it's a recurring theme."

As I was about to leave, Matt showed me the flight cages he'd designed. "Flight is the most important component to a bird's well-being," he said. In these cages, the birds are together, and can stretch and use their wings, assuming their wings have not been clipped.

I just wish that potential buyers of exotic birds could see his sanctuary—a large bird colony filled with examples of how difficult it is to keep and maintain creatures made for the sky. Most captive birds eventually become the responsibility of someone else. Matt and others to follow, including some good-hearted souls yet to be born, will spend years of hard work cleaning up after the foolish decisions of others, and trying to make things right for these creatures.

I also feel so grateful to this young man for devoting his life to these birds. He is one in the growing ranks of people who see the need and answer the call, and whose unselfish efforts make a mark

in the world every day. It is the mark of respect and appreciation, of understanding and empathy for creatures great and small who have the same spark of life that we do, and who so often deserve better than they receive at our hands.

Parrots yearn for the sky, like all the fowl of the air. Elephants are called to roam, unbounded by the designs of man. Chimps want to climb and swing and dance, rejoicing in the lives intended for them. They all have their own minds and desires; they all have a place and purpose of their own. They have their own dignity and their own destinies to fulfill, in a plan ultimately beyond any man's power to know. Sparing or rescuing them from cruelty is a picture of humankind at our best. And so often in our dealings with animals, the greatest power we have is to stand back and let them be.

There's so much to the mental and emotional lives of animals, and though the research affirming that fact is fairly recent, it all suddenly seems so obvious. Outside the professional journals of the behaviorist school of thought, or the animal-science departments subsidized by animal-use industries, very few people will tell you anymore that animals neither think nor feel in any meaningful way. All the evidence and every ounce of common sense tell us otherwise, even if we still do not put that understanding into everyday practice.

Darwin himself, in the 1870s, recognized and captured the rich emotional lives of animals. Yet by a strange selectivity, his theory of evolution had a profound impact on how we humans see ourselves, while his evidence about the emotional lives of animals had almost no impact on how we treat them. And for all the pathbreaking work of Donald Griffin, the Harvard ethologist who a century later picked where up where Darwin left off, somehow we've still had a hard time getting past the mechanistic dogmas of the behaviorists. In part because of the falsehoods they have spread, with their way of fitting every animal they study with the same scientific straitjacket,