

# AAV

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# BIRDS

## THE NEED FOR AVIAN ADVOCACY

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# THE WILD BIRD TRADE



BY MONICA ENGBRETSON

In 1992 the U.S. Congress learned that the international pet trade in wild-caught birds contributes greatly to the decline of species in the wild, and that the trade produces an unacceptably high rate of mortality among imported animals. After intense lobbying by environmental and animal protection organizations, Congress passed the Wild Bird Conservation Act (WBCA), which transformed the United States from the largest importer of wild-caught birds to one of the smallest.

The WBCA requires documentation by the importer on the source of the bird, a complete description, and the reason for import. Also, the importer is permitted to bring in only two exotic birds as companion animals per year. The law makes exceptions for birds imported as part of approved breeding consortiums. The Department of the Interior administers the Act through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Passage of the WBCA was without a doubt a great victory, but the war wasn't over. The U.S. animal protection community largely moved on, or adopted the mantra that purchasing captive-bred birds for use as pets was a valid solution and substitution for trade in wild-caught birds.

Case closed. Mission accomplished.

But it wasn't. Not only were the welfare problems associated with captive breeding brewing, but the trade in captive-bred birds—who are physically indistinguishable from wild-caught birds—provided a perfect smokescreen for smugglers. Moreover, the trade in wild-caught birds within their countries of origin and in other international markets continued.

It is difficult to accurately estimate the number of birds impacted annually because most estimates only count birds who are legally traded or those confiscated during illegal trade—they don't typically track the number of birds traded within a country, nor the number of birds who die before making it to market. It is estimated that up to 75 percent of trapped birds die before reaching their commercial destination.

## THE PRICE OF POPULARITY

Parrots are still one of the most popular types of birds for the pet trade, and the results of that popularity are sobering. Parrots constitute the greatest proportion of threatened and endangered species over any other large family of birds.

According to the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the international body that regulates global wildlife trade, the African grey parrot is the single most heavily traded wild bird due to high pet demand around the world. Traders have taken full advantage of the instability in West African countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo to exploit African grey parrots. A 2016 study published in the journal *Ibis* reveals that the once-abundant African greys have almost disappeared from Ghana.

South Africa has become an important trade hub where African grey parrots are exported to markets around the world. This includes captive-bred birds produced from wild-caught parents, as well as wild-

# THE AFRICAN GREY PARROT IS THE SINGLE MOST HEAVILY TRADED WILD BIRD.



caught birds laundered through South African breeders and exported as “captive-bred.” The captive breeding industry in South Africa and the Middle East relies heavily on wild birds for breeding stock, again laying waste to the claim that captive breeding for the pet trade aids conservation.

The current situation in the Americas and across Indonesia is also troubling. Conservationist Rev. Dr. LoraKim Joyner reports that in Central America, the poaching rate of scarlet macaw nests (i.e., the number of young birds taken directly from the nest in a given area) is at or near 100 percent. And in Indonesia, now one of the most significant global hubs in the wild bird trade, many birds endemic to the islands, such as the yellow-crested cockatoo, are critically endangered and

in high demand as pets. Last summer, images of 23 yellow-crested cockatoos crammed into plastic water bottles confiscated aboard a ship at an Indonesian port provided a gruesome glimpse into the suffering caused by the modern trade.

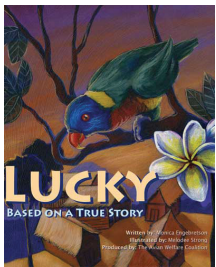
Clearly, the wild bird trade war is far from over. We must continue to fight, learn, and adapt our strategies to meet the challenge. Today, 24 years after the passage of the Wild Bird Conservation Act, any reputable animal protection organization understands that captive breeding for the pet trade isn't an answer to protecting wild birds. Instead, the most successful conservation tools include international trade restrictions, direct work with local communities and local law enforcement in the birds' country of origin, habitat protection, and rehabilitation and release

of confiscated parrots, as well as public education targeting the demand for birds as pets around the world. **AV**

*Monica Engebretson has worked professionally in the animal protection movement since 1999 covering issues including wildlife conflicts, trapping, exotic birds, pet shops, and animals used in agriculture and research. She is a volunteer board member of the Avian Welfare Coalition.*

## Lucky the Lorikeet

*Lucky* is an educational children's book that gently awakens young readers to the plight of captive birds and birds captured in the wild.



Based on a true story, it tells about Lucky, a parrot who was captured in the wild and eventually regained his freedom with the help of a young Indonesian boy.

*Lucky* not only teaches children to be kind to animals; it is also a natural fit for a wider educational curriculum including lessons about Indonesia, the natural history of parrots and tropical forest ecosystems, and real-life conservation efforts.

These topics, with sample lesson plans and class activities, are at [www.LuckyTheLorikeet.com](http://www.LuckyTheLorikeet.com). In addition, children can meet the real Lucky in a narrated documentary video clip available on the website—truly a rare and inspiring opportunity!

*Lucky* was written by Monica Engebretson and illustrated by Melodee Strong.

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## On the Front Lines in Central America

Rev. Dr. LoraKim Joyner is the director of One Earth Conservation, which is on the front lines of the battle to save wild parrots in Central America from the pet trade. I had the opportunity to speak with her about her work and current challenges.

### How is the pet trade impacting the species you are working to protect?

We don't have exact poaching rates for most of our sites. It's been too difficult to fund projects and to get into some of the places due to their remoteness and risk. In the 1990s, the poaching rate of yellow-naped amazon parrots in Guatemala approached 100 percent in our study area. We hear of similar poaching rates now when we work in Guatemala. In Honduras in 2014 we were able to document 100 percent failure/poaching of all scarlet macaw nests in our study area. In Paraguay, the poachers themselves say they are taking nearly every macaw possible.

### Where do the birds taken for the pet trade end up?

We don't know, though Central American birds do end up in Asian markets as well as in the Mideast. In Paraguay the poachers said they sold to the Japanese. There is a tremendous domestic trade as well—we see poached birds everywhere in homes—and we suspect that they get carried over national borders to neighboring countries.

### What solutions seem to be working?

For the scarlets in Belize, protecting the nests 24/7 with volunteers and paid people seemed to really help. In 2015 we hired parrot patrols in the last half of the breeding season and only one nest of 11 scarlet macaw nests was poached. In Guatemala, the presence of CONAP [a government agency], the military, and conservationists cut down the scarlet macaw poaching a great deal but the protection is not 24/7.

### How can U.S. citizens help?

Visit the areas for ecotourism. Get informed and share the stories. Donate to fund parrot patrols, education, and conservation.

—Monica Engebretson