

# features

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During the illegal trade many parrots die because of stress, rough handling, crushing and asphyxiation.



## Snatched and sold

ALIYA HOSEIN

WHAT did Marie Antoinette, Theodore Roosevelt, Alexander the Great and Henry VIII all have in common? Parrots! They all kept parrots as pets. After rediscovering the New World, Christopher Columbus carried Cuban amazons (*Amazona leucocephala*) back to Spain.

The parrot trade dates back thousands of years and continues to be fuelled by people seeking to own wild and beautiful pieces of nature even if their trade is illegal. It is therefore no surprise that out of 356 species of parrots in the world, 35 per cent are listed as near-threatened or endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species with more than 50 per cent of these being solely affected by the parrot trade.

In Trinidad we have already

witnessed the extirpation of the blue and gold macaw (*Ara ararauna*) from the Nariva Swamp during the 1960s. With much effort, these have since been successfully reintroduced and are now protected by law.

Several parrot species are ecological specialists (eg forest dwelling) and many are large-bodied, producing small and infrequent clutches. These characters make wild populations highly vulnerable to poaching. Rampant nestling poaching hinders population growth since parrots take many years to become sexually mature and are often taken before they are able to reproduce in the wild. At the local level, poaching is far from complicated and not organised by seasoned criminals as might be expected.

Parrots are followed to their nesting cavities on foot and monitored until the eggs hatch. Nestlings are stolen either by cutting down the tree or cutting



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open the nest cavities. Both are very destructive methods as they kill the tree in the process and prevent re-use for future nesting. If the nest is in a relatively short tree the poacher climbs up to the cavity and removes the nestlings.

For adult parrots, netting or fishing line snares are used. Many parrots do not survive capture and transport. Studies from Mexico and South America have reported that an average of 31 per cent of parrots die

before making it into the hands of an interested buyer. To compensate for high mortality rates, poachers take unsustainably large numbers of parrots. It has been estimated that the illegal parrot trade removes over 800,000 birds from the wild every year.

Parrots are not transported under luxurious and comfortable conditions. When crossing borders or oceans they have to by-pass detection from customs officials since many countries have now banned the trade in wildlife. They are drugged or given alcohol or have their beaks taped shut to stop them from making a peep or squawk during transit. To keep them from flying, wing feathers are ripped out and the birds are tied together. They are crammed into DIY cages and stuffed into

tyre wells, bottles and toilet paper rolls where they are barely able to move.

Many parrots die because of stress, rough handling, crushing and asphyxiation. Because they are kept in overcrowded substandard sanitary conditions they become highly susceptible to diseases. Several blue-fronted amazons (*Amazona aestivalis*) confiscated from smugglers in Brazil were found to be suffering from chlamydia. Symptoms include diarrhoea, depression, wheezing, weight loss, dehydration and discharge from the nostrils and eyes. Although the health impacts of parrot poaching on humans have not been widely discussed, it can be important, especially as diseases like chlamydia can be transmitted from parrots to humans.

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FEATURES

# TT still grappling with pet parrot trade

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The complimentary meal service parrots are given while in transit is either non-existent or far from nutritious (corn, plantain or sunflower seeds). Parrot diets vary throughout the year; seeds, flowers, stems, insect larvae and fruit pulp. For the poacher or middleman it can be very difficult to replicate or tailor a diet to each species' needs.

Neotropical parrots live in habitats where varied and nutritious foods are readily and routinely available. They therefore have a weak ability to store nutrients for long periods of time and are more vulnerable to the conditions under which they are traded. Because most parrots are stolen when they are young they become accustomed to this rather monotonous diet. They are very picky eaters only eating what they are familiar with even if later presented with nuts, vegetables and fruits by owners. As a result they become prime candidates for diseases caused by malnutrition, for example hypovitaminosis A, which causes beaks and nails to become thickened and overgrown.

Parrots are commonly thought of as pesky and wasteful feeders. But the way in which parrots feed allows them to both limit and enhance available resources within habitats they occupy. Their powerful beaks allow them to feast on hard-to-crack nuts and hard-to-peel fruits, which when left partially ex-

posed are fed upon by other animals, some of which are pollinators and seed dispersers themselves. Other animals are affected when the parrots they rely on are removed from the food chain. Oftentimes they drop the fruits or seeds while moving between trees, indicating that a local decline in these species also has a heavy consequence for local vegetation.

Undoing the damage caused by poaching is not as easy as returning pet parrot purchases. Stuck between wild animal and companion pet, parrots face very real pressures of starvation, severe weather conditions and getting eaten by predators if released back into their natural habitats. Long-term companion parrots rely completely on their owners for food, protection, and companionship. They lack the ability to recognise wild foods and to interact with their fellow species in complex social hierarchies which help them to evade predators, find food, and otherwise survive.

An alternative approach is to stop the trade before it happens by enforcing wildlife trade laws and increasing public awareness campaigns. In Trinidad, environmental protection is slowly being prioritised and we are still grappling with ending this multi-million dollar trade. Although there are laws governing the trade of wildlife and hard-working environmental organisations, parrots continue to be smuggled into the country from

Central and South America to be sold at local pet stores or passed on to North America and England.

People have also tried to smuggle locally caught blue and gold macaws and amazons out of the country. It is quite possible that pet parrot keeping has become normal or is even used as a symbol of status in society especially the large macaws. Either way, potential parrot buyers may be swayed by desire strong enough to override consumer responsibility and heavy penalties.

We need to be made aware of what we will be truly supporting if we decide to buy parrots. How much do I value wild parrots, the environment and my fellow Trinidadians? What if my children could never see the forests, savannas and swamps the way I have? And what about their children? These are questions we must truthfully answer for ourselves.

*For more info on our natural environment contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at [admin@ttfnc.org](mailto:admin@ttfnc.org) or visit our website at [www.ttfnc.org](http://www.ttfnc.org) and our Facebook or YouTube pages. The club's next monthly meeting will be held today at St Mary's College, Port-of-Spain. Lecture: "Is there more to the moriche palm" by Linton Arneaud.*

**PHOTOS COURTESY SEN CLARENCE RAMBHARAT, MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE.**



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