

Unsustainable Grey Parrot Trade in South Africa

Posted by Steve Boyes of National Geographic Expeditions in Explorers Journal on March 19, 2013

Interview on the "The Nature Journal" with Tim Neary and Que Naidoo on the tragic death of hundreds of wild African grey parrots on a commercial flight from Johannesburg to Durban...

(Talk Radio 702 / Cape talk / www.702.co.za)



It has taken us less than 70 years to decimate most grey parrot populations, transforming the species into one of the most abundant, well-known and widespread pet parrots on Earth. Over a million have been captured and removed from the wild to accommodate booming demand over the last century. Millions have now been bred in captivity and sold into international markets. Grey parrots are big business. African grey and Timneh grey parrots were once widespread throughout the tropical forests of central and West Africa. Today, they are restricted to protected forests with reported declines over the last 10-15 years. We have already experienced local extinctions in parts of Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and throughout the range of the Timneh grey parrot in West Africa. The United States banned all trade in wild-caught birds in 1992 and the European Union followed in 2006. Demand for wild-caught birds remains high and may in coming years see a boom in demand from growing, affluent markets in the Far East. High-quality breeding facilities are the norm in the United States, Europe and Australia, but emerging markets and poorly regulated hubs like Bahrain and South Africa are cutting corners and depending heavily on wild-caught birds. Please listen to this interview and watch this slideshow on the trade in wild-caught grey parrots. We need to make sure that no further grey parrots are removed from the wild.



500 confiscated African Grey parrots being allowed to stretch their wings at the Lwiro Sanctuary. They were later called the “Congo 500”.

In an effort to better conserve the species BirdLife International split the grey parrot into two species, the Timneh grey parrot in West Africa and the African grey parrot in central Africa. It is hoped that this move will upgrade their threat status to *Endangered* and *Vulnerable* respectively. The World Parrot Trust petitioned the CITES Secretariat to upgrade both species to Appendix I, worked with airlines and cargo carriers to track trade levels, and recently rehabilitated confiscated grey parrots for release back into the wild. We are moving slowly in the right direction, but much research is needed to support targeted conservation actions like the protection of potential capture sites and seasonal bans on capture with local government. We need local governments to see the value of protected flagship species like grey parrots. Local conservation authorities almost always agree that any further capture and trade threatens species survival.

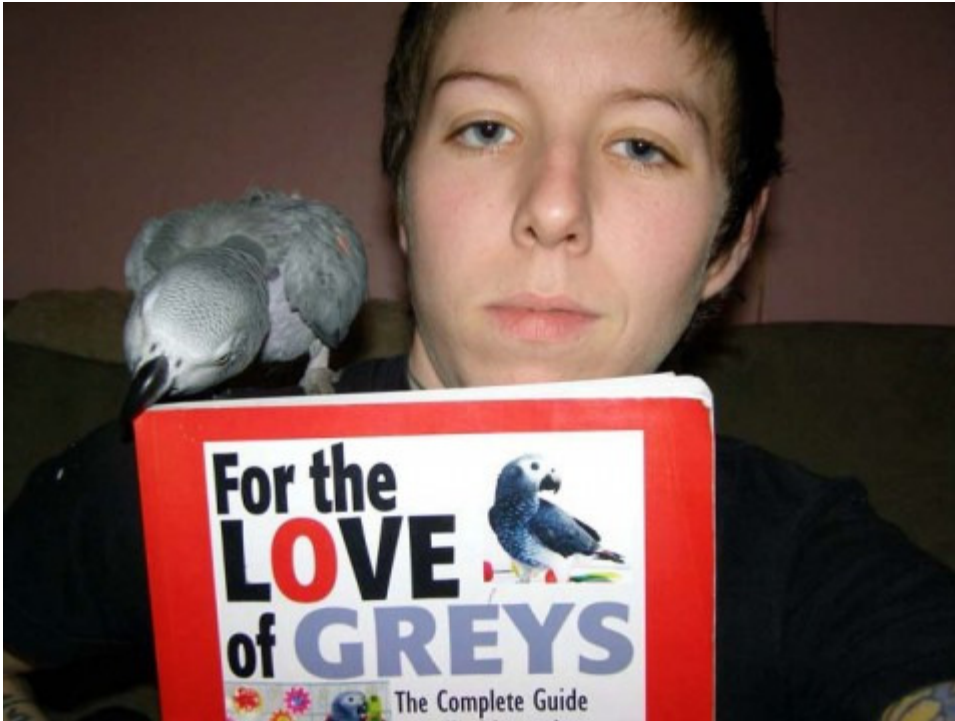


African grey parrot in captivity. One of the most intelligent birds on earth and an important global ambassador for Africa. (Cyril Laubscher)

African grey parrots and timneh grey parrots are threatened by habitat destruction and capture for the wild-caught bird trade. The effort to keep grey parrots safe in the wild is moving into the forests, salt licks and clearings of the Congo and West African forests, as we mobilize a global effort to save the species from further local extinctions. Saving one of Africa's most important global ambassador from persecution and capture back home needs to be a global effort. Emerging markets and the increased use of container ships to move large numbers of live birds and animals is spurring recent increases in trade levels. In recent years we have seen several African countries exceed their CITES import/export quotas for wild-caught African parrots. Traders are pushing the limits and moving large numbers of birds at a time, resulting in incidents like the tragic death of hundreds of wild grey parrots on a commercial flight from Johannesburg to Durban. We need to make sure that customs officials have access to the correct information and, for example, know the difference between an African grey parrot, Timneh grey parrot, and Cape parrot. We have a long way to go before we get anywhere near being able to adequately police the wildlife trade in Africa.

This radio interview examines the circumstances surrounding the tragic death of 687 wild-caught African grey parrots on a commercial flight from Johannesburg to Durban...

Link: <http://newswatch.nationalgeographic.com/2011/12/27/mystery-death-of-687-wild-grey-parrots-on-1-hour-flight-to-durban-revisited/>



Companion parrot owner reading a book with their captive-bred African grey parrot. Yes, they are that intelligent... (Frankie Fortyfour/Cape Parrot Project)

I recently visited a non-commercial parrot breeder near East London (South Africa) to film an insert for a local wildlife show (See: [“Cape Parrot Project: A Story of People and Parrots over Many Generations...”](#)), and had this experience:

“We were filming outside an African grey parrot breeding pair on eggs. Both were in the nest box when we arrived. After a few minutes the male stuck his head out and turned it upside down to consider us for who we were and figure out what the camera was... After a long silence in contemplation he emerged from the nest hole and walked over like a lurching old man in a grey jacket. He stopped a foot from us and asked, in a perfect parrot voice: “Hello. Do you have an appointment?!” After a calm delivery he paused for a moment and then began to growl softly. Both of us stood there amazed.”

Grey parrots have demonstrated advanced cognitive abilities in long-term lab tests and form complex relationships with human companions. In the wild, these parrots live in balance with nature, avoiding unnecessary risks wherever possible, mating for life, and living long, interactive lives in local populations of thousands of individuals. In captivity as companion parrots they have helped people through personal distress and become important members of the family. Grey parrots have well developed emotions and feelings and need to be treated accordingly. These truly amazing ambassadors of Africa’s tropical forests need several decades of care and conservation action before we can consider harvesting quotas for the wild-caught bird trade. There are too many serious threats and too much historical trade to justify any further trade in wild-caught grey parrots. A similar case can be put forward for most African parrot species. Most species

are data deficient or have experienced range reduction and population declines in the last 30 years.



African grey parrots feeding in the wild. © Diana May. All rights reserved. Source: World Parrot Trust – <http://www.parrots.org>

“Outrage over dead parrots”(January 14 2011) *By Yolandi Groenewald*

<http://mg.co.za/article/2011-01-14-outrage-over-dead-parrots>



Grey parrots crammed into a travel crate that was confiscated during a smuggling operation. Just look how stressed these poor parrots are... (World Parrot Trust/PASA)

“Bird mafia threatens African greys” (April 18 2011) *By Fiona Macleod*

<http://mg.co.za/article/2011-04-08-bird-mafia-threatens-african-greys>



Wild-caught African grey parrots being transported in cramped crates to markets like South Africa and the Far East. (World Parrot Trust/PASA)

“Birds perish as ownership row rages” (July 19 2011) *By Sheree Bega*

<http://www.iol.co.za/saturday-star/birds-perish-as-ownership-row-rages-1.1101863#.UUbz6nyhIXc>



African Grey Parrots take several weeks to rehabilitate due to the stress of capture and confinement.

“State hands over parrots to Mozambique” (August 23 2011) By Sheree Bega

<http://www.iol.co.za/saturday-star/state-hands-over-parrots-to-mozambique-1.1123416>



African grey parrots destined to be used as breeding stock for the pet bird trade. (World Parrot Trust/PASA)