

# Captive Bird Welfare



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## New York, NY



What is an  
exotic pet?

Why do  
people own  
exotic pets?

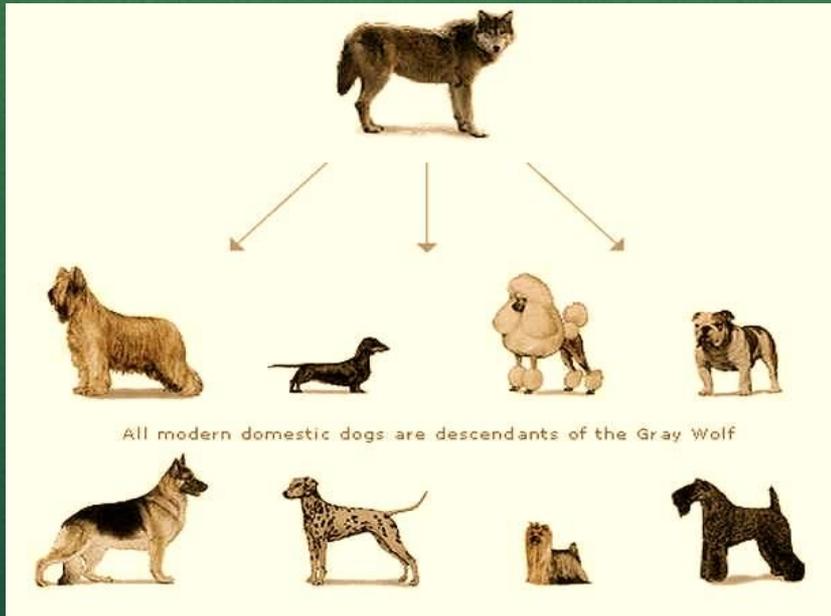
Birds  
Reptiles  
Small mammals  
Amphibians  
Fish

“Caged animals”



Not all exotic animals are poor companions

# Most exotic pets are not domesticated



- Domestication: selective breeding in which humans directly select for desirable traits over many generations
- Example: dogs were domesticated 14,000 years ago from wolves
- Dogs no longer resemble wolves behaviorally and do not fit into the natural ecosystem

# Pet Birds

- Most are not domesticated
- If born in captivity, they are often only 1-2 generations from wild parentage
- Genetically the same as wild cousins
- Wild instincts and behaviors are still present
- Tame: behavioral modification of an animal to accept the presence of humans.





# Federal laws protect our native wildlife



Pet birds are wildlife from other countries

Most health problems in exotic pets are caused by humans or are a direct consequence of being kept in captivity



# Exotic Pets in Shelters

- Limited budget for birds and exotic pets
- Lack of knowledge of the animal care staff on husbandry and medical problems
- Burden falls on private rescue groups to provide housing, medical care, adoptions
- No accountability



Animal  
Care Centers  
of NYC



# ASPCA NYPD Partnership

- “Having the full force of the NYPD protecting New York’s most vulnerable animals not only saves countless lives, but also signals the seriousness of animal cruelty and the need to prevent it”



2017: 123 cruelty arrests, 652 animals rescued and received treatment

# Agenda

- Types of birds kept in captivity
- Understanding birds in the wild- behavior, nutrition, anatomy
- Difficulties of keeping birds in captivity
- Welfare issues of captive birds, their owners, the environment
- Solutions

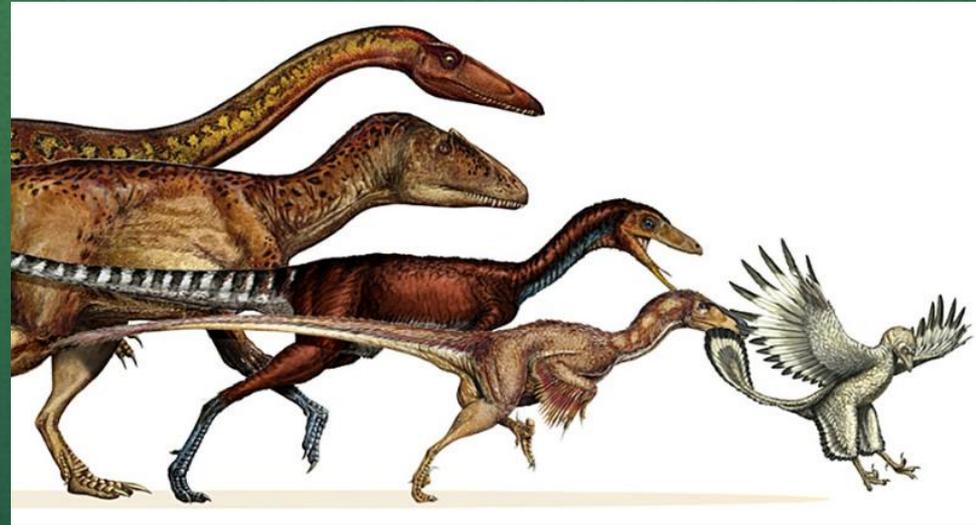
# Types of Birds Kept as Pets



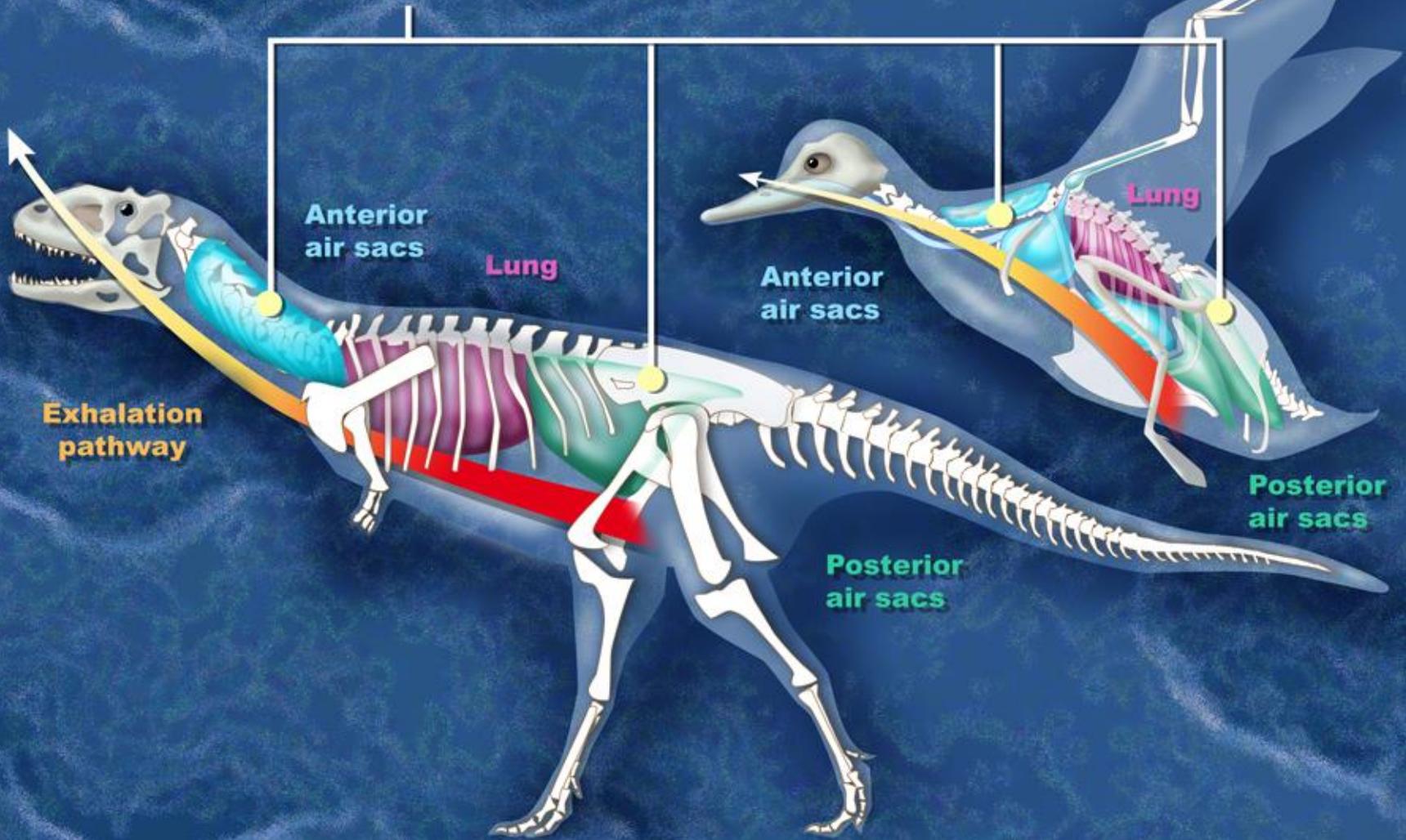
- Psittacines: parrots, parakeets, “hook shaped” beak
- Passerines: finches, canaries
- Galliformes: chickens, turkeys
- Columbiformes: pigeons, doves

# Birds are Dinosaurs

- Birds evolved from theropod dinosaurs
- 66 million years ago all dinosaurs except birds became extinct
- Skeleton, feathers, lungs/airsacs, egg-laying, gizzard stones

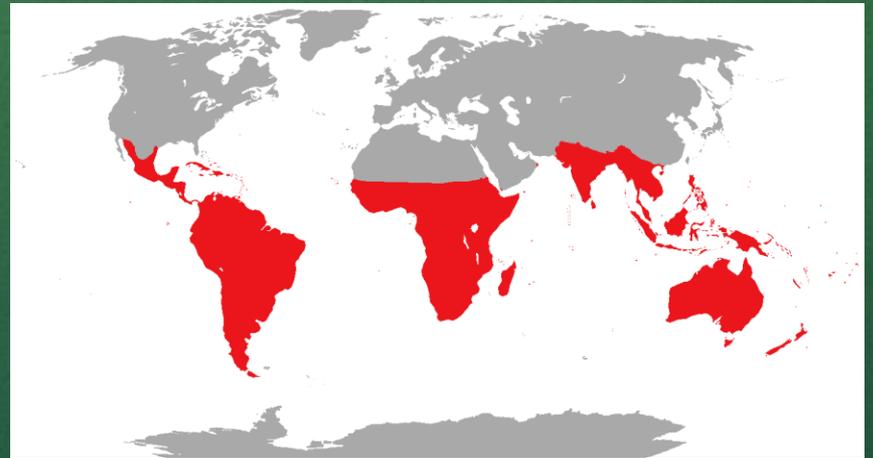


**Bones showing signs of connection to air sac tissue**



# Understanding Birds in the Wild

- Adapted to tropical and subtropical environments
- Care must be taken when housing or transporting parrots in the winter months in N. America



# Understanding Birds in the Wild

- Social behavior:
  - Flocks
  - Learned behaviors as juveniles
  - Monogamous breeding pairs
  - Grooming
  - Vocal communication

Parrots are never alone  
in the wild



# Understanding Birds in the Wild

## How they spend their days



- Flying
- Foraging for food
- Raising young
- Behaviors we don't understand due to difficulties of study

# Understanding Birds in the Wild

- Nutrition: seeds, fruit, nuts, nectar, pollen, buds/flowers, insects
- Seasonal
- Fresh
- Free choice
- Impossible to replicate in captivity



Parrots have been known to live  
for more than 80 years



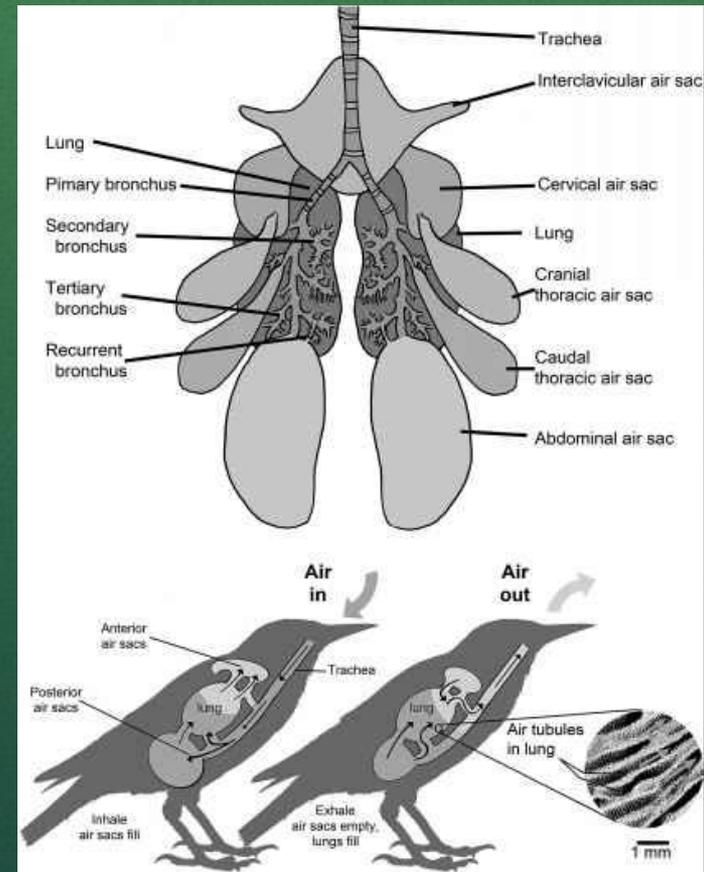
There is no reliable way to age a parrot

# Powerful, hooked beak



# Unique Respiratory System

- Air sacs and pneumatic bones assist with flying
- “Canary in the coal mine” scenario



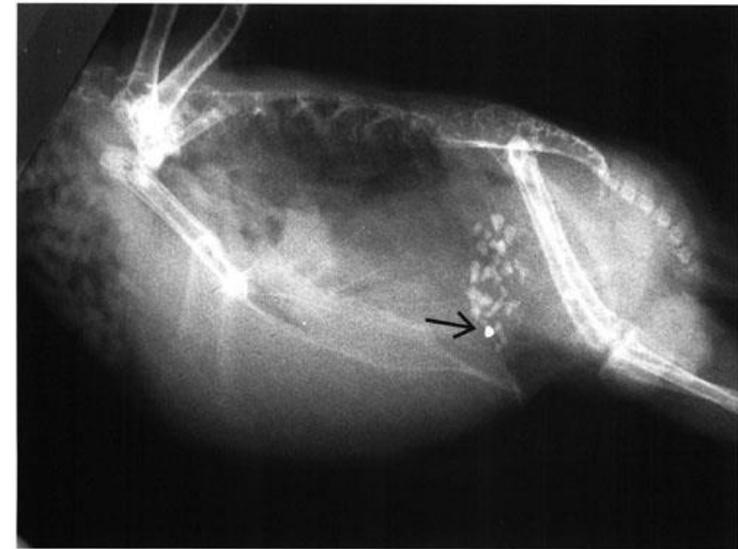
# No sexual dimorphism



- We can't tell the difference between males and females
- DNA gender testing is expensive
- Pet birds are not spayed and neutered routinely-lose health and behavior benefits

# Unique Digestive Tract

- Ventriculus (gizzard, or second stomach) collects grit to aid in digestion
- Toxins can also collect in the ventriculus: lead paint, zinc, foreign material



**Figure 3.** Lateral radiographic of a budgerigar administered a metal sphere by gavage to examine elimination times with different treatment protocols. This view was taken 7 days before the sphere was no longer visible. Notice the size of the sphere is smaller than that shown in Figure 2.

# Feathers and Flying

- Poor feather quality from not bathing (getting rained on), poor nutrition
- Overpreening- attempt to clean feathers, boredom
- Poor feather quality leads to inability to fly



# Intelligent

- Large brains
- Complex social behaviors
- Language
- Often compared to a 3 year old human



# Popularity as Pets

- Fourth most popular pet after dogs, cats, fish (2016 American Pet Product Association National Pet Owners Survey)
- 10-40 million pet birds- exact numbers unknown (rarely go to vet, breeding is unregulated, black market)
- Worldwide the trade in birds and exotic animals (illegal and legal) is a multi-billion dollar industry

# Parrot Misconceptions

- Birds are mistakenly referred to as “low maintenance” pets
- Most parrots do not talk and do not perform cute tricks
- Birds will only bond with a human if they are purchased as an unweaned baby and hand fed = WRONG
- TRUE = Most parrots are rehomed after 2-3 years

# Parrot Realities

- Extremely loud vocalizations
- Messy
- Require space to fly, climb, exercise
- Social and mental stimulation
- Varied diet
- Fume and toxin free environment



# Parrot Realities

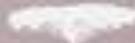
- Demanding, aggressive, unpredictable behavior
- Qualified and willing veterinary support is not always available
- Pet stores sell birds bred in “bird mills”
- Most animal welfare legislation does not include birds
- Birds often bond to one person- then become aggressive towards others
- Many bird sanctuaries are already at capacity



# PARROT

Confidential



  
NATURE

# What is Animal Welfare?

- Five Freedoms

- Freedom from hunger, thirst, malnutrition
- Freedom from disease and injury
- Freedom from physical and thermal discomfort
- Free from fear, distress, and other negative psychological states
- Freedom to carry out most normal forms of behavior

# What is *Animal Welfare*?

- Schuppli, Fraser (UBC): Framework for assessing the suitability of different species as companion animals
  - Animal welfare
  - Welfare of others
  - Welfare of the environment



# Avian Environmental Requirements

## Providing physical comfort

- Indestructible, safe from escape
- Non-toxic
- Large
- Varied perching surfaces
- Food/water bowl placement
- Ability to clean
- Well ventilated
- Thermoregulated
- Toys/enrichment
- Free from predators, hiding area







# Nutrition



# Problems with all seed diets:

- Birds pick out favorite items only
- Vitamin Deficiencies: A, D, E
- Calcium Deficiency: bone formation, egg-laying
- High fat = Obesity: fatty liver disease

# Nutrition

Freedom from hunger, thirst, malnutrition

- Commercial pellets: ground up grains fortified with vitamins and minerals
- Fresh fruits, vegetables
- Healthy grains, nuts, seeds, sprouts



# Toxic Foods and Unhealthy Foods

- Avocado
- Chocolate
- Caffeine
- Alcohol
- Extremely salty foods
- Oily, high fat foods
- Junk food



# Freedom from injury and disease

- Proper training
- Keeping the bird caged when no one is home
- Supervision when out of the cage
- Knowledge of environmental toxins: Teflon, household chemicals/cleaners, smoke, lead paint
- Access to veterinary care- is there a qualified avian vet nearby?

# Freedom to express normal behaviors



- Wing clipping
  - Prevents adequate exercise
  - Psychologically bird has lost freedom and ability to escape predators

# Where do people get pet birds?

- Pet store
- Breeder
- Family/friend
- Found/abandoned
- Rescue



# “Parrot mills”





Is there any appreciable risk of suffering, injury, illness, or death arising from procurement and transportation?

# Complications with “hand-raised” chicks



- Crop burn
- Bacterial and fungal infections
- Malnutrition
- Death

# Signs of a sick bird

- Fluffed feathers
- At bottom of the cage
- Breathing heavily
- Nasal or eye discharge
- Closed or sunken eyes
- Feathers missing



# Feather Destructive Behavior



# Transporting a bird



- Towel technique: gently grasp around neck and base of head, wrap towel around wings
- Birds can be transported safely in plastic dog/cat carriers



# Welfare of Others

- Is there a risk of a bird attacking or injuring humans and other animals?
- Parrots are unpredictable
- If bonded to one person, parrots will be aggressive towards others unless properly trained







Is the animal's life expectancy so great that the owner may lose the commitment or ability to provide care throughout its life?

# Welfare of Others

- Risk of infectious disease transmission
  - *Chlamydia psittaci*
  - *Salmonella*
  - Avian Flu
  - *Mycobacteria*
- Zoonotic: diseases that can be transmitted to people
- Diseases that can be transmitted to other birds (pet stores, breeders, poultry farms)



# Risks to the Environment

Marketing of captive-bred birds increases the demand for birds as pets, increasing the incentive for illegal and legal trapping of wild birds





Most captive birds have poor welfare, are unsuitable companions to owners, and their trade/sale cause significant harm to themselves and the environment



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