

New Shelter Book: It's for the Birds



Eileen McCarthy of MAARS cozies up to Angel, her 14-year old umbrella cockatoo. BRIAN MICHAEL

The four-legged guests of animal shelters often have a hard time adjusting to their temporary residence, but the feathered fellows who turn up in need of care may find it particularly rough, says Eileen McCarthy, chief executive officer of Midwest Avian Adoption & Rescue Services (MAARS) and cofounder and director of the Avian Welfare Coalition. Not many shelter folks have bird expertise, and typical suburban veterinarians may be unfamiliar with avian health issues. When McCarthy's interest in birds was piqued after her husband bought her a cockatiel, she found that few animal welfare groups were helping birds even by the late '90s. She ended up volunteering for the adoption program of a local bird club and eventually helped found MAARS. McCarthy recently helped author the excellent Captive Exotic Bird Care: A Guide for Shelters (available for purchase at www.avianwelfare.org). She talked with Animal Sheltering's Carrie Allan about her evolving interest in birds and the challenges of caring for homeless parrots.

You had budgies growing up, but it sounds like you had a very different relationship with the cockatiel your husband gave you.

Yeah, because she was hand-raised and was human-bonded. And then I started thinking I might like another bird, but I never really believed in purchasing animals from pet stores. So I was thinking there had to be birds that needed homes. But I started looking around and there really wasn't anything except for a local bird club that had a small adoption program. I joined the club mostly because I was interested in adopting a bird. And as it happened, they needed somebody to work on the adoption committee, and I just realized the huge need for it. By that point ... they were pretty saturated with birds. ... I thought, "This needs to be done, it's not being addressed. There's lots of people doing cats and dogs, and maybe this is somewhere I can really make a difference." I just had a sense of responsibility once I had seen the scope of the issues.

How did you end up going from the bird club to founding MAARS?

There were three of us running the adoption program at the bird club. And it grew, but I think we had a different take on how things should be done, not really supporting breeding. So the bird club wasn't too happy with us. So we formed MAARS at that time in 1999. Through taking in and adopting birds that had been already in other homes, it forced me to just learn a lot. Once I had a bird other than a cockatiel, I realized there was a lot to be learned about having these animals live with us and providing for them. There's been a whole evolution ... I think many people who come from either zoos or the exotic pet trade start to realize, "You know, there's something wrong with this picture."

What made you realize that there was a particular difficulty for birds in shelters?

[A lot of] shelters weren't taking them in. Once the bird club adoption program



Not all bird stress is as easily detected as that of this conure, who's plucked most of the feathers off his breast. McCarthy's book can help shelter staff recognize other signs of illness and disease. CARRIE ALLAN/HSUS

started, we were taking in birds directly from the public. It no longer was just kind of an internal thing that was just convenient for the club members. It was the numbers we started seeing, and then when we first started MAARS, it was just the huge influx of birds. Right away in 2000, we began working with local law enforcement and humane investigators and worked on a couple of large-scale confiscations. We knew we were just seeing the tip of the iceberg.

When you talked to people who were giving up their birds, had they tried to take the birds to their local shelter?

In my area, the largest humane society does actually take in a lot of birds and has for quite some time. Of course, people didn't want to surrender their bird to be

ethanized. Also, I don't think it was in their mind that shelters would take birds. There were also some pretty unsavory practices going on through [some] shelters and humane societies for a while where birds were then going out to breeders just because no one knew what to do with them. So they'd call breeders and they'd come and pick them up.

Has that stopped now?

That seems to have stopped. The largest shelter in our area, we have worked very closely with; we've done trainings with them and I think we realized we could not handle the problem on our own. Our idea through MAARS—and certainly through the Avian Welfare Coalition—is that we need to empower shelters to be able to at least handle the smaller birds. And that's

pretty much how it is here now: They will take in the cockatiels and budgies and lovebirds, and they just started doing some conures. But the larger birds will come to us. And if a smaller bird is considered not adoptable, they'll also then transfer the smaller birds to us. That has shifted over the years that MAARS has been in existence; we really do have some pretty good relationships as far as getting birds. But I know that some are still being euthanized.

What are some of the main difficulties of caring for birds in a shelter environment?

In some ways, it's similar. Just like a dog or a cat in the shelter, [a bird] is not going to get the one-on-one attention and the comfy accommodations that they would in a home setting. But also, the shelter staff, by and large, do not have experience with birds. They often don't have a room even to put the birds in separately from other animals; they don't know how to recognize signs of illness. Even [in] the wealthier shelters which have staff veterinarians, the vets aren't necessarily comfortable treating birds. So minor health issues are not usually addressed, so that's a problem. Two other big points: they're not domesticated at all—even the smaller birds. The Avian Welfare Coalition was really founded to work within the humane community and get [at] the issue of this exploding trade in captive-raised birds. The smaller birds don't suffer as much in captivity. In terms of size, you can provide a decent amount of space for them, they don't seem to have a lot of the hormonal and other behavior problems that the larger parrots do, and they really can be fairly good family pets even though they're not domesticated—because they do have a long history of breeding in captivity. But a lot of the natural behaviors that they needed in the wild, they still have. And the other big thing is that birds are prey species. That is a completely different psychology, and that's where a lot of people are very uncomfortable with birds. Once they realize that, "Oh, this is why birds can be so fearful; this is why they're so suspicious," it makes more sense. You have to put a lot more effort into gaining their trust because of their wildness and the fact that they're prey. And they're so intelligent.



Polly wanna home: Finding responsible adopters for large exotic birds like this macaw can be tricky. ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/LINDA BUCKLIN

And shelters have so many different animals to deal with.

Exactly. As we all know, shelters are already so stretched to handle the cats and dogs and rabbits that they get in. So making a program where you can train staff and have a place for birds to be comfortably housed is not a priority. But I think it's definitely a growing problem, and that goes by region: In California, Arizona, Florida, the shelters there are pretty used to handling birds. They may not be really knowledgeable about doing it, but they're used to having birds come in. For whatever reason, Minnesota seems to have a lot of birds. As the market has become flooded—and it's mostly due to the chain pet stores ... selling parrots—it's become like any other companion animal issue. People don't need much of a reason to decide that this animal's inconvenient and want to alleviate themselves of the responsibility. So the reasons they get surrendered are very similar to the cat and dog issues, compounded by the relative lack of information people have about living with birds and understanding them.

What should shelters consider when they get a bird? What areas should they be looking at for housing?

Well, somewhere away from predators, so not with the dogs and cats. For health

reasons, not with any other wildlife if they take those in, or with chickens and things like that, and really not with reptiles because birds are usually pretty fearful of reptiles, and then of course there are health issues with salmonella. Setting up an area in the shelter—even if it's an office—that's not being used, out of high traffic areas, away from the barking, and not being able to see the dogs and cats. And in a room that's warmer than you would really need to keep cats and dogs. And then having on hand an assortment of cages and food. I think many shelters do try to work with bird clubs, although we don't recommend that they necessarily turn the birds over to them because they can then end up in breeding. So whether there's a whole room that can just house birds and other exotics or it's an office, depending on the number of birds coming in, you can fairly easily accommodate them so they're more comfortable and reduce their stress.

You mentioned minor medical issues with birds that people sometimes don't pick up. What should people look for?

One of the problems with birds is that, being prey species, they mask their illness, so it does take a lot of observation. They need to look for birds that are very fluffed up, lethargic, any kind of discharge from

“Shelters are already so stretched to handle the cats and dogs and rabbits that they get in. So making a program where you can train staff and have a place for birds to be comfortably housed is not a priority. But I think it's definitely a growing problem.”

the nares [nostrils] or the eyes, sneezing ... I think what we've found is that if birds have made it to a shelter, they're usually pretty healthy overall. But malnutrition is a big thing they suffer from, upper respiratory infections, bacterial infections. There's a whole host of other avian diseases. So quarantining the incoming birds is best. We recommend always that any parrots coming into a shelter—or any bird really, a pigeon, a dove—should really be tested for psittacosis because it's zoonotic. And there have been problems with that. Recently there was a problem with a large-scale confiscation in New Jersey, and back in 2002, [a Midwestern shelter] did a large confiscation and there was not adequate screening done ... and unfortunately one of the birds ended up testing positive, and then the health department got involved and it was kind of a mess. So that is something that I would like to see routinely done, but that's going to be based on shelter budgets. But you want to protect your workers' health. The testing is a little more expensive than some of the routine testing for cats and dogs, but with shelters that have staff veterinarians, there's no reason they can't get the wholesale accounts at laboratories. That's what we do, and that reduces the cost enormously. [For] shelters that are having to go to outside clinics, it may be cost-prohibitive. AS