

# Born *to be* Wild

By Nikki Buxton

Photos By Nikki Buxton & Jerry Larder

The cacophony of 24 Amazons performing their wake-up routine beneath our window sends us careering into the new day; ready or not. We are bullied from our bed and forced to enjoy coffee on the veranda whilst two cavorting parakeets and a stately Blue-head (*Amazona farinosa*) circle the house, and a grounded Red-lored (*Amazona autumnalis*) nibbles gently on my ear.

THIS BEGINS THE DAY: feeding, cleaning, observing, writing, checking, feeding again... I was promised a dream retirement in our little corner of Belizean paradise – growing vegetables and growing old. Instead, we have become exactly what everyone who gets the parrot bug swears they will never be, and yet always are: besotted, consumed and totally enslaved.

April 2004. Jerry and I had been in Belize only a few short months when we were offered baby parrots. The shock of peering into a bucket at two bald little Red-lored chicks was a defining moment for me: the idea that anyone would take a bird from its mother had never entered my head. Of course we bought them – anything to get them out of that bucket. They cost us \$50Bz – around £6 or \$12US each: two days wages for the poachers.

WE HAD NEVER CAGED ANYTHING in our lives and we weren't about to start now. Bonnie and Clyde, and our subsequent addition of FatBelly Jones, the Aztec Parakeet (*Aratinga nana*) rapidly took over our lives, our home and anything chewable. The days of their introduction to the Great Outdoors were ones we will never forget. We learned valuable skills such as climbing trees and ladders, barrelling through the jungle yelling and cawing like lunatics and running whilst looking skyward (not easy - try it). The birds soon got the hang of

[1 & 2] Red-lored Amazon 'Clyde' enjoying one of his first rainbaths as a wild bird. Acquired out of pity as a chick, he and his sibling were raised and eventually released. They became the accidental beginning of Belize Bird Rescue. [3] Blue-head (Mealy) Amazon, 'Blue' flies around the house, his wings not quite fully regrown. [4 & 5] White-fronted Amazons 'Mick' and 'Titch' when they first got to know each other (love at first sight) and finally on release – an amazing day! Many birds pair up during rehabilitation. One waited on soft release for days for a friend. [6] Main Aviary at Belize Bird Rescue.



'Perky' an Aztec Parakeet.

flight and safe landings and settled into an easy routine of playing outdoors and returning home to roost on the shower rail. Bonnie and Clyde began to fly further afield, staying out for three or four nights at a time, until eventually around mid-December, they just stopped coming back. We had mixed feelings: we missed them desperately, but hopefully we had accomplished what we set out to do and they were wild birds again. Jones stayed with us for three years. She never lost her love of Red-loreds and periodically would leap up, squawking like crazy and take off after one or another of our recent releases: a wonderful way of keeping track of them. One very sad day in 2007 she failed to return home. We like to think in her short life as a free bird she

was more fulfilled than if she had been protected from natural dangers by a cage.

A few months after Bonnie & Clyde's departure, a villager gave us her unwanted pets. We had no idea at the time that as captive 2-year old birds they were classed in the scientific world as "unfeasible for release". In our minds, they were in their natural environment, they were probably hatched in a nearby tree, they were never more than caged wild animals, and we had no reason to think they would not revert to wild status given adequate time and conditions. Within a few hectic months, we had another 5 birds back in the wild.

Over the years our reputation as mad bird people spread and we managed to beg borrow and steal many more parrots. Since purchasing those first two birds, we realised we were part of the problem, and resolved never again to pay for parrots. It's a hard road to take, especially when a few dollars would secure a birds' freedom. But trading in wildlife creates demand and it is illegal, even if enforcement is sporadic and largely impractical.

ONE OF OUR FAVOURITE SUCCESS STORIES is that of Stevie, a 2 year old Red-lored driven crazy by his chicken cage-mates. Stevie was named after Stevie Wonder, as he would sway from side to side on his perch performing figure-8's with his head. Stevie the Parrot clucking his latest rendition from a nearby tree became a source of great amusement to our workers. Eight months later he was on his way as a wild bird, returning like clockwork after every nesting season for another 4 years. On one amazing visit he was accompanied by his rather nervous family: it was then we realised we were doing something worthwhile.



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“Wing-clipping is our biggest heartache and our biggest headache”



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WE LOST OUR FIRST BIRD IN 2008 and we were devastated. I misjudged the flight ability of a White-fronted Amazon (*A. albifrons*) and she was killed by a raptor. We will always feel sickened by what happened to Connie, but it made us think carefully about what we were doing. The rehab and release method we used worked, we just needed the right facilities. From this accidental beginning came Belize Bird Rescue with a large flight aviary, 2 intermediate aviaries and 7 indoor cages so we can get to know our little guys before we throw them out into the trees. We will doubtless continue to grow as more birds arrive at our door.

Although our primary goal is the liberation of maltreated captive birds, we have to accept that Belizeans will always want parrots as pets and generally speaking have no idea how to care for them properly. A typical response to “How long should Polly live?” would be anything from 100 days to 5 years. Here, parrots are a disposable commodity; they literally do grow

on trees. Trapping and keeping wild parrots is illegal, but as with most cultural practices, the law is generally disregarded.

THE AVERAGE WILD-CAUGHT CHICK faces a pitiful existence, permanently caged and fed through the bars on a sporadic diet of tortilla and white corn. We have seen cages where the door has been closed for so long, it will no longer open properly. Literally adding injury to insult, almost all Belizeans clip their bird’s wings as they believe it makes their parrot tame. The only ones we get that have full plumage are from the rusted-shut cages, having re-grown inside their prison.

Wing-clipping is our biggest headache and heartache. We have never seen it done properly and are desperate to make owners understand the consequences of over-clipping. Working with a clipped bird is tricky: breast and beak injuries are a real danger, but with enough time and care even birds clipped as chicks will become accomplished flyers. Belizeans also tend to be

scared of their birds and don’t want to get bitten, so parrots are rarely handled. Polly’s only job is to look and sound pretty. Sadly though, these birds know exactly what they are. All day they hear wild parrots flying overhead, every mating season they have the strongest natural urge to breed and, almost without exception, they are contained in cramped, squalid conditions, isolated and neglected until they die prematurely of malnutrition, sickness, or just plain misery.

ON THE BRIGHT SIDE, Belize is by no means a lost cause. On the contrary, it is a rare and beautiful place – a small country with a stable government and an environmental policy that places 44% of its territory in protected areas. Half of the 300,000 strong population are still in school, which represents a golden opportunity for environmental education, but we need to move fast if we want to positively influence the next generation. In traditional “interfering gringo” fashion, we nibble away at the attitudes and misconceptions Belizeans have toward their

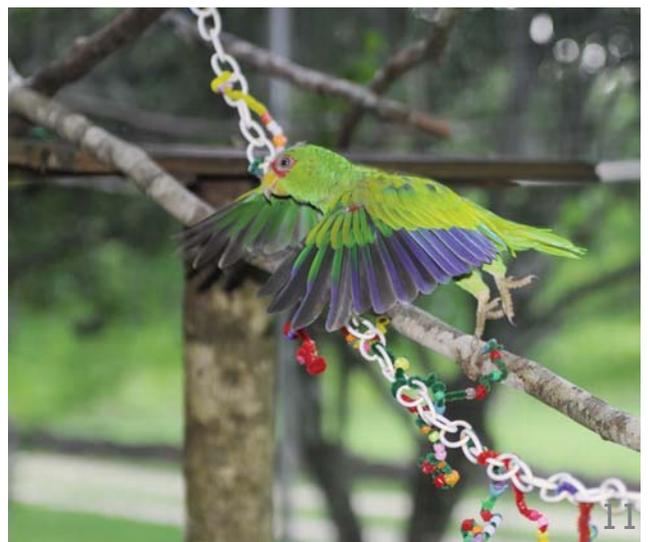


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[7] Three Red-lore Amazons experience their first real trees in the aviary. [8] 'Chac' and 'Chell' were owned by a family who let them fly free until they were captured, clipped and caged by a neighbour. [9] 'Chac's' severe wing-clip is typical – most Belizean's clip their bird's wings in this manner. [10] 'Spike' suffered 2 years in a cage underneath two other birds. A severe neglect case, he over-groomed the plumes on every feather. Still, despite being clipped as a chick and never having flown, he became a very accomplished flier. [11] Flight training pre-release.



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birds, both as pets and as a natural resource essential to the country's thriving tourism industry. If, though education, we can improve the quality of life of captive parrots, then we may extend their lifespan and thereby reduce the turnover of wild-caught "replacements".

ALL OF THE 9 RESIDENT SPECIES OF Psittacines are victims of the local pet trade and we have witnessed their price climb annually as availability dwindles, which can only encourage more poaching. A Red-lore chick now fetches around \$100 Bz, a Mealy Amazon (*A. farinosa*) upwards of \$400 and the endangered Yellow-heads (*A. oratrix*) were so scarce this year, we heard there were none for sale in the north of the country at all.

In our utopian dream-world, rigorous implementation of existing legislation would stamp out the pet trade overnight, but that takes money and resources that

the government simply doesn't have. This year, in a monumental stride forward, Belize's Wildlife Department doubled its workforce by appointing a second Wildlife Officer. The two of them have now launched a campaign against captive wildlife and will increasingly bring confiscated birds to us for rehabilitation.

TO DATE WE HAVE SUCCESSFULLY released 27 parrots and have 28 more at various stages of the 12 to 24 month rehabilitation process. Five years after those first releases we are still learning - the wilful intelligence of the Amazons certainly keeps us on our toes. Where release is concerned, we have our critics, especially amongst pet owners. But we have gratifyingly more evidence of success than of failure: encouragement indeed as time runs out for the parrots of Belize, where a bird in the wild will always be worth a hundred in a cage.



## About BELIZE BIRD RESCUE

Belize Bird Rescue is a non-profit organisation operating on a private reserve within the Cayo District of Belize. Since its accidental beginnings in April 2004, the organisation has been owned, operated and financed by UK-expat Belizean Residents, Jerry Larder & Nikki Buxton. They began "rescuing" birds in April 2004 with the arrival of two Red-lore Amazon chicks and as of mid-2009 have cared for 72 birds and made 40 successful releases, of which 27 are parrots.

Parrots are a particular concern for Belize Bird Rescue, as the local pet trade and ever-increasing human encroachment on nesting sites reduces population numbers of several of Belize's parrot species to potentially unsustainable levels: for example, Belize is one of the last strongholds of the endangered Yellow-headed Amazon (*Amazona oratrix*): the bird of choice as a family pet and still regarded by farmers as a major crop pest.

For more information or to donate visit [www.belizebirdrescue.com](http://www.belizebirdrescue.com)