Pet Bird Industry

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BACKGROUND

Worldwide, an estimated four million birds are recorded in the pet trade industry each year. Approximately 2,600 of the more than 9,600 species of birds in existence are subject to trade, and 20% of these species belong to the order Psittaciformes (Parrots). The main importers of Parrots are Europe, the U.S., Singapore, Central America, and the Caribbean. Parrots and other caged birds represent the largest group of captive wild animals in the United States. In 2009, almost 4% of private households in the United States owned birds, three fourths of which belong to the Psittaciforme order (Parrots). The impact of the global trade on wild bird populations, particularly Parrots, has been devastating.

Globally, many Parrot species are in decline and nearly one-third of all Parrot species are threatened with extinction due to habitat loss, hunting, and collection for wild-bird pet trade. Of the 350 living species, 130 are listed as near-threatened or worse by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and 16 are currently considered critically endangered. (Exotic pet fact sheet, www.captiveanimals.org). It is estimated that in Mexico, from 65,000 to 78,500 birds are caught and traded annually, with roughly 15% ending up in the U.S. Psittacidae populations in Mexico have declined 30% due to a combination of habitat loss and the capture of these animals for the pet trade. (Defenders of Wildlife).

STATE AND FEDERAL LAWS

Birds have less legal protection than almost any other animal. National, state, and local governments have laws that prohibit the capture and sale of certain species, but most of these regulations are poorly enforced and are designed to protect humans from disease rather than ensuring that the animals themselves are treated humanely. When you possess, breed or distribute exotic birds, many state laws may require an application for a license. Selling exotic birds without a license can make you liable for hefty fines. (See O.C.G.A § 40-13-12 for Ga bird licensing rules and Certificate of Veterinary inspection O.C.G.A. §§40-13-2(16&17)).

Although laws vary, all states require exotic birds to have a permanent leg band as a means of identification. The leg band gives information about the bird’s current owner. Imported birds are required by the United States Department of Agriculture to carry a band before being accepted into the country. A numbered band with a split in it means the bird was imported and the band was applied at a government quarantine station. If the bird was bred domestically, the band will have a solid ring and means it was applied when the bird was young. The band should contain the breeder’s identification number, the year the bird was hatched, a unique identification code for the bird and which state the breeder lives in. One of the requirements for obtaining a permit to transfer certain birds into a state, is a bird’s band number, as it represents proof that a bird was either legally imported or domestically bred. A few states will accept other forms of identification, such as a microchip or DNA fingerprint, but most states still require a leg band.
Although wild birds in the U.S. are protected under the Wild Bird Conservation Act (WBCA), Endangered Species Act (ESA), and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), millions of wild birds are still smuggled illegally and traded on the black market to meet the demand for the pet trade. The sale of exotic pets over the internet is weakly monitored and a lack of enforceable legislation makes it impossible to properly regulate. Promoters of domestically raised exotic birds tell potential buyers that birds are simple to care for and perfect for people with busy lives. However, every wild species is highly adapted for its own unique environment and occupies a specialized place in the ecosystem. Parrots are “wild” animals, not domesticated creatures and even captive-bred birds retain all their wild-type behavioral needs. Most regulations are motivated predominantly by human health and safety concerns and not concerned about the welfare of the bird. Presently there are no laws which establish humane standards of care applicable to bird breeders or dealers.

**BIRD BREEDING MILLS**

While the Wild Bird Conservation Act (WBCA) effectively curtailed the flow of wild-caught birds into the U.S. in 1992, the demand for exotic birds as companion pets did not diminish. Consequently, domestic bird breeders accelerated their operations to meet the continuing demand for pet birds. Bird mills, or warehouse facilities which are used to mass produce parrots and other exotic birds for the pet trade, are mainly interested in turning a profit rather than caring about the health and welfare of an exotic animal. Almost all pet stores, especially the larger chains, purchase their parrots from bird mills. The USDA has no authority over bird mills because the Animal Welfare Act does not cover birds. Many people familiar with the inhumane nature of puppy mills, are unfamiliar with the inhumane conditions inside mass-breeding bird-mill facilities. In the United States, the overproduction and promotion of parrots as “pets” has resulted in serious animal welfare issues such as abuse, neglect, excessive numbers being euthanized when they get sick, or an influx into animal shelters and exotic animal refuges.

Birds in breeding mills are forced to live in intolerable conditions in warehouses which have rows and rows of small, unsanitary cages and a lack of staff to provide the care an exotic bird needs. These birds are bred relentlessly with the baby birds being taken away from the parents and weaned too soon. Bird mills use the cheapest and fastest way to wean baby birds, sometimes force feeding or using “deprivation” feeding which starves the bird until it is forced to eat solid food. Most birds live in confined, unsanitary conditions, with a lack of social interaction or stimulation, veterinary care or a varied diet. Lack of awareness on the part of consumers, coupled with inadequate law enforcement measures to protect captive birds, have continued to allow these birds to be bred in intolerable conditions. Many of these birds die or suffer from untreated diseases or medical conditions that are then passed on to the unsuspecting pet owners.

**RISKS OF DISEASE**

Around 75% of the emerging diseases affecting people are zoonotic or transmitted from animals to humans. 50 million people worldwide were infected with zoonotic diseases between 2000 and 2006 and as many as 78,000 have died.

(Exotic Animals Are Not Pets; [www.captiveanimals.org](http://www.captiveanimals.org))
Parrots and other exotic birds can transfer potentially deadly pathogens such as psittacosis, salmonella, and even avian tuberculosis to humans. Exotic Newcastle disease (END), which devastated whole flocks of chickens and turkeys in the 1970s, was believed to have been brought to the U.S. from South American parrots who were smuggled in for the pet trade. An outbreak of END in Florida resulted in the deaths of 8,000 parrots in 1980. West Nile Virus was reported in canaries, parakeets, cockatoos, lorikeets, rosellas and caiques in 1999.

The four diseases that most frequently affect pet birds are: salmonella, trichomoniasis, aspergillosis, and avian pox. Birds are also susceptible to bird flu, feather mites, lice and lyme disease. All of these diseases are transmitted from one bird to another, usually at feeding stations, especially when unsanitary and crowded conditions occur. Animals kept in inhumane conditions, crowded cages, dirty cages, with poor ventilation and packed so tightly as to maximize profits accelerate the occurrence of these illnesses.

Most breeders and pet stores cannot follow the strict procedures needed to completely rid an infected aviary of any of these diseases. Aviary control methods would include avoiding the housing of infected birds on premises where other species are bred, adhering to strict hygiene procedures, preventing access to the facility by visitors, and not introducing new birds into the aviary without 90 days quarantine and testing. Because the presence of infected neonates and fledglings propagates the disease, adult birds should be moved to a non-infected area while the entire aviary is disinfected. Nest boxes should be disinfected or discarded and replaced.

It is important that breeders and pet stores be monitored so the spread of disease is stopped as early as possible to prevent problems from getting out of control. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection Department (DATCP) and USDA Animal and Plant Inspection Services (APHIS) accept reports from the public about unhealthy conditions in pet stores and breeding facilities. In Georgia, one can contact the Georgia Department of Agriculture, Companion Pet Division, or the Department of Health for sanitation violations. If animals are being neglected or abused, the local Animal Control Officer can be contacted. (See Appendix A for recommendations to promote the healthy welfare of companion birds)

REFERENCES
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http://awionline.org/content/bird-trade
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_parrot_trade
http://www.animalliberationfront.com/
http://www.bornfreeusa.org/exoticbreeding (list of state breeding laws)
http://www.nowisconsinpuppymills.com/
http://www.merckvetmanual.com/
APPENDIX A
POTENTIAL AVENUES FOR PROMOTING THE WELFARE OF CAPTIVE BIRDS

http://www.bornfreeusa.org/

Enact laws which require humane care of animals in pet shops.
Ensure that existing pet shop laws include birds as protected animals.
Ensure that pet shop laws are comprehensive and include provisions requiring: sufficient wholesome food, sufficient potable water, adequate space, ventilation, temperature control, enough hours of light to enable normal animal behavior, humane housing and handling, and veterinary care.
Prohibit any animal dealer from selling unweaned animals -- including specific language that prohibits the sale of unweaned birds.
Define "unweaned bird" to include any bird that has not become accustomed to taking solid food and has done so, without nursing, for a period of at least five days.
Extend laws which apply to pet shops to all bird breeders and dealers.
Require a license for the possession of exotic birds. Empower animal control officers to inspect licensed premises to ensure that birds are kept in legislatively defined humane conditions.
Change laws which give authority to euthanize animals which are confiscated from noncompliant parties. Provide instead that wherever possible animals should be surrendered to a sanctuary, humane society or some other organization equipped to house or find homes for confiscated animals.
Devise model language relating to care, housing, and treatment of birds, which possessors must comply with and introduce the bill as an amendment to the state’s animal cruelty statute (assuming of course that the state’s animal cruelty statute covers birds).