

Rodeo resident works to educate the public about his feathered friends

By **DAWN M. NEWMAN-AERTS/Rodeo**

It is not unusual to find a striking Scarlet Macaw pruning his massive wings on Chris Biro's shoulder these days. When he walks to the mailbox in town, a small bevy of bright yellow Conures follow him – they swirl and swoop, before lighting on his outstretched arm, or sometimes, atop his head.

The man attracts birds like a 'pied-piper' of aviculture.

Biro, a showman and parrot trainer by profession, would like to show people both the joys and responsibilities of parrot ownership. And he teaches the importance of science in understanding the daily interactions with this amazing exotic bird. There is, he says, an 'effective' approach in this field — where the physical and biological issues work in tandem with the emotional welfare and intelligence of the birds.

While the desert Southwest has long been considered an apex for bird watchers and naturalists, it's the biology and sociology of thick-billed parrots that has brought Biro home to Rodeo.

It is his mission to improve on the science of reintroducing parrots into their former habitats: And to educate people on the virtue of free-flight training. Biro has championed the cause for scientific research, avian study, and the natural training process for more than 25 years.

"Conures have delightful energy, and the Scarlet Macaws are beautiful in flight – the Military Macaw is a less appreciated species, but a jewel in the bird world," Biro said. He explains that these parrots were once considered 'sacred' to local Native American peoples. It is this keen interest in exotic birds that he hopes to share through public education and in teaching owners and handlers how to provide a natural and enriched life-style for parrots.

Biro's personal history with exotic birds began when he lost his first parrot during a cross-country road trip. Chester, a cherry-headed Conure, and he were inseparable. "He went everywhere I went...he would ride

on the handle of my motorcycle." Unfortunately, he knew little about their flying ability and when the bird flew away, didn't know how to recover him.

"I absolutely know my little buddy did not survive with his (partially) clipped wings," says

free on his property in Morton, Washington.

"I let them fly freely outdoors during the day and they are inside for protection at night," Biro said. He says the idea of (pet) parrots being allowed to fly loose, or free, is now acceptable. But it was not that way in the early '90's says Biro of the avian world. And today, a parrot in free-flight is still pretty unusual if not downright controversial.

To promote public education, Biro has established Liberty Wings a website designed to give people a general understanding of free-flight training. "Over the past 20 years, I have used a process based on their natural development, which prepares parrots to live in a range of natural environments." The theory, he says, is based on scientific research and his own unique, first-hand experience.

In short, free-flight enthusiasts recognize that parrots enjoy healthier lives than those with clipped-wings. "If handled properly, free-flight

can be almost risk-free. You really can train these birds to fly in a way that is safe and give them opportunity to 'spread their wings.'" He explains that humans know that when they get into a car, there's always a risk of serious accidents, but like birds in free-flight, the odds of being in that accident are actually pretty low."

Over the next 20 years, Biro parlayed his part-time job as seasonal showman into the self-educated exotic bird consultant he is today. He and his parrots live in a Rodeo-based home with a spacious 15 x 30 foot 'aviary' situated outside his door. "There were parrots native to the U.S. (the Carolina Parrot which became extinct in the 1800's) and now, only 2000 Thick-billed parrots left in the world. He explains that none are left living in Arizona or New Mexico — where they could once be seen in flocks of up to 1500 birds." Today, Biro is working on a breeding program to increase those numbers.

Many bird enthusiasts suggest that exotic birds depend on the protection and care of an owner to maintain the birds through wing-clipping and enclosed spaces. "Unfortunately, once they mature in a caged environment, the adaptation process is largely complete. At that point, re-introduction to the freedom of flight would be extremely difficult."

He admits that 'pet birds' do best in low-density neighborhoods, in natural habitats, without risk of highway traffic. Neighbors can be disturbed by their noisy contact calls but they can be trained and restored to free-flight experiences if given



Chris Biro, executive director, Bird Recovery International – is a non-profit organization that uses field research (past and present) to properly release and re-introduce thick billed parrots into habitat using tested-methods that work. "We learned a good deal from projects done in the Chiricahua during the 1980's and 90's," says Biro of the science. In some ways we can look at what to do and what not to do. And we know that nature already has an effective process for parrot adaptation in a range of environments."

Biro. "I knew roughly where it landed in the trees, but didn't realize (then) that if I had waited long enough, if I would have listened for his call that evening. I would likely have found him." It was six months later that he bought his first Blue and Gold Macaw he named Jeremy.

In his studies at Southwest Washington State in electrical engineering, Biro taught Jeremy to ride on his shoulder while he rode his motorcycle through neighborhoods. And it wasn't long before people became curious. "People would come up to us and ask all kinds of questions about the bird. They would wave," says Biro with a smile, and of course, "their interest was all about Jeremy and our friendship."

It became Biro's calling to educate an inquisitive public.

And it was that kind of attention that prompted Biro to take Jeremy to visit local classrooms and senior centers throughout Washington State. "It started out very part time. But I loved sharing the story about him. For me, it was more about enjoying the reaction, the interaction, answering the questions and letting people see the unique qualities and abilities of the birds up close."

And they were fascinated by the relationship they had.

In Rodeo, Biro's parrots are free to fly – to explore, exercise and return. "What you find out there is the 'standard practice' to clip their wings," adds Biro. "Instead, I use a very scientific training approach that prepares the birds to successfully live in both worlds – without trimming their wings." In 1993, he began to allow his parrots and conures to fly



Chris Biro believes in a parrot housing model similar to that used by equestrians. "We know that experienced horse owners almost always provide a stall, a larger riding area for training, and an open pasture for movement and 'down time.' In the world of exotic birds, Biro believes in providing a safe in-house cage, a larger outside aviary, with a daily opportunity for free-flight, natural experiences."

the right circumstances.

Over the past 25 years, Biro has made his living doing seasonal shows at state and local fairs across the country. "The public's favorite part of the show was when my birds would pick up dollar bills from the fingers of the audience." Then they would swoop back to a one-third scale Brigantine pirate ship to drop the dollars into a vase. He said it was this pirate-based routine that attracted thousands of people.

In 2005, Biro expanded his knowledge of psychology and biology while experimenting with abilities in a variety of environments, and the possibilities of free flight training. "It was obvious the birds were at their best during the free-flight experiences we shared...and the public enjoyed the unrestrained freedom that the birds had during their show. Maybe for the first time in their life, they were able to touch those birds and interact with them."

In 2010, Biro created the Liberty Wings website for public outreach and for bird owners. His website promotes the flight training process that is necessary for a parrot with unclipped wings. "Basically, I formalized a natural training process that uses systematic exposure to complex environments – during the development stage and for the benefit of the bird. I also wanted to give people the very basics of flight training so they were less likely to lose their birds if they were copying work they might only view through videos."

Liberty Wings workshops have been offered in countries like France, Portugal, and Holland and seminars are planned in Singapore and Germany. "In December, he traveled to Honduras to develop an ecotourism project to bring Scarlet Macaw's back to the northern regions of that country. "My goal is to develop the parrot into a social and skilled athlete of

the sky, and to bridge the gap between professional animal training and research biology."

He explains that most animal trainers work with a high degree of control that limits natural instinct. Whereas, biologists often work *without* the close, hands on experience. In contrast, Biro permits natural instincts to develop. "I think the live show (audience) experience gave me a unique opportunity to develop the ability of the birds and to work with the natural behavior (instinct) of captive raised animals."

Biro has been able to bridge the gap between professional animal trainer and research biology.

"Of course, birds have to figure out a lot on their own, and owners can do their part by teaching 'recall methods' and providing a safe place to land." He says Liberty Wing students are given the information they need on how to select the right bird to train, the right locations to train in, and how to recover a lost or missing bird. Not all (adult, pet) parrots will become expert flyers.

"It is a learned skill they can master at a very young age. Unfortunately, some might be way past their prime when it comes to those basic skill-set — It may take an adult bird months or even years to reach the same level of flight ability that a

(trained) fledging chick can master in just weeks in open flight." He explains that pet parrots can become adept flyers inside the house, but they won't all master the skills needed to fly outside.

In addition to learning how to choose the best landing perch for their weight, they must learn to maneuver and avoid predators. They have to gauge their speed and landing can be a tricky moment...But mostly, they have to be physically fit to withstand the rigors of flying long distances, and to recognize (the go to) points so they don't get lost."

Biro says that his inclination is analytical, closer to that of an engineer, which sometimes requires him to step outside of accepted boundaries. "I know the effort to release captive raised birds back into their natural environment is considered a controversial concept — I have challenged the norms of conservation biology at times."

Biro, who has trained 20 species of parrots with over 202 years of combined flying time, believes that given the right support as young birds, the captive (raised) parrots can use their wings to survive and thrive in a variety of environments. "They can be in habitat like Arizona, where they once enjoyed freedom in the wild."



Liberty Wings is an online and interactive educational program for Free Flight training of parrots. In the 1990's Biro brought exhibitions to local and state fairs, schools and senior centers in Washington and Utah State. His pirate-themed shows featured parrots, yellow sun conures, a restored brigantine ship, free-flight performance and an opportunity for the audience to interact with the birds.

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To our Relatives and Friends,
We gratefully acknowledge the expressions of sympathy, kindness and thoughtfulness extended to us upon the passing of our sister and aunt,

Emma Dora Verdugo Saucedo.

God Bless you and your families.

Herbert, Connie & Rene Saucedo

