



## Parrots & People: Getting in Early

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**The Parrot Society of Australia has developed an educational supplement for children called *Fledglings*. Available with its member magazine, *Fledglings* aims to engage and inspire young readers with a view to learning about parrots and developing into knowledgeable and responsible future avian caretakers.**

### **An Old Relationship with New Challenges**

Parrots and People are an odd but enduring combination: for centuries the fortunes of these two distinctively different yet curiously similar sets of animals have formed a complex and tense relationship. Generally, parrots are easy to anthropomorphise; their intelligence, social nature and ability to mimic human speech all too often dupe us into mainly thinking of them as feathered folk rather than masterpieces of evolutionary and behavioural shaping. The cult of the parrot has found many expressions in human culture, taking a prominent place in everything from art and advertising to their company in our lives. Many of us will have experienced this in a number of ways, such as the chatty family budgie, garish urban lorikeets that scrap and yap at back yard bird feeders to extensive avicultural collections of exotic species, flamboyant in colour, character and cash value. It seems that with parrots, there is definitely something for everyone.

But are parrots *really* for everyone? As wild creatures that enthrall and delight, they definitely are, but so often pet parrots live cramped, barren lives that suggest they definitely *aren't*. As homes become smaller and the desire for the compact pet becomes larger, they are under increasing pressure as companion birds. It is estimated some twenty to forty million pet parrots are kept in American homes (Karen Justice, pers comm). This is a global trend. The circumstances of captive life are for many of these birds greatly divorced from their natural setting; living alone in a cage with very little stimuli is a great contrast for the intrinsic wiring of these smart, social, strong-flying seed-eaters. And since the fascination with parrots shows no sign of abating, the need for lucid, constructive education for their carers is greater than ever. The Parrot Society of Australia (PSOA) is devoted to maintaining the avicultural and ecological welfare of parrots by educating its members on all facets of their husbandry, biology and conservation. One of the Society's charters among its aims and objectives is to:

*Provide and disseminate informative, innovative and engaging educational opportunities for all parrot enthusiasts.*

To this end, Shane Hancock and Nicholas Bishop recognised that the PSOA could substantially improve a facet of its education program: that of its junior members. Children and young adults will not only form the backbone of future expertise in avian husbandry but will more importantly be advocates for the conservation values that inspire responsible attitudes and action.

### ***Fledglings* is hatched...**

As professionals involved in early childhood education and avian, wildlife and conservation interpretation, Shane and Nicholas were also acutely aware that there is more stimuli than ever out there vying for the attention of young minds. In response to this, they created *Fledglings*, a bi-monthly supplement about parrots for children included with the main magazine, *Parrot Society News*. As well as writing Conservation Corner (see below) Shane oversees general production, coordinating with Nicholas in his role as co-writer and illustrator and graphic designer Hannah Donaldson. Renowned bird photographer Peter Oderkerken supplies quality photographs and Shiloh Gordon a range of fun cartoons featuring club mascot Bamaga, the Palm Cockatoo. The team's main aim is to engage the attention of young minds by exploring a particular generic group or species with a colourful format that features a variety of articles, activities and competitions for young readers. These include:

#### **Conservation Corner**

A punchy section that highlights the conservation concerns for the species or related taxa and provides information about action young people can take to assist them.

#### **Wild Shot**

An image is presented of the featured species in its wild environment to show the readers that the parrots in their care are wild animals and have a natural history. The stunning images are provided by avian photographers to inspire children to appreciate the beauty of wild parrots and to look for them at every opportunity in the environment around them beyond their backyard.

#### **Species Profile**

Explores the natural history and aviculture of the group/species and aims to give a broad picture of their evolutionary character and how it relates to their captive care requirements.

#### **Nicibird's Training Tips**

Assists in explaining the use of positive reinforcement to train behaviours in companion birds that enrich their lives as they enrich the lives of those they live with. So often, parrot body language and behaviour is misunderstood or ignored with undesirable consequences. *Training Tips* aims to redress this and create sound relationships between parrots and people with sound welfare outcomes for companion birds.

#### **Back to Basics**

Features an aspect of avicultural care for young bird keepers to assist in developing skills that enhance the captive welfare of the species being kept predominantly in an aviary context but also applies to companion bird care.

#### **Fun Stuff!**

The kids get to complete a puzzle, word search or competition challenge to test the knowledge they have just acquired. As a bonus resource, there is also down-loadable PDF colouring-in illustration produced by Nicholas for every issue. With prizes donated by numerous avian businesses, this page is a favourite amongst the readers.

These aspects have created a comprehensive yet concise précis of this remarkable taxon that is growing into a substantial reference and activity resource for its focus audience. The team aims for it to be fresh, original in its format and detailed yet simple enough to appeal to a wide range of age groups and abilities. The layout is colourful with the emphasis on learning as a fun exploration of the wonder that surrounds us while also developing practical skills.

*Fledglings* is now in its 18<sup>th</sup> issue and has been well received by children and adults alike. The team has received positive feedback from a variety of local and international readers as well as suggestions for improvements that we incorporate into future issues. It has already served as a classroom resource, been

modelled as an example for other ornithological publications (most notably the journal of the *International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators*) and is assisting us in growing a community of passionate young bird enthusiasts.

### **Fledglings: The Workshop**

The team's greatest achievement so far was the inaugural *Fledglings* workshop facilitated by Shane and Nicholas at the PSOA biennial international convention, *Parrots2008*, held in Brisbane, Queensland. Attended by 16 participants, the workshop consisted of two one hour sessions held on the morning of the second day of the seminar. The first session reviewed the basics of learning and behaviour, with a simple exploration of how positive reinforcement and the principles of operant conditioning apply to managing companion birds. Other content included the practical aspects of parrot management, covering topics such as selection of accommodation, appropriate perching, the provision of good quality and variety of food, water, natural browse and enrichment toys.

After a short break, the practical sessions began, with Shane supervising half the group to set up two very different aviaries for a pair of Blue-fronted Amazon parrots and Hahn's macaws, kindly loaned by Stewart Williamson, President of the PSOA. It was a hive of activity, with startling ingenuity and creativity to the fore as the teams worked on their projects. Concurrently, Nicholas worked with each child in turn, giving hands-on experience with basic step-up handling and the delivery of smooth reinforcement with a Fig-parrot and a Gang-Gang cockatoo loaned by Brisbane avian vet, Dr. Adrian Gallagher.

To close the session, each child received a junior delegate bag packed with a range of donated bird-related goodies including seed samples, toys, key-rings, vouchers and an Australian BirdKeeper magazine. These were presented in a graduation ceremony in the presence of Bamaga the Palm Cockatoo, the club mascot, brought to life as a professional character suit by Animal & OddBod Creators productions in Melbourne. Bamaga has appeared at a number of PSOA functions and conservation media events at Australia Zoo now – the only challenge is finding someone willing to sweat it out inside his faux fur for each appearance!

### **The *Fledglings* Future**

*Fledglings* continues to grow, with edition topics charted up to the end of 2011. The team has had interest in workshops from groups in other Australian states and is currently exploring other methods for bringing avian education to life, with *Fledglings* pod casts in the pipeline to reach an even greater international audience.

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### *Please Note:*

*We have a number of high res images that can be supplied on disk with captions. Due to their overall file size, these will need to be supplied via mail on CD.*