

Fostering Hope

An Interview with Founder & Executive Director Karen Windsor of Foster Parrots

By Jessica Harris

(dialogue has been lightly edited for clarity)

“Providing place, peace and protection for captive parrots” for over 30 years, Foster Parrots is as awe-inspiring as the birds it rescues. As one of the first established parrot rescues in the country and GFAS Accredited since 2009, they have a lot of experience under their wings. Currently housing nearly 400 permanent residents, including parrots, iguanas, aquatic turtles, and even Patagonian Cavies, the organization has evolved from a burgeoning hobby to a 25,000 square foot sanctuary. Located in a renovated chicken factory farm in rural Rhode Island, it seems the sanctuary provides redemption for much of bird-kind. Intrigued by their work, I reached out to Karen Windsor, Founder and Executive Director, to find out what it takes to effectively and compassionately rescue and house wild birds, even during a pandemic.

JH: It’s great to speak with you Karen. Please tell me a little about how the sanctuary came to be.

KW: My husband was a potter. People would come into his shop, they saw he had a parrot, so the parrots began to come in. I came on as a volunteer, but eventually took over the organization, and married Marc! We had been a home-based parrot rescue organization like most of them are. One day in 2006 we got notice that the Catskill Game Farm in Upstate New York was closing. And this was basically a glorified roadside zoo that had a really bad reputation. So Foster Parrots showed up just in case there were parrots that needed to be saved from that situation. We were part of a pretty well organized rescue coalition, and there were supposedly sanctuaries lined up to take animals, but when all was said and done a lot of those sanctuaries backed out because the animals had no medical records, were poorly cared for, and every single animal was pregnant; so Foster Parrots ended up with quite a few animals by mistake. We had a man we knew who owned a big property, he owned the old Chickadee Farms in Rhode Island. We were looking for a place where we could deal with the situation and we walked into that abandoned, junk-filled, rat-filled facility and my husband said “This is it. This is what we were looking for”. We moved in in 2007 and we’ve been under construction ever since.

JH: How did you learn so much about all these species, what was your background?

KW: I probably know more about parrots than any other thing on earth, but it was all self-taught. I got my first parrot in a yard sale in the 1980s. I think that anybody with any kind of animal, especially exotic animals, are compelled to take the time to learn about those birds. In the context of working with them every single day and also writing about them, I’ve had to do a lot of research. It’s just day by day.

JH: What were you doing before your work full time at the sanctuary?

KW: Well I had a background in office management out in California and I moved back to Massachusetts. I had two little kids in tow and I’d taken a waitressing job and was trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I read about Marc Johnson in the paper and

joined Foster Parrots as a volunteer. I had a degree in writing and publishing from Emerson College in Boston, and that skill gave me the capacity to fund and promote the organization.

JH: So what does your average day look like?

KW: My average day is spent chained to my desk in my office! I actually only get to the sanctuary one to two times a week, but I go there because I feel that it's important even for the executive director or the founder to remain connected to the birds and the way to do that is to provide direct care. I feel it's important that nobody gets to not do bird chores! I have special relationships with a lot of birds at the sanctuary.

JH: Do you have a favorite resident?

KW: That would have to be a Scarlet Macaw named Rose, who's a big handsome male and he loves me. But we're trying to get Rose a girlfriend, that's really what he needs, an avian girlfriend.

JH: What's his story?

KW: He was one of our first retired birds. Somebody did their estate planning and they left several birds in an endowment with Foster Parrots when they passed away. People tend to assume that all of these birds have been abused, they're unwanted... you know most of the birds that come into our care are not abused. Many of them have been really well loved and I think that's also one of the most disappointing things for us: the fact that some people loved their birds and yet the quality of care is still so poor because people just don't know how to care for birds even when they love them. So if the most well-loved birds can suffer so egregiously in captivity, the birds that nobody really cares about... imagine what's happening to them.

JH: What's your favorite part of the job? The hardest?

KW: I guess my favorite part of the job is direct care because I connect with the birds. I think that the hardest part is losing them. Avian medicine is not really well advanced. We are connected to every single one of those birds so it's devastating to my staff and to my volunteers to lose any bird for any reason. One of the leading causes of death in our sanctuary is heart disease. It's happening to birds who are only in their 20's, and this is a result of captivity. These are flighted animals that were evolved to get an enormous amount of cardiovascular exercise and they're not; they're sitting on perches all day. The other hard part is just dealing with all of the surrender requests that come across my desk every single day. These are good birds and they have no control over what's happening to them; they have no choices.

JH: Compassion fatigue and emotional burnout are known to plague animal rescuers, how do you handle that?

KW: I think you've got to be able to compartmentalize. I think that you have to feel your pain, but you can't embrace that as your only position. You've got to get the work done.

JH: Do you have a ballpark of how many captive parrots there are currently?

KW: Estimates go between 10 million and 40 million. An estimate was that 5 million baby parrots a year were being pumped into the market and whatever is going on privately. Parrot sanctuaries are all underfunded, it's really tough for birds.

JH: Are there efforts to stymie the number in the pipeline with birds, something comparable to cat and dog spay/neuter efforts?

KW: I think that the only way to stop what's happening is to educate people, to get the word out and cut into the market. We launched, with one of our partners, One Earth Conservation, a "No cage is big enough" campaign. This is an international message that we're trying to get out. We do work in Central and South America. The more people that we can reach and impart the value of the freedom for all wild animals, including parrots, I think that's really the only way. I do have to say that at this time the parrot breeding industry in this country is in full swing. It's not slowing down. There are no federal regulations on the breeding of parrots in this country, so anybody can breed any number of parrots they want under any conditions.

[News Flash! Since we conducted this interview, the news has been released that, after working on this for last 16 years, the American Anti-Vivisection Society (AAVS) and the Avian Welfare Coalition (AWC) have successfully won a lawsuit against the USDA to finally incorporate standards of care for birds under the Animal Welfare Act! This is a huge accomplishment that will have a direct impact on the parrot breeding industry.]

JH: What are some unique aspects of rescuing and housing wild birds?

KW: The central theme here is permanent sanctuary for unadoptable parrots. So many parrots are not suitable for lives in homes with people, but we do end up with quite a few birds that really should not be in sanctuary. We get calls every single day - between 600-900 calls for surrender every single year. Most of them shouldn't be in sanctuary. They are human bonded birds. Adoption is the best way to meet their needs. Everybody thinks that their bird should live with other birds but sanctuary can be a really difficult situation for a lot of parrots who desire human companionship. I think that in the context of GFAS, a lot of the wild animal sanctuaries do not promote contact between wild animals and (people)... parrots straddle that line. You can't pretend that there's no human impact on these animals.

JH: What's something you wish people knew about parrots?

KW: The number one reason why parrots fail as pets is the lack of adequate social support. They are such highly social animals and I think people understand that about dogs and they try to accommodate that. I don't think on a large-scale people understand that about birds and they think they can get a bird, put it in a cage, and then live their lives and walk out the door and go to work for 10 hours a day. When parrots don't get that social support they don't just passively sit there, they make it known that they're unhappy. Their frustration from being caged too often and from not having social support means aggression, self-mutilation, screaming, which are things that are intolerable to pet owners. I hear people often say that "parrots make bad pets" but that is not generally the case; people make bad guardians of parrots. So many of the reasons why parrots are relinquished are because of the changes in human lives. We have a lot of those people who age out and can't care for them which is a really sad situation for a parrot who's been well loved and cared for by somebody for 40-50 years. I think that also there is a cultural situation where people don't value animals.

JH: That's certainly a frustration that I understand across many species but I think when an animal has really unique needs that's compounded.

KW: One of the other features about parrots is they are really incredibly intelligent animals. I think that people are attracted to their speaking ability, which is the most superficial reason ever to get a parrot. But they're intelligent animals and I think that contributes to their failure as pets, because their mental capacity is so much broader than people are able to accommodate

JH: How do you address some of these needs? You have a situation where you might be able to overcome some of the social problems or space issues.

KW: When we bring birds into the sanctuary the goal is to get them out of standard cages and into aviaries with either a bonded mate or into a compatible community. So social support is our number one priority. We don't like having parrots that don't have a meaningful bond in their life, so trying to integrate parrots back into avian societies is our ultimate goal and it's not always easy. In many cases you have a bird that's been in a cage for 40 years and that is the one constant predictable place that he's known. You bring them to the sanctuary and they don't automatically want to be with other birds. It's frightening for them. So we have got to work at the pace that is comfortable for the parrot. We get quite a few parrots who are very strongly human bonded and do not want to integrate with other parrots or it's going to take them a very long time, so to the best of our ability we have to supply that social support. It's not easy, I have six staff members and usually up to 50 regular volunteers but right now as you can imagine volunteer help has been drastically cut. We do the best that we can and our philosophy is that every bird's experience matters.

JH: It's so refreshing to hear that. You mentioned how you've been impacted by the coronavirus situation. Can you tell me more about that and what kind of support you need?

KW: I think that we're pretty stable now, but we have no idea what's going to happen to donations in the future. We've lost probably two-thirds of our volunteer crew. The staff is great, though. They hold it together and they really do a great job with those animals and they really understand them.

JH: Do you have any plans for resuming tours?

KW: I don't know what the rest of this summer or fall is going to bring and I fear that people are becoming a little too complacent about Covid. We are going to resume Feral Arts Movie Nights, our drive-in style movie event scheduled on one weekend night each month from July through October. We show films that are animal welfare, environmental or cultural diversity promoting.

JH: That's a great idea!

KW: We can do that even amidst a pandemic because it is outside and we can social distance. At this event we do like to let people sample some vegan items because a lot of people think that vegan food is horrible food so when they try it's kind of fun. Vegan food can be amazing.

JH: You previously mentioned having finished remodeling your current place and now have some frustrations with it - I'm curious what you would like to see?

KW: We've actually designed new building structures and we are in the very earliest stages of a capital campaign. Our new building designs address all of our frustrations about our current building that don't work. I mean we tried to retrofit a chicken farm into a sanctuary! Our new building design takes care of a lot of our parrots' natural needs and also a lot of our maintenance nightmares.

JH: If anybody reading this is interested in supporting the sanctuary, what are your biggest needs right now?

KW: Funding. Always. Funding to make sure that we have the staff that we need. Funding to make sure that we can continue to expand on the environments in aviaries. Parrots are the most destructive creatures on the planet and no matter what you do for them they take it apart so it's difficult to keep them in toys and enrichments! It is easier to contain tigers than parrots! I've been to the Big Cat Rescue, Carole Baskin is a friend of ours, and the gauge wire that she can contain her cats in, our parrots would chew right through.

JH: Is there anything else you'd like to mention?

KW: I'd like to comment on the sanctuary situation in the country. There are not enough sanctuaries! There are certainly enough animals in bad situations in need of help. But there are not enough sanctuaries, and you can't rescue them if you have nowhere to put them. We need more animal sanctuaries in the country and more funding underneath them. This is an issue across species. But for parrot sanctuaries I think they are probably in bigger trouble just because of how many parrots there are in homes and bred for the pet trade.

While the number of wild, captive birds being bred, bought, and kept in poor situations is staggering, Foster Parrots' conservation work and humane education programs hold promise for a better future. Despite the fact that, as they say, "No cage is big enough", it's clear that Foster Parrots' sanctuary is the next best thing to freedom for captive wild birds. The organization provides these individuals a chance at companionship, safety, enrichment, and loving care - in other words, hope. Perhaps Emily Dickinson said it best: "Hope is the thing with feathers".

We would like to offer our sincere thanks to Karen Windsor of Foster Parrots for taking the time to tell us about their work and for all the incredible and difficult work you do for animals.

If you would like to learn more about Foster Parrots' sanctuary, programs, or fundraisers, please visit their website at <https://www.fosterparrots.com/>. Donations to help them continue their life saving work despite the pandemic are accepted here:

<https://www.fosterparrots.com/support-us-page>.