

The Parrot's Scribe



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I LOVE WATCHING FLOCKS OF NOISY, jittery conures, or parrots, fly over our house. Sometimes they hang out in our schefflera tree. They consume the little black fruits, making a glorious big mess, then they're off in a whirl. The parrots of Pine Island seem in synchrony with this green heaven of ours—well, probably not if you own a tropical fruit farm, for then it's as my Jamaican friend Roy says, "Parrots are destroyful."

I should know this, as I have lived with a contentious blue-fronted Ama-

zonian parrot for the past 27 years. My daughters are fearful that I will leave him to one of them in my final will and testament.

We all know nothing's more stubborn or nastier than an ill-tempered parrot; but why, I wonder. Medieval monks, who wrote the first books of natural and unnatural history, which they called bestiaries, declared that parrots were indestructible. The hardest part of a parrot's body, they said, was its head. They wrote that a parrot could dive out of the sky, drop down and crash on the point of its beak without doing any harm to itself.

Amazonian parrots like George can live 75 years or more. Actually, I've stopped thinking of George as a parrot. He is a child. When I roll his cage into the hallway, he cries like a baby, until our guests beg me to wheel him back into range of our dinner. Whereupon he begs for chicken bones—he loves to crack them

and suck out the marrow. He loves scrambled eggs, too. Thus making him a cannibal, I suppose. But the words that come out of his beak when he's not screeching for goodies defy the latest avian research.

The other day when my friend, John Bredin, visited, he stopped in the kitchen to greet George. "How are you doing, George?" John said in his friendly way. George scanned John with his molten orange eye, and said, I swear—"Too busy to talk to you now!" He was pacing on his perch when he said it, too, like a man who has no time to waste on idle talk. John gave me a critical glance and commented, "Wonder where he got that."

I believe George is a thinking being, not just an imitative one. He says what he will, when he will, as he will. And there's no coaxing another comment like the one he said earlier. He really talks the way we do; he observes things and makes remarks that have substance. He does, however, repeat "nighty-night" when it's time to go to sleep. But he only says it once after we turn out the lights.

When our aged dachshund had an accident on the kitchen floor, I heard George sigh from his perch and say, "The poor little thing."

In addition to his ability to speak proper English at the proper time, George exhibits other signs of an uncanny intelligence. The other day when our carpet was being cleaned by a woman with a loud voice and a militant manner, George growled at her. When the officious carpet cleaner continued shouting, George slipped out of his cage and flew at her face. She screamed as George alighted in her abundance of auburn hair. After he was safely ensconced in his cage and the door was locked, the carpet lady said, "People say my voice is grating, and I guess it is. Your parrot thinks so, that's for sure." She was quiet for the rest of that day. George preened his feathers and looked well satisfied with himself.

The worst George attack on record was when he went after a photogra-

pher from *The News-Press*. This affable fellow wanted a picture of our whole animal family, with us in the middle. I warned him, "George doesn't like to have his picture taken." The photographer smiled. "I just finished a shoot with some Bengal tigers—you think I'm afraid of a little bird?"

I heard a little, faraway voice say, "Hel-loo, hello, hell-ooooo." I yelled, "George!" And he said, "Help!"

George was balanced on my index finger when the photographer snapped his first shot. He turned into a green meteor, flying straight at the photographer, who used his telephoto lens to ward George's flared claws. The poor fellow was philosophical about it, though.

"Well," he said, "I didn't believe a parrot was faster than a tiger, but now I know different."

One day I put George outside so he could enjoy a little sunshine. He has a perch on top of his four-wheeler cage. One second he was there talking to me. The next second he was gone. I spent the rest of that day searching for him. Our house is surrounded by pine flats and palmettos. Out there the hawks scream and the eagles whistle, and the parrots, if there are any, lie low to the ground.

My wife and I walked the shell roads repeatedly, calling out, "Georgie, Georgie." At dusk I went out one last time.

Way off in the palmettos I heard a little, faraway voice say, "Hel-loo, hello, hell-ooooo." I yelled, "George!" And he said, "Help!" I ran to where I thought I heard the pitiful cry, and there he was, crouched low at the base of a slash pine. I really thought he was going to say, "What took you so long?" But he didn't. On the way home, he

scrunched himself down flat and had a wary eye trained on the sky. I gave him a little kiss and he said in a small, pathetic voice, "Is that it, then?"

That outing didn't faze him much; the following day he was out in his cage on the porch when I heard him giving someone a hard time. A man was walking his dog and having a spirited conversation with George. Because we have a wall of trees in front of the property, he couldn't see George and George couldn't see him, but they certainly could hear one another.

The dog-walking gentleman was saying, "Well, son, you just keep up that foul talk and I'll come over there and wash your mouth out." I don't know what George had said to irritate him, but this was an incident in the making. I called through the fence of trees, "You're throwing insults at a bird, sir."

The indignant walker responded, "Give me the bird, and I'll wash both your mouths out!"

As I wheeled George back into the house, he eyed me and said, for the second time, "Well, that's it, then." "Yes," I said, "I guess it is." Then he chuckled, sounding very much like a frog.

After George bit a guest of ours, I decided to ask a friend of mine about controlling his increasingly beastly behavior. "I think George needs two places of residence: a daytime house and a nighttime roost," he counseled. "This is consistent with parrot behavior in the Amazon region."

I set up a second cage in the small office where I do all of my writing. It gets a bit crowded in here with our Great Dane and Siamese cat—and now, George—but George loves being in the office. He likes to hear the computer keys clicking. His behavior is much less antisocial, too. I suppose he fancies himself the writer of this essay, which isn't all that untrue, come to think of it. Guess that makes me the parrot's scribe. I can live with that. †

Pine Island Soundings won a first-place award for Best Column from the Florida Magazine Association last year.