

When Parrots Need Homes

Foster volunteer volunteers offer homes and help for parrots in need.

By Bonnie Kenk

In the early 1990s, I met a woman who was involved in an early version of a parrot rescue organization. She was in the process of moving more than 250 parrots into a new home in an upscale area of San Diego. Some of the parrots were kept inside her house, but many were housed in outdoor aviaries. Although she had a substantial amount of property, some of her aviaries backed up onto a chain link fence that separated her property from her neighbor's.

Photo Courtesy of Melanie Chouinard, NH

Foster Volunteers help break parrots of behavioral problems and socialize the birds.

The birds received excellent care, but being that these were parrots, the noise factor was often unbearable. After several months, she was forced to move because of numerous noise complaints from her neighbors. This caught the attention of the local media, which followed her story on and off for a few more years through several additional moves until she finally found property in a rural area.

When I started Parrot Education & Adoption Center (PEAC) several years later, I remembered the valuable lesson I learned about the noise created by an overabundance of parrots all in one place. I didn't want to have to keep moving from place to place, but how could I avoid that fate? The answer was foster volunteers!

What Is Fostering?

Foster situations are always needed by rescue organizations to provide a bird with the home it needs and deserves. Parrots end up in rescue organizations primarily because of changes in their owners' lifestyles. In many cases, the parrot develops a behavioral problem and the owners no longer want to deal with it. It is imperative that a parrot be removed from a home as soon as this happens to avoid long-term behavior problems.

Most of the time, a permanent home cannot be found immediately for a parrot in this type of situation. In my opinion, placing the parrot into a new home might not always be desirable, either. A foster volunteer or avian rescue organization can assess a parrot's personality and pet potential to determine whether it can successfully remain as a pet in another home.

Foster volunteers provide care for the parrot, which might include exposing it to a stimulating environment, and introducing change and new experiences — which, in turn, helps ensure long-term success in a new, permanent home. The foster volunteer also provides the fresh food that makes up part of a healthy diet (e.g., vegetables, fruits, cooked mixes); converts a parrot on a seed-only diet to a more balanced diet and works to redirect any behavior problem(s) the parrot might exhibit and observes the parrot for health issues, seeking medical attention when necessary.

The foster volunteer also determines any fears and preferences the parrot has (e.g., dogs, cats, children, women with blonde hair, etc.) that need to be considered when choosing its next permanent home. Additionally, foster volunteers should be willing to open their homes to visits from potential adopters.

It takes a very special type of person to be a foster volunteer. Before we opened our doors in 1996, we were fortunate to have found several of these people who were willing to foster parrots in their homes. Because of them, we were ready to take in parrots during our first week of operation.

Fostering is not for everyone. According to PEAC volunteer, Jessica Niehoff, "A foster volunteer has to be able to give loving care to a sad, angry or confused creature. The person also must be able to let that creature go."

Aside from the added work of providing for another parrot, you'll also want to consider the emotional aspect. Can you give the bird up when it's time? The parrot might come with baggage: screaming, biting, fearfulness — all are a challenge for the foster volunteer. Niehoff pointed out that a foster volunteer also needs to properly assess the situation. "A shy, cage-bound parrot needs to be approached in a subdued, non-threatening manner, while a very confident macaw may need a no-nonsense approach."

Not everyone who wants to foster lives in an appropriate environment. There may be space constraints, a spouse who doesn't care to share their home with another animal, or they might live in an area that has limits on the number of animals permitted in one household. Other types of foster work exist for these types of willing volunteers.

Once or twice a week, "honorary foster volunteers" — as I call them — visit the parrots living in other foster volunteers' homes. They play with the birds, help train and socialize them, and sometimes work on redirecting their behavior problems. This situation ensures that the parrots do not become overly bonded to the people fostering them and it helps with general socialization goals.

PEAC is privileged to have a mother/teenage daughter team that visits my home and another foster volunteer's residence at least once a week. Their visits made a huge difference with the parrots that experience their attention. We always welcome these types of volunteers.

Foster Volunteer Knows Best

A foster volunteer plays an undeniably important role in the adoption process. After all, they are the ones within the organization who have been living with the parrot the longest and know it best.

The foster volunteer will likely be able to ascertain which, if any, of the potential adopters will be best suited for his or her foster parrot. He or she will also tell visitors the good as well as the bad about the bird. Most foster volunteers create a handout to give at the time of the final adoption that details the parrot's likes and dislikes, what it says and what certain gestures mean, as well as its medical history. They also make themselves available to the adopter should any questions arise or problems occur.

Not everyone is cut out to be a foster volunteer. Those who understand they can help more parrots through fostering than they can through adoption are ideal candidates. Above all, if your heart and your home are big enough to provide a loving environment for a parrot in need, contact a local parrot rescue group today!

Author Bio

Bonnie Kenk is founder of the Parrot Education & Adoption Center (PEAC), which was formed in 1996. She is the author of "How To Start and Maintain a Successful Parrot Rescue Organization."