

A Parrot Flock Grows in Brooklyn

One man makes an effort to educate others on wild quaker parrots

By Elizabeth Anderson

Steve Baldwin shares what quaker parrots in the wild can teach to people that own them as pets.

Steve Baldwin doesn't own a quaker parrot, but he regularly visits whole flocks of them. In fact, he's been chronicling the wild quaker parrots of Brooklyn at www.brooklynparrots.com. He talks about how he got started, why he does it and what quakers in the wild can teach people who own them as pets.

Q: How did you get started with the site?

A: In 2004 I learned (I think it was on the Web) that there were wild parrots living in Brooklyn, but there was very little information about them and no good pictures. So I went out to Brooklyn one day and was amazed by all these wild quaker parrots living up in the light poles at Brooklyn College. I learned more about their other colonies, and then it dawned on me that a Web site would be a pretty good way to share information about the parrots. So I launched the site in March of 2005.

I also thought that, as long as I was out wandering around looking at the parrots, why not have some company? So I started running free walking tours ("Wild Parrot Safaris"). At first, there was no interest, but eventually (through the Web site) people started coming, and it built momentum. Now I get enough regular people that I don't have to do any promotion.

Q: Do you think the notoriety the Brooklyn parrots have received has helped educate the public about quaker parrots as pets?

A: I wanted to show people the parrots and let them discover the fact that they live here without causing environmental problems. I do think, however, that the folks who have quaker parrots as pets have found new respect for these very smart, very enterprising birds. By learning about these parrots' behavior in the wild, they can better understand their birds' needs and moods in captivity.

Q: What about your "Wild Parrot Safaris" — what do they mean to you, to the public and to educating about quaker parrots?

A: I do the safaris for a completely selfish reason: seeing these parrots always cheers me up! They're a great, undiscovered, undocumented anti-depressant. I've actually had a clinically depressed person who came on my trip, and smiled—for the first time in five years!

Seeing them each month gives me a much better sense of how they change their behavior over a complete year. The parrots act very differently in the fall than they do in the spring, and their behavior (e.g. what they eat, where, how much they're building or fighting) changes almost week to week in certain seasons.

In terms of public education, I had a chance to meet Mark Bittner (author of *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill* and focus of the documentary of the same name), and I'd like to repeat something that was told to him when he first started studying the San Francisco parrots: "Make the parrots famous (but not too famous)." He meant that when you spread the word about a delightful creature that happens to be living in your back yard, you make it more difficult for "mean people" to harm them.

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