

Bird Rescue Organizations Adapt to High Costs

Rising costs and more birds in need have caused bird rescue organizations to reassess finances to stay afloat.

By Rachael Brugger

Courtesy of Kathy Arnold, Michigan

As a result of home foreclosures and rising prices, bird rescue organizations have seen a dramatic increase in the number of birds on their waiting lists.

Whether at the gas pump or in line at the grocery counter, the decline of the economy has become a reality and a struggle for people in America. But it's not just people's pocketbooks that are feeling a little empty right now. The economy is affecting everyone's way of life – including the birds.

Rising prices have crept up on bird rescues and have gradually caused them to reassess their finances and capabilities in order to stay afloat. Here's a snapshot of six bird rescue organizations currently facing economic pressures.

Fuel Up

Expenses have gone up in all arenas of bird rescue operations. Prices for seed and pellets have risen, vet costs have soared and even rent and shipping costs have begun to increase. However, the cost of one rising commodity has really shaken the modes of operation for many organizations – and that is fuel.

At the heart of Pheonix Landing's mission is the need to transport unwanted birds to new homes. Because it has no central facility, it uses its transportation service, the Feathered Express, to move 200 to 400 birds a year around the eastern part of the country, serving the states between Pennsylvania and Georgia.

"Because we do serve such a wide geographic area, a lot of times a family is a perfect match for a certain kind of bird that may be in one of our other areas of operation," said Ann Brooks, Pheonix Landing's president and co-founder. "We will move a bird from point A to point B, and in the past, we've never had problems finding people willing to do that. Now with gas price changes, it's getting really hard."

Northwest Bird Rescue and Adoption Orphanage, Inc., out of Vancouver, Wash., works within a smaller region but also has felt pangs due to the rising fuel costs. As a result, it has had to narrow its coverage area.

"Our circle used to be a 150-mile radius," said founder Christopher Driggins. "We've brought that down to a 50-mile radius for emergency pick-ups."

But for Pheonix Landing, which receives more and more calls everyday from bird owners outside its current network, that is not a possibility. Brooks said the organization is investigating new ways to transport birds.

"We've thought about picking one weekend every couple of months and trying to make a loop so that people can drive 30 minutes and do a hand-off to the next person," she explained. "Maybe that would be better than trying to get people to go longer distances."

For Driggins, adaptation has also been the key factor in making the gas prices cost effective. He said that fuel costs caused his suppliers to begin charging for shipping. Not able to afford the additional expense, he now uses his volunteers to transport bird food on a weekly basis, even though that means losing out on the ability to bulk up on stock.

More Birds, Less Space

While additional expenses have translated into bird rescues making cutbacks in the number of birds they can help, home foreclosures and rising prices have left many bird owners illequipped to take care of their pet birds. As a result, bird rescue organizations have seen a dramatic increase in the number of birds on their waiting lists.

"We've always been pretty much close to capacity, it's just that our waiting list has grown exponentially," said Galiena Cimperman, director of intakes at Midwest Avian and Rescue Services (MAARS) in Stillwater, Minn.

While in the midst of trying to expand its facility, which holds about 175 to 200 birds, Cimperman said MAARS has had to prioritize the birds it takes in.

“The people who aren’t moving or who aren’t going to kill their birds because they can’t handle living with them are being made to wait much longer,” she said.

Experiencing a similar shock wave of birds in need, Irena Schulz, founder and president of Bird Lovers Only Rescue in Schererville, Ind., has heard from 60 to 70 percent more people looking to relinquish their birds in the past year, a number of them doing so for financial reasons.

“I received a call from a lady this morning who has a small baby and she said, ‘I have a sun conure and it’s egg-bound and the vet says it’s going to cost me \$1,000 for surgery and I don’t have the money. Can you take this?’” Schulz said. “That really puts us on the spot because we’re not a vet. We are not equipped to do anything like that.”

As part of a solution to the problem, Bird Lovers Only Rescue, like other rescue organizations, will try to put bird owners in contact with people willing to help them out, such as other rescues or a veterinarian that the organization has a working relationship with who will provide services at a discount.

Finding able and willing adopters has also contributed to the line-up of birds in need of a home. Because adopters are experiencing the same economic difficulties as those people trying to re-home their birds, the number of bird-friendly homes is dwindling. There’s no denying the fact that financial problems have hindered birds from being adopted out.