

## Endangered Parrot Soldiers Through Cancer Treatments

### Elvis completes first round of radiation therapy for melanoma

By Katie Ingmire

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Courtesy of the Gladys Porter Zoo

Dr. Carlos Gonzalez-Angulo examines Elvis the thick-billed parrot at Texas Oncology in Brownsville. Elvis is alive. He doesn't walk through the gates of Graceland or croon to adoring fans, but he's making history all the same.

Elvis' place in history, however, comes from the groundbreaking medical treatment he's receiving near his home at the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, Texas. That's because he's not a singer, but a thick-billed parrot (*Rhynchopsitta pachyrhyncha*) being treated for a malignant melanoma on his beak.

This endangered parrot's fight for life began at the zoo less than two months ago.

"Initially, the bird keepers brought him to us because they noticed he had a bloody mass on his beak," said Amanda Guthrie, DVM, the zoo's associate veterinarian, "and they initially thought it was an infection or an abscess."

After a round of antibiotics and a biopsy, zoo staff uncovered the cancer. Since then, Elvis has completed a month-long course of 20 radiation therapy treatments at the Texas Oncology center in Brownsville. Now, Guthrie said, he's taking one medicine to counteract inflammation and another to protect his stomach and slow the growth of his tumor.

"His long-term prognosis is very poor, but he's been doing very well," Guthrie said, citing Elvis' good spirits and body weight, normal blood work and willingness to eat.

Treating Endangered Parrot Presents Unique Opportunity For Oncology Center Staff

Medical professionals adapt treatment style for Elvis' radiation therapy. [More>>](#)To gauge his progress, Elvis went to the oncologist July 9 for a recheck. The good news? The size of the tumor hasn't really grown in size, Guthrie said. The bad news? It hasn't decreased in size, either. The doctor wants Elvis to return in a few months.

"Since this has never been tried before, I don't know if we had a lot of expectations going into it," Guthrie said. "I was really excited that he lived through all the radiation therapies."

For the zoo doctors, the next step will be to decide which treatment to try next. Guthrie said surgery is not an option because doctors would have to remove a large portion of Elvis' beak. One viable alternative is to treat Elvis with higher radiation doses at more spread-out intervals to ease the parrot's signs of illness.

In the meantime, Elvis spends his days in the zoo's animal hospital so the veterinarians can observe him. He gets "plenty of food," Guthrie said, and watches people pass by his cage and uses his perches and toys.

As the staff at the Gladys Porter Zoo tries to give Elvis as normal a life as possible, they also recognize the knowledge this treatment might bring to the world of veterinary and zoo medicine.

"For us, it's a lot bigger than just one bird," Guthrie said. "We feel that we should try to help in any way we can."