

Exotic pet trade sends Florida bird rescues soaring

June 22 2016, by Kerry Sheridan



A rescued baby opossum is fed by a clinic worker at the Pelican Harbor Seabird Station in Miami, Florida

In this small animal hospital perched on Miami's sun-splashed harbor, some of the most exotic creatures fly in and out of Carla Zepeda's life.

From peacocks to pelicans, opossums to owls, Zepeda is part of a six-member staff that cares for both the furry and the feathered at the Pelican Harbor Seabird Station, one of south Florida's oldest wildlife rescue centers.

Though it began in 1980 as a place for injured wild pelicans, pet birds are increasingly common, like one of the newest arrivals, a fluffy green quaker parakeet.

The bird landed on a man's shoulder, appearing malnourished and with bruises around its beak, so it was brought to the Pelican Harbor Seabird Station for care.

"Here in Miami we deal a lot with the exotic pet trade," says rescue and release coordinator Zepeda, 22. "A lot of escaped pets or released pets."

"We now have a very high population of quaker parakeets, which weren't here before and are doing great in the wild."

Also known as monk parrots or quaker parrots, quaker parakeets (*Myiopsitta monachus*) are native to South America, but have established their own wild colonies here, forming loudly chattering flocks that fly over Miami and its mango tree-lined suburbs.

"Now the problem with that is they are not native species and they are taking up nesting space from blue jays, red-bellied woodpeckers and even eastern screech owls," says Zepeda.

"Released pets or escaped pets make a big impact on the environment."

Zepeda says the center will try to find a new caretaker for the recent arrival, whose friendly nature could pose a danger to its survival in the wild.



Clinic worker Carla Zepeda plays with one of the permanently injured pelicans in a rehabilitation pen at the Pelican Harbor Seabird Station in Miami, Florida

Record caseload

With more than one thousand patients already this year, the center is barreling toward another record, according to executive director Christopher Boykin.

"The number grows every year. We treated 1,968 in 2014 and 2,010 in 2015," he said.

"We anticipate another record breaking year."

More local residents are becoming aware of the rescue facility, which

helps drive the numbers, he said. A total of 146 different species came into the center last year.

Increasing conflicts with humans also bring in many patients, including peacocks that were hit by cars and had to be euthanized due to the severity of their injuries.

For Zepeda, the most surprising arrival was a prairie dog, a rodent native to the grasslands of the midwest.

"Apparently they are part of the [pet trade](#)," says Zepeda, who has seen three prairie dogs in the past three years.

The locals need care, too. The clinic is currently housing a handful of tiny baby opossums that need feeding every few hours. They lost their mother somehow, and now cling to a stuffed animal opossum while Zepeda plucks them off, one by one, to feed them formula via a small tube.

Injured ambassadors

Pelicans were once the sole reason for the center's existence, but now they make up only five to 20 percent of its patients, depending on the year, says Boykin.



Clinic worker Carla Zepeda releases a pelican back into Biscayne Bay at the Pelican Harbor Seabird Station in Miami, Florida

However, they still represent the center's greatest success. After arriving entangled in fishing lines or with hook injuries, three out of four are released back to the wild after treatment, he says.

On a sunny day in May, Zepeda releases a young pelican that arrived two months earlier with line wrapped around his beak and two hooks embedded in its neck and wing.

The bird flies a short distance, then plunks down in the gentle waves, preferring to bob back to its life in the wild.

Some pelicans never leave the center, if wing injuries prevent them from flying, or if they are partially blinded and could not hunt on their own.

These and other resident birds, like eastern screech owls, sometimes accompany staff to schools and public events to educate the public about how to deal with wildlife.

Zepeda says one old myth has proven particularly tough to dispel—that a mother bird will not care for her baby bird after a human has touched it.

"That is completely false," she says.

"They have a really poor sense of smell."

If people find a baby bird that seems healthy, they should just put it back in the nest, she says.

Zepeda, who often takes home baby rescue animals and wakes in the middle of the night to feed them, has permanently adopted four creatures that were left at the center—two cockatiels, a white-bellied caique and a Siberian husky.

She says she once thought she might go into zoo medicine, but that was before she tried wildlife rehabilitation.

"I ended up loving it too much and now I cannot leave."

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