

What I Did On My Holiday *A Parrothead Rescue Tale*

Story by Phil Tripp

My partner and I are bird lovers and the proud owner of a gorgeous green male Eclactus-Jackson on the cover-so we always get excited when we see Eccies during our travels. Going to Hawaii quite often, we've seen a few there for sale (\$4000 or more compared to \$1000 or less here) as we cruised pet stores for new toys for our feather kids. We see the occasional parrot on the shoulder of a tourist photographer on the streets of Waikiki or caged in a hotel foyer with other birds on display, either on perches or in enclosures.

Most of the time, hotels are proud of their birds, see them as investments rather than furniture, and are happy to have them as a people pleaser and foyer feature. In the case of one chain of Hawaiian hotels, the routines of bird care, feeding, health issues and playtime versus display time are rigorously monitored by specialized staff. But as was the case with a situation we encountered at another hotel-which will remain unnamed for obvious reasons in the tale-precious parrots can be abused, endangered and even killed by negligence of management or staff. Or they can be saved.

On one of our jaunts to the Big Island of Hawaii, we had to stay for a night at a hotel before we moved into our condo, and we noticed that it had two somewhat scruffy looking Eclactus parrots-male and female named George and Gracie-sitting quietly on a stick strung between two trees just over a small pond outside their foyer. Our initial joy turned to concern when we looked a little more closely and saw that the birds were not that healthy looking, seemed somewhat sad and also had filthy, rusty steel dishes for their food and water.

I recalled that this hotel once had a magnificent Blue and Gold Macaw in the foyer during a previous visit, when the hotel was under different ownership. Looking even more closely at the two Eclactus, I observed that their feathers were dull, matted, dirty and smelly with one of the birds having an overly long beak which indicated a potential health problem. In their food dish was a horrible looking seed mixture that appeared to be old and picked over while their water dish was a gross mess.

Thinking that management should be alerted to this state of affairs, I inquired at the front desk about who I should speak to and casually asked what had happened to the Macaw I'd seen a couple of years back since I was a bit of a bird fan. "Oh, he was scared by a guest, being teased, and since his wings hadn't been clipped for a while, he was able to fly off into the pool where he drowned." I was told by a rather sad staffer. When I asked what sort of care the two remaining birds were being given, the employee said that dogs were treated better!

I was appalled and decided to see where these birds were housed. As it turned out, they were taken out every weekday morning (except holidays) around 9 am and put back into their cages about 3 pm. But what was alarming was that the birds were housed in extremely small cages in a dank, dark, smelly and filthy area within the Maintenance workshop of the hotel. I talked my way into the area and managed to get a good look at not only the cages, but the appalling storage area where the bird's food was subject to vermin-a rat was seen there by me and the groundskeeper who let me in-the seed was filled with flour moth larva, the pellet mixture was rancid and their water dishes the same rusty steel as the ones outdoors, filled with a disgusting soup of crud.

In looking at their dirty cages, I noticed there were no toys or other things for them to play with and since they were left in their cages over the weekends their boredom would have been horrific. Especially when the four day holiday weekends meant they got no attention or contact, time out or, judging from the care level, no replenishment of food or water. And to top it all off, the maintenance area was used for spray painting, welding and woodwork which could harm or kill the birds with toxic fumes or dust.

I decided to confront the manager with what I'd discovered and found him a somewhat meek, yet diplomatic person to talk to who indicated that they had taken over the hotel and the animals in the condition I'd seen and that yes, they were planning to make some changes. When I pointed out they were primarily on a seed diet with a pellet mixture that was contaminated, he admitted that he was concerned about this and would take steps to quickly rectify the conditions. I made a couple of suggestions which he seemed happy to accept-firstly that the birds needed fresh fruit and vegetables in their diet and it appeared by their condition that they didn't get any kind of showering or spraying, which, as tropical birds, they needed.

As it turned out, they had never been cleaned, showered, sprayed or even misted. He admitted he knew little about caring for birds and that their previous carer in the maintenance department had left the hotel's employment. He was apologetic and promised to use his best endeavours to change things. I gave him some information on Eclactus diet and care that I'd printed off the Internet and told him I'd check in when I returned in six months. We felt like we had done something of real value to make these birds' lives better.

Fast forward a half a year and we returned to Kona. The first day, I went to the hotel and walked into the maintenance area. The birds were still there and with the exception of a slightly cleaner area, nothing had really changed. The cages were the same, encrusted with faeces and dirt, the water and food dishes remained unchanged and the only toys the birds had were the remnants of the ones we'd placed in their cages on our previous visit. (See photo of Before).

Furious, I went back to the condo, grabbed my camera and video, returned to the maintenance area and, using the excuse with one worker who remembered me from the last visit, was let into their area and started shooting. The timing could not have been better because at that point when I was in their cage area, two of the staff were welding and sawing plywood with smoke, dust and noise clearly visible and audible on the video I shot, backed up by digital photos of the appalling conditions the birds were still subject to.

With evidence in hand, I proceeded to the General Manager's office. He sheepishly came out to see me and said plans were progressing for a new area for the birds. I said I didn't believe him and based on the video and photos I'd just taken, his parrots had a new public relations representative-me! Since nothing much more than a cleanout of trash and spoiled food had occurred in six months, I told him that if the parrots were not removed into safe shelter care with an immediate veterinarian check within 48 hours, that I would take the photos to Hawaiian newspapers and the videos to television, issuing a press release alleging abuse. This got his attention.

On returning to the condo, I got a call from the head of the hotel chain in Los Angeles, not offering to change things, but instead, threatening a criminal action for trespassing and a civil lawsuit for defamation should I put out a release and the footage I'd gathered. Having run a PR company for years, I knew it was a bluff and called it. Since he wanted to play hard ball, I told him I'd not bother to give them the 48 hours grace, and start writing the press release then and refer any media directly to him. After further threats, he hung up angrily, but called back within minutes to say that he had spoken to the manager and reconsidered. He backed down from his previous stance, said he had been misinformed about the status of the birds and the proposed works to create a new area for them and apologized.



Above: Before

Below: After



The next day, the birds were put in care of a shelter and rescue facility called Three Ring Ranch in Kona which was a private resource centre that took in retired circus animals, abandoned exotic pets, injured animals and illegal creatures that smugglers had attempted to bring into Hawaii. It was a fantastic privately-funded facility on a large, fenced property where you could see zebras, llamas, hawks and owls being rehabilitated after injuries and a range of other animals under the best of care. George and Gracie were given large clean cages, a lengthy vet check which included treatment for George's elongated beak and heaps of attention from the staff.

The hotel's owner in California agreed to pay for the birds care at Three Ring until the hotel built a suitable protected area for their care and showing in the foyer, admitting that they had dragged their feet in taking over the facilities from the previous operators. Within days, the birds-which were dirty, listless and underfed-transformed in the care of the Three Ring owners. They were showered daily, greedily lapped up fruit, vegetables and other treats twice a day, took to bird toys that we bought them for their big cages like kids under a Christmas tree and started talking, chirping and playing like totally new creatures.

The happy ending came three months later when the hotel opened the new home for George and Gracie (and by this time, their new son) which incorporated three large stainless steel homes for them at night with covers and lavish interiors. It had been custom built with a huge, safe, fenced in play area of intertwining branches and ropes, surrounded by a pond in a bright and clean gazebo. A better parrot paradise would be hard to come by.

Each morning, they are let out early and fed fresh fruit and other treats in addition to their vet supervised combination pellet and grain/nut/seed mix. One of the staff became the parrots adopted 'keeper' who spent time each day playing with the parrots, letting them ride on her shoulder and mooch around as she cleaned their area to a sparkling standard. Now, the Eclactus family is a proud centerpiece of the hotel's foyer with their own signage, the best of care and attention and a rich new stimulating life.

We couldn't be happier seeing them when we got back to Hawaii a few months after the opening of their playground and new homesite. It was another world compared to the horrors they'd put up with for many years. It was like night turned into day. With lots of screeches, babbling and happy sounds.

How Our First Urban Animal Was Born!

Well, it's been nearly two months since we wrote the Publisher's Message across the page when we launched the idea of Urban Animal as Sydney's first free all pet magazine. And it's October 1, two weeks before we receive 40,000 copies of this project from the printers and distribute them free to pet stores, vets, groomers, shelters, kennels, pet-friendly cafes and accommodation as well as other places where people take their pets to be serviced. We've learned a lot in a short time about creating a new consumer magazine, though our company has been publishing a Music Industry Directory for 17 years.

The first issue is always the hardest but this has been incredible fun at the same time as being an economic and layout challenge. Though we aimed at a 48 page initial issue, we settled on a 32 page release to keep things cost effective and to retain our 40,000 copy guarantee. The 'first issue syndrome' of potential advertisers wanting to wait to see the debut issue, coupled with the end of the year exhaustion of ad budgets of major advertisers meant that we had to prove ourselves as a quality publication and also tested our editorial policies.

We decided when we conceived this publication that we would not do any advertorial-believing our readers are far too smart to accept stories based on advertising spend-so we turned down one major pet food manufacturer who insisted we take a column from their 'consulting veterinarian'. Another major pet food manufacturer was taken aback when we didn't accept advertising for their canned product (which by the nutrition analysis on the can made it more like junk food) and decided to withhold other products in their line as leverage.

Our decision not to accept advertising from any product that can cause pain or poses a danger to animals meant we had to forego the lovely long term ads from an electrical shock collar and perimeter control device supplier. And of course, by electing not to cram our pages with the easy ads we could get from breeders-which we feel though most are reputable, there are too many puppy & pussy mills out there-we lost that revenue stream too.

For anyone else trying to initiate a magazine of this magnitude, these sort of obstacles would have made a publisher either delay publication, reduce the number of copies, sacrifice their editorial ethics or just give up. But we were having too much fun creating it and knew once we got our first copy out, the results would be enough to overcome any obstacles.

We were amused by the large number of people who either volunteered to be writers-so long as they could write about themselves, their store, their product or service-and those who were happy to put their business forward as a compelling subject for an article on themselves. As you can tell from the editorial we have, we've invested considerably in features from top overseas sources with stunning photos, editorial generated only by ourselves or professional journalists and once again, no advertorial. We took no freebies, paid for our own accommodation in Come, Sit, Stay.

But we're thrilled with the faith and belief of those who decided to invest in our first publication from the get-go which allowed us to present this new Urban Animal to you in the style, quality and quantity that we strategised. Now that it's out on the street-much like the music press you see at CD shops, venues and cafes for that set-we feel we've delivered and can now approach our potential advertisers to assure the magazine's growth in size and distribution.

We're also heartened by the incredible support and advice we received in setting this up for the first time and the promises of greater things as we continue to deliver an informative and fun publication for intelligent practitioners of a pet lifestyle-YOU!

Phil Tripp
Urban Animal Publisher