

# SoCal Parrot: The Rescue, Rehabilitation & Release of Naturalized and Confiscated Parrots

By Pat Latas, DVM,MS,BS  
All Photos by SoCal Parrot



*Three endangered species in one basket: red-crowned, yellow headed and lilac-crowned babies*

Raw diesel fumes from the bus stop below rise above the busy sidewalks and mingle with smoke from the kabab shop and the thundering Harley's exhaust. No one looks up or around, even as the Southern California sun arranges a typical and stunning Pacific sunset. Traffic noise and sirens and crying babies compete with the pungent atmosphere. But no one looks up. No one registers the above-ground utility lines drooping with the teeming and vociferous hundreds of parrots assembling for their nightly gossip.

A roost of a thousand parrots gathers here every night. The spectacle rivals any in the native habitats of these birds - Red-crowned and Lilac-crowned parrots - and represents more individuals of these two endangered species than occur in their endemic geographies. Full of life and energy, they offer a joyous pilgrimage to the very few observers who have come here on a special mission to witness the amazing phenomenon. The minute the sun goes down a special call goes up by a few birds near the tallest tree...and en masse a thousand birds rise up to circle and roost in the tall trees around the city building, a deeply emotional and ear-splitting tumult. And at that golden moment, dozens of rescued wild parrots are released to join the throng, to the tears and cheers of the dedicated onlookers. In direct flight to the trees, these newly released parrots are greeted by the birds at roost, the juveniles are preened and protected immediately; the adults introducing themselves at high decibels. The sun disappears

with the first stars peeking out of the marine layer, and another call goes up by a single bird. Instant silence. A thousand noisy parrots are suddenly invisible.

On the street level, not a person has glanced up to see this miracle.

Southern California hosts 13 species of wild, non-native naturalized parrot species. Three are endangered, one critically so. Yet they are afforded no legal protections; Endangered Species Act, CITES, and state laws protecting endangered species do not pertain to non-natives. At minimum the State of California does not consider them invasive, rather as naturalized, stabilized populations, non-threatening to native flora and fauna and not dangerous for agriculture. State and local laws do at least prohibit nest poaching and harassment. But despite having such unique status-wild and descended from wild-caught ancestors, NOT pets - they are not considered native wildlife and there are no provisions for their rescue, rehabilitation and release back to the urban wild. In the past, orphans and injured adults often entered a lifetime of captivity, confined to a world of imprisonment they could not understand. Until Brooke Durham raised her voice for compassion, calling for a safe niche for those urbanites falling through the cracks.

SoCal Parrot is a 501.3c non-profit organization founded by Brooke and staffed with dedicated and

skilled people who rescue, raise and care for, rehabilitate and release the naturalized parrots back to the wild. Since 2014, SoCal Parrot has admitted almost 900 parrots into care and released approximately half of them back to the wild. Of these birds 3 species are endangered: Red-crowned parrots comprising 60% of the releases, about 10% Lilac-crowned parrots, and a few Yellow-headed parrots. Red-masked and Mitred parakeets comprise about 20% of the releases. The commonest naturalized wild psittacine species in Southern California, Red-crowned Parrots, Lilac-crowned Parrots, and Red-masked Parakeets, are endangered or near-threatened and decreasing according to the IUCN Redlist. Yellow-headed parrots are critically endangered. The urban populations are distributed in Southern California from roughly Santa Barbara south to the Mexico border. SoCal Parrot is the only rescue, rehabilitation and release facility for these urbanized species in the world.



***Yellow-crowned parrots under the the care of SoCal Parrot***

Recently, on the southern border, a vehicle was intercepted by Customs and Border Protection, and 22 unweaned baby psittacines were discovered packed into the door panels. They were seized by USFWS agents, who identified all but one (a Northern Mealy) as Yellow-headed parrots. Normally unweaned neonates would be euthanized on the spot, but because these were a critically endangered species, USFWS endangered species agents intervened. Ultimately, because of SoCal Parrot's expertise and because long-range plans might include repatriating to a safe area in their native lands, Brook Durham was contacted and SoCal Parrot was asked to take on the care of the babies. In the end, 19 beautiful young birds flourished and thrived. What happens now? There is no government funding for their continued, potentially life-long care. But they are not entering the pet trade. They are wild and meant to be so.



***Lilac-crowned parrots are an endangered species too frequently confiscated at the Mexican border***

We in the wild psittacine world are all too aware of the massive illegal trade in parrots. The world populations are being decimated for a cruel journey from the wild to life-long imprisonment. Many birds die along this journey, reasonable estimates are 80-90% in transit and untold more after captivity. The wild parrots of Southern California originated from wild-caught birds released en-masse from the 1950s through the early 1990s (when legal importation into the USA ended). SoCal Parrot is the acknowledged expert in the care of wild urban parrots.

We preach parrot conservation, yet have no provisions for repatriating the tiny percentage of survivors from the horrendous conditions associated with trafficking of these birds. Confiscated parrots who miraculously survive the ordeal end up in captivity and never see the free open sky or have the solace of a wild family. It will be up to sanctuaries to offer these birds a chance at being as wild as possible. Together, we must find a way to shoulder the responsibilities, once again, which others have dropped and ignored. Perhaps someday the situation will be so dire that repatriation across international borders will be possible, more feasible, and we can do right by these poor victims of a modern-day slave trade. Until then, we will have to network and help each other out and hope for justice and compassion from authorities and the public. A Herculean task, yet who else is there?