

A Convention of Parrotheads



It only happens every other year in Brisbane where the Parrot Society of Australia—an all volunteer organisation—stages a two day featherlust convention. Using the theme “Raising the Perch in Avicultural Education”, Parrots 2008 was a wide-ranging series of multimedia presentations on all things parrot from a range of local and international speakers, a conservation fundraising dinner and tours of aviaries in the region for the hardcore psitticulturalist. Oh, and there was also a 30 stand trade fair where I dropped more than \$300 on toys, lights and other goodies—about \$100 more than it cost me to fly up and back in one day with a rental car added.

If you judge the success of an event by the numbers, there were 40 more than the expected 180 feather fanciers with the crowd of 220 including companion parrot owners, backyard hobbyists, avian vets, novices, experienced breed owners and aviculturalists. It was neither academic nor snobby; not for breeders solely nor for avian scientists. I met some delightful bird owners from Sydney there who had also flown up for the weekend and knew me by the Hawaiian shirt from the photo in the magazine.

If there is one common denominator among the flock of attendees, they are parrot enthusiasts. There were no strains of Jimmy Buffet—the musical king of Parrotheads—in the large pub and conference centre about 25Ks outside of Brisbane where Parrots 2008 was held. It was a charming location made even more so by the hospitality of the volunteer organisers and the humility of all who worked it. The speakers from America knew each other from the parrot convention circuit and were amiable, joking about the long flights, and new culture that they were learning and their eagerness to see so much of Australia’s wildlife.

They were dynamic speakers, with audio-visual presentations that had the audience riveted to their seats. I was rapt with the professional quality of the production and fascinated with the diverse program that unfolded in the one day I attended. The only thing I regretted was that I hadn’t booked for both days.

Dr Donald Brightsmith is a Texan who has been studying wild parrots in Peru, specifically the Tambopata Macaws that congregate around a series of clay licks embedded in cliffs. His research focuses on conservation, natural history, ecology, diseases and diets of parrots, with an emphasis on how human habitation and deforestation is affecting the birds of the Amazon and South America. His slides and videos were fascinating, especially in presenting why the parrots eat the clay—was it for mineral supplementation or to absorb toxins from some of the fruits and seeds the birds eat?

Dr Susan Friedman was a hit because, as a psychologist and behaviouralist, she drew parallels between bringing up babies and bappies (baby parrots). Her expertise is learning and behaviour with a special emphasis on children’s behaviour disorders. Having a parrot is like having a two-year-old—only for decades. I learned so much from her in terms of the most positive and least intrusive, effective behaviour solutions. Having a temperamental pair of parrots has produced a large number of hand scars from biting and her tips reinforced my techniques for reducing this.

Another fascinating behaviouralist is Texan Barbara Heidenreich who publishes Good Bird Magazine, produces a range of parrot behaviour DVDs and has authored several books on problem solving. She’s also an ace trainer in free flight shows for zoos and nature centres. Her humorous style and arresting videos were a surprising hit. She has a wealth of knowledge and, like her friend Susan Friedman, met countless attendees, answered all levels of questions and exuded enthusiasm about her love of training.

Local boy Nicholas Bishop of the Taronga Zoo is a trainer and presenter of the free flight bird show there while Daniel Gowland runs the Priam Psitticulture Centre in Bungendore where his focus is on breeding techniques, hand rearing and parrot nutrition. Both are devoted to parrots and their presentations brought home the great birds that we are blessed with here. Nick is passionate about parrots and passionate about learning how to improve the lives of the birds in our care. This is evident in his writing for Fledglings, the Parrot Society of Australia’s junior aviculturist publication, of which is he co-creator and author. Daniel’s expertise is in captive housing and management of endangered species as well as bird husbandry.

It was a day packed with knowledge and capped off by Australian photographer and filmmaker Peter Odekerken who presented his latest doco on a project to return special lorikeets from Tahiti to neighbouring Rimitara, which was a superb production.

Details on all programs and speakers over the two days are at the Parrot Society’s website at <http://www.parrotsociety.org.au>. A great event from a fabulous organization.



SK8TING
budgies rock out

Who would have thought such great talent was right under our beaks. These supercharged, talented little budgies reside in Sydney and have been trained to skate on tiny, purpose-built skateboards and pose in front of little props like grand pianos and drum kits.

Trieste Visier is the brains and trainer behind these sweet little avian actors. Visier started training her band of budgies a few years ago and really tapped into their ability to learn tricks and fearlessly tackle all types of tricks. She won’t divulge her training methods but is quick to stress that they are keen and eager pupils with the right training touch.

Stay tuned as she’s working on a book and other projects that feature her favourite flighted friends. We’re sure her publishing projects will fly off the shelves.