

The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill

This is the story of how one guy, searching for some path and meaning in his life, finds his purpose and life's work. Mark Bittner is a self-described dharma bum, a term coined by poet Gary Snyder that means 'a homeless seeker of truth'.

Raised in Washington State, his ambition as a teenager was to be a Great Novelist, but Mark was alarmed by the uniformly miserable fates of all the writers he loved—alcoholism, depression and suicide. So he decided to pursue a career in music instead. After hitchhiking through Europe in search of experience, he moved to San Francisco determined to sink or swim as a poet-singer-songwriter. He sank. Completely bereft, he turned to spiritual seeking and ended up on the street where he spent the next 14 years. Ultimately his search led him to the wild parrot flock, which, in turn, led him back to writing, and his first book: *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*.

The book became a New York Times Bestseller and there's also a documentary which hit our theatres October 20. The documentary has become somewhat of a 'sleeper' success in the US and really captures the unique and special relationship that Mark has with these wild parrots. We were lucky enough to capture Mark and ask him about his relationship with the parrots, the book and the documentary.

When you first started to observe 'the flock', approximately how many parrots were there?

When I first noticed them, there were just four. But three years later, when I really started to observe them, there were 26. Last November I took a photograph of the flock flying across the sky. I enlarged the photo and counted the parrots and it came to 160. Around this time of year is when I see the babies emerge and join the flock, so the numbers will increase. The flock's numbers are not growing exponentially but it is growing. Some years are good and some years are bad. The virus that has affected the juveniles in past years hasn't really been seen for a number of years. The biggest threat to the flock these days would

"When you find your place, practice begins"
- Dogan

be the hawks as they seem to be really focusing on the parrots.

In the book you mention that the parrots looked intelligent and seemingly had distinct personalities. Were you surprised by this?

Yes I was surprised back then. Now, after having observed the flock for so long, it seems funny to think that this would be unusual. Overall I think I was delighted by their individual personalities. I didn't know anything about birds, especially parrots, when I first started to observe them. So to discover that they have distinct personalities and differences was wonderful.

Were you concerned about the parrots being declared a 'pest' as a non-native species in the Bay area?

Yes, at a certain point it did become a concern of mine. There's never been any kind of move towards declaring them as pests, but it's always been an idea on the horizon.

When you consider the amount of non-native trees, plants and other introduced species, these parrots really aren't creating any problems or impacting on the environment in a negative way are they?

No they're not at all. It's interesting considering so much of a city is non-native. The whole city is non-native—the people living in it are non-native. When people ask me about that I always think human beings are the real pest. Consider the havoc created by

other species in the environment and compare that to human beings—no other species comes close to what we're doing.

Did you have an underlying desire to make these parrots popular so that there would be a public outcry if the city authorities or environmental activists tried to eradicate them?

Well it was more than underlying—it was deliberate. Making the parrots popular would be their best defence. It was from the advice of a guy who was observing a similar flock in Chicago. There had been several attempts to eradicate this flock and the only thing that stopped the authorities destroying them was public protests.

I understand Judy Irving (film maker) became interested in doing a documentary about the parrots through an article you did for 'Bird Talk Magazine'? Did Bird Talk find out about you or did you contact them about doing an article?

Actually there were several steps in the documentary being made. Judy first heard about me through an article I wrote but she didn't think it was worthwhile contacting me because I mentioned in the story that I was moving. Little did I know at that time that I would end up staying at Telegraph Hill a good while longer. Judy kept hearing about me through friends and finally she contacted me about the idea of a documentary.

I found out about Bird Talk Magazine when I was searching for information on parrots. I've really wanted to be a writer and so I set about writing an article for them. It came after I was feeling frustrated of trying to make money doing odd jobs. It was a personal test to see if I could make some money out of doing something I really enjoy, which is writing.



Mark Bittner

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I believe Sally Blanchard from Companion Parrot quarterly lives in or around the Bay Area - did they have any interest in your story?

Yes, they were very interested in the parrots. Last year Sally approached me about doing an article that was published in the Fall 2004 edition.

In the book, the care of Tupelo and her subsequent death made you realise how deeply involved and attached to the birds you were. Her death and your subsequent sorrow forced you to front up to the realisation that you loved these creatures. Would you consider this to be a major 'light-bulb' moment in your life?

Oh definitely, the whole thing has been. In some way I'm the same person but it's how you do something and it opens all of these doors that weren't there before. At several different levels it's changed everything for me, one of them being confronted by death. Until that point I had never lost anybody to death and suddenly I realised this when Tupelo died. I realised how much I loved her and how important she was. Death in this country is swept under the rug, we hide it and people die in a room somewhere and then they're gone. With my involvement with the parrots and nursing the sick ones, I've had them die in my hands. I'd never experienced death of a loved one so closely before.

The desire to have a 'wild friend' is probably the dream of most animal loving children and something a great deal of adults could relate to. You achieved this with the bond and level of trust you achieved through your interest in the flock. Does it still give you a thrill when the parrots recognise you?

I'm not sure if it's a thrill. There's a sort of joy that I feel when I'm with them and they make me laugh. I feel kind of happiness when I'm feeding them and they're all over me and sometimes they're fighting and biting and I have to be careful. The great thing about them is that they're so humorous. When they fly across the sky their calls sound so urgent, even if they're just flying from one hill to another. They sound like their business is very urgent and important like there's a fire somewhere.

When the care and costs of necessary medical attention for the sick birds was financially impossible for you, your small appeal for money at the local grocery store resulted in a generous donation from a local. Are you surprised at the generous spirit of people when a creature is in need?

It made me happy at that moment because there was an urgent need and it happened almost immediately. About half an hour after posting the notice there was a hundred dollar bill from a local. It didn't really surprise me because the parrots are popular in this neighbourhood.

Were you prepared for the media frenzy that occurred after the San Francisco Examiner did a story on you and the parrots?

I wasn't expecting the attention and certainly wasn't prepared for it. I didn't expect to become part of a media snowball.

With the success of the book and the documentary I would expect that there would be many charities and rescue organisations wanting you to help them with their causes.

I have done a number of organised talks to benefit sanctuaries and rescue organisations. I recently did one for the Oasis Sanctuary where three of the sick parrots went to when I moved and couldn't take them. The Oasis is in Arizona and only takes special

needs birds. They currently have around 400 birds that require special attention. It's right in the middle of the desert and the birds can make as much noise as they like.

So you've just recently returned to the flock and started observing them again after an absence. Did your time away from the parrots affect them at all?

They've survived and multiplied quite nicely without me. Now that I have a more permanent address, I've started feeding them again.

*Did anyone give you any flak about the controversy of feeding parrots sunflower seeds?**

When I started feeding the parrots, sunflower seed was all I had on hand. I had no idea that there was any issue about feeding them sunflower seeds. Since learning more about parrots, I've put out all sorts of other things like fruit but they're not interested in this. They come to me for the sunflower seeds. There's so much other food for them out there that they eat and so I think they're happy to get some extra fuel from me. In my absence, they've survived quite nicely without the seed. But it's only the seed they'll drop in for.

So you're kind of like their corner pub.

(Laughs) Yes, I'm their corner pub.

* Editor's note: Sunflower seeds are widely regarded as being like candy to parrots, making them hyperactive and not a nutritionally balanced food.

The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill opened nationally on October 20 through Palace Cinemas and various independent cinemas.

To follow Mark Bittner and his observations on the Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill you can check this site www.pelicanmedia.org/wildparrots.html

To find out more about the Oasis you can go to this site <http://www.the-oasis.org/>

Excerpt from The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill - A Love Story With Wings

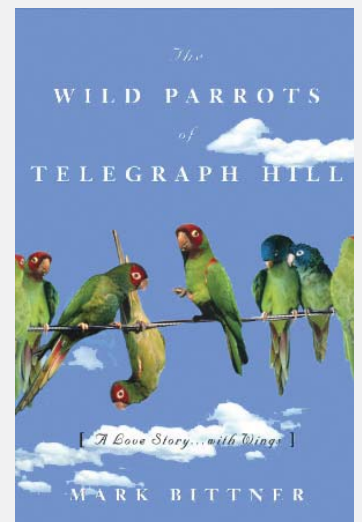
By Mark Bittner

The entire flock landed on the fire escape. All twenty-six of them. I was ecstatic. It had been years since I felt that kind of joy. The day before, when the first three came to the bowl, I'd been about ten feet away from them. Since they'd been comfortable with that, I carefully maintained the same distance now. The flock started coming every day, and each time they did, I'd move a step or two closer to the Dutch door that led to the fire escape. After about a week, I was right up against it. I slowly eased myself down to the kitchen floor and sat in front of the lower window to watch. I did not go unnoticed. The parrots kept one eye trained on me at all times. Whenever I made even the smallest motion, they bolted instantly and in unison back to the trees and the power lines. After a few minutes of cautious waiting, they would return one by one to resume their feasting and fighting.

The scene at the bowl was chaos. They were screaming furiously and running all around the area directly in front of me. They had large, floppy feet, and I got a big kick out of watching their clumsy, plodding runs across the fire escape floor. Their colours were luminous. The green had a

shimmer that was almost psychedelic, while the red was a bright fire-engine red. I was struck by their eyes again. In a lot of native birds I'd seen, the iris was nearly as dark as the pupil, which made the eye appear empty and impassive. But the cherry heads had a light iris, and the black pupil stood out distinctly. I could see their emotions, which were constantly shifting from playfulness to curiosity to rage. Fights were breaking out everywhere. A bird would jump on the lip of the bowl and lunge at the bird next to him, stabbing him with

his beak if there was any resistance. They used their beak on one another quite freely. Birds perched on the bowl were often attacked from behind with a bite on the leg or wing, or a yank on the tail. The bitten bird would scream loudly and fly away. I was totally captivated. It was like watching the Three Stooges, only much funnier.



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