

Oryx

Penchant for parrots: are parrot hobbyists the curse but also the cure?

By Anuj Jain & Jessica Lee, 16th August 2021

'Wow!' Anuj whispered to Jessica, barely containing his surprise as they followed the sound of wingbeat and the foreign flash of colour that descended across their path. Could that really be a South American macaw, in the middle of Singapore? They regained their bearings as the initial astonishment began to fade.

Singapore is home to only three native species of parrots: the blue-rumped parrot *Psittinus cyanurus*, the long-tailed parakeet *Psittacula longicauda* and the blue-crowned hanging parrot *Loriculus galgulus*. However, exotic bird species such as cockatoos and lorikeets are becoming an increasingly common sight in the sprawling urban—yet wild—metropolis. Equally common are gatherings of parrot-keeping enthusiasts—communal groups that meet to socialise and bond over their shared passion and hobby. Some of these meetings culminate in free-flying sessions where pet birds are released and recalled to their owners. Anuj remembered that in Singapore such gatherings were rare 5-10 years ago.

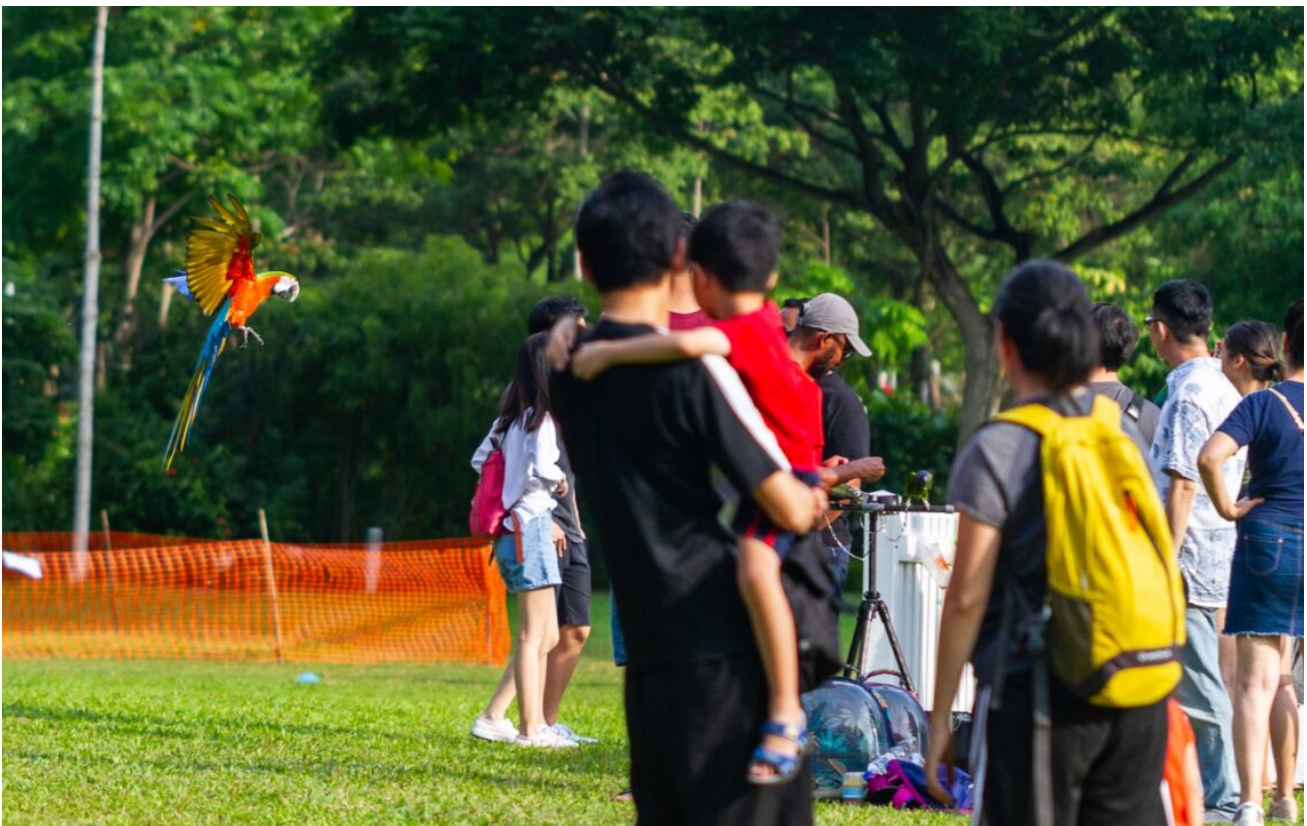


A parrot hobbyist group gathering in west Singapore, displaying colour morphs of rose-ringed parakeets

Psittacula krameri (in the foreground) and lovebirds *Agapornis* sp., budgerigars *Melopsittacus undulatus*, macaws *Ara* sp., amazons *Amazona* sp. and grey parrots *Psittacus* sp. in the background. Photo: Tim Plowden/www.timplowden.co.uk

Each year thousands of parrots are trapped in the wild. Combined with ongoing habitat loss in their home countries, these threats have pushed many parrot species closer to extinction. In a previous study, Anuj, Jessica and team showed that parrots kept as pets are becoming more common in Singapore and that nearly a third of Singapore's imports of CITES listed parrots during 2005–2016 were wild-caught. Beyond the direct impacts of the trade, it is also driving indirect threats, such as the establishment of non-native species, the spread of parrot-borne diseases and distressing animal welfare concerns for the birds involved. There is an urgent need to tackle the often unregulated, unsustainable and illegal trade of wild parrots at local, regional and global levels, and to emphasize the conservation of their wild populations and habitats.

However, the issues run deep, and solutions remain elusive. To address the problem of trade in wild-caught parrots, we first need to tease out and understand the inner workings of the growing hobby of parrot keeping. We mapped out Singapore's parrot trade ecosystem by observing parrot hobbyist group events, cataloguing their social media profiles and interviewing members of parrot hobbyist groups. With this information, we were able to provide insights into the growing hobby of parrot keeping, and its implications for the conservation of threatened parrots.



Several free-flying parrot hobbyist groups have emerged in Singapore in recent years. Macaws are a favourite group of birds to free-fly among such groups. Photo: Tim Plowden/www.timplowden.co.uk

During our interviews with parrot owners, we found that many were aware, and concerned, that

parrots are illegally captured for commercial trade. Yet, most parrot owners did not know the conservation status of the birds they kept. Promisingly, however, most owners were willing to pay more and wait longer to procure a sustainably sourced parrot. The majority also reported they prefer captive-bred to wild-caught parrots. Although these matters are encouraging, there is still a lot of work to be done to sensitize this community about the key conservation issues that affect the birds they cherish.

Unsurprisingly, we found that parrot hobbyist groups play a key role in driving trade and shaping consumer preferences. Over half of respondents were members of a parrot hobbyist group. The majority confessed that their membership of a hobbyist group had motivated them to buy more parrots.



A hyacinth macaw *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus* at a parrot hobbyist group gathering along with a pet's day out event. The Vulnerable hyacinth macaw is a much sought after species in the pet trade, with an individual bird sometimes worth several tens of thousands of dollars. Photo: Tim Plowden/www.timplowden.co.uk

Given the influence that parrot hobbyist groups have on the parrot trade, it would be beneficial if members could be engaged to become champions for parrot conservation. We want to explore the potential of working with them to shift attitudes towards sustainably sourced and captive-bred birds. The ultimate goal is not to put a stop to the practice of keeping parrots but to empower communities to become advocates for responsible and sustainable bird ownership.

We are also aware that mobilizing the hobbyist community will not be a trivial undertaking, and on its own will not be sufficient to protect threatened parrots. The entire parrot trade ecosystem has to work together. We hope that retailers of live birds and bird accessories can be encouraged to promote ethical bird ownership, providing evidence such as source, health certificates and CITES

permits for the birds they sell. This should be reinforced with the tightening and effective enforcement of regulations by the national authorities overseeing both import and export of parrots.



Well known for its intelligence and remarkable speech, the Endangered grey parrot *Psittacus erithacus* continues to be a popular pet among experienced parrot owners in Singapore. Grey parrots were listed on CITES Appendix I in 2017. Photo credit: Tim Plowden/www.timplowden.co.uk

Our study contextualizes parrot ownership as embedded within the social network of hobbyist groups. Usually, pet ownership studies are focused on the consumer. We found that it is helpful to look at parrot ownership and trade as part of a complex ecosystem, in which various types of traders, platforms and consumers interact and adjust their behaviours. A better understanding of these dynamics could help us create more effective conservation strategies.

How reflective is Singapore's parrot-keeping scene of other cities in Asia? We suspect what we see in Singapore could be happening in other major metropolises and trade hubs across Asia, such as Hong Kong and Taipei. We hope that our research in Singapore could become a model for studies elsewhere in Asia.



Left: Keeping parrots as pets is becoming increasingly common even among children in Singapore. Seen here is a young person interacting with a blue-headed parrot *Pionus menstruus* at a hobbyist group gathering in central Singapore. Right: Yellow-crested cockatoo *Cacatua sulphurea* and sulphur-crested cockatoo *Cacatua galerita* are popular species in the parrot trade and are regularly seen at hobbyist group gatherings. Escapees from the trade have established feral populations in the wild in Singapore and may potentially compete with native birds.
Photos: Anuj Jain

The article [Understanding Singapore's dynamic parrot trade ecosystem](#) is available open access in *Oryx—The International Journal of Conservation*.



Anuj Jain & Jessica Lee

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Jessica Lee is an ornithologist with a para-veterinary background and a PhD in avian conservation biology and management. She is an Assistant Vice-President (Conservation & Research) with Mandai Nature - a Singapore-based, non-profit conservation organization. She is involved in conservation management of threatened bird species, tackling issues around habitat loss and the illegal bird trade, conservation of birds in urban areas, conservation genomics and breeding, and the rehabilitation and release of rescued birds.