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Jean M. Langford

When Species Fall Apart

How do we attend to the species identity of nonhuman animals living in sanctuaries, who are retired or rescued from laboratories, entertainment, or human homes? What constitutes care for creatures who are not only physically separated from their wilder conspecifics, but also often psychically dislocated to the point of lacking social skills necessary for living with their own kind? Two North American sanctuaries, one for primates and one for parrots, suggest possibilities for care when species, both as concept and as creaturely collective, fall apart.

At the primate sanctuary, both the chimp house and the outdoor islands sport either actual trees or rope and log structures simulating trees. But G, the director, discovered early on that the chimps are more apt to climb the wire mesh of their enclosures than the biological or artificial trees.[1] Metal is more familiar than wood. She laughed. “My stupid idea that all chimps like trees. . . . I have chimps that climb and can’t come down. Is that normal? Of course it’s normal for someone who’s lived in a tiny little box their whole life!”

She mused about one chimp who bares his teeth when he smiles. “A normal greeting . . . they cover their teeth, the bottom lip is droopy. . . . But Jethro doesn’t know how to do a chimp face.” When Jethro smiles, he risks communicating fear and aggression to his conspecifics. Nonetheless, Jethro is well respected by the other sanctuary chimps. “He’s a big hugger,” G said. “He’s busy hugging and always getting in between fights.”

She described Jeanie (now deceased) as “a chimpanzee who’s so burnt, so fried, so done with this life that she spins and urinates and defecates all at the same time, and froths at the mouth and her eyes roll back. That’s like watching someone in a mental institution for god’s sake, and that’s a chimpanzee?” Jeanie went especially crazy when humans walked down the hall toward her enclosure at a certain time of day. “She’d be spinning and screaming and freaking out . . . to the point that you thought she was hurting herself.” One day while cleaning Jeanie’s room, G noticed that anyone walking down the hall at that hour was in shadow, backlit by glare. The situation, she figured, duplicated the lighting at the lab when technicians approached the chimps' cages from a door at the end of a hallway: "Knockdown time, surgical procedures, and they're all in white, you can't make out the face."

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[1] One of the sanctuaries requested that I use pseudonyms for the humans and actual names for the animals. For the sake of consistency, I follow that practice here for both sanctuaries.

Retired lab chimps have typically undergone hundreds of knockdowns. They were anesthetized whenever they were moved or scheduled for a procedure. Many chimps scream and flail, losing control of their bladder and bowels, when faced with a dart gun. Chimps are sometimes anesthetized at the sanctuary too, though preferably not with a gun. Billy (also deceased) was the first chimp to need surgery. G recalled, "I didn't want to partake in this whole event of Billy having a knockdown. I thought, 'I don't want to be the bad guy.' . . . I was around the corner. . . . But there's Billy looking at me, he's screaming . . . he's got his hands out for me to come over. . . . So I went down and I put my mouth to his mouth. . . . He screamed into my face so loud I thought I was going to go deaf. . . . He hung onto my hand and I thought my finger was going to pop. . . . And he took the next injection . . . and he stared into my face . . . and his face just fell into my hand and that's how he went to sleep. And from that moment I knew, I always had to be there."

Billy had spent the first 15 years of his life in a human home, where he wore clothes, went fishing, and watched television. When he became too large for his human family to handle they surrendered him to a research lab where he lived for the next 15 years. When he came to the sanctuary, G attempted to introduce him into various chimp social groups, but he was repeatedly beaten up. He lacked even the most fundamental social skills for living with other chimps. "It was on the fifth beating that I said, 'This isn't going to work.' . . . When you're starting a sanctuary . . . everybody is saying, 'Oh chimps are supposed to live together.' . . . You know what? They're not real chimps. . . . Tell me what about their life makes them a real chimp? . . . They're kind of a weird cross of some very messed up beings, who don't fit in anywhere anymore."

As she handed out bananas and cups of tea, G told me the history of the sanctuary's "tea drinking culture." Tom refused to take his medication, until his closest friend Pat, a human, took the medicine himself in a cup of tea. "And so Pat would have a cup of tea and Tom would have a cup of tea." Although Tom has since died, his legacy lives on, as several other chimps request cups of tea each day.

When we left the chimps G took me to visit Theo the baboon. When Theo first arrived at the sanctuary he stood outside, calling into the surrounding cornfields for three nights. Later G learned that when baboons in the forest are separated from their troop they also call out for three nights, before apparently concluding that their troop is no longer in earshot. Theo was captured from his troop in Kenya at the age of two and probably still remembers them. But at the sanctuary, where there are no other baboons, he has made friends with Newton, the macaque who lives in the adjacent enclosure. They play chase, sit near each other, and groom each other through the bars.

Caring for Billy meant reassuring him with human touch. Caring for Jeanie meant trying not to trigger her terrifying memories. Caring for Tom meant serving his meds in a cup of tea. Caring for Theo means housing him near Newton.

The parrot sanctuary houses about 80 birds of a dozen or more species. Each bird has a file in the sanctuary office in which their species is recorded, along with their name, history, behavioral concerns (feather-plucking, aggression, self-mutilation, withdrawal, stereotypic movement), and prescribed medications. (Commonly used psychotropic drugs include chlomipramine, fluoxetine, and amytriptiline.) But beyond the note in their file, species is not a particularly salient identity for these birds, many of whom were bred in captivity and have lived their lives in closest contact with nonconspecifics.

Ravi is an Indian ringneck, belonging biologically to the genus *Psittacula*. At the sanctuary, though, Ravi shares a room with cockatiels. Even when there are other *Psittacula* in the flock, he bonds only with cockatiels. “He’s the one who always wants a little cockatiel of his very own,” the sanctuary director, H, told me. Ravi is one of many birds at the sanctuary who loves across species lines. The white-fronted Amazon Calypso fell for Stubby, a lesser sulfur-crested cockatoo. “They were the cutest pair,” K, a volunteer and ex-vet technician, commented. “Sometimes you have weird little companions that love each other. Okay, sure, whatever.” Malachi, a male Moluccan cockatoo was bonded for years with Gomer, a male military macaw. They spent their days side by side in one or the other’s cage, preening each other’s feathers. When Malachi died, Gomer grew listless, lost his appetite, and refused to leave his cage for weeks. There are many cross-species (not to mention same-sex) intimacies at the sanctuary, all of which are encouraged by the humans, who are happy for the birds to form intimacies of any kind.

For many of the parrots, especially those bred in captivity, cross-species relationships extend beyond birds to humans. Parrots bred in captivity for the pet trade are typically separated from their parents long before they would separate from them in forest habitats. The breeders "think it makes a nicer, human-bonded bird," H said. "It actually creates the opposite, a bird who has no idea what they are or how to interact." The wild-caught birds are markedly less interested in learning human speech. "The reason [human-bonded birds] copy us," H said, "is because we're their flock. . . . They want to fit in with us." K commented that most of the birds at the sanctuary are "pretty messed up." The Moluccan Cowboy (called Cowboy the cockatool-maker for his habit of sharpening toothpicks to wound himself in the chest) "doesn't fit into anything," H said, and Harpo, another Moluccan, "has no clue what to do with other birds." Cowboy and Harpo form intimacies only with humans, and they even court us, tapping their bills against our hands or thighs and building nests for us in the sanctuary hallways.

Philippe, another Moluccan, is more often referred to by the nickname Bird. It was some weeks before I learned that the volunteers started calling him that as a way of reminding him that he is biologically a bird. The Moluccan Karly often screams loudly for minutes on end. One day when his screams were especially deafening I was surprised to hear a volunteer comment, "Sometimes we rue the day we taught Karly to scream." "You taught him to scream?" I asked. "He was too scared to scream," H explained. "He rarely would make a peep. He was beaten [at his previous home] for making noise. So . . . any time we heard him make noise, we were like 'Yay, Karly, yay.' Now we're like 'Why did we do that to ourselves?'" But her question is both rhetorical and a joke. They did it to nudge Karly along an unusual continuum of "speciation," from anomalous creature toward cockatoo. Species here is less a secure identity, a noun, than a tenuous becoming, a verb.

Although the sanctuary has a policy of not clipping any birds' wings, many of the larger captive-raised birds have never learned to fly. Selected staff work to teach them. "It's part of trying to teach them that they're birds," H tells me. "It helps them become more stable mentally. . . . Birds fly to get away from things, birds fly to get places. If they've never felt that they've had a way to escape something or get where they want to go, it generally turns into a lack of confidence, increased aggression, adds to them not really recognizing that they're a bird, helplessness, increased reliance on humans. . . . [Learning to fly] can decrease feather-destructive behavior." Here H refers to the habit of many of the larger birds of compulsively plucking out their feathers as if in contempt for their capacity for flight. Some of the feather-destructive birds self-mutilate like Cowboy, gouging their skin with their bills if not prevented from doing so by vests or collars. Malachi eventually died from his own self-injuries, and some of the staff understand his death as a suicide.

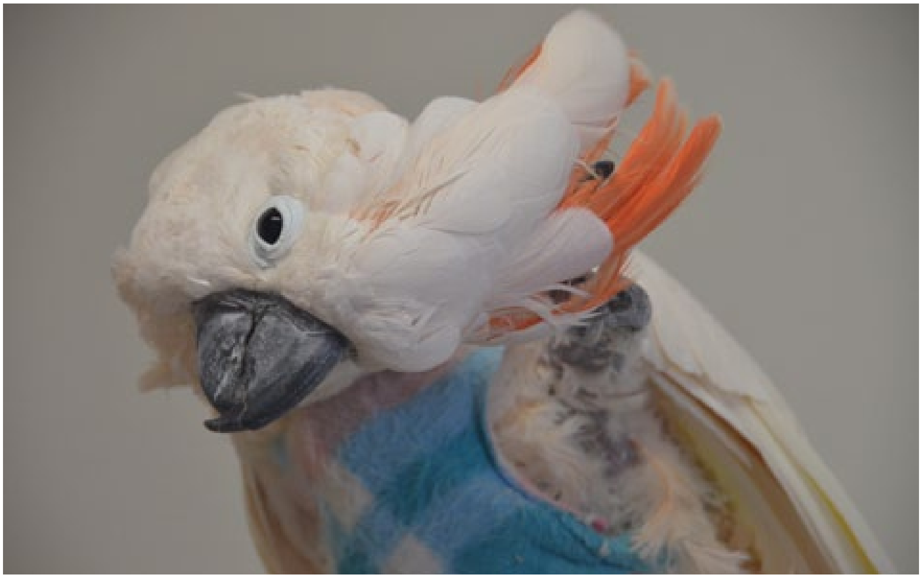

Figure 1: Cowboy inviting a head scratch. Photograph by author.

One bird, who I call Jody at H's request that he not be identified, killed another bird, Unchi, during what H referred to as a "psychotic break." Unchi was one of the few wild-caught birds at the sanctuary who, H explained, are more apt to be "birds' birds" who "know they're birds." Unchi often harassed more human-bonded birds like Jody. It was during one such incident that Unchi was killed. Afterward, Jody descended into a depression that lasted for eight months. That is, he grew silent, lost his appetite, and became socially withdrawn. During those months, Jody seemed to be haunted by Unchi's death. But perhaps he was also haunted by Unchi's life, which exemplified the possibility of being a bird who could distinguish between harassment and a fight to the death, a bird who confronts Jody with the impossibility of being a "birds' bird" himself. Caring about Jody means concealing his identity, protecting him from the stigma of his murder, so that human volunteers will continue to befriend him.

A key element of care at both sanctuaries is the cultivation of social life, which is critical to the vitality of both parrots and primates. Sociality is both constrained and facilitated by the arrangement of physical space and of movement within that space. Fostering relationships through spatial configurations involves knowledge of individual animals based on observation and intuition.

At the parrot sanctuary, smaller birds like cockatiels live together in large flights, while larger birds have their own roomy cages. Each bird is released from their cage or flight for at least four hours every day to allow them to explore their environment and interact with other birds or humans. This uncaged time is carefully orchestrated, since flock dynamics change with each shift of volunteers, depending on current intimacies and jealousies. Some birds are hostile to one another; others can only be trusted together when certain humans are or are not present. For birds with especially poor social skills, uncaged time may consist of time spent in the "playroom" with one or two humans or an avian friend if they have one. Maintaining an amicable flock conducive to individual flourishing requires continuous fine-tuning of interspecies sociality in the sanctuary's "public" space. (Unchi's death resulted from a human mistake in the orchestration of avian movement.)

In primate sanctuaries, clusters of rooms can be opened or closed to one another to allow for changing social groups. Introductions of individuals into groups range from carefully planned to semispontaneous. G described the day she introduced Annie to a group of chimps she hadn't lived with before. "She was frantic, she was looking . . . at the door . . . bobbing up and down. . . . She looked at me. . . . She was so vocal, she was squeaking . . . like a whimper. . . . I've got the keys in my hand and . . . once the lock is off we're in trouble, honey. . . . Donna Rae was directly in line with her. . . . I took the lock off and Annie . . . just flung the door up . . . and off she went. . . . Donna Rae started to walk and Annie started walking and . . . they came around the corner and they met right in the middle. They hugged, they hugged, they hugged. . . . Annie turned around, Donna Rae turned around, she hugged her from behind, they hugged from the front, they held each other's faces, they panted into each other's faces. . . . From that day on they shared nests. . . . They doted on one another, they lay in the sun in the morning . . . Donna Rae under the sheets and Annie resting comfortably with her feet up in the air, just lovely, beautiful relationship."

While this encounter might be understood as the enactment of a chimply capacity for familial touch, the personal histories of the chimps belie the simplicity of this interpretation. In the laboratory, Annie was a “breeder” who, after being artificially inseminated, showed little interest in caring for her baby. Donna Rae was raised in a human family, wearing dresses, riding a bicycle, and playing with her human foster sister, before being sold to a lab where she spent the next 19 years in a cage by herself. Given these histories, we might understand Annie and Donna Rae as two creatures whose chimpanzee identity has been compromised, but who still manage to form a friendship amid the strangeness of captive life.

In these sanctuaries, it is less species that are the subject of care than creatures with unique histories and idiosyncrasies. Sanctuary life invites us to consider a form of care where animals are asked less to conform to normative parameters of biological species, than to participate in collectively extemporized transpecies socialities. We are called to care *beyond* species, when species fall apart.