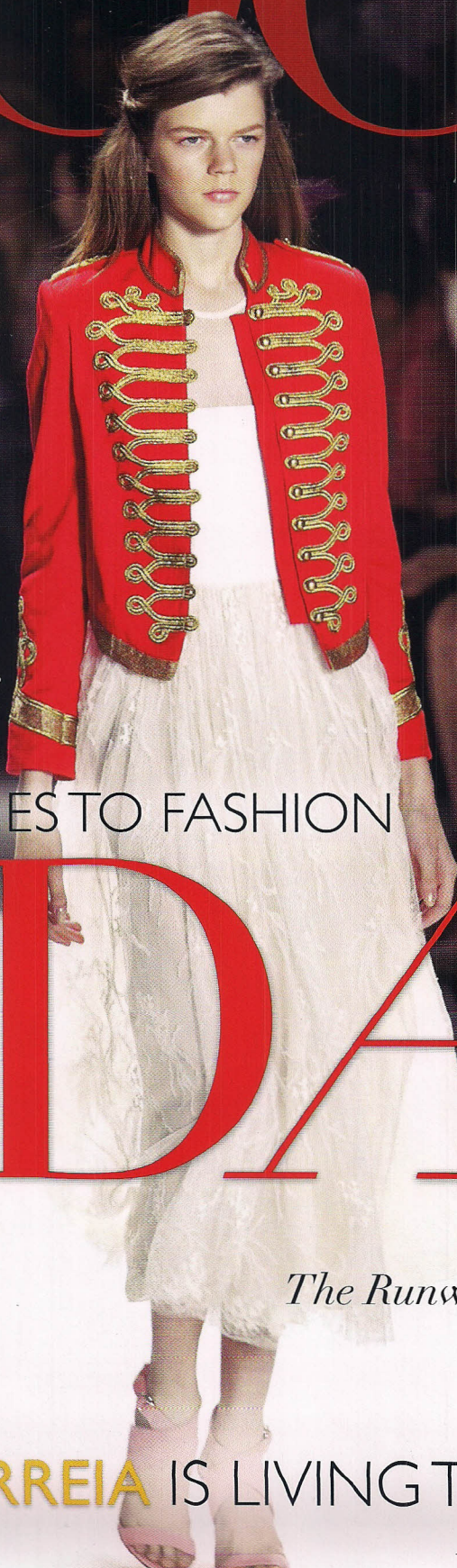


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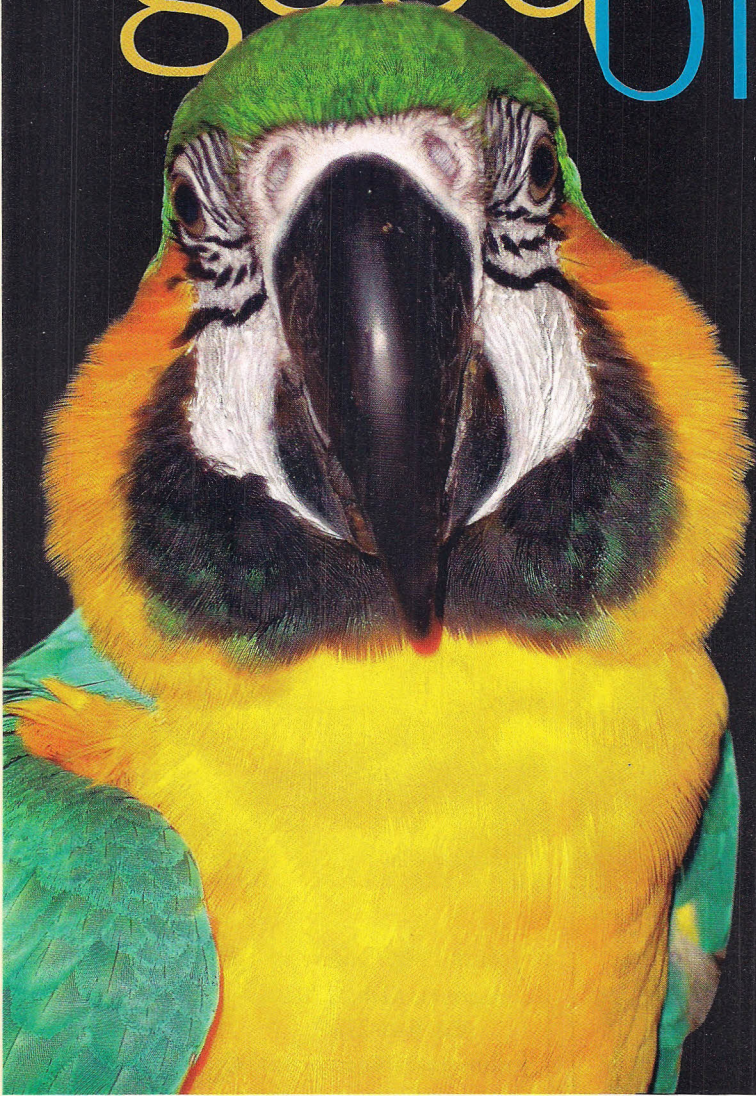
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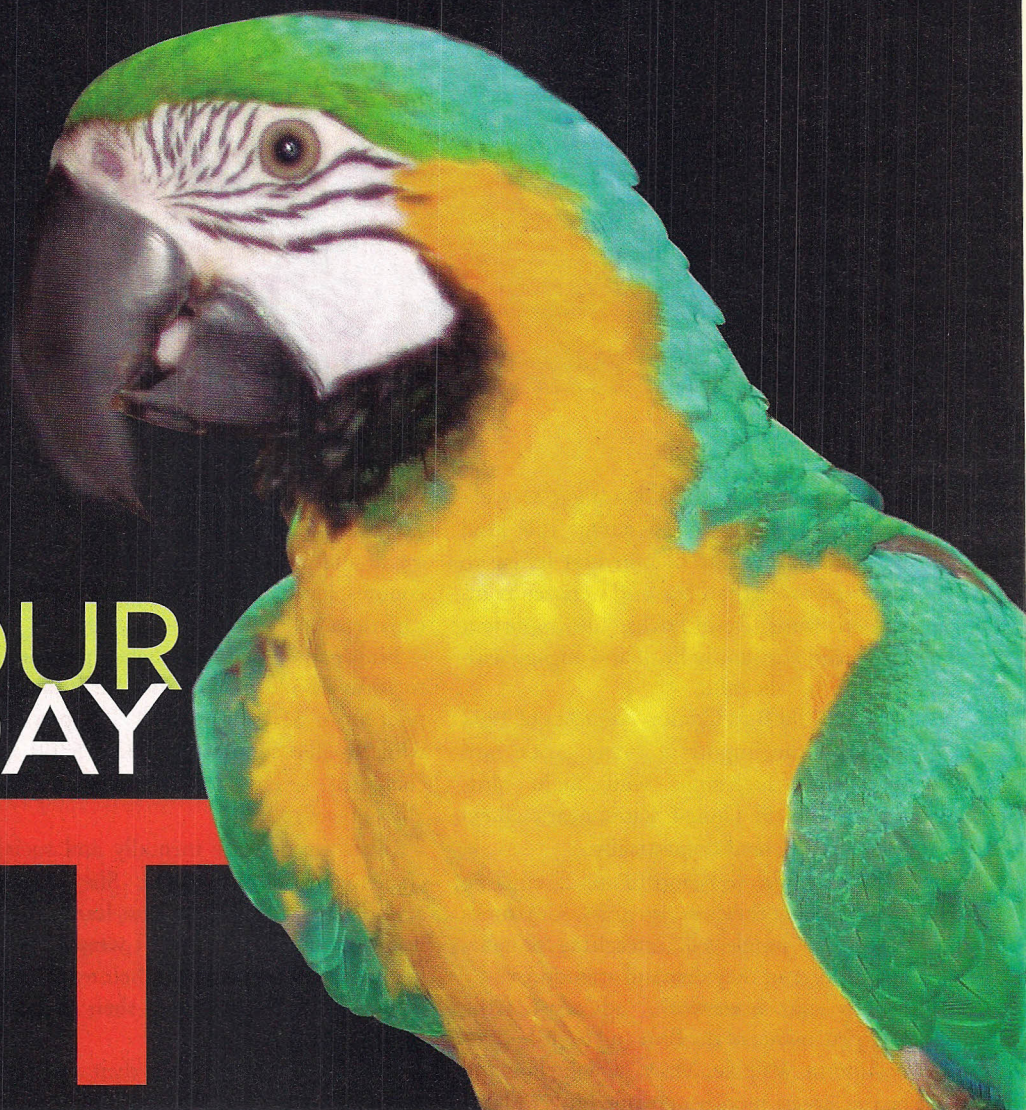
EXOTIC BIRDS

by Kathy Anderson

In a clear, sweet voice, Goethe greets a guest coming into the Koocher home. “Would you like a drink?” she politely asks. Hearing no response, she continues, “Would you like an apple? Would you like a bagel?” When the guest answers “No,” Goethe gleefully throws a kiss. For Goethe, a 22-year-old African Grey parrot, communicating is what life is about.

"BIRDS ARE REALLY GREAT COMPANIONS. THEY ARE EXTREMELY INTELLIGENT AND SOCIALLY INTERACTIVE.

- Dr. Marjorie McMillan



NOT YOUR EVERYDAY PET

S

tarting at "parroting," or verbal repetition, birds mimic everything from doorbell and telephone rings to curse words and terms of endearment. Their intelligence enables them in time to associate the actual word with its meaning, giving them an advanced level of communication and a vocabulary.

"I'm a big parrot person," said Robin Koocher of Brookline, Mass. "I've had birds for over 20 years. I have Joey, a 65-year-old Amazon parrot; Sylvia, a 6-year-old macaw; and Goethe."

Koocher's birds sing and converse among themselves in what she refers to as "bird-ish."

"Goethe, the African Grey, will sing the first six bars of the 'Star Spangled Banner,'" she said with a laugh, "then wait for a human to finish it." The parrot also likes to dance

to her favorites, Bruce Springsteen, Bonnie Raitt, and Eric Clapton, said Koocher. "Goethe snuggles with my husband, Gerry, and will sit next to him like a watch bird," she added.

"Birds are really great companions," said Dr. Marjorie McMillan of Windhover Veterinary Center in Walpole, Mass., and a pioneer in the field of avian radiology. "They are extremely intelligent and socially interactive. But people have to understand the commitment it takes." Large birds can live from 20 to 80 years, so planning for their care after an owner dies is essential. McMillan provides extensive resources on exotic bird care on the center's website, windhovervet.com.

Birds form deep bonds with their human companions and can sometimes become



“BIRDS NEED TO BE MENTALLY AND SOCIALLY CHALLENGED. I WRAP ALMONDS IN CUPCAKE CUPS JUST OUT OF THEIR REACH. THEY ‘FORAGE’ FOR IT, HOLD IT WITH THEIR CLAW, AND OPEN IT.”

“one-person” pets. McMillan suggests working with the bird to discourage this kind of dynamic because of potential injury to someone other than the bird’s chosen companion. Birds live in flocks. “It’s important they learn the family flock and engage with the family,” she said.

The Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992 prohibits the import of many exotic bird species. Although some “wild caught” birds still exist in the United States, nearly all exotic birds are bred domestically.

Exotic birds are beautiful and fascinating to watch. But they are also noisy, sometimes emitting a “jungle yell,” screeching for hours at a time. And they demand attention.

“Do your homework,” advises Martha Phippen, owner of the Bird and Reptile Connection in Walpole, Mass., which claims to be the largest retailer of exotic birds in New England. “We screen interested customers to make sure they understand the commitment in owning a bird,” she said. Birds are not an impulse buy. “Birds are intuitive, entertaining, and messy. No matter what size, they all require fresh water every day and a clean cage.”

Dander is another consideration for allergy-prone people, noted Phippen. The bird’s daily grooming emits dander dust and in breeds like cockatoos, dander powder as well.

Exotic birds suitable for pets come in a wide variety of colors and sizes. Amazons, macaws, cockatoos, African Greys, and Eclectus parrots are large and brilliant in color and characteristics. Their beaks are strong enough to amputate a finger. “Amazons are loud and boisterous. African Greys are the most popular of the large birds be-

cause they don’t scream,” said Phippen. “And they are very vocal and clear speakers.” Small and medium birds include cockatiels, conures, lovebirds, parrotlets, parakeets, and canaries.

Birds can be purchased when they are 16 to 20 weeks old. Large exotic birds range in price from \$1100 to \$1900, Phippen said, while smaller conures run about \$300, and cockatiels, lovebirds, and canaries are usually under \$100.

“Birds need to be mentally and socially challenged,” said Koocher. She attended a workshop at Windhover to learn how to teach her birds to forage. “I wrap almonds in cupcake cups just out of their reach. They ‘forage’ for it, hold it with their claw, and open it.”

Birds need time outside their cages and a chance to socially interact. Replicating a natural environment such as a bathing station is essential. Koocher says her birds are so intelligent she was able “toilet train” them. When they are out of their cages, Koocher will watch to see when they are ready to defecate and get them to perch on a limb and deposit their droppings on the newspaper.

The large number of exotic birds given to shelters and rescue groups is a testament to the challenges of exotic bird ownership. “Change-of-life conditions such as downsizing and apartment ‘no bird’ renting policies force people to surrender their birds,” said Marc Johnson, director of Foster Parrots and the New England Exotic Wildlife Sanctuary in Hope Valley, R.I. “Medical issues and allergies are also reasons.” Johnson says his organization tries to match people surrendering a bird with people looking to adopt one.

Dr. McMillan has seen birds come from

bad environments. “They come frightened,” she said, “but placed with a new family that works with it, they regain trust.” She suggests working with an avian behaviorist, who helps the owner “think like a bird.” Often these consultations can take place online using video, she added.

Birds perched on their owner’s shoulders have become staples of tall tales and television. In Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, the pirate Long John Silver toted around a green parrot named Captain Flint. Cockatoo Fred sleuthed through urban streets with Detective Tony Baretta in the TV series “Baretta.”

The bird/human bond has been explored in extraordinary detail by Dr. Irene Pepperberg, adjunct associate professor in the Department of Psychology at Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass. Her extensive research into the intelligence of African Grey parrots is documented in papers and books, including *Alex and Me*, which details her own relationship with an African Grey named Alex.

In the documentary film *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*, musician Mark Bittner befriends a flock of wild parrots in San Francisco and is emotionally transformed by the experience.

Bird clubs, the Bird Channel, and numerous online chats about humans and their relationships with their exotic birds attest to the lasting friendships possible in a life with birds, despite the demands of their care.

“My birds take a lot of time,” said Koocher, “but they are entertaining and enrich my life.” ★

SOCO™

FOOD FOR THOUGHT™

News, Events, & Opinion

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SOCO magazine is a monthly magazine reaching over 350,000 hard-copy & electronic readers where they live, work, and play.



365 DAYS OF HOPE GALA

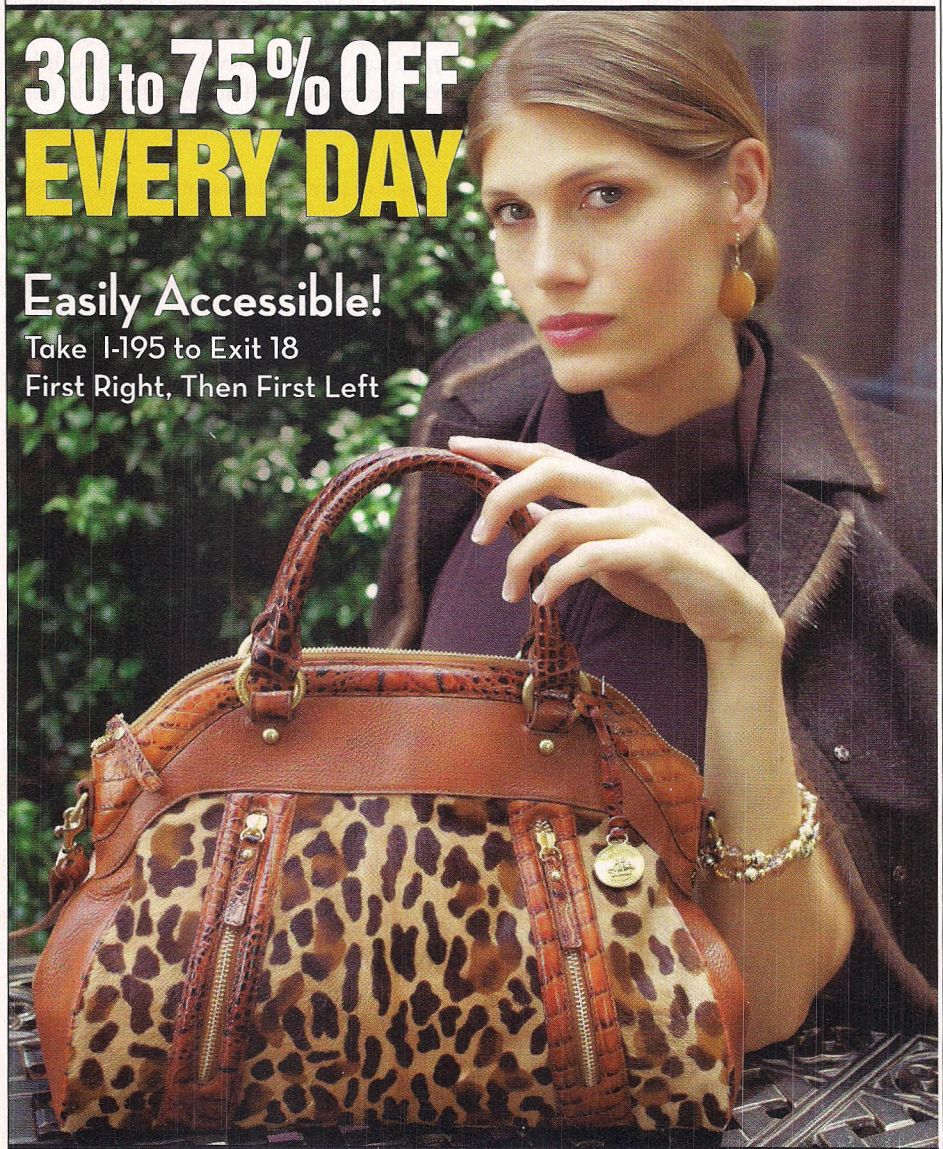
Child & Family Services will hold its annual gala, **365 Days of Hope, November 17, 6-9:30 p.m., at the Hawthorne Country Club, 970 Tucker Road, Dartmouth, Mass.** Guests will have the opportunity to taste an assortment of wines and beers, sample foods from local restaurants, and dance to Freeze Pops. There will also be a raffle and silent auction.

Now in its 13th year, the gala supports the organization's Holiday Hope Project, as well as other work with children and families throughout the year. Admission is \$75. For more information visit child-familyservices.org.

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