

PARROTS

Issue 88

May 2005

parrots

...dealing exclusively with
parrots & parakeets

**Living
with a
Senegal**

**Little-known
parrots of Colombia**

The low-down on

Lovebirds

**Rehabilitating
a plucker**

**Preservation of
Macaws in Costa Rica**



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**Bodin's
Amazon**

INSIDE *this issue...*

PARROTS

MAY 2005

4 EDITOR'S DESK

5 BIRD ALERT

6 NEWS

10 THE COMPLETE PSITTACINE

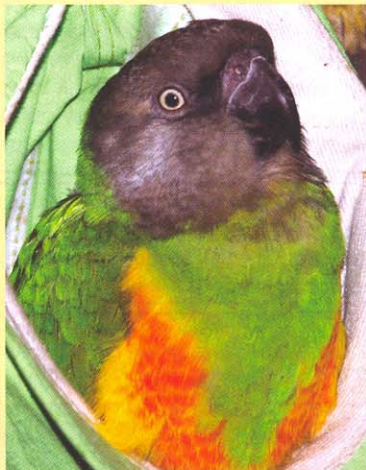
Parrots that learn about noisemaking

12 LOW-DOWN ON LOVEBIRDS

A good choice for the breeder who does not have time or finances to invest in larger species

18 LIVING WITH A SENEGAL

How this big-beaked, brave and affectionate 'small' parrot could win your heart



22 PARROT PERILS

Some unfortunate recent occurrences which readers may wish to be aware of

On the cover: **Senegal Parrot**
(*Poicephalus senegalus*)

Photo: **Piet Zwinkels**

24 LITTLE KNOWN PARROTS OF THE COLOMBIAN ANDES

Rosemary Low went in search of the endangered parrots of Colombia



30 A HOMEMADE AVIARY

How to keep costs down using reclaimed or renovated materials and free labour

34 PARROTS IN FOCUS

Canary-winged Parakeets

36 CANADIAN PARROT 'CYCLES' THE PACIFIC COAST

How a parrot took his owners on a thousand mile bicycle trip



42 MACAWS IN COSTA RICA

Reintroducing Scarlet and Great Green Macaws



46 BODIN'S AMAZON

This subspecies is a little known gem

48 BALD IS BEAUTIFUL

Caring for Jake, a feather-plucked Cockatoo

51 HOMEOPATHY

Emergency trauma treatment

52 READER'S STORY

54 POSTBAG, IN THE NEXT ISSUE

56 YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

58 MAIL ORDER

59 WEBSITES

60 SUBSCRIBE

61 BACK ISSUES

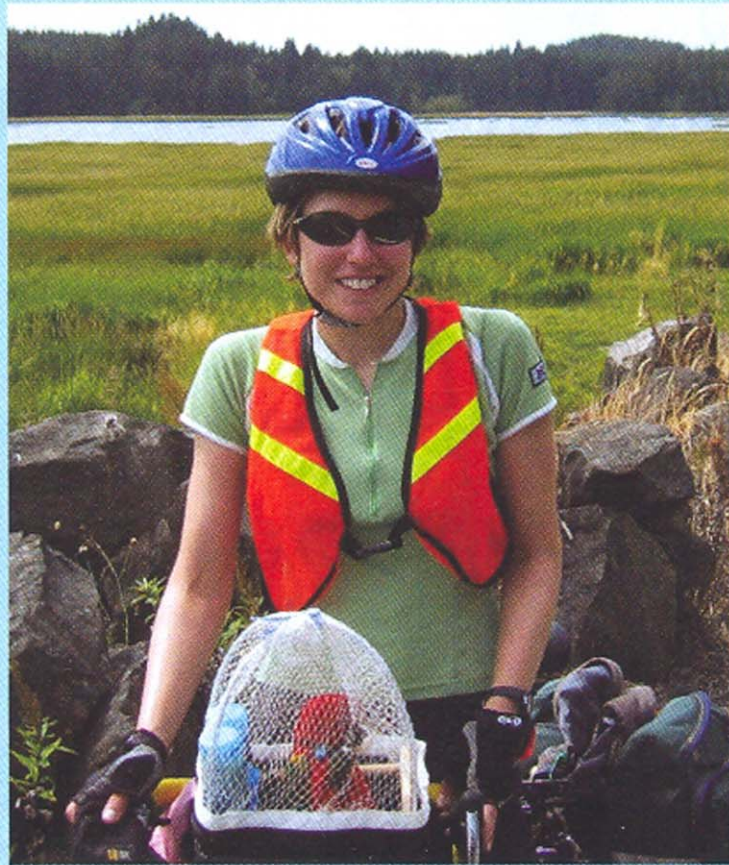
62 CLASSIFIEDS

64 AVIAN VETS REGISTER

66 MAKE A DATE

36 CANADIAN PARROT 'CYCLES' THE PACIFIC COAST

How a parrot took his
owners on a thousand
mile bicycle trip



Canadian parrot 'cycles' the Pacific Coast

When Lorraine Escher undertook a thousand mile bicycle ride from Canada to the USA, she took along her partner and their parrot. She describes their incredible journey together

Pictures by the author

Dixie is not the first bird to travel by bicycle, but he may be the first parrot to travel 1000 miles in a custom-made bike carrier. In August 2003, my partner Rick and I took Dixie with us cycling from Abbotsford in British Columbia, Canada to San Francisco in California, USA. He travelled with us for 3½ weeks, through interesting and remote terrain. Dixie sat in a carrier on my handlebars, which gave me an excellent opportunity to learn about our bird, and about people behaviour too.

Dixie is a Chattering Lory (*Lorius garrulus*). When he is not on the bicycle he is hopping about his cage, hanging upside down and eating Nekton-Lori, as well as fruit and vegetables. He says about 25 words and sometimes greets us in the mornings with "Hey baby!" or "Good morning!" You might also find him playing on his back with a stick or bathing in his water dish. Sometimes he gets possessive of his toys and delivers a nasty peck, but on the whole he is a very happy bird.

In the summer of 2003 Dixie experienced a rather different lifestyle than the one that he typically enjoys at home. To accommodate the conflicting interests of spending time with Dixie while training for our coastal bike trip, Rick and I built a bicycle bird carrier.



Dixie in his bicycle carrier with food and water bottles



Lorraine, Dixie and all our gear outside the Bovine Bakery in Point Reyes Station, California

The bicycle bird carrier fits into my handlebar bag. The base of the carrier is made of Cordura, which we chose for its washability and durability. The top of carrier is dome shaped and made with two pieces of coat hanger, encased in clear plastic aquarium tubing. I sewed a couple of tops that zipped onto the Cordura base, including a mosquito mesh top and a large-weave, fishnet top.

Dixie favoured the large-weave top and would hang his feet in the fishnet and sway with the motion of the bike. He also liked to grip the frame of the carrier and hang upside down. The sensation of speed was foreign to him, and he seemed to love it. He would hover his wings a bit as I took him downhill, and he would shout and imitate other birds.

Preparation for the trip

Originally we had planned to leave Dixie at home with our bird sitter, but he clearly enjoyed being with us on our bikes, and we soon found ourselves making phone calls to learn how our bird could travel with us to the USA.

To investigate the process, we contacted the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. I was surprised to learn that Dixie is recognised as an endangered species. In fact, CITES lists "most exotic pet birds (including parrots, cockatoos, and macaws, but excluding budgerigars and cockatiels)" as protected species. Dixie's status as an endangered species meant that it would be difficult to transport him to another country.

The people that we spoke to tended to provide information about their agency or department only. It was difficult to get a complete picture of what was required, and some of the permits required long lead times, which we didn't anticipate. We sent faxes and used an overnight courier. Each agency required a different set of papers. The entire process including a trip to the vet, inspections and permits cost several hundred dollars.

Red tape aside, we had Dixie's health to consider. Using *Fodor's World Weather Guide* and the internet, I compared a Chattering Lory's natural habitat of Indonesia with the coastal climate of Washington, Oregon and California. We contacted and prepared a list of avian veterinarians along the coast and talked to park rangers. We also read about the West Nile Virus and monitored the quarantine area of Exotic Newcastle Disease, which was affecting parts of Southern California. It was a busy time, but everything fell into place for our trip.

Starting off

For Dixie, the bicycling adventure started from the moment he left his birdcage at home. We wondered if Dixie thought that we were adopting a permanent new lifestyle and that he might never return home again. I put him in a soft carrying case and took him to the airport. Dixie played peek-a-boo at the airline counter, shouted a little bit, imitated any noise resembling a beep and attracted curious looks from other passengers. Dixie travelled as carry-on (hand luggage) and remained under the seat at all times during the flight. An airline attendant gave us a pet bird safety lecture and described how to use a yellow oxygen mask on Dixie in case of a pressure drop in the cabin. Dixie was an excellent passenger,



Dixie on the road in his 'wind cozy'



Dixie chewing a branch

and occasionally imitated the sneezes of other passengers.

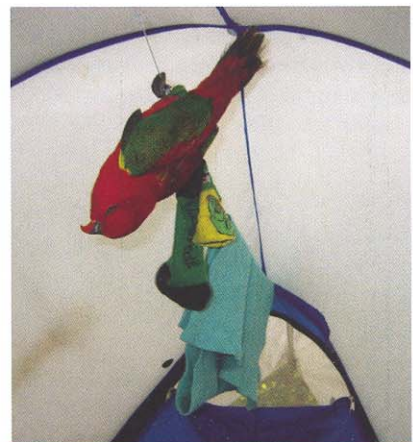
Arriving in Abbotsford, we put Dixie in his Feather Tether bird harness and cycled to our campsite. While we were riding Dixie always remained in his bicycle carrier and for his safety, the carrier was strapped to my handlebars so that it wouldn't inadvertently bounce out of the handlebar bag. Later, Dixie enjoyed being out of his carrier and spent the afternoon sitting in a tree or grooming himself under the picnic table.

The night-time temperature dropped to 50°F (10°C) but Dixie slept soundly in the small collapsible carrier that we used on the airline. Snuggled between our sleeping bags and covered with a down-filled vest, Dixie's carrier remained toasty warm. Dixie slept in a fleece nest that I lined with a drugstore-variety hand warmer, tied in a sock. The hand warmer held its heat for 6 to 8 hours, and Dixie could be heard cooing like a pigeon. He liked it so much that I gave him a hand warmer on almost every night of our trip.

In the morning we fed Dixie, packed our things and cycled to Sumas, Washington. Sumas is one of a selected set of border crossings that are set up to permit the entry of animals from Canada into the United States. To allow us to get an early start, we had pre-arranged a 9 am appointment with a veterinarian and wildlife officer. They inspected Dixie and our CITES paperwork.

Entering the USA

The inspectors shook their heads at our mode of travel but remained with the task at hand, which was to ensure that Dixie had comfortable housing and access to food and water. They reviewed our paperwork to ensure Dixie was disease-free, and that we were not planning to sell him in the United States. Dixie was, of course, oblivious to the officialdom, and lapped up the attention, entertaining himself and the customs office with his shouts of "Hi baby" and "Hello". Later, he flicked up one of his wings, buried his head in his armpit and watched us coyly as he groomed himself.



Dixie hangs out on the laundry line in our tent

After passing through customs, we cycled through farmland, the Olympic Rain Forests and remote logging areas. A damp and dewy feeling hung in the air, and we could see snow on the mountaintops in the distance. To monitor the outside temperature I had brought a mini-thermometer of the sort that people sometimes hang on their ski jackets, but



Dixie in his 'warm cozy'

Dixie gave me some good indications as to his comfort level.

For the most part, Dixie seemed comfortable and happy. He enjoyed going downhill and would hover his wings in appreciation. When it became too cold or windy, he would fluff himself up and express his displeasure by turning his back to the wind. His feathers would blow forward in a little crown, which made him look like a stout version of the Statue of Liberty without the torch.

Countering the climate

To counter the cold breeze and the sun I made Dixie a cover, which I call a "wind cozy". It looked like a miniature tent, made of rip-stop nylon with mesh sides, and a mosquito netting front. It fit over the bicycle bird carrier and worked like a charm.

Early in the trip I learned that Dixie

and direct sunlight do not mix. During a rest break, I put Dixie in a sunny spot as I thought he'd appreciate the sunshine. Minutes later I looked over at his carrier and could see no sign of Dixie whatsoever. I raced over to his carrier and saw that he had not escaped at all, but he was escaping the heat. It was his instinct to lower his body to the bottom of his carrier, tucking himself into the shade.

The wind cozy also came in handy for naps, which he took at almost precisely 4 pm each day. He

would bury his beak into the large-weave netting and I'd watch his soft, grey lids blink shut and hold for a second. Gradually his eyes would close and it was very peaceful until I hit a bump in the road. Dixie naps at home, but not very often. Initially I had thought that he was suffering from jetlag, but as the days passed, I think he was catching up on sleep that he missed because of his erratic schedule.

The climate allowed me to try out some of the other covers that I had made for Dixie, including a 'warm cozy' which looked like a wind-proof tea-cosy with a front opening, but in truth he didn't seem to like it. He also resisted the 'wet weather' gear that I had constructed with good intentions. In hindsight, I should have considered the natural waterproofing abilities that come with being a bird.

Bear country

In Washington, the roads were rough with lots of traffic. We had changed ten flat tyres in two days, and I needed my faculties to concentrate on the road. This was difficult to do with Dixie playing in his carrier. At the same time, I was keenly aware that we were riding our bikes in black bear territory. Although park rangers assured us that we would be fine, I wasn't so sure.

Some guidebooks recommend that you

back away slowly from a bear, avoid eye contact and speak softly or lie still. How would this work with Dixie? I had visions of Dixie screaming and shouting and confusing a bear, and the bear would stand up, open his big jaws, and then everything would go dark and narrow to a tiny dot, just like in the movies.

Fortunately, Rick offered to take Dixie for a couple of days. We didn't see any bears, though fellow campers did.

In Oregon, the pavement improved and we had fewer flat tyres. We were still in bear country but the coastal scenery took my mind off it. Besides, Rick and I kept our food in a hard-plastic bear canister, and Dixie's trilling may have been an excellent bear deterrent.

Throughout the trip Dixie mimicked the birds in the forest and at the seaside. In



Dixie and Lorraine stop for photos in Washington

the morning, campers awoke to the happy chirping sounds of the forest birds, followed by Dixie, who kept up his end of the chorus. Soon I grew to enjoy Dixie's ear-splitting shouts. Bears don't like surprises and, with a sound like that, I could be assured that no bear in his right mind would venture out of the forest.

Other travellers

The coastal route brought many other types of travellers. We were passed by huge logging trucks and huge caravans. Some of the caravans were rented, and we would watch with caution as novice drivers lumbered around tight corners and waffled about the road. We passed lighthouses and watched big waves crash over rocks in the sea.

While cycling in the sea bluffs we saw large black birds, which I assume were birds of prey. This observation added



Dixie and Lorraine at Port Angeles, Washington

another dimension - of height - that is important to birds, but I tend not to consider. By being with Dixie, I learned that wild birds must pay attention to everything in their surroundings, including the space below and above them. On one occasion, a dark shadowy bird flew directly above my bike and seemed to peer down. The bird must have been curious, as he was perfectly aligned with my bike. Dixie, who is not used to threats either in or outside his birdcage, seemed unconcerned and unaware. But after that, I felt more protective of Dixie and kept a close eye on him.

Part of the excitement in cycling with Dixie is exposing him to new things, and I was sure that the sea would hold a certain level of attraction for him. After all, the scenery was fantastic and completely unfamiliar to him. Yet Dixie identified himself as a forest bird. While I watched the crashing sea, Dixie would hover and look towards the forest. Later when we took him on the beach to step in the sand, Dixie walked as though he was on crutches, clearly uncomfortable with the whole experience. It was painfully obvious that our parrot's feet are suited for gripping tree branches, not for sitting on flat surfaces or sand. Dixie's trail of pick-like footprints were a marked contrast to the webbed, confident and hooked tracks that were left behind by the sea birds.

One night it struck me how different Dixie looked in the night-time. In the beam of our headlamps, Dixie's feathers seemed iridescent. From the back, he had the appearance of a single, exotic leaf. His green wings met at the back and his little red body, dappled with yellow, now looked brown in the moonlight and reminded me of a Prayer Plant. From the front, the yellow spots on his shoulders glowed like two predatory eyes. He had perfect camouflage for the forest.

Reaching California

After about two weeks of cycling we left Oregon and travelled into California. I had heard that the California state border inspections could be onerous and that the border patrols would shake you down for oranges, amongst other items that are not permitted into the state. At the time of our trip, Exotic Newcastle Disease had resulted in the culling of many birds in southern California. Canada had imposed a ban on importing poultry from California. The illness had not spread to northern California or to San Francisco, so I was not worried that Dixie would contract the



Dixie hangs out and enjoys the ride

illness, but I thought it might present a problem at the California border crossing.

My worries did not come to pass. We reached the border late in the afternoon and the offices were closed. We passed through without ceremony. We paused for a photo under a "Welcome to California" sign, rode through a field of Easter lilies and camped amongst huge redwood trees. Reaching Eureka, California was a personal milestone for me, as it meant that I had now cycled the entire US Pacific Coast. The year before, I had completed another 1000-mile bike trip when I cycled from Eureka to San Diego. So, after averaging 50 miles a day, we

decided to reduce our pace and rent a car or take a bus to go further south. It was a Sunday, and nothing seemed to be open or accessible to two people and a parrot on their bikes. So we hitched a ride to Santa Rosa in an 18-wheeler transport truck.

From Santa Rosa we meandered through wine country and back to the coast. Dixie ate grapes fresh from the vine, and we spent the night in Bodega Bay where Alfred Hitchcock filmed *The Birds*. After a few lazy days of

riding, we reached the Golden Gate Bridge, where Rick gave me a wonderful surprise and proposed. As we stood on the bridge, he held a little red box in his hand. We must have been quite a sight, as some cars on the bridge started to honk. I'm sure that Dixie had no idea that he was part of such a personal moment. We smuggled our bird into a chic hotel in San Francisco, and flew back to Canada a few days later.

Summarising the trip

Throughout the trip, most people didn't notice that I was carrying a bird. But for those who did, seeing a bird on a bike



A cold day in Bodega Bay, California - Lorraine and Rick stop for photos. Dixie is in his warm cozy. Bodega Bay is where Alfred Hitchcock filmed 'The Birds'.



Dixie gives his eye a scratch while sitting in a tree, attached by his Feather Tether



Dixie and Lorraine in a garden outside the English Inn and Resort in Victoria, British Columbia, where we stopped on our way back to Ottawa

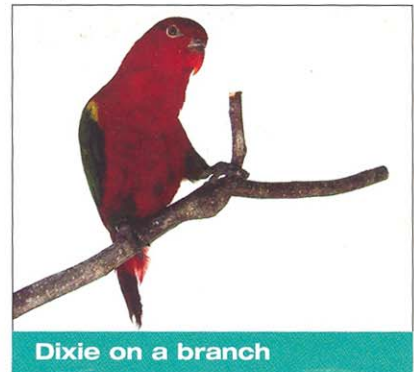
seemed to provoke a mixed reaction. Some people thought we were being cruel, or just plain crazy. One person was quite interested in hearing about Dixie's birdcage at home, and then caught herself mid-sentence to ask whether we actually had a home. Other people took pictures or video. I'm not sure that I enjoyed the attention, but Dixie didn't mind at all.

We met lots of other parrot owners, and we were surprised to hear that other people take their parrots on their bicycles. We even heard of a macaw who rides on a man's shoulder on a motorbike. Children were openly fascinated by Dixie - they wanted to know how much he cost and whether he could talk. One little girl succeeded in getting Dixie to say "Hello" and was clearly delighted. I found myself reprimanding a child who was poking at

Dixie to get a reaction, but this was the exception, not the rule.

Our trip was not without its share of surprises. My biggest fear was that he would escape or become sick while we were on the road. One of these fears was nearly realised when we stopped at the roadside to feed Dixie, near a lush green forest, and he momentarily escaped his carrier. On another occasion Dixie let out a howling scream, and we stopped to tend to him. While we never figured out exactly what caused him to shout, I suspect that a wasp might have stung him.

A question that we often have asked ourselves since our return is, "Would we do this again?" Certainly, I have learned a lot about Dixie as a result of our trip. He enhanced our trip in many ways, but it was a lot of work to clean his carriers and ensure that he was well fed. We estimate that Dixie's care added about two hours to an already long bicycling day. To do it again, we would either need to slow down the pace, or leave Dixie with our bird sitter. I like to think that Dixie was pampered and coddled, and most importantly, he was with us - his flock - for three weeks straight. ■



Dixie on a branch