

---

# SPRINGS

---

## THE RACHEL CARSON CENTER REVIEW

Issue #6 | 2024

October

---



© Alison Pouliot and Valérie Chételat

---

## AVIAN ESCAPEES AND BUDGIE SNUGGLERS

*Kieko Matteson*

---

*Springs*

*The Rachel Carson Center Review*

6 • 2024



This article is peer reviewed

## Kieko Matteson



© Franklin nevis on Shutterstock. All rights reserved.

## A Budgie



Earthbound budgie in Jubilee Park, Sydney (close-up). © Kieko Matteson. All rights reserved.

Late one evening soon after I had arrived in Australia for a sabbatical, I was out strolling with my daughter through a Sydney park, seeking relief from the summer humidity, when something yellow on the ground caught my eye. We stopped to take a look. It was a bird. Small, disheveled, its feathers neon bright in the glare of a nearby lamppost, the creature appeared out of place. It was vaguely pecking at the grass, but when it pitched forward clumsily, it was clear it needed help. My daughter and I debated what to do. Should we capture it? How? Even if we could, what would we do with it? Other people walked past, deep in conversation, unaware of the drama unfolding inches from their feet. Lacking my glasses, I tapped “lostt brid rexsue?” into my phone’s search app and snapped a location photo just as the bird abruptly rose and flapped unsteadily into a tree, high out of reach.

My first reaction was relief. Though it looked ill, the bird—a budgie, I ascertained from Google—had shown it could fly. Was that not also proof it could fend for itself? I would not have known how to care for it in any case, nor where to find a vet at that hour. Nonetheless, my relief quickly morphed into guilt. “Poor Howard,”

my daughter murmured, having already given it a name. "He's not going to make it." Realising I should try harder, we headed home, where I searched the web for further guidance. A quick scan yielded a half-dozen Facebook groups devoted to pet birds in New South Wales. Selecting one of them, I hastily composed a "found" message, added my photo of the pitiful Howard beneath the lamppost, clicked through image grids of buses and bikes to prove that I was human, pressed enter, and waited.

Responses soon rolled in. A wave of sad-face and hug emojis, coupled with comments like "Did U catch it?," "poor baby," and "It's sik [sic]," while not especially useful in the way of advice, helped drive my post to the top of the group's page, where it had a better chance of being seen. I had started the "rescue" process, and now I had to persist. I herded my daughter to bed, sent my partner on a seed run to the all-night grocery, and stayed up monitoring the lost-and-found thread while my less-than-thrilled partner tramped through the park proffering bird kibble to invisible budgies. To no avail: Though he encountered fruit bats and rats aplenty, not one nocturnal parrot appeared.

The next morning, Howard's unfortunate fate became evident: A woman named Catherine posted on the thread that she had gone to the park in the morning, millet in hand, "hoping to find him alive" but instead "found [the] little one deceased." "I covered with leaves and left some flowers on top. So sorry for the loss," she wrote, adding a flower emoji in condolence.

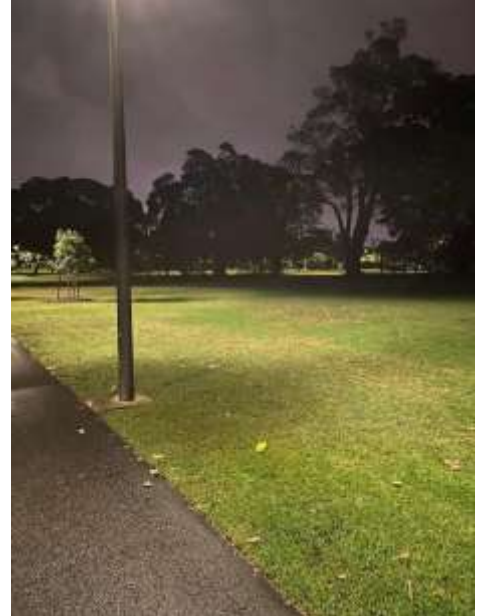
Having tried and failed to save the yellow budgie from oblivion, that might have been it for my association with the "lost and found birds sydney And Surrounding Areas" Facebook group. By this point, however, my curiosity had been piqued by the seemingly endless stream of messages—as many as 20 or 30 per day in inner Sydney alone. Posts like mine, announcing the sighting of an apparent pet, were in the minority, far outnumbered by communiqués from owners in desperate search of their "Cupcake," "Bobo," or "baby boy GUCCI."

Who were all these birds on the lam, I wondered, and what of the "budgie snugglers," as I came to call them—humans who cherish birds' companionship but express their devotion in welded mesh and galvanised wire?<sup>1</sup>

As a longtime admirer of winged creatures in the wild, I could not help but feel an unkind sense of reproach. There was no doubting the authenticity of snugglers' affections, but if their beloved "Peaches" and "Pearface" had never been captive to begin with—much less bred for a life of confinement—they would not have ended up expiring disoriented and alone on their first and only experience of life on the wing.

Bird keeping by its very nature is fraught with contradiction, as myriad studies from veterinary medicine to environmental history have shown,<sup>2</sup> but the most commonly cited contemporary justifications for avian ownership—to enjoy the birds' bright plumage and sociable natures—feel especially incongruous in Australia, where an astonishing array of large, colourful, and exceedingly voluble birds abound.

To be sure, domesticated budgerigars of the sort one finds at the pet store are far removed from their native cousins. Nearly two centuries of selective breeding have turned them into heavy-chested specimens with eye-popping hues and human-tolerant dispositions—as distant from their lean yellow-and-green wild kin as wolfhounds from wolves. Unlike some species of escaped or released pet birds, moreover—the ring-necked parakeet most notorious among them—budgies bred in captivity do poorly on their own and rarely establish themselves outside of cages for long without human assistance.<sup>3</sup>



Under the streetlight. © Kieko Matteson. All rights reserved.

The hapless “Howard” never stood a chance.

## Freedom is the Thing with Feathers

It was around the time that my daughter and I encountered the ill-starred yellow budgie in the Sydney park that another, much larger member of the Aves class was making international headlines: Flaco, the Eurasian eagle owl (*Bubo bubo*), had reached the one-year anniversary of his escape from New York’s Central Park Zoo. His clandestine release by an unknown individual in February 2023 had not been without controversy; zoo officials and many others feared for Flaco’s safety and characterised his liberation as a criminal act.<sup>4</sup> Still, even those who felt he would be better off in captivity found it hard to resist the spectacle of an apex predator with a two-meter wingspan soaring through Central Park, flexing his freedom for the first time.

Aside from possible surprise at a blink of his huge yellow eyes, those who visited Flaco while he was still in the zoo may have found the experience little different from looking at well-rendered taxidermy. Hearing him hoot for hours from city rooftops or watching him preening in the park, however, inspired familiarity and awe, even for those who only saw him secondhand through video clips. “[Yay our friend Flaco](#),” commented a typical YouTube viewer.

*Even those who felt Flaco would be better off in captivity found it hard to resist the spectacle of an apex predator with a two-meter wingspan soaring through Central Park, flexing his freedom for the first time.*

A mere three weeks after his freedom anniversary, Flaco’s growing adulation turned to anguish when he abruptly slammed into a West Eighty-Ninth Street building and died. A necropsy indicated he had been suffering from a raging case of pigeon herpesvirus and acute rodenticide exposure, both of which likely contributed to his demise.<sup>5</sup>

Comparatively unknown during his 13 years of confinement, Flaco had catapulted to the all-time Who’s Hoo of *Bubo bubos* only as a result of his scrappy, year-long urban survival odyssey outside of the zoo. Although the Central Park Zoo press release announcing his death suggested embitterment, blaming “the vandal who damaged Flaco’s exhibit” for his abbreviated existence, few could deny that Flaco’s final year of life had been glorious compared with the isolation and anonymity of his time behind bars.<sup>6</sup>



New York City, 26 February 2024: New Yorkers made a makeshift vigil in Central Park for Flaco, a Eurasian eagle owl who escaped his long-time enclosure at Central Park Zoo in 2023 and passed away after nearly a year of freedom. © picture alliance / Capital Pictures / Katie Godowski/MPI. All rights reserved.

Observing the outpouring of public responses to his death, from national news reports and editorials on its meaning to heartfelt online odes and handmade portraits left at the base of Flaco's favorite oak,<sup>7</sup> I was struck by the intensity of people's sense of loss. "You moved us all, we loved you so much. We are so glad you had a year of freedom," wrote one of the many mourners who left messages by the tree.<sup>8</sup>

The comparison with the discourse on the "lost and found birds sydney" Facebook group, which I was reading at the same time, was jarring. Flaco had been on display for over a decade but was only truly seen and appreciated when he was free. By contrast, the distraught back-and-forth about avian escapees like "Mango," "Rex," and "Bluey" suggested that captivity was intrinsic to their value, and without it their existence was futile and finite.

As is the case with most other-than-human species, the perception of a bird's worth and right to autonomy is directly proportionate to the function it fulfills for people.<sup>9</sup>

*The outlooks of budgie snugglers and freedom-loving Flaco fans can be understood as expressions of the universal human desire for closeness and connection with other beings.*

For many, Flaco's year of ecological autarky made him an icon of liberty and self-determination and reinforced commonly held anthropomorphic ideas about the special entitlement of predators to live unfettered. The discussion on the lost-and-found Facebook group, on the other hand, emphasises birds' bonds with their owners and penchant for kisses and cuddles. Juxtaposed thus, the outlooks of budgie snugglers and freedom-loving Flaco fans would seem at utter variance. Yet

they can also be understood as expressions of humans' innate interest in "the big wide world . . . of bumptious life," to use Donna Haraway's phrase, and of the universal human desire for closeness and connection with other beings, feathered or otherwise.<sup>10</sup>



Flaco lounging on a Manhattan fire escape, New York, 3 January 2024. © picture alliance / Associated Press | David Lei.

Flaco's decision to stay in Central Park and roost next to a well-trafficked road, despite being theoretically able to go anywhere, made it easy to observe him in action.<sup>11</sup> Having been on exhibit his entire life, he was apparently untroubled by the parade of onlookers below his branch, snapping pics and aahing as he fluffed his feathers and swiveled his head. Proximity and predictability alone do not a relationship make, but this more than anything is what made people love Flaco: His nearness fostered knowingness and felt like intimacy.

Pet birds' interactions with their owners likewise serve as evidence of amity, though they have less say in the matter. Uncertainty over the true nature of their attachment—sincere or merely transactional?—may explain the anxious subtext beneath bird owners' lost-and-found Facebook posts: Does the fact of their birds' escape suggest they were never really close after all?

As different exemplars of Haraway's concept of companion species, both sets of escapees underscore the challenge of interspecies incomprehension and the limits of freedom as a framework for understanding.<sup>12</sup> Judging by the reports on the lost-and-found Facebook page, factors like poor flying skills and harassment by other species are the main reasons birds fail to return once they have flown the coop. Few owners dwell on what caused them to depart in the first place. It is unspoken but obvious. Hope sings. Freedom flies.

## Time to Scale Up the Snuggling

At this point in the essay, it is likely apparent where my sympathies lie regarding birds in confinement. A lifelong birder ever since being handed a pair of binoculars by a science teacher on

a seventh-grade field trip, I had never thought very hard about pet birds, beyond fleeting pity. If it were up to me, caging birds for human pleasure would become a bygone relic of past cultural outlooks along with fox-hunting and bear-baiting. Still, even though I oppose bird keeping as a pastime, I found the discussion on the lost-and-found group fascinating as evidence of everyday acts of altruism and concern towards other species.

There are effectively two categories of participants in the “lost and found birds sydney” Facebook page: seekers, whose pets have gone missing, and finders—usually random people like me who came across a bird in distress. Without necessarily being conscious of it or articulating it as such, finders are engaged in what theorists describe as the “ethical practice of care,” defined as having an emotional response, being compelled to assist, and taking action in a meaningful way.<sup>13</sup> Posts on the page show this practice playing out multiple times a day. Indeed, it is the unspoken principle upon which the whole enterprise rests. Passersby notice a bird where it would not normally be and take it upon themselves to report it or even transport it to a vet, making it possible for the bird to be reunited with its owner.



The author birding on the French-Spanish border, July 2017. © 2017 Frank Zelko. All rights reserved.

*Why is it so easy to care about exceptional birds like Flaco or parrots that elude their owners, but so much harder to feel comparable passion towards birds' survival on a larger scale?*

This impulse extends to wild birds as well. Although the Facebook group's raison d'être is linking pets and their keepers, people consult the page when they do not know where else to turn. One recent discussion thread, for example, involved an ailing lorikeet that turned out not to be a pet, as the person who spotted it assumed, but a wild bird suffering from Lorikeet Paralysis Syndrome (LPS). Guided by members of the group, the individual was eventually able to capture and deliver it to a wildlife rehabilitator.

Though my own bumbling attempt at budgie rescue came to naught, it is comforting to know that in a city the size of Sydney, birds can gain attention and assistance. At the same time, however, I find myself unsettled and a bit dubious about the disproportionate interest lavished on these singular cases. Why is it easy to care about exceptional birds like Flaco or parrots that elude their owners, but so much harder to feel comparable passion towards birds' survival on a larger scale?

It is an age-old conundrum, of course; one that has long confounded thinkers from behavioral psychologists to bioethicists. Various described as the “spotlight” or “identifiable-victim” effect, the phenomenon reflects humans' natural tendency to feel empathy for individuals while disregarding or being oblivious to the needs of anonymous others, even when they hail from the same groups. It poses particular challenges in the context of environmental conservation.<sup>14</sup>

Flaco's display was intended to educate zoo visitors about Eurasian eagle owls' lifeways and the threats they face in the wild. Its success in this regard is hard to measure. What is clear, however, is that once Flaco became free, conservationists had a very difficult time leveraging his fame to raise awareness about eagle owls in general, much less explain why he should live out his days in a tiny enclosure.<sup>15</sup>





Eurasian eagle owl in the Netherlands. © AGD Beukhof on iStock. All rights reserved.

Eurasian eagle owls are listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature as a species of least concern; which is not to say no concern. There are no current coordinated monitoring programs across their vast range, which extends from Scandinavia and southern Europe to East Asia, nor are reintroduction efforts in progress. Nonetheless, Eurasian eagle owls' numbers have been in decline for decades due to an assortment of intentional and inadvertent human actions: poisoning, egg theft, high-voltage power-line strikes, habitat encroachment by Alpine tourism, and more.<sup>16</sup> Flaco's charismatic presence in Central Park could have been an opportunity to educate the public about the magnitude of species declines worldwide and the manifold challenges birds encounter on a warming planet of eight billion people. Instead, he was mostly championed as a tough and tenacious New York personality, the type urban denizens claim as their own and miss when they are gone.

Similarly, bird owners project affection and personality traits onto their pets, like "Jiaojiao" (meaning "graceful" or "gallant," depending on the characters) and "Precious," but they seem little aware or interested in their parrots' status or impact as a consumer good.<sup>17</sup> Alexandrine parrots, for example, are listed by the IUCN as "near threatened" in their native range of South and Southeast Asia, in large part due to nest-robbing and adult capture to supply the global pet trade.<sup>18</sup> In Australia, imports of live parrots have been banned for more than 25 years, meaning that in theory, nonnatives like Alexandrines are born and bred in captivity. In practice, however, exotic animal trafficking into Australia has continued, facilitated by online commerce and insufficient monitoring and enforcement.



Caged birds for sale on a street market in Italy. © [Cerib](#) on Adobe Stock. All rights reserved.

Worldwide, the statistics on parrots are extraordinarily grim. According to a recent estimate by the World Parrot Trust, as many as half the parrots on the planet live in captivity.<sup>19</sup> Even as a rough tally, based on an approximation of fifty million in private ownership, zoos, and breeding centers and a roughly equal number in the wild, the implications are shocking.<sup>20</sup> The proportion varies widely by species, depending on their popularity as pets and ability to reproduce in confinement. The African grey parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*), for example, has been highly prized as a caged bird for more than five centuries and can be bred in captivity. Nevertheless, one hundred thousand are captured and exported from West Africa for the pet trade every year, to the point that the African grey is now listed as endangered in the wild by the IUCN.<sup>21</sup>



(Left) An African grey parrot sitting on top of its cage. © Lothar Brademann on iStock. All rights reserved. (Right) An orange-bellied parrot. © susan flashman on Adobe Stock. All rights reserved. This image has been cropped.

For the critically endangered orange-bellied parrot (*Neophema chrysogaster*), by contrast, captivity is its only ticket to survival. Found only in Tasmania and a tiny area of South Australia and Victoria, the orange-bellied parrot has suffered habitat loss and migratory mortality so severe that it is now doomed without human intervention.<sup>22</sup>

Beyond the special challenges parrots face because of habitat pressures and their allure as pets, the world bird population as a whole has seen a precipitous drop over the past 50 years. Grassland birds in North America and Europe, as well as birds of tropical and subtropical forests in Central and South America and Asia, have been especially affected, with losses on the order of 40 to 80 percent depending on species and region.<sup>23</sup> While not all the news is bad—notably, the recovery of raptors from their DDT-driven declines in the 1970s, and increases in water and shorebirds along some US coastlines—the overall picture is alarming.<sup>24</sup> In North America alone, the population loss is estimated at three billion birds since 1970—a drop of roughly one in four birds present a half-century ago.<sup>25</sup>

How might the hype surrounding standouts like Flaco be harnessed to protect wild birds and the ecosystems upon which we all depend?

As Thom van Dooren argued in *Flightways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*, under such circumstances, the meaning of existence itself is ambiguous. While conservation measures like captive breeding and release can stave off annihilation, they cannot address attendant losses like ecosystem engagement and intergenerational knowledge that constitute a species' significance in context.<sup>26</sup>

How might the hype surrounding standouts like Flaco be harnessed to protect wild birds and the ecosystems upon which we all depend? How, too, might bird owners be urged to expand their avian attachments beyond their personal parrots and *scale up the snuggling* to encompass species-level support?

The threats are too great to leave to conservation groups alone. Rather, as more people become aware of the scale of species declines, they are launching initiatives to combat the problem. In New York, for example, a group of state lawmakers renamed their proposed bird-safe building legislation the "Feathered Lives Also Count" (FLACO) Act, seeking to turn the owl's demise into a win for the hundreds of thousands of migratory birds who navigate urban hazards every year. Mandating the use of safer window glass and other techniques to mitigate bird strikes, the bill has gained far greater attention than when it was introduced a year earlier, thanks to its homage to the owl-turned-New York-icon.<sup>27</sup>



© PeterPolcz on iStock. All rights reserved.

Building public support for flora and fauna that most people will never see is no easy task. Conservation advocates increasingly seek to counter the problem through whimsical branding campaigns that spotlight particular birds, beasts, or causes, and foster a sense of stakeholderhood, even if only fleeting. Bird of the Year polls in Australia and New Zealand similarly capitalise on people's love of online contests, using stunning nature photos to highlight the diversity of antipodean birdlife and call attention to the threats it faces. Perhaps inevitably in this era of electoral distrust, some participants have cried "fowl" as the polls' popularity has grown, launching bitter accusations of ballot stuffing and vote rigging run amok. For the birds at the center of the feud, however, the more attention the better.<sup>28</sup>

The newly launched Americas Flyways Initiative (AFI), a multilateral partnership between the US-based National Audubon Society, BirdLife International, and the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean, could take a page from the FLACO Act and avian pin-ups playbook to similarly advertise their efforts. Ambitious and potentially transformative, the initiative aims to monitor and protect migratory birds on a hemispheric scale through extragovernmental coordination of national policymaking, sustainable development, and private-sector investment.<sup>29</sup> At present, however, the birds that are the project's target beneficiaries get lost in the language of global finance. To succeed in gaining attention and to mobilise pressure on flyway nations to embrace and underwrite the AFI's policy prescriptions, the initiatives' organizers could use a dose of identifiable-victim viral star power of the sort that made Flaco a global phenomenon. An unabashed tie-in with the animated 2011 Twentieth Century-Fox film "Rio," for example, featuring a real-life migratory hero instead of a cartoon character, might be just the ticket to tug heartstrings and open wallets.

More successful in this regard are community-oriented wetland restoration projects like the [Pacific Flyway Center](#) in the greater San Francisco Bay and the [Bellarine Catchment Network](#) in Victoria, Australia, that cultivate human visitors' sense of place and solicit their participation in their ongoing stories. Through marsh boardwalks, interpretive panels, and educational outreach, these initiatives foster understanding of migratory corridors, while also offering opportunities for recreation, wildlife

viewing, and sensory engagement. Though tiny in the grand scheme of things, these sites nonetheless provide a critical lifeline for birds. To keep them going, organizers are keenly aware that capturing and sustaining human interest must be part of the equation. However, without a Bird of the Year or Flaco, such projects, too, can struggle over time.



(Left) A brushturkey at Manly Beach in Sydney. (Center) A bakery-loving cockatoo in Katoomba, New South Wales. (Right) A white ibis strolling past a warning sign in the Royal Botanic Garden Sydney. © Kieko Matteson. All rights reserved.

Perhaps the best example of an initiative that combines people's curiosity about birds with the opportunity to establish personal connection is the long-running [Cockatoo Wingtag / Big City Birds](#) project, first launched in Sydney in 2011 with a focus on sulphur-crested cockatoos (*Cacatua galerita*). Using Facebook and, more recently, a citizen-science app known as [Spotteron](#), participants can report sightings and provide activity reports on urban birds marked with large yellow tags. Over time, the observations of individual birds and their doings have generated a narrative understanding of their personalities and preferences as they go about their lives and interact with people, places, and other avifauna. The project has now been expanded to other parts of Australia and encompasses four other common urban bird species as well: the brushturkey, white ibis, little corella, and long-billed corella.<sup>30</sup> Though not specifically developed with conservation goals in mind, Cockatoo Wingtag / Big City Birds has been remarkably enduring in developing awareness of cities as spaces of avian coexistence and in fostering an alternative understanding of community.

In an ideal world, such projects, which acknowledge birds' agency but also provide the sense of connection people crave, could take the place of cages. For budgie snugglers committed to keeping birds close, however, it does not have to be an either/or proposition. They can continue looking after their pet parrots to the end of their (very long) lives while also advocating for psittacines in the wild. As a voting bloc, parrot owners are arguably the best positioned to push for policies that support avian conservation, as they know better than most how full and rich every individual bird's life can be.

Bird owner or not, it is incumbent on all of us to embrace a multifaceted approach to environmental altruism: Beyond the celebrity escapees or "identifiable victims" that grab our attention, we must snuggle the species and spaces around us, acknowledge our interconnectedness, and take meaningful action.

---

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As opposed to “budgie smugglers”—Aussie slang for men’s Speedo-style swim trunks popularised by former Prime Minister Tony Abbott (and derided by association).
- <sup>2</sup> E.g., A.-K. Burmeister, K. Drasch, M. Rinder, et al., “The Owner-Bird Relationship: Relevance for Pet Bird Welfare,” *Animal Welfare* 31, no. 1 (2022): 137–54, <https://doi.org/10.7120/09627286.311.012>; Shawn Peng and Donald M. Broom, “The Sustainability of Keeping Birds as Pets: Should Any Be Kept?,” *Animals* 11, no. 2 (2021): 582, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani11020582>; Anne Tygesen and Björn Forkman, “The Parrot-Owner Relationship and Problem Behaviors in Parrots,” *Anthrozoös* 36, no. 6 (2023): 985–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2023.2238434>; Ingrid Tague, *Animal Companions: Pets and Social Change in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 14–57, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271067445>; Nancy J. Jacobs, “Conviviality and Companionship: Parrots and People in the African Forests,” *Environmental History* 26, no. 4 (2021): 647–70, esp. 660–64, <https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emab052>.
- <sup>3</sup> Mattia Menchetti, Emiliano Mori, and Francesco Maria Angelici, “Effects of the Recent World Invasion by Ring-Necked Parakeets *Psittacula krameri*,” in *Problematic Wildlife: A Cross-Disciplinary Approach*, ed. Francesco Maria Angelici (Springer, 2016), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-22246-2\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-22246-2_12); Penny Olsen, *Flight of the Budgerigar: An Illustrated History* (National Library of Australia, 2021), 113, 198–200.
- <sup>4</sup> Statement from Central Park Zoo, “An Update on Eurasian Eagle Owl,” Wildlife Conservation Society Newsroom, 12 February 2023, <https://newsroom.wcs.org/News-Releases/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/18689/An-Update-on-Eurasian-Eagle-Owl.aspx>.
- <sup>5</sup> Statement from Central Park Zoo, “Central Park Zoo Releases Postmortem Testing Results for Flaco, the Eurasian Eagle Owl,” Wildlife Conservation Society Newsroom, 25 March 2024, <https://newsroom.wcs.org/News-Releases/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/22247/Central-Park-Zoo-Releases-Postmortem-Testing-Results-for-Flaco-the-Eurasian-Eagle-Owl.aspx>.
- <sup>6</sup> Statement from Central Park Zoo, “Flaco, the Eurasian Eagle Owl, Has Died,” Wildlife Conservation Society Newsroom, 23 February 2024, <https://newsroom.wcs.org/News-Releases/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/22056/Flaco-the-Eurasian-Eagle-Owl-Has-Died.aspx>.
- <sup>7</sup> E.g., Janet Winkler, “Ode to Flaco,” in Gus Saltonstall, “Flaco’s Cause of Death Confirmed; a Central Park Memorial; and an Ode to the Eurasian-Eagle Owl,” *West Side Rag*, 26 February 2024, <https://www.westsiderag.com/2024/02/26/flacos-cause-of-death-confirmed-a-central-park-memorial-and-an-ode-to-the-eurasian-eagle-owl>.
- <sup>8</sup> Saltonstall, “Flaco’s Cause of Death.”
- <sup>9</sup> On relative valuation, see Andrea Gaynor, “Animal Agendas: Conflict over Productive Animals in Twentieth-Century Australian Cities,” *Society and Animals* 15, no. 1 (2007): 29–42, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853007X169324>; also Amir Zelinger, “History of Pets,” in *Handbook of Historical Animal Studies*, ed. Mieke Roscher, André Krebber, and Brett Mizelle (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2021), 425–38.
- <sup>10</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 32.
- <sup>11</sup> Charline Charles and Eileen Lehpamer, “Fugitive Flaco Returns to Beloved Oak Tree in Central Park,” *PIX11: New York’s Very Own*, 17 November 2023, <https://pix11.com/news/local-news/manhattan/fugitive-flaco-returns-to-beloved-oak-tree-in-central-park/>.
- <sup>12</sup> Haraway, *The Companion Species*. For expansive application of the companion-species concept, see also Eben Kirksey, *Emergent Ecologies* (Duke University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822374800>.
- <sup>13</sup> Thom van Dooren, “Care: Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities,” *Environmental Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2014): 291–94, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615541>. The essay discusses María Puig de la Bellacasa, “Nothing Comes Without Its World: Thinking with Care,” *The Sociological Review* 60, no. 2 (2012): 197–216, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02070.x>; and Puig de la Bellacasa, “Ethical Doings in Naturecultures,” *Ethics, Place and Environment* 13, no. 2 (2010): 151–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668791003778834>.
- <sup>14</sup> See discussion in: Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (Ecco, 2016), 106–8. Also see Dale Jamieson, *Morality’s Progress: Essays on Humans, Other Animals, and the Rest of Nature* (Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. “Zoos Revisited” (179–89) and “Wild/Captive and Other Suspect Dualisms” (190–96); Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (HarperCollins, 1975; updated ed. Harper Perennial, 2009).

- <sup>15</sup> Jaclyn Jeffrey-Wilensky, "Central Park's Flaco Had a Family: Conservationists Fear Other Owls Will Become Targets for Release," *WNYC Gothamist*, 26 February 2024, <https://gothamist.com/news/central-parks-flaco-had-a-family-conservationists-fear-other-owls-will-become-targets-for-release>.
- <sup>16</sup> BirdLife International, "Eurasian Eagle-Owl: *Bubo bubo*," IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2017: e.T22688927A113569670, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2017-1.RL.TS.T22688927A113569670.en>.
- <sup>17</sup> Jiaojiao, a Quaker parrot, was listed as "Missing from Hurstville"; likewise, Precious, an Alexandrine parrot, was "Missing from Fairfield," in "lost and found birds sydney And Surrounding Areas," Facebook, 23 May 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/982210595283052/>.
- <sup>18</sup> BirdLife International, "Alexandrine Parakeet: *Psittacula eupatria*," IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2017: e.T22685434A110985466, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2017-1.RL.TS.T22685434A110985466.en>.
- <sup>19</sup> Emma L. Mellor, Heather K. McDonald Kinkaid, Michael T. Mendl, Innes C. Cuthill, Yvonne R. A. van Zeeland, and Georgia J. Mason, "Nature Calls: Intelligence and Natural Foraging Style Predict Poor Welfare in Captive Parrots," *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 288, no. 1960 (2021): 20211952, <http://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2021.1952>. "For this highly threatened order, in which > 40% of species are threatened or near threatened [7], captive populations equal wild ones in size (each around 50 million; J. Gilardi, World Parrot Trust, 2020, pers. comm.), spanning zoos (for a few thousand individuals [8]), breeding centres (for tens of thousands [9]) and private homes (for tens of millions [10])."
- <sup>20</sup> Determining the actual number of parrots worldwide—captive, feral, naturalised, and resident in their native habitats—is extremely difficult. See Stephen Pruett-Jones, ed., *Naturalized Parrots of the World: Distribution, Ecology, and Impacts of the World's Most Colorful Colonizers* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 24–28, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691220710>; also George Olah, Stuart H. M. Butchart, Andy Symes, et al., "Ecological and Socio-Economic Factors Affecting Extinction Risk in Parrots," *Biodiversity and Conservation* 25 (2016): 205–23, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10531-015-1036-z>.
- <sup>21</sup> BirdLife International, "Species Factsheet: Grey Parrot *Psittacus erithacus*," IUCN Red List for Birds 2024, accessed 24 May 2024, <https://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/grey-parrot-psittacus-erithacus>. No breeding populations of naturalised (escapee) African grey parrots are known to exist. Craig T. Symes, Ielyzaveta M. Ivanova, Caroline G. Howes, and Rowan O. Martin, "Introduced and Naturalized Parrots of South Africa: Colonization and the Wildlife Trade," in Pruett-Jones, *Naturalized Parrots*, chap. 17, 267. See also Jacobs, "Conviviality and Companionship."
- <sup>22</sup> Dejan Stojanovic, Carolyn J. Hogg, Fernanda Alves, et al., "Conservation Management in the Context of Unidentified and Unmitigated Threatening Processes," *Biodiversity and Conservation* 32 (2023): 1639–55, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10531-023-02568-0>.
- <sup>23</sup> Alexander C. Lees, Lucy Haskell, Tris Allinson, et al., "State of the World's Birds," *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 47 (2022): 231–60, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-112420-014642>.
- <sup>24</sup> Agricultural and industrial abandonment of wetlands is linked to an uptick in water and shorebird populations in North America and Europe over the past thirty years. Lees et al., "State of the World's Birds," 237.
- <sup>25</sup> Kenneth V. Rosenberg, Adriaan M. Doktor, Peter J. Blancher, et al., "Decline of the North American Avifauna," *Science* 366, no. 6461 (2019): 120–24, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1126/science.aaw1313>.
- <sup>26</sup> Thom van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (Columbia University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.7312/columbia/9780231166188.001.0001>.
- <sup>27</sup> An estimated 90,000 to 230,000 migratory birds die annually as a result of New York City building collisions. See "Helping Birds Migrate Safely Through New York City," Project Safe Flight, accessed 24 May 2024, <https://www.nycaudubon.org/our-work/conservation/project-safe-flight>. The FLACO Act is currently making its way through the New York Senate (Senate Bill S7098A, 2023–2024 Legislative Session). See "Senate Bill S7098A: Enacts the Feathered Lives also Count Act," New York State Senate, 2023–2024 Legislative Session, accessed 24 May 2024, <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2023/S7098/amendment/A>. The bill only applies to state-owned buildings but could set a precedent for private construction and renovations as well.
- <sup>28</sup> Kathryn Armstrong, "John Oliver Ruffles Feathers in New Zealand's Bird of the Century Election," *BBC News*, 19 November 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67371909>; Adam Gabbatt, "Voting Scandal Rocks Alaska's Fat Bear Contest," *The Guardian*, 12 October 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/oct/11/alaska-fat-bear-week-voting-scandal>.
- <sup>29</sup> "Audubon Americas," National Audubon Society, accessed 24 May 2024, <https://www.audubon.org/our-work/americas>; "The Americas Flyways Initiative Launches, Investing Billions to Save Birds, Landscapes and Livelihoods," Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean, 22 September 2023, <https://www.caf.com/en/currently/news/2023/09/the-americas-flyways-initiative-launches-investing-billions-to-save-birds-landscapes-and-livelihoods/>; "The Americas Flyways Initiative Launches, Investing Billions to Save

---

Birds, Landscapes and Livelihoods," BirdLife International, 22 September 2023, <https://www.birdlife.org/news/2023/09/22/americas-flyways-initiative-birds-connect-us/>.

<sup>30</sup> Australian brushturkey (*Alectura lathami*), Australian white ibis (i.e., black-headed ibis) (*Threskiornis molucca*), little corella (*Cacatua sanguinea*), and long-billed corella (*Cacatua tenuirostris*). On public reception of the project, see Eben Kirksey, Paul Munro, Thom van Dooren, et al., "Feeding the Flock: Wild Cockatoos and Their Facebook Friends," *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1, no. 4 (2018): 602-20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848618799294>.





**Kieko Matteson** teaches environmental history and the history of revolutionary and modern France at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. When she is not tied to her desk as department head, she is an avid hiker, birder, and chorist. Some of her favorite birding experiences come from her time as an RCC fellow in 2013, when she regularly saw wild kingfishers, grebes, and a very sleepy tawny owl in Munich’s Nymphenburg Palace Park.



CC BY 4.0

2024 Kieko Matteson

*This refers only to the text and does not include any image rights.*

---

**Cite this article**

Matteson, Kieko. "Avian Escapees and Budgie Snugglers." *Springs: The Rachel Carson Center Review*, no. 6 (October 2024).  
<https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc-springs-11915>.

---

*Springs: The Rachel Carson Center Review* is an open-access online publication for peer-reviewed articles, creative nonfiction, and artistic contributions that showcase the work of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC) and its community across the world. In the spirit of Rachel Carson, it publishes sharp writing with an impact. Surveying the interrelationship between environmental and social changes from a wealth of disciplines and perspectives, it is a place to share rigorous research, test out fresh ideas, question old ones, and to advance public and scholarly debates in the environmental humanities and beyond.

*Springs* is available online. To view, please visit <https://springs-rcc.org>

ISSN 2751-9317

SPONSORED BY THE



Federal Ministry  
of Education  
and Research