

THE WENDY LADY

“**W**atch your belongings!”

Before Wendy Huntbatch can explain, a bright green macaw swoops down from the reams of driftwood strung from the ceiling, grabs her bright red hair in its claws and begins to tear it from her scalp.

Huntbatch runs the World Parrot Refuge in Coombs, home to hundreds of the colourful—and perhaps overly curious—birds.

“They’ll take anything they can, even my hair if I’m not careful.”

Several staff members come quickly to Huntbatch’s rescue with broomsticks and frightening screeches of their own. Seconds later, the birds have been shooed, Huntbatch’s hair is back in place, and so is her composure.

“It’s not mine you see,” she explains. “The chemo, it kills everything. Everything. Look, I’ve got no eyebrows.”

Huntbatch is under treatment for stage-four cancer.

Such a prognosis pretty much means death, she says, casually.

Huntbatch, however, doesn’t plan on going anywhere.

“What would God want with an old lady with 800 children? Besides, I’m the Wendy Lady,” she says, referring to the immortal character from the Peter Pan story. “We live forever.”

Huntbatch may not live forever, but she has lived long enough to found and successfully run one of North America’s largest refuges for unwanted pet birds.

And on a continent where anyone can walk into their local pet store and purchase a parrot or cockatoo that might well outlive them by decades, with no certification or licensing requirement, the unwanted are many.



Wendy Huntbatch comes eye to eye with a Moluccan Cockatoo, one of the hundreds of birds in her care at the World Parrot Refuge.

More than eight hundred of them now live here.

Huntbatch leads a tour around the 24,000 square feet of corridors and flights (huge cages that allow the birds room to fly) that make up the shelter as she does her rounds—talking to staff, clipping claws and dealing with conflicts between birds, which break out with alarming regularity. The noise of the shrill, grating screeches of hundreds of wild birds in a closed room is truly staggering. Most of the people visiting today are wearing earplugs.

She pauses during a brief decibel drop and begins to sing at a high pitch. As soon as she stops, the same note drifts effortlessly back from the bill of a double yellow-headed Amazon parrot.

“One of her lives was spent with an opera singer,” she explains.

Another bird, a blue and gold macaw, lived for 22 years with a Chinese couple.

“She speaks Mandarin,” says Huntbatch. “I don’t.”

Another bird was the previous possession of a restaurant owner in the Yukon who taught it how to swear. When he couldn’t stop the bird’s foul-beaked outbursts—which began to put customers off their meals—it was left to live outside in a cage in the freezing weather.

Huntbatch smiles as she describes how some people

stole her and brought her to the refuge.

The personalities of these birds, their intelligence, their complexity and depth of character quickly become apparent.

So why have so many been spurned?

“Most people just don’t realise the responsibility and work involved. They become overwhelmed by the noise and the dust; a lot of people get asthma.”

So what inspired her to found this refuge?

“I’ve been in animal welfare my entire life. I can remember my first rescue, clear as a bell.”

Huntbatch was three years old—she swears—when a truck carrying some cows and calves passed her home near Wolverhampton, England. She asked her mother where they were going, to which her mother replied: “to the butcher’s.”

“Not in my lifetime they’re not,” she recalls thinking. “So I set them loose, 20 cows and all their babies went running all over the town.”

At this early memory, she begins to laugh, but the laughs turn quickly into coughs. Huntbatch has what’s known as keeper’s lung, a condition common among those who live with birds and one exacerbated by the necessary poisons of chemotherapy.

Another story involves a slightly older Huntbatch, on a farm, also in England.

At least she thought it was a farm.

It was actually a livestock auction, and she describes watching a man putting rings through the ears of all the pigs that were to be sold, clearly causing them pain.

She asked politely if he would “please stop doing that.” The man laughed at her. She asked again, would he “please, stop doing that.” He laughed again.

“So I kicked the living shit out of his shins,” she says, laughing again, coughing again. “I made him bleed.”

Then, in 1993, four of her own birds were stolen from her home in Abbotsford. Wendy launched a widespread poster and radio campaign that garnered the return of only one of her own birds but also offers of many others.

“People started calling. They didn’t have my birds, but they had birds that needed better homes. So of course I took them.”

A warehouse was constructed to house the growing number of orphaned animals that came her way and as more and more birds were taken in, more and more buildings were built to house them. Her growing operation led her to purchase the property in Coombs upon which the current refuge now stands,

and where still the birds keep coming. Fifteen macaws were taken in during January alone.

The work is not without its rewards and recognition. Up to 30 volunteers complement the 15 full-time employees, and last year the refuge won an international award for compassion.

As the tour comes to a close, she picks up another bird, a peachy-white moluccan cockatoo that recently recovered from bone cancer.

“We were diagnosed at the same time, weren’t we, Iago?” she asks as she looks lovingly into its pearl-black eyes. “And look at you now, you got better, didn’t you?”

Here’s hoping the Wendy Lady does too.

*“So I kicked
the living
shit out of his
shins...I made
him bleed.”*

Wendy and Iago.

