AFRICAN GREY PARROT

Psittacus erithacus

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Conservation status: Endangered, faces a very high risk of extinction in the wild
Population Trend: Decreasing
Size: Length 33cm, wingspan 46–52 cm
Lifespan: 50-70 years

RANGE & HABITAT

Native to the rainforests of West and Central Africa, African greys thrive in large flocks, where they are highly socially interactive. Their foraging and seed dispersal activities support forest propagation.

CHARACTERISTICS

African greys are renowned for their exceptional intelligence. Scientific studies demonstrate that they can outperform five-year-old children at some cognitive tasks. They also possess the remarkable talent of mimicking human voices and can retain a vast vocabulary. Their beauty, impressive communication skills and intelligence has led to increasing demand for these birds as pets.

CONSERVATION CONCERNS

The trade in African Greys - Due to conservation concerns, since 2017 the international trade in African greys has been limited to captive bred birds, which is regulated via permits. Wild African greys captured for the pet trade cannot be imported legally into Hong Kong. The exotic pet trade and habitat loss have driven significant population declines. Estimates suggest that over 20% of the African grey wild population is captured each year.

Hong Kong is the 9th largest importer of African greys globally, with 2,800 birds arriving from 2015-2021. A quarter of these birds were from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), taken directly from the wild. The DRC is considered the parrot's last natural habitat and Hong Kong's demand has played a significant role in driving the regional population to the brink.

Illegality: There is plenty of evidence that poached African greys have been laundered into Hong Kong's pet trade, with live adults, eggs and also taxidermised individuals being seized locally.. Unscrupulous practices, including forged permits, smuggling, and misidentification of wild-caught birds as captive-bred, contribute to the illegal trade. Unregulated breeding is known to be ongoing in commercial premises and private hands, with bird and eggs being laundered into the legal trade. The lack of traceability mechanisms once the birds have been imported exacerbates these issues.

High mortality rates: Due to the stress involved in their capture from the wild, such as rough handling, poor conditions and exposure to diseases, about two out of three birds are likely to die before reaching their destination market. The mortality rate has been reported to be as high as 90%.

COMPLEX NEEDS AND WELFARE CONCERNS

Malnutrition and improper care are primary causes of disease in captive parrots, leading to significant suffering and high death rates. Birds instinctively conceal signs of illness and pain – sometimes only being noticed by owners when the bird is critically ill or close to death. African greys require substantial mental stimulation, social interaction, and space, making it difficult to meet their needs in captivity. Deprived of mental enrichment, they may develop harmful behaviours such as anxiety and self-mutilation. The long lifespan of African Greys and the associated costs of care and veterinary bills often exceed the owner's ability to pay, meaning medical conditions may go unaddressed.