

Spanish speaking parrots

Birdbrains enrolled at A.C. Houghton elementary

Four birdbrains have recently enrolled at A.C. Houghton Elementary School, Irrigon.

Sitting in class each day clad in chartreuse green with splashes of yellow and red attire, four parrots—Buque, Llorona, Lupita and Macho—have proved very colorful personalities in more ways than one.

Indeed the four have acquired a vast following of "pupil Parrot fans."

The parrots take great joy in their mimicry. "They will snap at each other," said their co-owner Lian Wilkes, "and then laugh like it's some big joke."

The quartet immigrated from Costa Rica with the aid of Lian and her husband, David. They recently completed a 2½ year stint with the Peace Corps. "I worked at the nutrition center and David taught at the National University, advising the biology department on programs and materials," Lian explained. "We returned to the states in July."

They adopted their four feathered friends in the course of their volunteer work. "When it came time to leave we had to get a lot of signatures and paperwork squared away in order to bring them with us," says Lian. "If we would have come through the Miami or New York airports they would have just destroyed them, not even bothered."

"But we came through Los Angeles and they saw that we had gone to a lot of trouble when we showed them the papers so they allowed them in," Lian said. A veterinarian was sent in to check them over and we quarantined them ourselves. The University of Oregon Biology Dept. is going to study their behavior habits during the summer and that was all we needed to get them out of Costa Rica."



At the end of October Lian, who has a University of Oregon teaching degree, was added to the A.C. Houghton teaching staff. "I bring the parrots to class with me every day because they become very friendly if you handle and talk to them a lot. But if you leave them alone too much they are so sensitive they will withdraw and get crabby," Lian explains.

"I teach reading and math as a Title I teacher, hired to teach in areas of special need," says Lian. "The committee (A.C. Houghton) thought some of the children here needed help in some subjects. I really enjoy the individual basis of working with each child. The children seem to work harder for the privilege of doing something like handling the birds at the end of the period. Lupita was older when we got her, she's 10 or 11 now, and hadn't been handled enough so I asked the children not to handle her. But the rest are fine for touching."

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Sitting on an elk horn perch in the middle of the room the parrots are not particularly choosy about their listeners and will speak at length to all available ears, in Spanish no less. "They haven't been here long enough to learn any English words or phrases yet. What they have picked up are the gross things unfortunately. If you sneeze or cough they will too," says Lian in disgust.

"They have different backgrounds so the way they talk is individual," Lian said. "Lupita was raised in a family that must have had a man who was drunk a lot because she can produce a drunken laugh that you could swear was a man's. She has about seven different laughs as well. One sounds like my grandmother's and another like a child's giggle. Llorona, (pronounced Yorrone) she's two now, had been a baby's pet so she can produce the cry of a 2 year old that fools many people. Her words are all baby words with a baby sound like 'Bowwww Wowwww'."

If a bird is raised around a child, when that child is scolded and then cries the bird learns to associate the scolding voice with crying and will cry too if you speak to him in a scolding voice," Lian said. The two younger birds, Macho and Buque, are each about one now and just beginning to talk. Mostly the parrots say whatever they want to, Lian said.

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by Lavon Starr
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"A lot of families in Costa Rica have parrots for pets," she pointed out. "It's like having a dog here, some like them others don't."

"The birds actually learn to talk much better from women and children than they do from men who have a lower tone to their voice. I'm much more fond of them than I have ever been of a dog or cat as a pet. It may be because they can speak back. We do spend a lot of time just talking," Lian said.

"Papa, Mama, Papa," calls Llorona, "cough, cough, cough." Sounds as if parrot fever has hit instead of that swine flu thing.

"They haven't had any colds or anything since coming here," assured Lian. "They have adjusted to the climate very well. I bring them to and from school in a towel covered cage. They eat apples, bananas, sunflower seeds and peanuts."

Macho flutters down to the table to grab a quick peanut which he expertly peels and consumes.

"They love milk," said Lian, "and drink most anything else—coffee, water, anything."

Their wings are clipped and the birds are loose in the room. "If I don't keep things locked up they'll be into everything," says Lian, juggling the four birds now sitting on her hands, arms and shoulders. "They go for things like thread, string and yarn. They're just in hog heaven when they do find some."

"As for pets, I would recommend them only for a person who had a real interest and the time to spend with them. You should get very young ones, the older ones have probably been in a cage much of the time and are not nearly as affectionate as those you raise. They learn most of their words during the first two years, but they can learn other words after that too," said Lian as she grabs Macho who is hanging from her collar down her back.

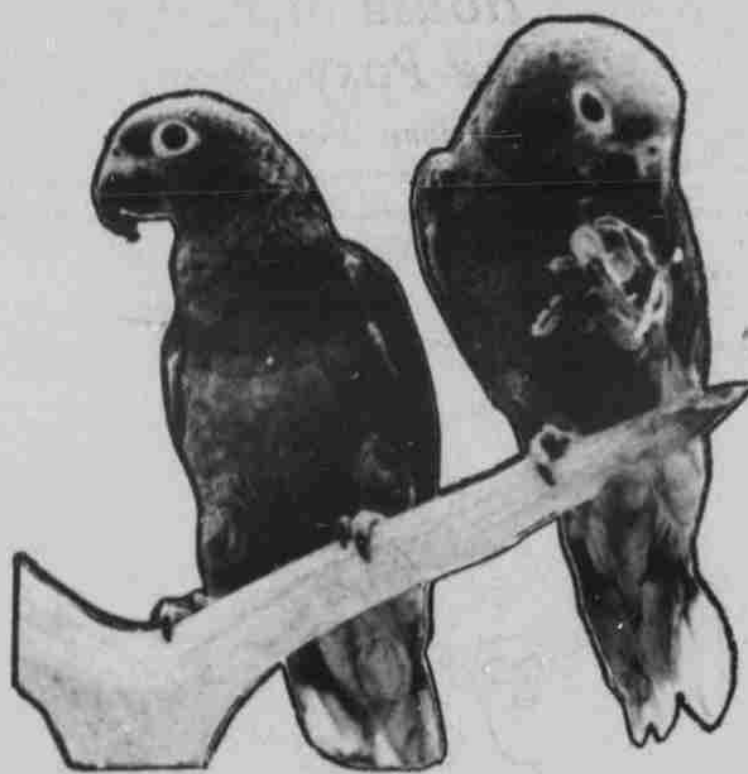
"Actually, they are able to talk," continues Lian, "because they have a hole on the back of their tongue and..."

"Hasta Luego, Mama (Good Bye Mama)," interrupts Lupita. "Hasta Luego." Apparently not wanting to give out any trade secrets, Lupita has had quite enough of the interview.

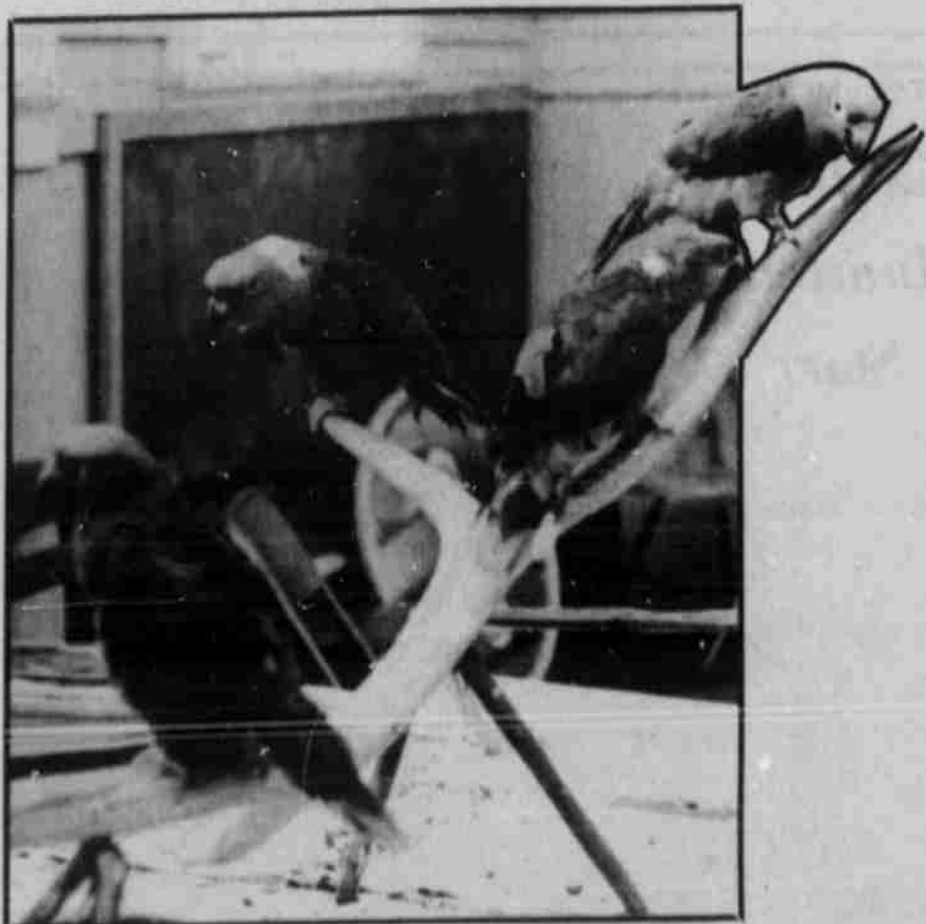


Lian Wilkos and two of four parrots.

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