

FIVE QUESTIONS

ON PARROTS

TO AUGUSTE VON BAYERN



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Parrots are among the most intelligent creatures on Earth, but they are also one of the most endangered groups of animals. Will these fascinating creatures survive the great species extinction of our time? Auguste von Bayern studies the mental capabilities of various parrot species and knows all about the threats to these animals and their needs.

Ms. von Bayern, what kind of research are you doing with parrots?

AUGUSTE VON BAYERN My working group aims to better understand the development of intelligence and complex communication in vertebrates and to find out how language is linked to intelligence. To add to this, parrots are able to learn and imitate sounds extremely easily, and these abilities could be a key to unraveling the evolution of language in human beings.

What is the greatest danger to parrots?

The most serious threat is the destruction of their habitat. It's not surprising, because most species live in tropical and subtropical rainforests, and these, too, are particularly endangered, unfortunately. Another problem is the pet trade, not to mention that some parrots, including even endangered species, are hunted for their feathers or simply for sport.

Which species are particularly endangered?

Of the 387 parrot species known today, 109 are on the red list, so almost one-third. Of these, 17 are “threatened with extinction” and 38 are “threatened”. There are also 16 species we know of that have died out over the last few centuries. Particularly endangered, for example, is the Brazilian Spix’s macaw made famous by the animated film Rio, which has meanwhile become extinct in the wild – also the Puerto Rican Amazon or the possibly already extinct New Caledonian lorikeet.

So, which organizations are working to protect parrots?

Birdlife International, World Parrot Trust, and Parrots International, to name but a few. The Loro Parque Foundation, with which I collaborated for my research, also works to protect parrots. For 30 years, the Foundation has been supporting protection projects for 30 to 40 parrot species and some mammals with the aim of saving endangered species from becoming extinct. Its efforts have helped to save nine parrot species from extinction, five of which have even been downgraded in their threatened status. In addition, as the most species-rich parrot collection in the world, the Foundation’s parrot

breeding program supports international reintroduction programs.

Parrots are popular pets. What constitutes appropriate parrot husbandry?

Parrots should actually only be kept by experts. Without the international breeding programs by zoos and professional breeders like the Loro Parque Foundation, some species would die out in the near future. As pets, however, many parrot species are decidedly unsuitable. They need a lot of space and should not live alone, on top of which, they are often relentlessly noisy. They easily develop quirks such as feather-pulling or incessant screaming if they cannot live out their natural behavioral repertoire and their urge to move and nibble, or if they get too little attention. You, therefore, need to consider carefully in advance whether you are able to meet these requirements over many years. Anyone who has a parrot is practically taking on a toddler that will never grow up and shrieks a lot more.

Interview: Harald Rösch

Auguste von Bayern leads the research group “Comparative Cognition” at the Max Planck Institute for Biological Intelligence (currently being set up).

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