

Book review

THINKING LIKE A PARROT: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE WILD

By AB Bond & J Diamond

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Alan Bond and Judy Diamond are Nebraska-based behavioural ecologists who have studied parrots in the wild for some 30 years. Their parrot research began in New Zealand with detailed field work focused on the kea, the world's only alpine parrot. This led to further studies there on the kaka and kakapo, and then expanded to other parrot and cockatoo species in Australia and Costa Rica, as well as species that have escaped from captivity to found free-living populations in Florida, California, and Spain.

This book is unusual. It is a synthesis of the research efforts of the authors and other scientists, but is written in an engaging and popular style. This involves the risky strategy of aiming to please two audiences: members of the general public keen to understand why their pet parrots behave the way they do; and academics who may be interested to read a review of several decades of rigorous research.

The book succeeds in these dual aims. The public should be satisfied by the structure of the book with its 17 chapters, which are grouped into seven sections (origins, behaviour, sociality, cognition, disruption, conservation, parrots and people). These constitute the first 141 pages. The remaining 122 pages

comprise seven appendices mostly intended for scrutiny by scholars. Also included are end notes which link to the source of the point being made, and then to a detailed list of literature cited. The great care taken in preparing the book for publication is also exemplified by a comprehensive index, an essential item that seems to be disappearing from scholarly books nowadays.

The authors' kea studies began in the late 1980s and involved colour-banding birds at a garbage disposal site and recording details of their behaviour (foraging and social interactions). Research subsequently expanded to include vocal communication (function and geographical variation).

Several chapters, notably 1, 4, 7, and 13, struck me as superficial, being based on casual observations. Other chapters compare and contrast parrots with humans, noting similarities in large relative brain size, social living, and ability to innovate, and differences in use of the tongue to feel rather than taste, complexity of vocal repertoire, and retinal structure. Chapter 3 examines the implication of the large forebrain of the parrot as an indicator of intelligence.

About one-third of the nearly 400 parrot species are experiencing decline and 18 species (mostly on oceanic islands) are now extinct. The efforts of New Zealanders in removing introduced predators from islands and mainland reserves and reversing declines in parrot populations are carefully evaluated.

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