

# Grey Parrots of the SSESES

by Elaine Henley and Lori J. DeLeo



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Referring to Uganda as “The Pearl of Africa” is far more accurate than one might imagine. The myriad landscapes – rain forests, mountains, lakes, savannahs – are on their own, magnificent. When then considering the extraordinary variety of wildlife that calls this nation home, one is left at a loss for superlatives.

**WE FIRST VISITED UGANDA’S LAKE VICTORIA REGION** in 2016, hoping to observe the Grey Parrot in the wild. During our stay, we spent several days on one of the 84 islands that comprise the Ssesse Islands in the lake’s northwest region. During our visit we had the privilege of watching small groups (numbering 4-9) of visiting Grey Parrots forage in trees, socialize in Musizi trees (*Maesopsis eminii* - a tree of a softer wood than those in which they choose to roost), and, on one afternoon, we had the rare opportunity of observing a pair of Greys mating.

Wanting to learn as much as we could about the Grey Parrots’ travels between islands and their presence, if any, in the lives of local people, we hired a boat and travelled to a nearby island. There we spoke with some villagers who identified the trees from which the Greys feed and areas of the island where they roost in



the evenings. What we learned in 2016 inspired a return trip to the Ssesse Islands in November of 2017 to observe the behaviours of the Grey Parrots and interview villagers as well.

Upon returning to the Ssesse Islands, we looked to examine trends in the parrots’ flight patterns, threats to their population, and their behaviours in the wild, to help better meet the needs of Greys in captivity. That is what we expected. What we did not foresee was that the knowledge garnered through observation of wildlife and conversations with local people would create an experience more rich and disturbing than we could have imagined. As we were ferried to the Ssesse Islands, we were awed by their lush beauty, friendly regattas of fishing boats, and small crowds of people eagerly awaiting the catch of the day to work its way onshore and into the homes of hard-working families.

Moving forward, we watched large tree trunks piled high on barges and in boats, but were unaware of what was yet to come, nor did we realize that this activity was part of a larger story. But, the birds and the people had their own stories to share.

Leaving the villages, we were struck by the abundance and variety of trees and wildlife. All too soon, however, the only vestiges of what had once been dense forest were acres of tree stumps and palm seedlings eventually laying way to miles upon miles of palm trees. These thousands of hybridized palm trees (cross bred for disease resistance from varieties native to Ivory Coast and Costa Rica) yield large fruits beneath the dense canopies, completely inaccessible to most wild birds. At that moment, it seemed we were in an area created by man, but serving as the antithesis of a natural forest.

From this location atop the island, the silence was deafening – not a single bird call could be heard. We became as silent as our surroundings; as if sadness had stolen our ability

to express ourselves similar to the way the palm industry had stolen the habitat of the island’s wildlife. There are 1,061 species of birds in Uganda – and yet, we neither saw nor heard a single one. The abundant, rich habitat of so many species – including the Grey Parrot – had faded into the past.

As we continued our journey over the next several days, we enjoyed the opportunity to be among the local population and to interview more than 70 island residents. The majority of the Ugandan people we met – from hotel managers to fishermen – enthusiastically expressed pride in their country’s wildlife, flora and fauna alike.

When asked about the Grey Parrot, most commonly, Ugandans expressed their admiration and fascination with the Grey Parrot (called “Enkusu”) often noting their playful nature and mimicking their calls. But, they also lamented the fact that the flocks have dwindled over time. Not long ago, residents claim Grey flocks numbered in the hundreds; however, today flocks range between two and thirty, and

they are seldom seen unless they are feeding on certain seasonal fruits before flying off to other islands. Many of the people spoke quite openly of the manner in which the palm oil industry hyped the benefits the palm trees would bring to their communities in the form of money for families that sold or leased their farmland to the palm oil companies.

However, what the families did not realize was how this would impact their ability to grow dietary staples or would affect the wildlife they enjoyed as a part of their daily lives.

Our goal of observing the natural behaviours of Greys in the wild was best met in a place we called “Enkusu Village” -- the woodland grounds of a hotel compound on the banks of Lake Victoria. There, small flocks (12-16) of Grey Parrots gathered each morning to socialize with each other before flying off in search of food.

Preferred trees for socializing included the Enziru (*Pseudospondias microcarpa*) and Eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus grandis*).

Similar to the Greys that we observed in 2016, these parrots chose to visit trees that bore no fruit and were located close to staff quarters. A similar phenomenon was reported by Tamungang et al (2013) in Central Cameroon, who hypothesized that the Grey Parrots visited local villages and thus gained their protection.

Enkusu Village was a flurry of activity as Grey Parrots flew from tree to tree and made a "whoop" call to each other when landing on a tree. Then, however, the parrots remained quiet if humans were around, except for those calling when they were leaving their tree or responding to another's flock call.

In the presence of humans, the Greys would either ignore them and engage in previously noted normal behaviours (share drinking water from holes in a tree or chew branches for beak maintenance and perhaps pleasure – just as they do in captivity), or sit quietly and observe the humans in their midst. When relaxed, they spent significant time preening themselves and, occasionally, each other in much the same way captive parrots have preening sessions with their caregivers.

It is often thought that mutual grooming among parrots is an activity shared between pair-bonded individuals only, but we learned that this is not the case, as we observed individuals from different groups preening each other, too. We also observed that two Greys would often rub beaks with each other and another Grey who joined them in that tree. This suggests that rubbing beaks is not purely sexual in nature, but also an affiliative behaviour as well.

Nearby the village, we saw a nest with a chick inside along with a female Grey who did not leave the nest. Instead, the male Grey flew to the nest and fed her – she, in turn, fed the chick. When an African Hawk-eagle (*Aquila spilogaster*) landed close to the nest, the female disappeared into the nest and did not reemerge for a significant time until the hawk had left. During this time, the male Grey and two other adult Greys remained quiet and still on nearby

branches of the same tree. Similarly, whenever we saw a juvenile Grey, at least four adult Greys would follow the young bird from branch to branch or fly overhead. Our observations led us to believe that it is more than just the parents who look after the safety of the young.

In this region, contrary to what we expected, Grey Parrots' preferred food is not the palm nut. Indeed, we watched as they chose to eat olives and fruits, even when ripe palm nuts were readily available. Preferred foods come from the Msasa tree (*Brachystegia spiciformis*) and Empafu tree (*Canarium schweinfurthii*).

We watched the Grey Parrots cross to other islands at dawn and dusk. Only when there was an early thunder and lightning storm did six Grey Parrots remain overnight and, on that evening, they roosted in three separate Kiriundi trees under a flock of kites. This was surprising, as it has been assumed that Grey Parrots roost together as a flock,

separate from other species, either on the same tree or in close proximity to each other. One day, we enjoyed a visit to the home of an island resident named Benny, and here we met Cookie, a 40-year-old Grey Parrot originally from the Congo, who was perched on a small tree about 15 feet from where a cage sits. The cage door is opened every day and Cookie is free to come and go as he pleases because Benny believes that Cookie ultimately belongs to nature.

Some days Cookie flies off to forage with wild Grey Parrots in the area while, on other days, the wild birds visit Cookie. Still, when the wild parrots fly off to other areas of the island to roost for the evening, as Cookie does not join them, locals often return Cookie to his "home."

You see, Cookie can be easily distinguished from others of his kind by his gift of human speech. Ironically, this unique ability to use human speech—not to merely mimic, but to use language in context—is one of the primary reasons the Grey Parrot population has been

poached for the pet trade. Surprisingly, we met and spoke extensively with several people who admitted to knowing certain individuals involved in the poaching of Grey Parrots both in the past and present. But, indeed, they shared this information with reluctance explaining that they feared retaliation from poachers whose identity might be revealed.

One young man gave a detailed account of how nets are placed over fruiting trees to capture the birds as they are feeding, and he provided a

vivid, visceral description of the birds' screaming as they are being caught in nets. Our knowledgeable guide, Johnny Kamugisha, is a life-long birder who is passionate about protecting the birds of Uganda. His passion and vision were evident as we listened to him speak with this young man and others about how pride in and protection of wildlife translates into benefits for communities through ecotourism.

Now we must ask ourselves what we can do to preserve and protect that which remains of the Grey Parrots'

habitat and continue to study their behaviours in order to provide the best possible life for those already held captive. The writers will return to Uganda to continue to study Grey Parrot behaviours and work on these multi-faceted questions through the engagement of people and improved understanding of the inhabitants, the wildlife, and the landscape of which they are a part. □



#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Elaine Henley** P.G.Dip CAB, is a Full member of the APBC, an ABTC Registered Clinical Animal Behaviourist, and an IAABC Certified Parrot Consultant. Passionate about Grey parrot conservation, she has dedicated her free time to learning more about wild Grey behaviour, using this information to help parrot caregivers.



**Lori J. DeLeo**, MAT, LMFT, is a psychotherapist and adjunct professor. Lori employs her interpersonal and therapeutic skills to connect with people, sharing their connection to wildlife while educating others with her personal knowledge garnered from keeping parrots and travelling to observe their natural behaviours.

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