



The wild Greys of Uganda

Elaine Henley P.G.Dip CABC, 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.

Elaine Henley and Lori J. DeLeo are the proud owners of five African Greys and here they share their experiences about their visits to Uganda to see Greys in their natural habitat



Poaching and habitat loss have driven the remaining Greys to move further east on the continent where they are surviving in significantly smaller flocks in countries such as Uganda



Between the two of us, we are the caretakers of five Grey parrots. Okay, we are actually owned by them, but that's not *this* story. For those of you who share your homes with these intelligent and playful creatures, you know how fascinating they can be from watching them make toothpicks out of wooden blocks and crafted woodwork to dancing across kitchen counters. But few things are as magically surreal as watching a Grey parrot in the wild, and in order for them to continue to exist in the wild, much needs to be done.

Poaching for the pet trade and habitat loss have resulted in the loss of millions of Grey parrots in the wild. Indeed, in some countries of western and central Africa, it is estimated that their population has declined 90-99 per cent. Flocks of Greys were once seen numbering in the many hundreds, but now, a flock of dozens is a rare and cherished find.

Poaching and habitat loss have driven the remaining Greys to move further east on the continent where they are surviving in significantly smaller flocks in countries such as Uganda. Here they will face the same plights regarding habitat loss, but thanks to the efforts of the World Parrot Trust and other wildlife organisations, CITES placed the Grey parrot on its Appendix I list, making it illegal to capture them from the wild in every African nation. This landmark was achieved in October of 2016, and while poaching still exists, its penalties are severe. Now there is hope.



The World Parrot Trust continues its commitment to helping combat threats to the wild population of Grey parrots through its initiation of the Africa Conservation Programme. The programme is reaching out to and developing educational programmes for local communities and assisting in the rescue, rehabilitation, and release of confiscated parrots. During our journeys to Uganda, we have been able to witness the interest that individuals and some local communities have in these efforts.

Before beginning our first tour of Uganda in 2016, we decided to spend a few days on one of the Ssesse Islands. The Sseses are located in the Northwest region of Lake Victoria and are a part of Uganda. While the lake borders Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, it is not visited much by tourists. But, we had heard that the Grey parrot can sometimes be spotted on these islands, and we did not want to miss such an opportunity.

Within minutes of our arrival, we heard the distinctive screech of a Grey parrot landing in a nearby Musizi tree calling to its small flock numbering four to nine. For several days, we were able to observe them foraging and flying across the island. We followed them when we could and paid attention to their flight patterns. In the evenings, they seemed to be flying away from the island, and as we wanted to know if this was true, we hired a boat to take us to another island to see if we could gather more information about their behaviours.

The local people were indeed curious to learn why we were interested in the parrots, and they shared with us the locations where they most often see them roosting in the evenings. It was also on this island that we were confronted with the reality of poaching when we were shown a tree with nails used to climb and steal the babies from their nests. Our hearts sank imagining the terror experienced by the adult Greys and their chicks when human hands entered their nest.

While our stay on the islands was only a few days, we knew we would return to explore other islands, and in 2017 and again in 2018, we returned to the Sseses to see

The local people were indeed curious to learn why we were interested in the parrots, and they shared with us the locations where they most often see them roosting in the evenings



if we could locate more Greys. Indeed, we did. Here we found larger flocks numbering dozens and hardly the hundreds that used to be seen in the past.

The realities of the expanding palm oil industry were evident. Where there were once expansive forests, there are now hybridised palm trees covering the hills of the island. Neither Greys nor any other birds were calling to each other in these man-made forests that spread from the edges of people's homes to the water's edge. However, there are pockets of forest remaining amidst the palms, and it is in some of these that the Greys roost in the evening.

As these roosting areas are guarded areas and human traffic is minimal, one can surmise that they feel safe. Interestingly, we observed the Greys leave their roost areas





each morning to seek out others and to forage and socialise during the day. Ironically, there are even more instances of the Greys gravitating to where humans gather, near the staff living quarters of hotels, in family gardens, and in large park picnic areas.

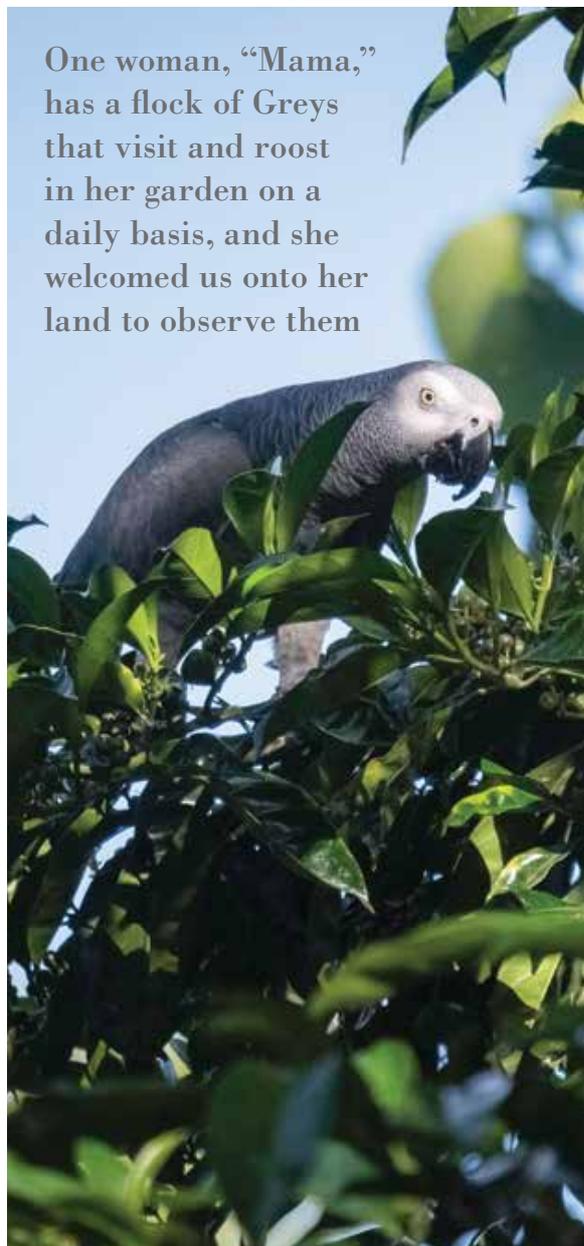
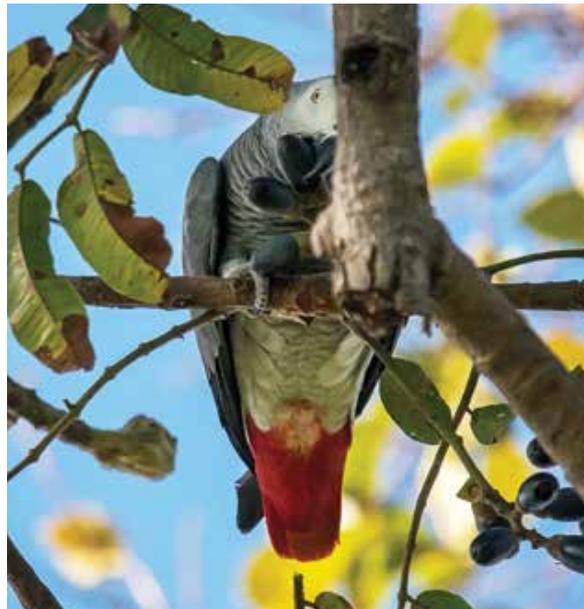
Similar behaviours were observed by Tamungang et al, in 2013 in Central Cameroon, Greys actively seeking out areas populated by humans, and it was hypothesised that they do so because they feel safe. Having previously witnessed evidence of poaching, the irony of this was not lost on us.

The people of Uganda are more than happy to discuss the wildlife of their country, especially their birds. Uganda boasts more than 1,000 different species of birds, many of which are an integral part of people's daily lives. The weavers gather in their nests at bus stops and in gardens, the hornbills whose distinct "whoosh" sound can be heard as they approach overhead, and the screech of the Grey parrots can be heard as they call to each other in trees and in flight.

When asking local people of the islands what they think of the Grey parrot, almost all laugh, enthusiastically mimic their, calls and begin to tell stories of the Greys from where they see them to the various trees in which they feed and roost. One woman, "Mama," has a flock of Greys that visit and roost in her garden on a daily basis, and she welcomed us onto her land to observe them. She was animated in talking about their habits and calls and was thrilled to see that people from outside Uganda were interested in the birds that bring her such joy. Many people who reside on the Sseses sold their land to the palm oil companies, but 'Mama' did not, instead electing to preserve the indigenous environs surrounding her home which so many living creatures also call home.

Kibale National Forest in southwest Uganda proved to be another location for spotting Greys. Though fewer in

number, they seem to gravitate to two specific locations for social time with each other. As there are few fruit trees in the area, and knowing that they are what most attract foraging Grey parrots, we purchased some at a local nursery and a lodge caretaker enthusiastically planted them on his property. He committed to care for them with the knowledge that the parrots will be more likely to increase the time they spend there if such a food source is provided. This is an ideal example of the interest the people of Uganda have in preserving the natural habitats of its precious birds and their growing desire to draw eco-tourists to these stunning locations.



One woman, "Mama," has a flock of Greys that visit and roost in her garden on a daily basis, and she welcomed us onto her land to observe them

During our travels, we met a young boy and his father who shared a story with us of how they used to enjoy walking together in the forest that used to exist near their home. After a day of watching the machines of the palm oil company clear-cutting to make way for more palms to be planted, father and son decided to walk through what remained of the forest after the trees had been felled. They came upon a tree with a dead baby Grey parrot in its hollowed nest. The adults could fly away, but the fledgling could not. The boy shared how upsetting it was to see and experience the reality of the palm industry's impact on the forest he loved and the animals in it. But, he said, he simply had never given a thought to the possibility of a negative outcome from the palm enterprise until he experienced it first hand.

This caused us to reflect on just how many species, including the Grey parrot, are being devastated by the ever-

increasing human demand for palm oil. Ironically, some companies that produce pelleted food for parrots living as pets in captivity promote the use of palm oil in their products, citing that it is a preferred food and dietary staple of Greys and other parrots in the wild. Refuting this, we observed that the Grey parrots' preferred foods that come from the Msasa tree (*Brachystegia spiciformis*) and Empafu tree (*Canarium schweinfurthii*) literally ignoring the palm nut fruits when these other food sources were available.

Watching Greys engaging in their daily activities was both educational and entertaining. In a particular gathering spot, we decided to call Enkusu Village (Enkusu is the name the locals use to refer to the Grey parrot), anywhere from 6 to 20 Greys could be seen in the mornings and evenings drinking from watering holes in trees, socialising, preening themselves and each other, and resting high in the tree branches between flights circling the area. Greys flew from tree to tree calling each other, sharing drinking water from holes in a tree, and chewing branches for beak maintenance and perhaps pleasure, just as they do in captivity. 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

Elaine and Lori are organising an eco trip to see Greys in the wild, for information see: [Shades of Grey Parrot www.shadesofgreyparrots.com](http://www.shadesofgreyparrots.com) for details of our next trip to Uganda in May 2019, which will include visiting the Mabamba Wetland, Ssese Islands, Queen Elizabeth and Kibale Forest National Parks.





Greys flew from tree to tree calling each other, sharing drinking water from holes in a tree, and chewing branches for beak maintenance and perhaps pleasure, just as they do in captivity

individuals from different groups preening each other too.

One afternoon, we noticed that several Greys were perched in a tree and seemed to be moving to one particular spot. Curiosity got the better of us, and as we walked through tall thickets to see what was drawing them there, we noticed a hole in the tree. For the next few hours we watched two adults feeding each other and chicks in the nest. They tended to their young ones with dedication, and while they did this, other Greys stood watch for predators. There is a great deal of competition between bird species for suitable nesting holes, and this family of Greys had selected a precarious location indeed as, on the other side of this tree, a hawk was busy preparing a nest for itself too.

On another occasion, we were able to see similar behaviours within a flock of which a juvenile

was a part. It was evident that the juvenile was not yet confident in flight and so it flew only from branch to branch, and while it did this, several adults followed him carefully. Whether or not the adults were related to this juvenile or the chicks in the nest could not be known for certain, although both situations suggest that there may be cooperative parenting of young within a flock of Greys, with other members of the flock invested in the raising of the young Greys too.

On one island, we watched a flock of Greys as they flew off at dusk. Following close behind was a juvenile screeching to his flock as if to say, "Wait for me!" These experiences were proof that indeed the Greys are not only finding safe places to survive, but to breed as well, which gives us hope. But hope is not enough. In order for Grey parrots to survive in the wild, we need to use our voices to continue to educate people about their plight, and support organisations that take action to protect those that still remain free. For this reason, we have organised eco-tours to Uganda, to visit the wild Greys of Enkusu Village, as well as the other animals and birds that Uganda is famous for, to include, Chimpanzees, Shoebill Stork, Elephants, Lions, Leopards, etc. The eco-tours will bring much needed revenue into local communities and help to bond them to the wildlife surrounding them. ■

