Chris Biro has made a living for two decades by travelling around the United States, as a pirate (with a real cutlass) and a fully rigged pirate ship. His educational bird show, “The Pirate’s Parrot” teaches general audiences about parrots in the wild and as companion animals.

During the shows, flighted birds have total freedom to fly, play, and interact with audience members. Chris recalls them back to him by using trained behaviors. During a recent show a concerned women, likely familiar only with wing-clipped parrots, asked “will they come back?” Chris, always the scallywag, shrugged and said “I hope so.”

Chris’ interest in bird training extends beyond shows. For many years he gave the birds he worked with opportunities to build their flight and survival skills in varied and interesting locations. He has worked to create behaviorally balanced groups of parrots who are autonomous, aware animals, while also being friendly and interactive.

Chris has created a scenario where birds can learn complex, wild-type behaviors, while under the protection of a human caretaker. His practices could have significant impacts on conservation.

Before I met Chris, I knew him as the
the pirate guy from the internet who taught me how
to fly my pet parrot outside instead of clipping her
wings. His “Freeflight List” on Yahoo Groups was
my tutor in the early 2000s. I remember fourteen year
old me receiving an e-mail from Chris, answering
my questions. I spent hours dissecting the informa-
tion then took my young parrot outside to practice
flying. Years later, I met Chris in person when our
paths crossed again. I was hired to film his birds in
the Canyonlands of Utah.

During filming I realized that the birds Chris
trains are incredible. Hand-fed pet birds are not sup-
posed to avoid predators, mob predators, find food,
excavate nest sites, navigate long distances, or re-
spond in parallel to the alarm calls and activities of
local wildlife when there is a predator threat!

Chris’ parrots are like wild birds... But snug-
gly! This is very significant because of what sci-
ence learned when conservation biologist Noel
Snyder released captive parrots into the mountains of
Arizona in the 1980s; parrots from the pet trade tend
to get eaten, sicken, and starve, when released.

After filming, I worked with Chris to quantify
his approach, and convinced Chris to enter the con-
servation world beginning with the zoo community
and the aviculture (bird breeding) community. We
wrote and presented our first paper in 2008. Today,
Chris has expanded our initial one-page methodologi-
cal summary into a ten hour course. Now, individuals
in Australia, Europe, the U.S., and the Middle East
have reproduced Chris’ methods and continue to have
excellent results with their own birds.

Our non-profit, Bird Recovery International,
was founded to translate Chris’ techniques into con-
servation tools. Current strategies to prepare captive-
bred parrots for release involve an entire team of
trained staff to manage the large colonies, transloca-
tions, and may require the presence of existing wild
flocks for integration. With Chris’ method, only a sin-
gle person is needed, and birds need minimal caging
for sleeping and bad weather. There is no need for
an expensive large aviary, large numbers of staff, and
huge numbers of birds. The high survival rates of a
managed flock as they learn wild skills would mean
hundreds of birds don’t have to be released to cre-
ate enough survivors for reproduction. By utilizing
the pet trade to produce birds rather than a special-
ized breeding project, existing expertise and facili-
ties provide birds with no need to re-invent the wheel.
The human overseeing the birds’ education can recall
them from dangerous situations until they have
the appropriate skills to deal with threats. So, even
though there is not a wild flock to integrate them into,
there is low risk to the parrots.

Having been accepted into the ABS NSF-
IGERT program, I am currently writing a compari-
on paper to see what conservation can learn from
free-flying birds compared to existing methods to
prepare birds for release. For example, one standard
currently used in conservation is to make parrots in a
cage watch a hawk hurt another live parrot. In con-
trast, Chris allows his birds to develop habits and be-
haviors to avoiding predators through practice. The
birds gain useful behaviors when pursued by benign
but curious gulls, ravens, or turkey vultures. I person-
ally prefer Chris’ method.

My long term hope is to fly a flock of parrots
here at Texas A&M in order to carefully study the
process of wild skill acquisition. With the support of
my advisor, Donald Brightsmith, I believe I will be
able to bring these unique methodologies and results
created by “Captain Chris the Pirate” into the conser-
vation mainstream.
Photos of wild behaviors by hand-raised pet trade birds trained by Chris Biro

Below: Foraging with and responding to signals from local prey species. Multi-species flocking in response to threat. Excavating nests and laying eggs (which are not left outside to hatch, Chris is not interested in creating potentially invasive parrot populations.) Opposite: Predator evasion, wild foraging.