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Exotic bird sanctuary in Hudson begins expansion project

Facility plans to shelter up to 2,000 birds by end of decade

By PAT MORRIS, Suncoast News

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Mango, who laughs at his own jokes, is one of 800 birds being cared for at the Florida Exotic Bird Sanctuary in Hudson.

Photos by PAT MORRIS/Suncoast News

NEW PORT RICHEY — It's not unusual for people who collect exotic pets to find themselves unable to care for them at some point. When those pets are parrots, who can live up to 80 years and more, it's almost inevitable that a bird will outlive its owner, or at least that owner's capacity to care for them. That can mean, in a worst-case scenario, a bird being passed from owner to owner, living out its years indoors, in cages, with a changing cast of humans and no avian company.

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Or they can live out the best-case scenario, which is to wind up in the Florida Exotic Bird Sanctuary in Hudson. This is where, says Patricia Norton, president of the nonprofit, people place birds they can't care for but want to live a long, healthy and natural life in a bird-friendly environment. Currently 800 parrots — a designation that includes macaws and cockatoos, among others — live as close to nature as possible in the facility's 3½-acre campus. Those who can fly and get along well with lots of others enjoy spacious aviaries; others are paired with a compatible companion or two in a smaller enclosure. All of the birds receive vet care, are observed for their behavior and are slowly transitioned to the sanctuary diet before being released into the general population. Foraging chickens keep the bottoms of the enclosures free of insects and other pests.

People who surrender their birds to the sanctuary pay a healthy fee and can come and visit their birds whenever they like — no parrot is ever adopted out. Norton, in fact, told the Suncoast News she discourages the adoption of exotic pets such as these birds: "Come volunteer with us and get your parrot fix here." The facility also raises some funds through tours, and it plans to expand fundraising events and activities. Mostly, though, it relies on donations and volunteers to keep things going — food, for example, costs \$1,200 a week.

Those expenses will continue to rise now that the sanctuary has embarked on an expansion that will, Norton said, allow it to take in 400 more birds this year and eventually be able to care for 2,000. It owns 1.6 acres next to its current facility, and Phase 1 of its plan involves clearing that land, installing infrastructure, adding about 32,500 square feet of flight space for the birds, and replacing the outdated workshop, storage space and caretaker's residence. The estimated cost of that work is \$795,000. Phase 2, farther off, involves buying an additional 5 acres. The sanctuary hopes to have the whole project completed by 2030.

To arrange a tour, learn about volunteer opportunities or for more information, call the facility at 1-844-FLA-BIRD. The Florida Exotic Bird Sanctuary is located at 8933 Casper Ave. in Hudson; the website is flabirdsanctuary.org.

Pat Morris



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