

George: My Beloved Orange-winged Amazon  
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I debated for a while to write this because of how very personal the subject matter. This will be a much longer article than what we are used to. I pray that the context is appropriate and that people will find the time to read it because you never know who might have the answer or connections that I am searching for in my time of need. I feel in my heart that if I cannot share with the wonderful members of RDCBS, then who else can my heart cry out to? I also found it appropriate since the bird of the month for August was the Amazon. In this message, I wanted to first tell my story of my passion for birds, and then I need to ask for a plea of help. I know there is someone out there who knows the answer to my dilemma; I just hope they are reading this.

Many people are bitten by the “bird bug” for a number of reasons: companionship, pet ownership, breeding, showing, or even to make a profit, but my reasons go deeper than that. Birds are a personal connection between me and my mother who passed away from cancer when I was only ten years old. One of my earliest memories was my mother handing me bread, cereal, and bird seed and asking me to place the treats for the song/wild birds in the backyard. With anticipation, I rolled the bread between my fingers spreading the food evenly in the grass, next the seed, and lastly the cereal. Then without hesitation, I would rush into my room, peek out the blinds of my window, and stare in awe at the hundreds of song birds that would flock to our yard. This went on for years until my mother was diagnosed with a brain tumor and passed away peacefully at home in 1988.

Two years went by, and then my friend Neal and I were in a pet store called Pet and Hobby Shoppe located in Old Town, near Winston-Salem. While Neal was looking at the reptiles, my eye caught a room located in the back where an unhappy soul lived. Inside the room was a cage with the scruffiest looking bird I had ever seen. His tag said “My name is George, Orange-winged Amazon: \$300.” I knew he was a wild-caught by the open band on his foot. I will not ever forget the look in his eyes; they resonated with fear, revenge, and the look of someone without hope because they have just been taken and stripped away from their home. I also remember his wonderful, fresh smell. His fragrance smelled just like dried daisies. George reminded me of the wild birds my mom and I use to feed, but he was not free anymore. My heart melted at his pain. We both lost something that was dear to us; my mom and his home. I knew that if I could just bring him home, then we both could be there for each other’s time of need and both of us could learn how to love again.

It was Christmas time and my dad asked me what I wanted and I told him, “A parrot for \$300 I saw in the pet store!” He said he wasn’t paying that much for a bird, but he secretly went to Pet and Hobby Shoppe and purchased George for me later that month. During our family’s Christmas gathering, my dad brought out George in his cage to present him to me. I was never happier. I opened his cage and said, “Come out baby, I won’t hurt you.” He stepped on my hand, but as soon as I brought him out of the safety of his cage, he flew right into the trash can. I gently picked him up, placed him back into his cage, turned to my dad and said, “I love Him!”

Several weeks went by, and it seemed that George was becoming more tolerant of my offer of friendship. He would step-up, but his personality always remained vacant. I was also always worried about his health. His beak never looked good, his feathers were very ratty, and he did not ever seem to want to play with his toys or chew wood. I changed his seed diet to Nutriberries, fruits, vegetables, Crazy Corn, and the occasional chicken leg; in true Amazon gusto, he ate everything I offered. Within the next few weeks, George began playing with his toys and splashing in his water dish. He would stay on my hand for longer periods, take showers with me, but he was always very quiet; almost too quiet.

One night after supper, I noticed a red-orange substance in the cracks and crevices of his beak. We called an avian vet, and she informed us that his beak was infected and he needed to come in that night. So, my dad took George to North Wilkesboro, and he was there for two days being tested and treated for everything possible. When my family took me to go see him, I had to wait patiently for him in the vet's office. They brought out George and when he saw me, he yelled for glee and started biting at his cage door to get to me. When I took him out, he immediately nuzzled his head beneath my chin and I held him close to my chest. This was not only the very first vocalization I had ever heard from him, but it was also the very first time he let me touch his feathers. He was telling me that he was happy to see me and he wanted to go home.

After the visit to the veterinarian, life for George and I was great. When he went through his first molt with me, all those ratty feathers were replaced by the most iridescent, rich, emerald green this planet had ever seen. Every time I brought him to see Nick and Sandy Morganelli of Luv-N-Birds in Winston-Salem, Nick would comment how great my Amazon looked. That meant the world to me, because Nick and Sandy are well respected in the bird community and I knew they would not just give out complements to any bird. Since they are from New York, they tell it like it is. George would go everywhere with me and my family. He attended both my middle and high school, went on family vacations, and across the United States on business trips when I worked with my dad during the summer months. George even got to go to church a few times to visit the kids in Children's Church. George never learned to talk, but he flew to me on command, would lay on his back to play dead, was potty trained to go in the toilet four times a day with my assistance, and was one of the tamest and most trustworthy animals I have ever met. I not only took him to nursing homes, but he would even let a small child pick him up from his cage and then motioned to be petted.

Speaking of cages, even though he received a new cage with lots of toys and a very large playground, he was never caged up. He had full access to the house; even a spot at the dinner table. I would also let him play outside in the apple, crabapple, and pine trees in the yard. He was quite fond of the grape vines and finding seeds in the grass. Our house in the country was nestled in the view of the mountains of both Stokes and Surry Counties. I believe the sight of Hanging Rock, Saura Town, and Pilot Mountain at the same time reminded him of the wild; and it delighted his soul.

These were great and happy times for both George and I. We both filled the emptiness in our hearts with what we were searching for. Nobody told me that an Amazon was not a good choice for a twelve-year old boy, nobody told me that I was supposed to get a baby bird instead

of an adult, nobody told me that male Amazons (George was DNA sexed) go through aggressive, hormonal periods during the breeding season (which he never did), and nobody told me that a wild-caught Amazon wasn't supposed to act like a hand-fed, baby cockatoo; you know what, I'm glad they never did.

I had George for close to a decade, but unfortunately time was now our greatest enemy. I was accepted to the Mary Cannon-Hayes School of Music at Appalachian State University. I knew that I would be there for at least five years because I knew there was a chance that I may want to major in both music composition and music education to receive my teacher's certificate. Unfortunately, ASU requires all freshmen to live in a dorm; and there was an absolutely no animal policy on campus.

I put off college at ASU for three years after high school, and I knew that I could no longer wait. What was I going to do with George for the next five years while I was away in Boone? My family was certainly not going to be able to keep him like he was accustomed to. With the help of my dad, we tried everything. I purchased a camper that we newly renovated and turned it into a large outdoor flight aviary, but he was now outside all the time and away from his family. I got a beautiful, loving, handfed Quaker named Sydney from Luv-N-Birds to keep him company, but my Amazon was still missing his human companionship. My gracious sister volunteered to attempt to keep them, but when I visited George and Sydney on holidays, I was horrified with the sanitary conditions that she was letting them live in. My dad was in the right for making me wait an entire year to decide to keep my birds or find them another home. My dad wanted me to wait it out so I could have them after college, but I was so worried that their joy would be tarnished forever. With sadness in my heart, a voice in my head was saying, "If you truly love something, set it free." I decided it was time.

At that moment, the hole in my heart that George filled ripped open. I placed George and Sydney in their pet carrier, and then my dad drove me to Luv-N-Birds so Nick could find them a new home. I gave them to Nick, too heart broken and afraid my words would turn into tears, and I simply left the store not even saying goodbye. My dad explained the entire situation to Nick. The silence was deafening on the ride home. As I looked out the window, I saw the birds in their trees living happily and free. I wished that George was back in South America; that's where he was born, and that is where he should have lived out his entire life. The pain I felt was guilt. If only I took the time to say goodbye, maybe the pain in my heart could have been resolved. However, I was too worried about showing my emotions in front of my dad, Nick, his employees, and all the customers. I felt as though I would never be worthy of another bird's love again. When I got home I looked at the trees that George used to play in, and I made this promise to him, "Since you helped me in my time of need, and taught me how to love again, I promise to make a difference in the lives of animals in their time of need from now on."

In college, one year had come, and one year had passed; I avoided all animal contact scared to fall in love or even get close again forsaking my promise. At the beginning of my sophomore year, the most life changing experience happened; I met my future wife Tamara. We started dating November 11, 2000. By December, her family had invited me over to spend the holidays with them. When Tamara was showing me her room, a familiar fragrance touched my nose. She had dried daisies in an open jar that she had collected. Tamara told me that daisies

were her favorite childhood flower. They were my favorite childhood fragrance also, but my smell did not come from a flower but from a friend. That's when I told her of George. Then we went in the family room where I had the pleasure of meeting her two dogs: Benji and Sophie. Benji was a German Shepard/Rottweiler mix who was very old and stricken with arthritis, and Sophie was a Jack Russell/Rat Terrier mix who was much younger and in her prime. Sophie immediately jumped in my lap and lavished me with her kisses. Later that night she even slept with me on the couch. Tamara said this was a very unusual behavior, because Sophie normally hates strangers and has been known to even bite them. Benji even saw me as part of the family, telling me when he needed to go out and sleeping beside the couch on the floor whenever I visited. Tamara's family called the dogs "Traitors" when I came over, but I just simply called it "Love".

Benji soon passed away. The family was extremely heart-brokened and mourned their beloved family member. Even Sophie was having extreme anxiety problems, so the family decided to get her a playmate. Tamara found a wonderful dog at the Watauga Humane Society in Boone named Peanut. He was a Jack Russell/Rat Terrier mix just like Sophie. So, Tamara adopted Peanut to be Sophie's companion. The only problem was that it was exam week at ASU. Music majors, like me, had already taken their exams, but Tamara and the rest of campus had not. Then after exams, we were all to move out of the dorms. Tamara's family was not coming for a week, and the Humane Society could not hold Peanut for that length of time. Since Tamara could not keep him, I had no choice but to take care of him for that last week. This meant for the first time in about three years, I would be one on one with an animal. Believe it or not, I was extremely nervous.

I dedicated that whole week for just one cause: to please Peanut. I knew dogs like to do four things: eat, sleep, play, and poop; so, that is exactly what we did the entire week. But the most interesting thing happened while I was keeping to these four main activities: we were bonding. By the time Saturday came along, we were great friends. I had to meet Tamara's dad and brother, Thomas, to help clean out Thomas' dorm and give them Peanut. When the van was packed, and they were ready to leave, Tamara's dad said, "Ok Peanut, let's go." I heard a whimper come from Peanut as he left my arms. At first I thought, "Oh great, I got close to another animal again, and now I lost him", but then I knew it was ok because I would see Peanut for many years to come anytime I wanted. Now, I visit Peanut and Sophie every week, and Peanut still seems like my dog, my friend. He gets so excited and jumps in the air only as a Jacky could, but I know it's his way of telling me he loves me.

After that wonderful experience with Peanut, I decided it was my time to live up to the promise I made to George. It was time to make a difference in the lives of animals. When school started back that fall, I started working for the same shelter that Peanut came from: The Watauga Humane Society. I absolutely fell in love with all the cats and dogs there. I noticed that only certain animals like puppies, kittens, and the very sociable animals were getting adopted. It was very hard for a quiet, scared animal to be noticed by the public. So this was my mission: to socialize the timid, scared, and problem animals so that they may thrive in a home environment with a loving family that they may call their own.

Luckily, my great friend and roommate, Dan, had a passion for animals also, because our apartment complex did not allow animals. For everyday that we got caught, they would have charged us \$250. We would have owed them close to \$70,000! The animals were worth it though, and I brought home animal after animal, socializing them and getting them used to a home environment. As soon as I got close to an animal, they would get adopted; but this was a good thing. Some of the dogs and cats were shy, scared, needed to learn basic commands such as potty training, or simply just overlooked because of their age, but with the help of Tamara and Dan, we found them all great and wonderful homes. Tamara loves photography, and she documented every dog and cat that came home with Dan and me. I am so grateful she did. Tamara also helped in hand feeding two young husky puppies who were abandoned by their mother. Without the help of great friends like Dan and Tamara, I could not have fulfilled my promise to George for those two years.

One day at the Humane Society, we received a phone call from Animal Control asking if we would take in a parrot they received. Genesis Wildlife found the bird in the woods, but they did not want to deal with it because it would bite everyone. Animal Control was calling because the bird bit them also and they were all afraid of him. Lynn, my manager, asked me what I thought we should do. She said that Animal Control described the parrot as grey with a red tail; I got excited. I told her it would be absolutely no problem if we take him in. I affectionately named the grey Alex.

Alex came in a pet carrier. With a smile on my face, I opened the door with confidence and spoke in a calm voice, "Come out baby, I won't hurt you." Then, while using the "Up!" command, Alex stepped gently on my hand without hesitation. This was the first time since George that I held a large parrot; it felt just like home. I went to the local pet shop spending my week's salary outfitting his very large cage that the Humane Society provided. During the next two weeks we had Alex, I taught him how to fly on command and to lie on his back to play dead. He enjoyed tearing up the pencils and papers on our desk, and he also enjoyed a game of fetch with the paper clips. But when he got too close to the computer, I had to intercept him from his devious plan. At night, when work and school would come to an end, I would come back to the Humane Society to preen his head and put him to sleep. I did not want him to feel that he was alone; I knew the sensitive nature of African Greys. He was very cuddly and loving at night. It was hard to leave him, but I knew that he needed his sleep so he would not be cranky the next day.

I researched his closed band, and it led me to a pet store and breeder in Virginia. I contacted the owner of the pet store and she gave me the contact information for the rightful owner of Alex. When the owner came in, I knew she owned Alex because she said the same "colorful" words that Alex had been reciting. I was glad to be there for the grey, but he was also there for me. It was a wonderful feeling to hold a parrot again and receive affection back from him. I thought I would not ever get another chance, but just a week later a yellow-collared macaw came in. "Here we go again!" This was a huge step for me to get back into the world of parrots, and I got my enthusiasm and joy back. At the Watauga Humane Society, every one of those souls is precious to me; and I will never forget them and what they taught me about compassion, love, and hope.

I knew two things for sure in my future: I was going to marry Tamara and that parrots would be in our lives. Now, I had to get her used to handling parrots. I was visiting Tam in Raleigh and the RDCBS was having their yearly bird fair. The experience was wonderful. It had been years since I had seen so many different species of birds. Tamara's very first bird that she ever held was a female Red-sided Eclectus from Jack's Aviary. Then, we went over to the pet display. Tam held everything she could while I just watched in amazement. While I could not even get up the nerve to ask one of the owners if could I hold their bird, Tamara was winning the heart of a Scarlet Macaw! Then without warning, a beautiful green bird caught my eye; it was a baby Orange-winged Amazon. I stepped back for a moment just about to leave, but then I got up the nerve to ask the lady if I could please hold her baby. She enthusiastically said yes. When she handed me the baby Amazon, my heart welted up with pure emotion. This could have been George's baby for all I knew. While I held the baby close to my chest, I told him that even though he was not mine, I still loved him. After Tamara took some pictures with her ever faithful camera, I told the owner holding the Orange-wing meant more to me than she would ever know. This was an experience that Tamara and I would never forget.

Over the months of our engagement, I took my fiancé to a bird store I discovered in the pages of Bird Talk Magazine; it was the Birdie Boutique in Durham owned by Dr. Burkett. While a baby Maximilian Pionus was fussing at me because she did not want to go back to her cage, Tamara surprised me by coming into the room with a Yellow-naped Amazon on her hand! (Interesting fact: while attending a RDCBS meeting two years later, we discovered that the beautiful and gentle Amazon was adopted and now owned by Trish Koontz). I asked Tamara, "How did you get him out of his cage?" She simply said, "Oh, I just reached in and said 'Up!'" I was never prouder. I knew then that she conquered her fear, or unfamiliarity, of parrots. Now, she was ready to call a parrot her very own.

Tamara and I have a very dear friend by the name of Ross Anderson. About once every two months, Ross hosts a game night social for the church's college campus group at his house. The very first time Tamara and I went, we did not expect a life changing experience. We were greeted by Ross and his father who had a very outgoing, beautiful Dutch Blue Peachfaced Lovebird named G.B. which stands for "Green Bird." We also met G.B.'s parents: Dewey, a Dutch Blue Pied Peachfaced Lovebird, and the very lovely Sierra, a Creamino Peachfaced Lovebird. G.B. spent the whole evening with Tam and I playing and exploring our clothes. He was very fun and we felt honored that he chose to spend his time with us. As the evening turned to night and it was time to say goodbye to our hosts, I curiously peaked in the nest box when nobody was looking, and saw 4 eggs that looked as white as porcelain. I knew those eggs were special, but I could not have possibly imagined how much one of those little jewels was about to change my life forever.

June 25, 2005 was the day of our wedding. During the reception, with a smile on their faces, Mr. and Mrs. Anderson told us that they have a very special wedding gift, but he was still in an egg. We both were very excited, but I was worried that my heart was not yet ready or worthy of a parrot to call my own again. We got the phone call around three months later that the baby was ready. On the ride there, I was very nervous; this would be the first bird I have owned in close to seven years! I turned to Tamara to ask her, "What should we name him?" Without hesitation, she said, "BeBe!" I never imagined myself as a "Lovebird Person", but as soon as I

saw BeBe, I knew he was our baby. BeBe looked just like a baby Amazon Parrot who never quite grew up. He sat on the bottom of his cage looking like a child at day care waiting for Mommy and Daddy to pick him up, and here we were. While Mr. Anderson gently placed his hand under BeBe's feet, my heart filled with compassion. He placed him in my hand and immediately BeBe lowered his head asking me to preen him. I almost cried, but my joy overrode my tears.

Mr. Anderson then told us the story of how BeBe actually had died because he got very cold one night. His fragile body literally shut down as the light left his eyes, his organs stopped pumping, and his excrements were as black as death. However, there is a force much stronger than the shackles of death, and that is love. With BeBe's determination to live and Mr. Anderson lovingly nursing him back to health, death was forced to release its hold on his life. I knew that Mr. Anderson spent so much time and effort on this little miracle, so I asked him, "Are you sure that you want to give him to us?" He assured us by saying, "He was always yours; even when he was just an egg. He's our wedding present to you and Tamara. " Those were the words that sealed our contract and friendship. I handed BeBe to his new Mommy, and she held him in her coat all the way home. While his little head was gently falling asleep on her chest, BeBe was serenaded by the music of her heart beating just for him. While I drove, I knew Tamara and I were no longer a couple, but a family.

Recently, the Andersons have been talking about finding BeBe's parents Dewey and Sierra a new home, and in fact for some time now. Tam and I debated the pros and cons during the summer of 2006. Could we care for more birds, did we want to become breeders, and did we have enough space and the time? All of the answers pointed to yes. So, on Tam's birthday, August 4, we decided it was time to expand our flock. As soon as we got home with our new additions, we let them out of their cage to fly around and stretch out their wings. While they were exploring their new home, they both landed on our heads and shoulders showing no fear what so ever. BeBe was very excited to have company as he called out to them expressing his welcome.

Dewey and Sierra came with four eggs, and on August 17, at around 10:30 pm, the most amazing thing happened: our very first baby was born! Now we were official bird breeders. I was so excited that I had insomnia the entire night. The next day, Tamara opened the nest box and held her new baby for the first time. It was so tiny, so precious, and such a gift from God. Dewey and Sierra are such great parents: the baby stays warm, cuddled, and is always well fed. Sierra never attacks during nest inspections either. She simply moves to her cage waiting patiently for her cue to return. Then, we always leave them a treat for letting us peak into their world. I hope soon that we will be able to afford what they truly deserve: a beautiful aviary so they may fly, stretch their muscles, and not feel restricted. They have been in a worn out, rusty, old black cage for the past five years now. It served them well in the past, but personally, I believe they deserve more.

Dewey and Sierra are such a blessing for Tam and I. We could not ask for a more well tempered, personality plus, beautiful pair. For example, Dewey loves to come out and play with BeBe and me every time we change their food, papers, or when we give them new material to build their nest. Dewey enjoys hanging out on my hand, or he will fly over to visit BeBe on his playgrounds. "Now I know where BeBe gets his crazy, overly sociable personality." While

Dewey is exercising, Sierra cuddles and keeps their baby warm in the nest box. Tamara and Sierra have a beautiful understanding towards one another: Sierra is “Momma”, while Tamara is “Mommy.” Both of them work together to make sure the baby, and future babies, grow up strong, healthy, and spoiled rotten. The future is very exciting, and it’s funny how life works. One day you have only one bird, and then two weeks later, you have four; “Wait, do I hear new peeping from the nest box?” “Man... I hope so!”

Even though Tamara has never known George personally, she knows what it’s like not able to say goodbye to a friend. Benji died while she was away at college and the rest of her family was either at work or school also. The only one to comfort him in the end was Sophie; his ever fateful and loving companion. Benji is now buried in her parent’s back yard where he loved to play. He is gone, but impossible to ever be forgotten. To this day, the memories of him chasing cats, chewing up the couch, or sitting right on top of Sophie when he had tired of her puppy games never ceases to put a smile on the face of the people who knew and loved him.

Seeing all those beautiful Amazons at the last RDCBS meeting brought back wonderful memories, and I know that George would have fit right in. Tamara even asked me if there was an Orange-wing. I told her, “Unfortunately no, but look at the Mealy! That’s the nominate form of the species that I held during our visit to Honduras.” (I had the pleasure of holding *A.F. Virenticeps*; a parrot rarely seen in United States aviculture). A professional picture of George is hanging in our hallway, but my baby should be living in our living room. If there is anyone who knows any information, I beg that your voice will reach my ears. I would love to have him back. If he is happy and making beautiful babies like himself, then I would love to adopt one of his children to honor his legacy. If neither of those options is possible, then I humbly ask just to say goodbye to one of the best friends I ever had. Nick could not remember who he sold him to, and my dad thinks that maybe a lady in Old Town might have him. Sydney is living happily with a boy and his family in the Winston-Salem area. George has a wild-caught open band around his right foot. There are two main color variations in *Amazona Amazonica*: predominately yellow on the crown and forehead or predominately blue with a light yellow highlighting the center of the forehead and crown. George has the variation with more blue.

That is all the information I know. I never tell anybody, “You look like you just lost your best friend,” because I know exactly what that feels like. I would never wish that upon anybody. All I simply ask for is any information that will give me that chance to say goodbye to a parrot that became my closest childhood friend. He not only was my true companion, but most importantly, he taught me how to love again.

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