We opened the door and the noise was deafening. Over 200 baby parrots shrieked as loudly as their small lungs would allow. They were hungry and confused, but most of all they were frightened. They wanted to be fed. They wanted to be touched. They wanted to be comforted. These 280 baby parrots were part of an original group of over 300 stolen from their nests to be sold as pets in the United States. The Honduran government had confiscated these birds as part of a crackdown on the illegal wildlife trade in Honduras. Over 50 of the babies had already died. Many were sick, malnourished, and in shock, reeling from the sudden, catastrophic upheaval in their young lives. It was gut wrenching to witness their panic. We would soon see much, much worse.

—Field notes of D. Wills and F. Dantzler
Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 5/16/91.

Top: The HSUS’s David Wills inspects wild baby parrots, already showing signs of stress (left), that are destined for the United States. Above: Frantz Dantzler looks over confiscated parrots in Honduras.
On average, nearly 750,000 wild birds are legally imported into the United States each year. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that another 100,000 are smuggled into this country, principally across the Mexican border. Most of the trade is in parrots and macaws, and most of the species of these birds being imported are in danger of extinction.

It is an axiom of human behavior that the more beautiful and rare a thing is, the more some people will pay to possess it. Thomas Quinn, a Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission agent, has said, "There is an insatiable appetite for animals of all kinds. If you have the money, you can get the animal. That's how it goes."

Mr. Quinn's territory is southern Florida, which, along with the U.S.-Mexican border, represent two of the hotbeds of illegal activity in the wild-animal trade. Every kind of creature known to nature seems sooner or later to find its way into this illicit market. The desire to possess a rare and beautiful wild animal has driven the demand for certain species to the breaking point. For the beautiful and intelligent macaws and parrots of Central and South America, that demand could cause their extinction in the wild within the next decade.

This possibility has propelled The HSUS to the forefront of a legislative push to ban immediately the importation of all wild-caught birds for sale as pets, regardless of their country of origin. Dr. John Grandy, vice president of wildlife and habitat protection for The HSUS, has been an outspoken proponent of an immediate and total prohibition on the importation of any such birds into the United States.

The United States is the world's largest importer of wild birds and as such provides a lucrative market for those who would profit from the pain and suffering of these creatures.

Millions of birds around the world are captured in the wild to satiate the appetite of the U.S. pet trade. It is believed that 50 percent of all wild-caught birds die before leaving the country of capture. Another 17 percent die from illnesses caused by the stress of transport and quarantine.

Many countries have banned exportation of native wildlife in a last-ditch effort to preserve dwindling populations. The United States, by continuing to allow the importation of wild birds, renders attempts at protection by these countries meaningless.

In an effort to dramatize the plight of wild birds and underscore the desperate need for an immediate ban on all importation, The HSUS recently undertook an investigation with two important goals. The first was to document how continued refusal by the United States to ban importation was undermining efforts by those countries that were trying to halt the export of birds. The second was to obtain evidence of the suffering these birds endured during capture and transport.

Honduras represented a prime location for such an investigation to take place. In 1990 the Honduran government had banned the capture and/or export of any native wild animal. Previously, Honduras had been the sixth largest exporter of wild birds to the
United States. Dr. Grandy had information that suggested that the capture and traffic in wild birds in Honduras were still prevalent.

On May 16, 1991, David Wills, HSUS vice president of investigations, and Frantz Dantzer, North Central regional director, arrived in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. In nine days, they traveled over a thousand miles, visited several suspected poaching operations, and saw more than 1,000 illegally captured parrots and macaws destined for the United States.

The first site they visited was in southern Honduras near Choluteca. The town is only a few kilometers from the border of Nicaragua; it was believed that a poaching operation collected birds from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras, then transported the birds overland along the Pan-American highway, through Mexico, and eventually into the United States.

Through a local interpreter, Messrs. Dantzer and Wills got directions to a location near town where a man "had a lot of birds for sale."

We drove about eight kilometers east of town and turned down a rutted dirt road that nearly took the bottom off of the car we were driving. It was hot and sticky. Even with the air conditioning running full blast, we were still sweating. At the entrance to the site, we were met by a large man who carried a machete. We were to observe later that every male over the age of ten carried a machete, but at that moment the sight of a clearly suspicious face and what appeared to be a very sharp machete provided us with no great confidence.

We drove into the compound where six

**A UNIQUE UNDERTAKING**

The HSUS is currently providing funding, expertise, and manpower to rehabilitate and release into the wild more than 1,000 birds discovered during its Honduran investigation. With the full cooperation and support of the Honduran government, the HSUS placed a rehabilitation team in Honduras on July 2, 1991.

The team leader was Karolann Kemenosh, a biologist from Anchorage, Alaska, with extensive experience in wildlife rehabilitation. Dr. Kemenosh gained nationwide attention for her successful rehabilitation of bald eagles after the Valdez disaster. Joining her are Curtis Clumpper, a wildlife rehabilitator from The Progressive Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) in Lynnwood, Washington, and veterinarian Charles Yates of North Andover, Massachusetts.

In July this team designed and constructed flight cages, implemented a scientifically balanced diet rich in calcium and other dietary needs, and began clinical care of birds in greatest need. Thirty parrots had been "flighted" and readied for release before the end of the month. Mr. Clumpper and Dr. Yates left Honduras on July 28. Dr. Kemenosh remained to take care of the birds. She traveled to several sites where the birds were to be released and protected and coordinated efforts with local biologists and conservationists who would continue the project after her work was completed.

The project has generated great interest. Drug companies donated supplies. Dr. Ted Eamber of Nester Bird Food Company provided more than seven hundred pounds of special diet food to the project. Special assistance came from Mr. Neil Boyl at the Honduran embassy in Washington, D.C., and Honduran Minister of Natural Resources Mario Nullo Campero.

The rehabilitation and subsequent release of parrots and macaws mark the first such effort of its kind in Central America. Tracking these birds is critical to plans to restore wild areas that have been stripped of native species. The political model of cooperation between a nongovernmental agency in the United States and the government of another country can serve as an example for future joint efforts. Perhaps most importantly, the success of this project can be measured by the improved health of the birds themselves. It was their desperate plight that served as the catalyst for this unique undertaking by the HSUS.
men stood staring at us rather intently. They all carried machetes as well. One guy also carried what appeared to be a nine-millimeter pistol. We sat in the car while our interpreter got out and engaged one of the men in a lengthy conversation.

Our interpreter came back to the vehicle and explained to us that the “owner” was in town but that the young man he was talking to was the “caretaker” and he would be glad to show us the birds.

Our guide/interpreter had told the men that we liked to take pictures of colorful birds and that perhaps we might be interested in purchasing a parrot or two. He also said that he told them that we were “poco loco,” an assertion that we had no grounds to quarrel with.

As we rounded the corner of the house, we were not prepared for the image before us. Suspended from a shed were over sixty cages filled with approximately 400 Amazon parrots. Some cages had as many 15 birds crammed against the wire, almost unable to move. The cages had no perches and many of the birds’ feet were swollen and bleeding. Few cages had any water, and no food was evident in any of them. All of the birds were young. They obviously had been captured from this year’s nestings.

Nothing can prepare you for the despair upon seeing these beautiful wild creatures, confined like so many heads of lettuce. Their eyes stared at us intently and the intelligence and the confusion were easy to ascertain. It is hard to describe the emotions and messages those eyes carried. We had known parrots were intelligent and marvelously complex animals. What we didn’t know and were not prepared for was how much it would devastate us to walk away from them, unable to help, unable to set them free.

When Frantz Dantzler and David Wills asked where these birds were to go, the young caretaker proudly replied “the United States.” He offered to sell them a single parrot for 40 lempira, about $8.00. If they bought 50 or more birds, the price would be reduced to $6.00 a bird. He guaranteed live delivery into the United States and took great pains to describe how they hired couriers to hide the birds tied and gagged in luggage, socks, and coffee cans to escape customs inspections at the border. They were also told that if they bought 50 birds, he would ship 60 or 70 to guarantee that enough survived to fill their order.

This scene would be replayed at each location HSUS investigators visited.

At one, on the north side of the country near the city of San Pedro Sula, they saw approximately 30 scarlet macaws destined for Florida.

Many of the birds [macaws] were so confined in cages that they could not turn around without bending their tail feathers. One large macaw kept biting and picking at his own chest while we stood there. He had managed to tear out his feathers to expose the skin underneath, which was now oozing blood, yet he continued to tear at himself. We wondered how long it would be before this stress-induced psychotic behavior would cause him to tear himself to death. We wondered how anyone could look these animals up in confinement like this. We wondered if we could buy the bird just to get him out of there. Unfortunately, that particular bird had already been paid for by an American in Florida, we were told.

By the time their investigation was concluded, HSUS investigators observed more than 125 macaws and 900 Amazon parrots. They photographed and videotaped monkeys, kinkajous, iguanas, hawks, toucans, and boas—all destined for sale in the United States.

It became apparent that Honduran attempts to protect its wildlife were meaningless in the face of current U.S. law.

On June 4, 1991, H.R. 2540 and S. 129 were introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate respectively. If passed, these bills would halt any importation of wild birds for sale as pets into the United States.

Several national conservation groups, along with the pet industry, are calling instead for a five-year phase-out on importation.

The HSUS believes that in five years it will be too late for imperiled species. We are opposed to a phase-out. All parties agree that continued legal importation of wild birds into the United States will guarantee the extinction within this decade of many of these species in the wild.

One cannot look at the footage obtained by HSUS investigators in Honduras and not be shaken by the senseless destruction. A five-year phase-out of importation is inadequate. This practice must be halted—now.