

Parrots: An Umbrella term (cockatoo pun intended)

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Known for their loud colors and even louder voices, parrots are often quickly recognized by the public as an icon in the bird world. However, when it comes to identifying to the level of family or species, most guests in my experience are only familiar with a few of the more common ones, like macaws, cockatoos or budgies.

“Is that a parrot or a macaw?”

This is a question many of us have probably heard countless times over our careers. Though it may be obvious to people in the avian field, the answer is that it's both. A macaw is a type of parrot. However, I offer the following challenge to you: instead of answering a guest quickly with the answer above and the exact species, see this parrot vs. macaw question as a conversation starter, a doorway, a Pandora's box if you will, into the crazy world of Psittacine biodiversity.

One way I approach this topic is by referring to parrots as an umbrella term. Depending on the guest, I will then maybe make a comparison to other various umbrella terms or categories we are more familiar with and/or use in our day-to-day lives. For example, whether it's species of cats, types of trees, or even cocktail drinks, it doesn't matter, as long as you make it relatable. Then I usually segue into how a macaw is a sub-category within parrots, but that within the macaw umbrella there are still 17 different species living today. If the guests haven't decided to move onto the next attraction or shaded spot by this point, I then generally sprinkle-mention some of my favorite parrot species. Hopefully this sort of interaction sparks some curiosity and future Google “Psittacine” searches after parting ways.

With roughly 389 species, it's hard to choose a favorite... but maybe consider some of these the next time you find yourself talking about parrots.

1. BUFF-FACED PYGMY PARROT (*Micrositta pusio*)

- Let's start small; we're talking 8.4 cm (3.2 in) in size and 10-15 g (0.35-0.5 oz) in weight. So small!
- Aside from the birds themselves, they also feature an even more adorable diet of lichen and fungi from bark, seeds, fruit and insects.

2. VASA PARROT (*Coracopsis vasa*)

- An unusually bald parrot, where feather loss on the head is normal during breeding season. Yes, you read that correctly.
- Notable for their striking all-black plumage!



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3. GANG-GANG COCKATOO (*Callocephalon fimbriatum*)

- Extremely cute and featuring bright sexual dimorphism, males of this species sport a beautiful bright orange/red head and iconic little wispy crest. And the females are 50 shades of gray.
- Described as having a croaking screech of a call (which my co-worker Chris Jenkins can confirm when they took over a tree outside his office at Melbourne Zoo).



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4. PALM COCKATOO (*Probosciger aterrimus*)

- A species with a large, erect, and prominent crest, goliath some would say.
- These cockatoos are also drummers and complex vocalists. Rock on!



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5. MOLUCCAN ECLECTUS (*Eclectus roratus*)

- Here's another very sexually dimorphic species, with males being a bright green with accents of red and yellow, while females sport bright red with yellow and purple pops of color.
- Often found singly, in pairs, or small groups.



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6. SPIX'S MACAW (*Cyanopsitta spixii*)

- The bird made famous by the movies Rio (2011) and Rio 2 (2014) ... no, that wasn't a Hyacinth Macaw.
- Listed as Critically Endangered (Possibly Extinct in the Wild).



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Hyacinth – Eats nuts from cow poop, not a Spix's macaw.

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7. HAWK-HEADED PARROT (*Derophtyus accipitrinus*)

- A species sporting a look most hairdressers would charge \$400+ to replicate.
- Their elaborate and fabulous fan of brightly-colored neck feathers can be raised and lowered and matches their beautiful barred breast plumage.
- Notable as the only member of the genus *Derophtyus*, and hailing from the Amazon Rainforest.



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8. KEA (*Nestor notabilis*)

- The only truly alpine parrot in the world.
- Innately curious, and the stars of a fair amount of viral video content.
- One of ten endemic parrot species in New Zealand.



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9. BURU RACQUET-TAILED PARROT (*Prioniturus mada*)

- A seasonally nomadic species.
- Pretty cool tail (Sorry no creative common photos but trust me, Google it!). Almost looks like an upside down kite, as the vane fans out to short tail streamers.
- Endemic to forest on the island of Buru, Indonesia.

10. PATAGONIAN CONURE (*Cyanoliseus patagonus*)

- Also known as the burrowing parakeet, named after its unique, excavated cliff side nests that can be up to 3 m (10ft) deep!
- Prefers a dry, open climate.
- Slightly sexually dimorphic - everything is on a spectrum nowadays.



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I could go on and on! Just the lorikeets alone had the ornithologists getting creative with names: ultramarine lorikeet (*Vini ultramarina*), mustard-capped lorikeet (*Trichoglossus meyeri*), coconut lorikeet (*Trichoglossus haematodus*) and the fairy lorikeet (*Charmosyna pulchella*), to name a few. Even within the generalities that most parrot species share, like not being sexually dimorphic, or generally living in warm, tropical environments, there are outliers. This is a reminder that nature always has exceptions, and that each species is specially adapted to live in their own unique ecosystem. Aside from a curved beak and zygodactyl feet (where two toes face forward and two face backwards), both characteristics every species of parrot shares, they also all face a sad reality. One in three parrot species are under threat and at risk of extinction in the wild today, mainly due to habitat loss and the illegal pet trade. This makes them the most endangered group of birds on earth.

This is why I challenge you to answer the silly, annoying, or maybe repetitious guest question about parrots vs. macaws. The conversation has the ability to open doors and make connections to something much bigger, to make the dialogue relatable and memorable to guests so they connect and hopefully start to care. You never know - there are so many amazing

species out there and a simple or seemingly small question may turn out to help save a species.

References

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