

On the alert for lost birds

Ron Toft explores **parrotalert.com**, an online service that aims to reunite stray parrots with their owners, and learns how it has helped distraught bird-lovers at home and abroad

BIRD RECOVERY

MORE and more parrot owners across the world are being reunited with their beloved missing pets as a direct result of an international, online lost and found service based in the UK.

Launched nearly three years ago, the free service – www.parrotalert.com – was the brainchild of information technology specialist Neil Rutherford.

After joining various online forums, Neil noticed that many fellow parrot owners were losing birds for a number of different reasons. He looked to see if there were any specific online services available to help people find their missing birds.

Much to his surprise, Neil discovered that he could not find any websites that the general public could use to submit lost and found reports, obtain updates from or ask questions through the internet. Nor were there any online services that incorporated a visual tool, such as a map.

In Neil's view, what was needed here was not a static reporting service, but a comprehensive, interactive facility. This would enable interested parties to be alerted immediately via the internet to lost or found parrots in their local area.

He says: "I spotted an opportunity to provide a community or social service, which I felt would truly help the many people who lose parrots, as opposed to people who have had them stolen."

Neil continues: "I also had the technical knowledge to set something like this up. Nobody else was really offering the sort of package I had in mind, so I decided to launch it myself – a bespoke, hand-crafted service."

The beauty of the website that Neil provides is its simplicity. Anyone searching for a lost bird can go online and register free of charge. Here, they have to provide a login name, password, email address and the name of the

country they live in. Then all members of the website have to do is simply describe the missing bird and provide information such as when and where it was last seen.

As soon as the "missing" message reaches parrotalert.com, the information it contains is immediately forwarded to members who live in the area where the bird was last seen. This is in the hope that someone has seen it or knows where it can be found.

"Not only is it emailed, but it's also automatically cross-posted to the respective parrotalert Facebook country group and Twitter within minutes," adds Neil. As well as this, various parrot societies, forums and vets are also informed.

He continues: "In effect, data about any missing parrot goes viral and receives an incredible amount of exposure. It's all about creating maximum awareness in the hope that somebody, somewhere, knows where any missing bird can be found."

More often than not, the results from parrotalert.com's email alerts are positive – sometimes literally within hours. Working like a satellite

navigation device, the website uses geographical positioning and targeting. Consequently, this invaluable feature of using mapping technology then allows viewers to see precisely where a bird has been lost or found.

The service currently operates in seven countries – the UK, Ireland,



Above: scarlet macaw – since parrotalert.com launched three years ago, more than 10,000 reports of lost birds have been received and distributed across seven countries. Left: an escape artist – Neil has found that cockatiels are the most common lost and found birds featured on his dedicated website



Australia, Canada, South Africa, Greece and the USA. There are plans in motion to make it available to the world's many Spanish-speaking nations.

Cockatiels, budgerigars, lorikeets, Amazons, macaws, cockatoos, Alexandrine (*Psittacula eupatria*) and eclectus parrots (*Eclectus roratus*), corellas, rosellas, kakariki and ring-necked parakeets are among the wide range of psittacines, that have been found as a result of parrotalert.com.

While African greys (*Psittacus erithacus*), cockatoos and budgerigars figure prominently in statistics, Neil has found that cockatiels (*Nymphicus hollandicus*) are the most common lost and found parrotalert birds.

For Neil, who works as a freelance IT specialist, parrotalert.com takes up about two hours of his time daily and he sees it as a hobby, or a community or social service, but not a business.

The costs of running the website are

subsidised by Neil himself, so donations are not only warmly welcomed, but actively encouraged.

Neil says: "Due to the large number of email alerts we send out daily, cheap shared hosting is not an option, due to the low maximum daily email limits imposed by hosting companies. A dedicated server is the method we currently employ to meet our goals."

The number of birds reported missing to parrotalert.com range widely from under 20 per day to as many as 40. Overall, more than 10,000 reports have been received since the service was launched in 2010.

"A problem shared is a problem halved," adds Neil. "Because we network with people daily, talk or overhear people saying things, a small bit of information can go a long way. Just passing on what little you know can help recover a lost bird. The more people we can alert, the greater the chances of finding a bird alive and well."

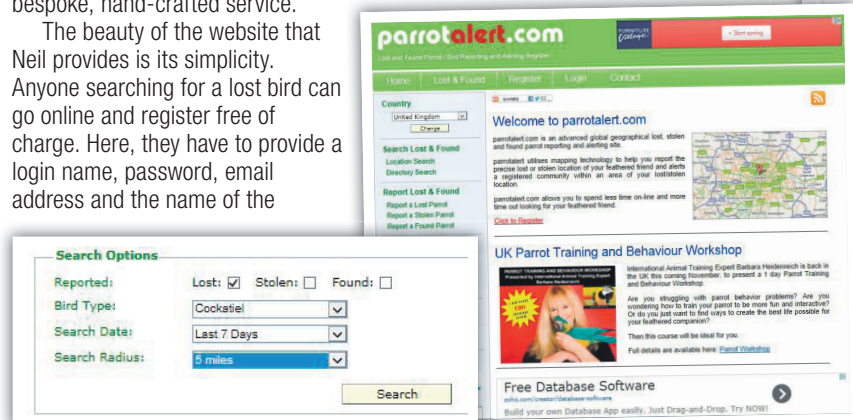
In July this year, the website received more than 44,000 visitors, the highest monthly total to date. Here, a satisfied customer comments: "Good luck to everybody still hoping to be reunited with their lost parrot children."

Neil can remember many examples of lost and found birds, including the case of an Amazon that disappeared in Hull. "It was subsequently found 45-50 miles away. A positive identification was made over the phone and the bird was collected by its relieved owner," he says.

Another prominent example was a missing African grey, which made its presence known by tapping with its beak on the window of a 15th floor apartment in a block of flats in Scotland. The man living in the apartment let the bird in and gave it some food. His daughter then searched lost parrots and found the owner's posting on parrotalert.com, complete with a phone number. She contacted the owner so the bird, named Gandalf, could be picked up.

Thanks to parrotalert.com, an Indian ring-necked parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*), which went missing in California, was found seven miles away from its home.

It's all about creating maximum awareness in the hope that someone knows where the missing bird is



Visitors to parrotalert.com can use the search tool (left), which allows members to enter the criteria to look for a reported lost bird; the homepage (centre); and the directory (right), where visitors can browse reports of lost birds, which include photographs and a map

Wider potential

TECHNOLOGY has changed a lot during the past three years since parrotalert.com was launched. This has resulted in Neil making plans to rebuild the website and also make the service available via mobile smartphones.

What's more, he is planning to create a new all-pet website called www.pingpets.com. This means that parrotalert.com will become a sub-set of pingpets – a site within a site. Neil says: "As dog walkers find parrots and cats often bring them home alive, I thought about reaching more pet owners to help boost the chances of finding lost birds and also provide a much-asked-for new service covering non-bird pets."

i For more information about parrotalert, visit the following web addresses:

- Website: www.parrotalert.com
- Facebook page: www.facebook.com/ParrotAlertFansPage
- FB group: www.facebook.com/groups/ParrotAlert.United.Kingdom/
- Twitter: www.twitter.com/parrotalert