

Argh! The first mate's a parrot!

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People who walk on pier four at the Port Washington marina know Harpo.

The white umbrella cockatoo can often be found on her perch on the afterdeck of the Maggie L, a Chris-Craft powerboat owned by Pete Pfeffer of Port Washington.

The cockatoo greets people by singing, "La-la-la-la-la."

"The moms and grandmas bring their kids to see Harpo," Pfeffer said. "When she's in good spirits, she'll sing, 'La-la-la-la.' Over water, sound really travels. A lot of people at the marina know her."



One time when he and his late wife Crissy walked into NewPort Shores restaurant, everyone in the lakefront establishment started singing, "La-la-la-la."

"It was a set-up. I couldn't stop laughing," Pfeffer said.

Harpo goes everywhere with Pfeffer, a security fraud analyst who moved from Chicago to Port Washington in 2009, three years after moving the Maggie L to the marina. He works from a home he rents on Pier Street.

"It's 230 steps from the front door to the marina," said Pfeffer, who takes Harpo to his boat almost every day, except during last week's hot, humid spell. He and Harpo stayed in the air-conditioned house then.

The beautiful white bird, who has light blue rings around her black eyes and yellow under-tail feathers that fan out like an umbrella when she preens, is about two-feet long from her bluish beak to the tip of her tail feathers. Her cage takes up half of the kitchen. She is allowed to fly freely when Pfeffer is in the house with her.

Harpo travels almost everywhere with Pfeffer, either in a carrying cage or perched on his shoulder.

"She's really good company," he said.

There is only one problem — Harpo has a tendency to get seasick.

"I can't go out when it's rough because she gets seasick," Pfeffer said. "I have to keep her in her cage below (when it's rough) and she doesn't do well. We don't go out unless it's flat."

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Harpo likes being out on calm waters. She sits on the wheel, Pfeffer's shoulder or anywhere she wants, enjoying the breeze as it ruffles her feathers.

A social bird with people she knows, she even sips a cockatoo cocktail from a straw.

Pfeffer, who has visited many marinas, said he's seen many dogs and a few cats on boats, but not another parrot.

He acquired the bird in 2007 when his wife, who loved animals, worked at a pet shop in Illinois.

"Harpo was in the back room with almost no feathers left," Pfeffer said. "Our theory is that someone bought her and couldn't give her the attention she needed. When a cockatoo is bored or depressed, it starts plucking out its feathers.

"When people buy a parrot, they don't understand what they're getting into. If you don't give them attention, they become very loud and can be obnoxious. Then, people shut them in a room by themselves, which is the worst thing you can do. The owners gave her back to the pet shop."

When he talked to his wife at the pet shop, Pfeffer could hear Harpo singing "La-la-la-la-la" in the background.

"Six weeks later, she called me and said, 'We own a bird,'" he said. "Her feathers starting coming back, but she still tends to pluck them when she's bored."

Pfeffer, who used to own sailboats, moved his powerboat from Chicago to Port in 2006, shortly after he and his wife visited the marina while cruising on the lake.

"Once we got into the harbor, we both said, 'This is where we belong,'" Pfeffer said. "It's a beautiful marina, and you can walk to the restaurants. It's such a convenient place.

"We joined the Yacht Club in 2006, so there's a parade of people stopping by. We have a wonderful circle of friends here."

But he did not expect to be living in Port alone. Crissy, who was athletic and had no symptoms of a heart condition, died of a heart attack in December 2008.

"We had planned to move to Port Washington," Pfeffer said. "I decided to follow through on the plan."

A well-cared for umbrella cockatoo can live 65 years or longer, so Pfeffer has already arranged for his daughter Sue, who lives in Saukville, to take Harpo when the time comes.

"She was my legacy from Crissy, and now my daughter will get her," Pfeffer said. "Harpo loves her and won't shut up until she pets her (when Sue visits)."

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Harpo even tolerates Sue's huge mastiff dog, but shows her talons if the dog gets too close, Pfeffer said.

Harpo is rarely alone long. If Pfeffer is working in his third-floor office, the bird is usually close by.

"She has a pretty good life," Pfeffer said. "If she wants something, she tells me. She'll say, 'Hi Harpo.' I look at her and I can tell what she wants. When the phone rings, she says, 'Hello.'

"When people she knows comes in, she's says, 'Hi,' and when they leave, she says, 'Bye.' She's a happy bird."

Harpo turned 13 on June 1.

"She's a teenager," Pfeffer said. "Now, I have to worry about sex, drugs and rock and roll."

Image Information: Harpo and Pete Pfeffer are familiar sights at the Port Washington Marina, where Pfeffer keeps his powerboat, the Maggie L.