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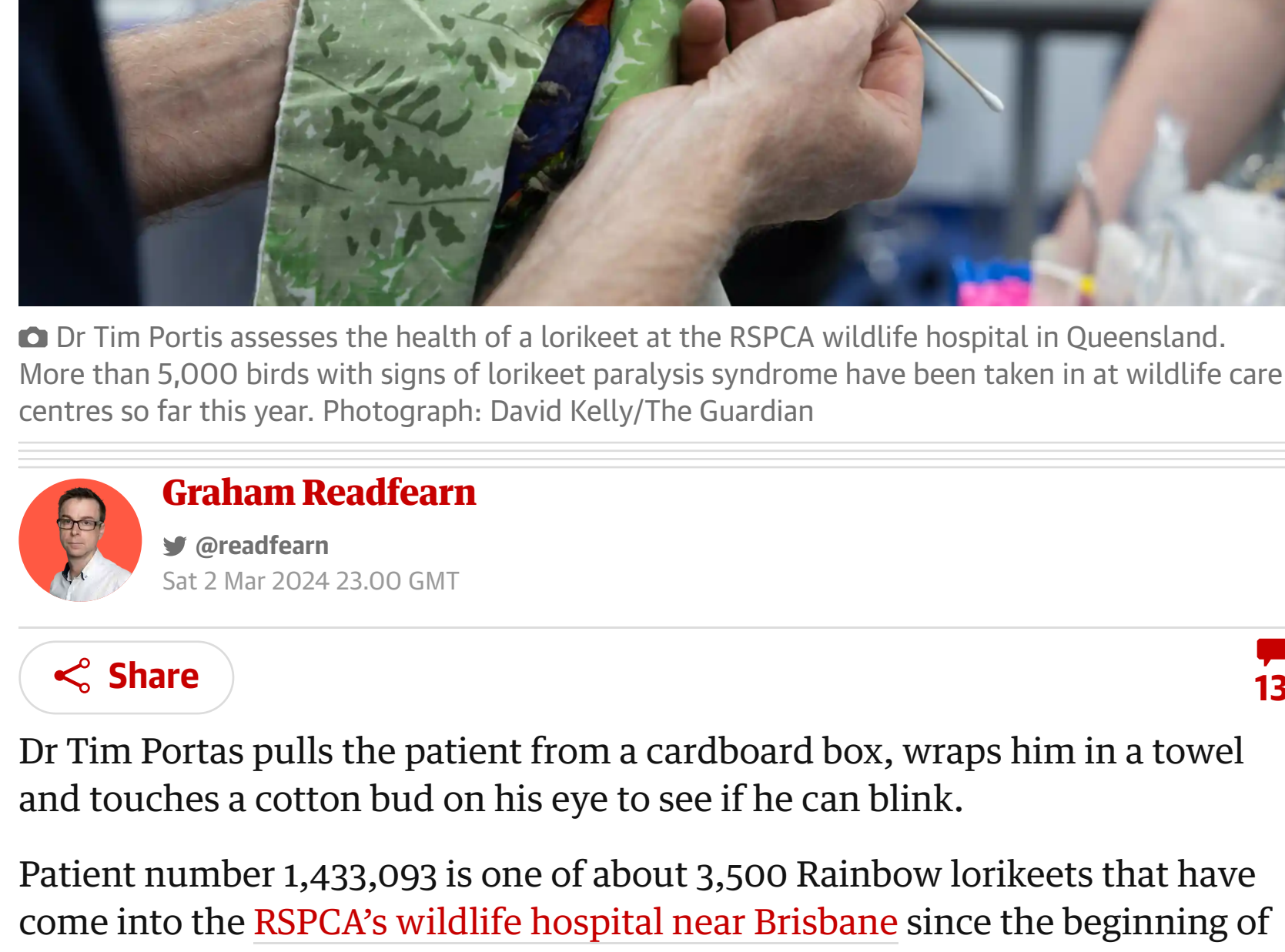
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## Birds

# What's paralysing thousands of rainbow lorikeets? Scientists search for the cause as volunteer carers are overwhelmed

A mystery paralysis syndrome is afflicting lorikeet populations in south-east Queensland and northern NSW at a rate scientists say they have never seen

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Dr Tim Portas assesses the health of a lorikeet at the RSPCA wildlife hospital in Queensland. More than 5,000 birds with signs of lorikeet paralysis syndrome have been taken in at wildlife care centres so far this year. Photograph: David Kelly/The Guardian

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Sat 2 Mar 2024 23:00 GMT

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Dr Tim Portas pulls the patient from a cardboard box, wraps him in a towel and touches a cotton bud on his eye to see if he can blink.

Patient number 1,433,093 is one of about 3,500 Rainbow lorikeets that have come into the [RSPCA's wildlife hospital near Brisbane](#) since the beginning of the year with a mystery paralysis.

This bird is one of the lucky ones. He can swallow and walk - albeit with a drunk-like gait, staggering across the triage room floor - so it's a quick injection of fluids and off to the aviary.

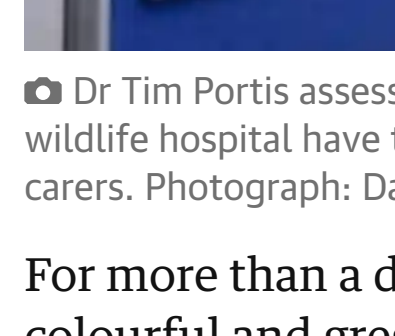
"He's a got good prognosis for recovery," says Portas, the hospital's veterinary director.

Across the corridor in the bird ward, a few dozen lorikeets are paired up in cages for more intensive care and hand feeding.

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"They're such a beautiful bird, but they're cheeky and cranky little buggers," says Jaimee Blouse, a senior nurse at the hospital.

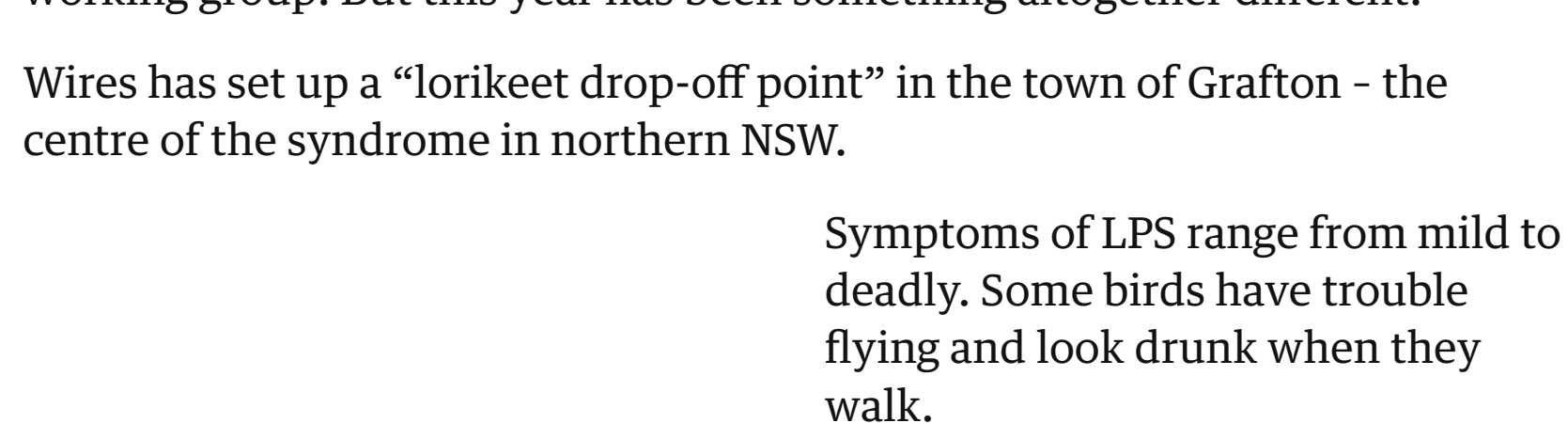
"They bite hard and they have sharp claws," she says, holding up her hands to show the scratches of treating hundreds of the distressed birds.



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By the time we have returned from the aviary, there are another dozen lorikeets inside boxes in a reception area waiting to be seen. In recent weeks, about 100 paralysed lorikeets a day have been coming in to the hospital.



Dr Tim Portas assesses the health of a lorikeet. About half of the birds that arrive at RSPCA wildlife hospital have to be euthanised, with the rest eventually being moved on to volunteer carers. Photograph: David Kelly/The Guardian

For more than a decade, Australia's most often sighted bird - a ridiculously colourful and gregarious high-speed parrot with an ear-piercing screech - has been going down with a mystery syndrome.

But this year, the numbers afflicted with so-called lorikeet paralysis syndrome (LPS) have been far and above anything seen before.

Across south-east Queensland and northern New South Wales - a hotspot for LPS cases - more than 5,000 lorikeets have been taken in at wildlife care centres since the beginning of the year.

"In the past it's been a trickle of cases," says Dr Tania Bishop, head vet at the [wildlife rescue charity Wires](#). "But then 2021 really spurred us on to form a working group. But this year has been something altogether different."

Wires has set up a "lorikeet drop-off point" in the town of Grafton - the centre of the syndrome in northern NSW.

Symptoms of LPS range from mild to deadly. Some birds have trouble flying and look drunk when they walk.

Others lose their ability to blink and their shrill screech starts to crack, and they struggle to swallow and breathe. If left untreated, the worst cases will die from starvation, dehydration or be an easy meal for other animals, including cats.

Wires wildlife vet Dr Tania Bishop says she has had to euthanise several hundred lorikeets this year. Photograph: Wires

Because of the sheer numbers, vets have been forced to prioritise which birds to try to nurse back to health, either at rehabilitation facilities or in the homes of volunteer licensed carers. Many hundreds have been painlessly euthanised with anaesthesia and then barbiturates.

Bishop has euthanised several hundred lorikeets this year. "Vets and carers really do care for their birds, but no one is trained to see death and suffering on a scale like this," she says.

### An avian whodunnit

Rainbow lorikeets are one of Australia's most common birds and the paralysis syndrome is only affecting a tiny percentage of the species.

But the scale of the suffering is making a [group of about 20 scientists coordinated by the University of Sydney](#) even more determined to understand the cause.

The syndrome peaks in summer and there is also concern some of Australia's large bats are also showing similar symptoms (the RSPCA hospital in Brisbane has treated about 250 flying foxes with paralysis this year).

"We're probably looking at five times more birds this year than we have had in the past," says Prof David Phalen, an avian vet at the University of Sydney who, along with Portas and Bishop, is among the scientists trying to unravel the mystery.

"We really need to get to the bottom of this but I'm hopeful this is the year we break into the cause," he says.

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The organs of the birds have been analysed, multiple necropsies carried out, toxicology tests completed and even DNA analysis of the birds' droppings. Samples of plants close to sites where birds have been found are also being checked.

Researchers have ruled out any infectious disease and there is no evidence so far that chemicals such as pesticides are to blame.

Phalen says the working hypothesis is that the birds are being affected by a toxin such as a bacteria or fungi, which could be growing on the plants they feed on.

The bird ward at Brisbane's RSPCA hospital contains birds deemed well enough to be transferred to an aviary for recovery. Photograph: David Kelly/The Guardian

Rainbow lorikeets feed on nectar, pollen and native fruits. But narrowing down what they are eating will be difficult.

Portas says DNA analysis of the gut contents of lorikeets has so far turned up about 150 different plant species.

"It's a real whodunnit kind-of mystery," he says. "But the challenge will be, once we know what it is, how do we control it?"

### The worst day

Phalen says the toll on vets and carers who have had to witness thousands of suffering birds has been high.

"These lorikeets - each one has its own personality. They're smart and beautiful and to have to kill bird after bird is terrible," he says.

Robyn Gray remembers one afternoon - "the worst day" - when she had about 200 lorikeets arrive in boxes and cages that were scattered around her house.

These rescued lorikeets have been transferred to an aviary and will soon be released. Photograph: David Kelly/The Guardian

Gray is a retired office clerk and a licensed volunteer carer for Wires and lives near Grafton. Her spare bedroom was turned into a makeshift triage ward.

"If they couldn't walk or swallow, we thought they were suffering and they needed to be euthanised. The poor birds were in a lot of pain," she says.

But Gray now has about 350 lorikeets recovering from LPS in two aviaries in her back yard. Some are getting ready to be released, as are about 50 of the birds with the RSPCA in Brisbane.

"Once it's all over I'll revisit everything and I will probably crumble after that," she says.

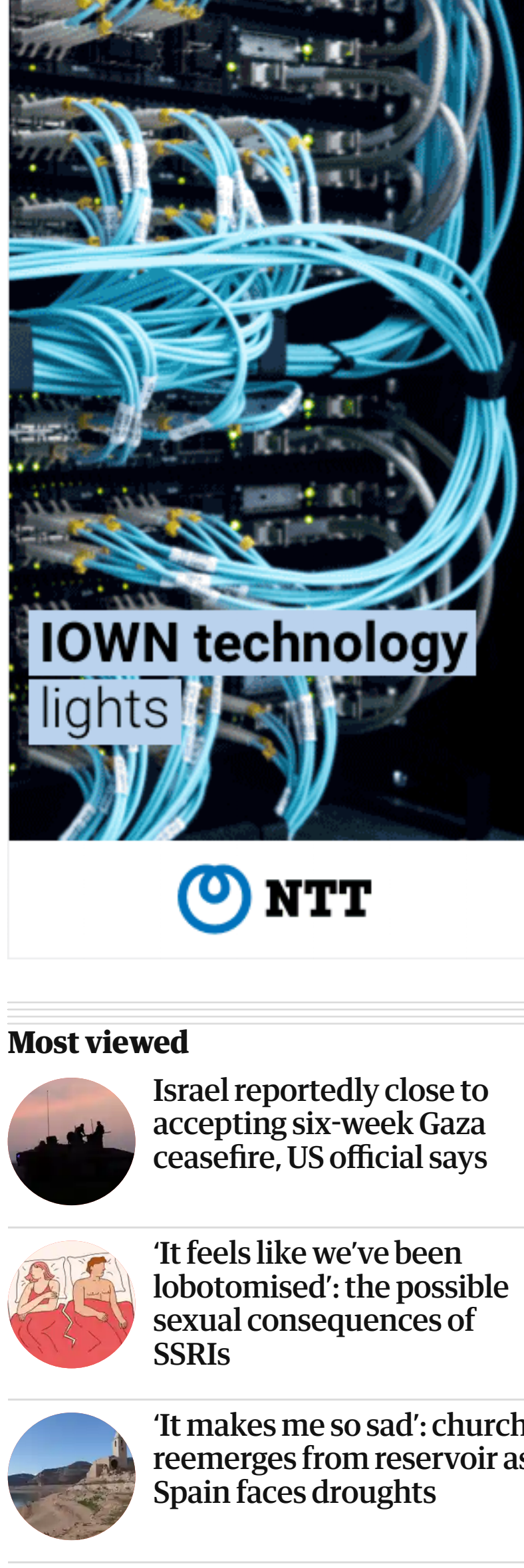
"They're all little lives and you want to save them all. You have to do something in this life to help, or else what's the point?"

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