

The Canadian World Parrot Trust Lends Major Support for the Conservation of the Imperial Amazon in Dominica

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In the November 2001 *PsittaScene*, Dr. Paul Reillo, Director of the Rare Species Conservatory Foundation (RSCF), outlined the joint RSCF-Dominican Forestry and Wildlife Division parrot conservation programme. It includes field monitoring of Dominica's two endemic parrot species -- the Imperial Amazon or Sisserou (*Amazona imperialis*) and the Red-necked Amazon or Jaco (*A. arausiaca*) as well as a strategic recovery plan for the Sisserou, the world's largest Amazon parrot and one of the rarest.

Recently this programme has received significant financial support from the Canadian World Parrot Trust (CWPT). In August 2001 the CWPT received a grant of CAN\$90,000 (approximately US\$58,500) from the Donner Canadian Foundation. This grant was given specifically for the Dominican conservation programme with 15% being retained by CWPT. Due to the positive working relationship between CWPT and RSCF and the effectiveness of the grant, CWPT received an additional CAN\$250,000 (approximately US\$162,500) from the Donner Foundation in January of this year.

This grant came into existence in an interesting way. The Donner Canadian Foundation is a private organisation that does not accept applications for funding. They go looking for projects to sponsor and wanted a new charity to donate to in Canada, specifically one that deals with conservation. Mr. Nick Roosevelt, one of the Trustees for the Donner Foundation, lives in Florida near RSCF. He contacted RSCF to learn about their work and was very impressed with the Dominica programme. Since CWPT had previously funded it through RSCF (with a grant from the Highbury Foundation in Vancouver), the Donner Foundation decided to contact CWPT about further funding opportunities. This has proved to be a very effective grant programme as both RSCF and CWPT have very low administrative costs and the vast majority of

funds go directly to the field. In fact, CWPT did not intend to keep 15% of the grant, but wanted to send as much as possible to the project. However, the Donner Foundation insisted that CWPT reserve some funds to cover administrative costs, to fund other projects, and to try to raise even more funds for this and other initiatives.

In the summer of 2001 Wayne Davey (CWPT Trustee) and I visited RSCF while on holiday to discuss our new working relationship. While CWPT had funded RSCF in the past, it was good to meet Dr. Paul Reillo and Karen McGovern (RSCF's Curator) in person and to see how closely their philosophy matches that of the CWPT. RSCF is a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving biodiversity through grass-roots conservation programmes rooted in sound science. RSCF employs the "flagship species" concept to identify and conserve high-profile, priority species and the ecosystems they represent. One of the things that Wayne and I liked best about RSCF's philosophy is their practice of co-operating with local



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governments to ensure that the projects not only have the backing of the government, but will be more likely to continue into the future with or without RSCF's presence. Since 1997, RSCF and the Dominican government have partnered to research Dominica's parrots and to conserve the Sisserou. Although the Forestry and Wildlife Division has been monitoring the parrots continuously since 1981, efficient methods to quantify the birds' population parameters and spatial distribution were lacking. By working with the Forestry Division, RSCF has been able to help them work out effective monitoring techniques using Global Positioning System (GPS) and Geographic Information System (GIS) technologies.

The money that CWPT has donated to the Dominica project has been used in several ways. Funds from the first grant went towards supporting the parrot team to monitor parrots. Grant money was used to engage the team in the



Dominica's Sisserou depends on the rainforest. The rainforest's future depends on you.



New poster.



Photo: Paul Reillo



A portion of the grant money will be used to finish and equip two apartments in the lower level of the new park Visitor Centre. These apartments will be used as a base camp for the parrot team and other researchers when they are doing field work.

Photo: Sandra Metzger

field while team members were on leave from regular civil service. The money from the first grant was also used to purchase a new 4-wheel drive truck for the Forestry Division. Due to the rough roads in Dominica and the steep topography, safe, reliable transportation is crucial for the team to be able to access their study sites. RSCF is using the money from the second grant to add a 10+ acre buffer zone to the edge of the Morne Diablotin National Park. This is an area that is currently used for agriculture, and is also used as a foraging area by both Sisserous (*Amazona imperialis*) and Jacos (*Amazona arausiaca*).

This buffer will provide additional protection to the only park area easily accessed by the public and will dramatically highlight the difference between the quality of the protected land on one side of the road and the agricultural land on the other. The remainder of the second grant will be used to finish and equip two apartments in the lower level of the new park Visitor Centre. These apartments will be used as a base camp for the parrot team and other researchers when they are doing field work, thus eliminating the need for an hour-long drive each way from Forestry headquarters to the Morne Diablotin National Park. Future plans call for a full-time Forester to be stationed in one of the apartments to provide better monitoring of the park and more patrols of the area accessible to the public.

As I mentioned, the Donner Foundation insisted that the CWPT retain 15% of the grant money. Their instruction was to see part of this money used to involve CWPT Trustees actively in the Dominica programme. In October 2001 Wayne Davey spent a week in Dominica with Nick Roosevelt and his family and with Paul Reillo. The purpose of this trip was for Nick to be able to meet a representative of the CWPT, and for both Nick and Wayne to meet the Forestry team and to become familiar with the conservation program. In April of this year I travelled to Dominica with Paul to spend a week in the field with the parrot team. That week in Dominica was one of the most enjoyable and exhausting weeks of my life.

Dominica is a very beautiful, pristine, rugged island. Approximately one-third of Dominica's 289



Dr Reillo prepares the peeper video camera system. The small camera, mounted on the end of the adjustable boom is used to monitor inside nest cavities using the telescoping pole to which it is attached.

square miles is protected either as nature reserve or national park. Mountains cover roughly 75% of the island. The majority of my time on Dominica was spent in and around the Morne Diablotin National Park area. I worked with both Paul and Stephen Durand (the Forestry Division's parrot team leader) monitoring both the Sisserou and the Jaco. While I was in Dominica, Lars Lepperhoff of WPT Switzerland was also there on holiday to see the project first-hand.

We spent the first day in the area of the Syndicate nature trail, the only park area easily accessed by the public and an active area for both Sisserou and Jaco nesting and foraging. During the approximately hour-and-a-half period that we spent at one lookout, we managed to spot about a dozen Jacos and two Sisserous foraging across the Picard River valley. These numbers are typical of what one might expect to see of the two species. Population estimates for the Sisserou put the

population at ~150 birds with local population densities rarely exceeding five birds per 1,000 acres. The Sisserou is a very shy bird and the two birds I saw on my first day were the only Sisserous I managed to see during the whole trip (although I did hear a few others). The Jaco population is estimated at ~800 birds and it is normal to see them foraging in groups of up to 30 at a time. They are a much more adventurous, gregarious species and are more tolerant of human activity.

The rest of my week was spent with Paul, Stephen and Lars hiking into different areas of the Morne Diablotin National Park and surrounding areas in an attempt to find and observe active Sisserou and Jaco nests. Hiking in Dominica is not an easy thing to do. The terrain is very steep and rough, and the "trails" were challenging and very muddy (even though it was the beginning of the dry season, we had rain every day). By the end of the week my legs were aching! The parrot team uses a variety of observational techniques. We divided our time between hiking various areas, listening and watching for parrots, and observing trees that had been active in the past to determine if they were being used and by which species.

Paul and Stephen also used the specialized video probe to inspect two nest cavities that had been previously used by Jacos. The team uses certain easy-to-access Jaco nests to determine the timing and success of a given nesting season. From what we observed while I was there it seems that the nesting season this year is late. While we did monitor some activity around nest sites and identify some nests believed to be active, most of the time we observed the birds foraging. This could be due to a combination of a very wet "dry season" this year, abundant rainforest fruits, and an overall vegetation recovery from last year's record drought.

So what does the future hold for the Sisserou and the Dominica project? Hopefully the future is bright. The CWPT is looking forward to a continued funding relationship with both RSCF and the Donner Canadian Foundation, and I am hoping for another chance to spend some time with the highly talented and dedicated parrot team in Dominica.



The Parrot Team, from left Stephen Durand (Parrot team leader), Matthew Maximea, Ronnie Winston and Paul Reillo. A new 4 wheel drive truck has been purchased for the Forestry Division using part of the grant money. Photo: Paul Reillo



Red-necked Amazon, or Jaco. Photo: Paul Reillo