

PsittaScene



IN THIS ISSUE:

Thick-billed Parrots
WPT Expedition - Peru



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Cover Picture By BILL KING

A wild Mitred Conure (*Aratinga mitrata*) having a go at a mango in the Mizque valley, Bolivia. It is a widespread, highly successful parrot of the Andean foothills.

Extensive trapping and trade from Bolivia has made this species a common pet parrot in Europe and North America. The Mitred Conures and their relatives are among the most successful feral parrots now established in many rural areas around the world.

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Thick-billed Parrots in Mexico

By CLAUDIA MACIAS-CABALLERO, ERNESTO C. ENKERLIN-HOEFLICH and MIGUEL ANGEL CRUZ

The Thick-billed Parrot (*Rhynchopsitta pachyrhyncha*) is globally threatened and conservationists have emphasized the need for its protection in the IUCN's Global Parrot Action Plan. The species has long been considered endangered and is closely dependent on pine forests for food. Populations of the Thick-billed Parrot have declined markedly in Mexico mainly due to large scale felling of the pine forests of the Sierra Madre Occidental. The species has also been under stress from extensive trapping for the pet and aviculture trades. Thick-billed Parrot is not limited to virgin forest and can exist in selectively logged areas where suitable dead standing trees for nesting are available and trapping does not occur. While the parrots still persist in suitable numbers in the best remaining forested areas, all such areas will surely be cleared of their large trees in the near future unless conservation efforts continue and prove to be successful (Snyder et al. 1999, Enkerlin et al. 2000).

After eight years of study (1995-2002), we have gained a better understanding of the biology and ecology of the species and of important features to consider plans for its management and conservation. We have achieved the protection of the most important nesting area for the species: Tutuaca Forest Reserve (Cebadillas de Toasanachi). The old growth forests in Sierra Madre Occidental have suffered an immoderate tilling during more than 100 years up to a point where it is estimated that old growth forests have been reduced to less than 0.06% of their original distribution (Lammertink et al 1996). Therefore new conservation strategies have to be implemented, including improving the quality of life of local people, which reduces logging pressures and at the same time provides real economic alternatives.

Goals and objectives

Our goal addresses the broader framework of the Mexico Conservation Program. We use a practical, multiscale approach that includes species, ecosystems and

landscapes to achieve conservation and sustainable development. Specific objectives include:

- Continue the study of breeding biology and habitat requirements for the species through monitoring nesting effort and nesting success in known breeding areas
- Document chick mortality causes
- Document the foraging ecology of the species, as well as document the chicks' diet components during breeding season
- Participate in the screening of wild bird diseases
- Document movements and site fidelity of some breeding pairs that have been translocated in the past two years within the current breeding range
- Continue the development of innovative, community-based conservation mechanisms through ecological planning, sustainable forestry, and habitat conservation plans
- Integrate high quality biological information in a general model framework for conservation, using charismatic flagship species

Methods

We have a research team located in the Sierra Madre Occidental. Field observation was the primary technique of study. Status and distribution studies for the Thick-billed Parrot involved on-the-ground surveys, interviews and counts at roosts, especially during the non-breeding season. We monitored active nests in all nesting areas using climbing gear to verify their contents and assess their reproductive stage. Once the eggs were laid, we recorded the conditions inside the cavity and width and



length of the eggs. Each egg was individually marked with a number and colour in non-toxic paint. After a chick hatched, we recorded the weight, wing-chord length and feather conditions of the chick every 7 days in most cases, and at least every 15 days in remote nests. The relationship between nesting success and forest maturity was analyzed from several standpoints: sizes of nest trees, growth rates of young, feeding rates at nests correlated with stand characteristics, and sizes of foraging ranges of nesting birds. Health effects on nesting success were investigated by screening nestlings and older birds for diseases and parasites.

Results and discussion

As in previous years, before the nesting season started we fumigated almost 40 nest cavities to control parasitism and reduce chick mortality. From July to October 2002, our field crew in Chihuahua monitored the Thick-billed Parrot nesting season, documenting the parameters of reproductive output of the species, the number of nests that had breeding activity during 2002 season, the annual productivity and success rates.

Productivity and success

We monitored 33 accessible nests cavities with eggs, 21 in Madera, 5 in Bisaloachi, 5 in San Juanito and 2 in Mesa de las Guacamayas. However not all nests could be monitored due to the snags' weakness. Information on reproductive variables was obtained for 33 clutches in accessible nests (Table 1). Of these, 10 were total failures and 23 were successful, for an overall success rate of 87%. Clutch size ranged from one to six eggs; although most of the clutches (48.48%) had three eggs. Two and four egg clutch represented 39.39%, one and six egg clutch with 12.12%. None of the clutches had 5 eggs. This season 93 eggs were laid. The two nest cavities inspected at Mesa de las Guacamayas were successful and showed an average of 3 chicks per nest. None of the 5 nests in Bisaloachi failed, however one egg did not hatch and one chick died of unknown causes. The chick/nest average for



The Thick-billed Parrot is not limited to virgin forest.

Photo: Javier Cruz

Bisaloachi was 2.4, the same as San Juanito's. Madera's nest success was 85.7% with an average of 2.2 chick/nest. Fledglings per nest for the 2002 season were the same as previous years' (1.6), similar parameters showed mean clutch size, percentage of eggs hatched, and brood size per nest (Monterrubio et al 2002). Percentage of chicks that fledged was lower than previous years average (70). We need to continue monitoring the breeding effort/productivity to document tendencies for the species population. We also determined mammal depredation as the main cause in chick's mortality.

Experimental translocation

Pair translocation was not possible during 2002 season mainly because the Thick-billed Parrots captured showed a weight considered below the required to carry the radio transmitters (380g). However we have conducted wild translocations in previous years, as potential strategy for bringing the Thick-billed Parrots back to Arizona and New Mexico, where they once existed. We carried out in 2000 an experimental translocation of two pairs from the southern-most nesting location to the northern-most nesting location. The

translocated pairs remained each in their new nesting site, selected a nesting cavity, and successfully reared offspring (two chicks). However the next season (2001), we monitored and radio-tracked those birds and found out the birds came back to their original breeding site, chose new nesting cavities and successfully nested. These results lead us to think that translocation of wild parrots from Mexico could be a successful strategy for reestablishing the species in their original range in the United States. Efforts of reintroduction to the wild have been unsuccessful, despite all the money spent in different projects. APC has determined translocation of healthy Mexican populations into the U.S. could be the only way to re introduce the species into its original distribution range.

Food availability

Because of logistical limitations, no systematic sampling of pine seed availability was carried out during the study, although qualitative assessments of food availability and foraging behaviour were made on an irregular basis. During 1995, 1997, 1998 and 2001, frequent parrot flocks (a minimum of three a day) were observed foraging on large emergent durango (*Pinus durangensis*) and white pines (*Pinus ayacahuite*) in the Cebadillas-Piceas, and Madera study areas. In contrast, pinecone crops were obviously poor in 1996, 1999 and 2000 and we noted no Thick-billed Parrot foraging flocks in the nesting localities in those years.

Disease analyses in wild and captive birds

During the 2000 breeding season we collected some fecal samples from Thick-billed Parrot chicks as part of our collaboration in the project led by Nadine Lamberski from Riverbanks Zoological Park & Botanical Garden. She is studying

Table 1. Parameters of 2002 season reproductive output of Thick-billed Parrots compared with previous seasons.

Parameter/Year	1995-2001	2002
Accessible nest with eggs	187	33
Nest Success (%)	80	87
Number of eggs	510	93
Mean clutch size	2.7	2.8
Eggs hatched (%)	79	77
Brood size per nest	2.1	2.3
Chicks that fledged (%)	75	70
Fledglings per nest	1.6	1.6
Fledglings per egg (%)	60	58

Thick-billed Parrot diseases in the wild and in captivity in United States and Mexico.

Management and conservation implications

We interacted with local people in order to explore new chances to cooperate and protect important areas. Due to the synergy generated by several NGOs' efforts, we have been able to protect the most important nesting area: Tutuaca and redefine it as a Forest Reserve. We are trying to protect some other important sites for the species, according to the goals proposed on the Priority Species Recovery Project (*Proyecto de Recuperación de Especies Prioritarias*) of the Mexican Government (Semarnap 2000). Among these areas are Madera, the only place where the parrots nest on aspen trees and Mesa de las Guacamayas, the most northern nesting site. Due to Madera's importance for Thick-billed Parrots, we elaborated the Justification Technical Study to declare Madera as a Sanctuary. In November 27th 2002 the Mexican National Official Diary published the notice addressed to the general public about the studies availability, which justify decree

expedition to declare Madera as a Sanctuary with a surface of 2,800 hectares. We have been participating in several meetings, carried out among collaborators and project participants, such as Sierra Madre Alliance, Naturalia, The Wildlands Project, Unidos para la Conservación, Pronatura Noreste, Chihuahua Government Tourism Secretary, Chihuahua Government Ecological Secretary; in order to design and develop joint projects in Sierra Madre Occidental.

Future work

We are looking for different strategies to preserve the important areas, such as ecological servitudes, forestry activities re-planning studies and implementation of ecosystem sustainable management practices. These actions will increase local people forest's value, provide real economic alternatives, improve agricultural practices, avoid soil loss and degradation, fire prevention and at the same time reduce community's dependence on logging activities.

We want to integrate the Mesa de las Guacamayas to the efforts carried out to create a Biosphere Reserve at Janos. We



Photo: Javier Cruz

will closely work with leaders in this Biosphere Reserve proposal and with authorities and different partners interested in preserving these important areas. We also will continue monitoring the breeding effort, productivity and population tendencies for the species and involvement with local people for the species conservation, continue fieldwork on nest parasite control, disease evaluation and determine migratory movements, through telemetry techniques in order to implement the translocation program of Thick-billed Parrots.

Wintering areas exploration is required. There is barely any knowledge of the wintering habits and requirements for the species. There are few potential wintering areas remaining in Sierra Madre Occidental Mountains, therefore we need to determine crucial wintering areas for Thick-billed Parrots conservation. We must also finalise construction of ecotourism cabins in Tutuaca Forest Reserve and raise funds.

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Young Thick-billed Parrots look out of their nest.

Photo: Javier Cruz

The Barcelona bird market

By LINDA ADAM, Australia

August 2003 was the first time that I came face to face with the full impact of the term "wild-caught". Many will read this and wonder at my ignorance but I only recently entered the "parrot world" (3 years ago) when I acquired my beloved first psittacine in the UK, an aviary-bred African Grey (Jambo) (*Psittacus erithacus*).

I had always been against this abhorrent treatment of what I consider one of the world's most charismatic and intelligent creatures - but until I witnessed for myself wild-caught parrots screaming in desperation while being sold on an open market, I had not really taken in the awful reality.

During this business trip to Spain, I discovered "Las Ramblas", the famous market area of Barcelona, where I came across the "Las Ramblas Dels Estudils" or "Rambla Des Ocells" (birds), described by the *Lonely Planet* travel booklet on Spain (p312), as being so named because of the "twittering of birds for sale in the bird market".. "Twittering" is in fact romanticising of the sound of birds in despair.

My heart broke as I contemplated the depths to which man will sink in order to satisfy his greed and those of others.

The ignorant public might think that these are captive bred Greys even though their behaviour suggested otherwise: fear of humans, continuous growling as one approached the cages, cowering into corners of the cages and severe stress evident by pulling at wing feathers and screaming.

What a pitiful and disturbing sight it all was. Some Greys were cowering in the corner, some were "growling" when people came close to inspect them or to whistle foolishly at what they thought would make a delightful house pet. All were too hot, noticeable by rapid panting and had filthy water bowls with little or no water and only sunflower seeds to eat. The cruel conditions under which these beautiful, precious creatures were kept was unbelievable.

To add to the birds' suffering, I found out that the traders only packed up at around

10pm which meant that these poor creatures are subject to over 12 hours of constant crowds, traffic noise, pollution, sirens etc while exposed. This of course does not take into account the incessant noise during the night to which they are exposed while "shut up" for the night. How much further removed can this be from the natural habitat from which they have been uprooted and more importantly, in an animal that requires around 10 -12 hours of sleep per day? The stress involved must be unbearable.

The "shutting-up shop" process has also to be seen to be believed. The birds are simply "concertina-ed" up into the traders' stalls which fold inwards like a "z" card. The birds are squashed in along with all the other merchandise sold by the traders - other cages, stands, seeds, toys, iguanas in their tanks, other birds etc. The near-suffocation experienced by the birds is inconceivable, let alone the spread of disease. There they remain all "squashed and folded up" for the night while drunken



Frustration and feather-picking- clearly not used to being in captivity!

revellers cavort nearby, cars screech past and sirens wail throughout the night, ignorant of what is boxed up in 3-4 of the cubicle-type kiosks on the avenue.

So, for me to leave this behind (albeit with an extremely heavy heart and despair for humanity) was a relief, as was my first visit to Paradise Park Wildlife Sanctuary in Cornwall en route home. How therapeutic to see happy, healthy birds kept in ideal conditions!

I believe firmly that one of the key actions in the battle against wild-caught birds is to ban the trade, but see this as part of a 3-pronged action plan:

- 1 Ban the trade
- 2 Dry up the demand
- 3 Offer an alternative

Greater public awareness of the benefits of aviary-bred, captive birds versus the wild-caught variety needs to be implemented as well as the identification of the latter.

It should also be emphasised that parrots are for life and that owning a parrot requires a long term plan in the event of the death or disability of its owner.

The trapper is involved in this activity because he wants to support his family in a country wrought with poverty and corruption. Would it not be an idea thus to offer these trappers an alternative to trapping birds? I am suggesting a type of co-partnership with large organisations such as Worldvision and UNICEF who are active in the education and training of people in all third world countries to make them more self-sufficient, preventing the reliance on first-world financial handouts and damage to their delicate environment.

Is this too idealistic? Who knows, but most things are worth a try if it means saving these precious birds!



The fold-out kiosk into which everything is squashed at night.

WPT expedition an outstanding success

By ROSEMARY LOW

Fourteen days of unsurpassed enjoyment is how I would describe the World Parrot Trust's members' expedition to Bolivia and Peru. How high were my expectations - yet they were exceeded! The itinerary might have been made in heaven! It was the first time that the Trust had put together a package just for its members. The advantages of such a group were threefold: our itinerary was tailor-made, we had the benefit of the guides who were familiar with the species we most wanted to see, and we had the company of other Trust members. We also had enormous luck - something that the best of planning cannot take into account.

We started off in Bolivia but, reversing chronological order, our adventures there will be recounted in the February issue of *PsittaScene*.

After a wonderful couple of days in Cusco, learning about the Inca empire, we flew to Puerto Maldonado to experience the contrast of Peru's forests and rivers. We were joined on the flight by Charles Munn, whose pioneering conservation work in the Peruvian rainforest is known throughout the world. At the frontier town in the southern lowlands, we boarded a ten-seater motorised canoe. During the three-hour journey (briefly on the Tambopata River and then on the Madre de Dios), Charlie told us how he has used macaws as the flagship species to protect and preserve thousands of acres of habitat. Manu National Park covers 1.5 million hectares and the research centre at Tambopata, 10 hours up the river, is now legendary. In 1990 the Tambopata-Candamo Reserved Zone was created, bounded by the Bolivian



Charlie Munn.
Photo: Tomoko Imanishi

border. It surrounds the Rio Heath sanctuary to which we were headed.

Charlie told us that in the combined Tambopata-Madidi Protected areas, which are about 20% the size of the UK (and reach from lowland rainforest up to 19,000ft glaciers) there could be 10,000 to 20,000 pairs of each of the three species of large macaws: Green-winged, Scarlet, and Blue and Yellow. Few areas in the world



Green-winged Macaws waiting to descend to the lick.
Photo: Krystyna Szulecka

have such a rich biodiversity. However, among the biggest threats to the protection of south-eastern Peru are gold-mining and the use of mercury to concentrate the gold. Lost mercury poisons the rivers and the miners strip off the finest topsoils to get to the gold dust in the sands of former river bottoms.

Eco-tourism and finding uses for more tree species will help to maintain the biodiversity. Protection of the clay licks will be vitally important for the future of the macaws and of the region, as eco-tourism develops. These clay licks, of which there are probably about one hundred in Peru, are high among the world's most spectacular wildlife attractions.

Our canoe crossed the border into Bolivia then headed upstream (south) along the Rio Heath. The Heath Lodge and its comfortable cabins are situated in the forest close to the river. We did not see it in daylight as we had a 3.30am call next morning. The night had been surprisingly cool and blankets were called for on our mosquito-netted beds!

Setting off at 4am (with four or more layers of clothes, plus lifejackets!) for what promised to be the most exciting day of the trip, we ran aground almost immediately onto a sandbank. Imagine the scene: three of our men with trousers rolled up to their knees jumping into the Rio Heath in the dark and pushing the canoe! This caused a good deal of hilarity but resulted in us taking more than one and a half hours to



How beautiful are Mealy Amazons in their natural habitat!

Photo: Priscilla Old



The floating hide (above) and the lick (right).

Photos: Rosemary Low

travel the 10km (6 miles) to the lick. This problem will be solved next year with the introduction of special, shallow-draft boats. This will reduce to less than 45 minutes the time it takes to reach the lick, a journey that is slow and difficult only during the low-water months of July, August and September.

When we arrived it was light and already bustling with parrot activity. A few macaws had overtaken the canoe and, as we came near to the lick, the cries of Mealy Amazons (*Amazona farinosa*) filled the air. They were circling around above a large tree. In the top I could see a young one and hear its loud demands for food!

An exhilarating spectacle

We disembarked from the canoe on to the floating hide in front of the lick. Inside seats were positioned around the sides, with a ledge for our cameras and binoculars and just above it observation slits in the palm thatch. As I sat down excitement surged through me! About to unfold in front of us was one of the most colourful and exhilarating spectacles of the tropics! This is as good as it gets where birdwatching is concerned - and we had the privilege of viewing it in comfort!

The lick consisted of an exposed bank of yellowish clay about 4.5m (15ft) high, topped with tall straggly white-barked trees and lower vegetation. The branches of some of the straggly trees were bare, no doubt stripped over the years by visiting macaws. But the macaws are the most wary visitors and always the last to come in. First come the small ones, the little Weddell's Conures, inconspicuous and grouped closely together on the lower face. This species is common and widespread throughout the Amazon region.

The Blue-headed Pionus are also early arrivals, unmistakable with their brilliant head coloration and red under tail coverts. They, too, keep together on the lick face,

more manoeuvrable and flighty than the big Mealy Amazons that soon come down, after perching for a while in the trees to survey the scene.

How beautiful are Mealties in their natural habitat! They have a *joie de vivre*, an exuberance that is rarely seen in captive birds. The sun lights up their silvery backs as they drop down on to the lick face with a confidence lacking in the little Pionus. Known in Ecuador as *loro real*, they are indeed the kings of the mainland Amazons, big, bold and boisterous. I watch one holding a piece of clay in his foot, then striking out with his foot at another Mealy trying to take it. I watch Mealties swinging on a palm frond close to the clay face. (I

have always loved Mealties - so underrated in aviculture. I think of the sad birds imported into Britain from Guyana every year. What right do we have to deprive them of their rightful existence?)

Four Green-winged Macaws fly over. Now more macaws are landing in the trees above the lick. Green-wings and more Green-wings, shrieking and dropping into the trees, playing on the wind a little, giving us the opportunity to photograph them with open wings. They look wonderful! Very cautious at first, they take their time to assess that it is safe, then drop down directly on to the clay, or hang on a branch of a tree in front of the bank, swinging there playfully.



A small number of Severe Macaws frequented the lick.

Photo: Priscilla Old



Green-winged Macaws, dropping down, feasting on the clay.

Photo: Priscilla Old

The volume of their calls fills the air and their sensuous redness causes me to draw in my breath with happiness. In front of us is a constantly changing scene: macaws dropping down, feasting on the clay, taking off, circling around in pairs emitting their deep, throaty calls, then coming back for another feed of clay.

Fifty or sixty Green-wings were present. Where were the Scarlet Macaws? Only one pair was in evidence. They came early and did not stay long. Does that mean, I wondered, that most pairs of Green-wings don't stay long, either, that there are so many they are soon replaced by others? I suspected not, rather that most Green-wings were not in a hurry to leave. In fact on that first morning we had incredible luck for the Green-wings stayed for one hour and 25 minutes, which is two to three times the average length of the "macaw show".

Early on we had been thrilled to see, among the Pionus, two little parrots, gleaming emerald in the sun, their red under wing coverts briefly visible in flight. Through binoculars I studied their beautiful faces with striking contrasting markings of orange and black. These were the Barraband's or Orange-cheeked Parrots (*Pionopsitta barrabandi*), a species that is virtually unknown in aviculture.

They were one of four species present in small numbers that morning, along with a family of Yellow-fronted (Yellow-crowned) Amazons that did not stay long, a small number of Severe or Chestnut-fronted Macaws and a few Golden-crowned (Peach-fronted) Conures (*Aratinga aurea*).

Parrots and mammals, including monkeys, peccaries and tapirs, that eat leaves and seeds, are dining on toxins that could kill them. The seeds and leaves of many tropical plants evolved to contain toxic compounds to ward off seed-eaters. Unfortunately for them, the seed-eaters learned a trick or two - that the consumption of clay would prevent these toxins from entering the bloodstream. Our Director, Jamie Gilardi, has studied geophagy (as soil-eating is known) and suspects also that the clay protects the mucus film of the gastro-intestinal tract, preventing chemical irritation. It has also been suggested that parrots and other animals find beneficial minerals in clay.

Clay seams of interest

Some clay seams are of particular interest and are mined with enthusiasm by macaws, while other clay faces are ignored by all animals. They definitely know what they are looking for!

The incidence of the species at this and other licks is interesting. Is it coincidence that the biggest-beaked macaws and Amazons were present in the largest numbers? Probably not. The strength of their beaks means that they can open a wider variety of seeds and nuts than smaller-beaked species which perhaps (mere speculation, this!) take less seed and more nectar and fruit pulp. The predominantly nut- and seed-eating species need to visit the lick more frequently. Charles Munn told us that Green-winged Macaws mainly inhabit the *tierra firme* forest where there is an abundance of trees with toxic and armoured seeds whereas the Scarlet Macaws also live in the flood plain. At one clay lick he had climbed a 45m (150ft) tall tree and used it as an observation tower to observe the direction from which the macaws came. In an hour he watched 54 Green-wings fly in - 52 from the *tierra firme* forest.

The predominance of Green-wings, when there were plenty of Blue and Yellow Macaws in the area, interested me. Charles Munn told us that there are about one hundred clay licks in the region but Blue and Yellow Macaws are present at only five or six - and in the hundreds at two of these.

... and on to Sandoval Lodge

There is still a great deal to be learned about the feeding habits of the large macaws - but one fact is certain. Their habit of visiting clay licks is the key to preserving huge tracts of rainforest. The large macaws are among the most charismatic birds on the planet and a huge draw to ecotourists. These macaws are normally glimpsed only fleetingly as they fly overhead. In good weather conditions clay licks provide almost guaranteed and unparalleled sightings of macaws and other parrots. Currently the licks at Manu, Tambopata and other sites in Peru draw more than 6,000 tourists annually, providing an incentive to preserve the birds and their habitat for people who might otherwise be out hunting or trapping parrots. Since 1984 the licks have generated approximately one thousand jobs at rainforest lodges. This type of tourism is increasing very fast.

Our enthusiasm for the Heath River lick was still high when we crawled out from under our mosquito nets at 3.30am next morning. This time the canoe had travelled only a few feet before it ran aground! So again it was 6am before we arrived at the lick. Four Severe Macaws were flying by the river bank and countless Mealy Amazons were congregating. Ten minutes later seven Blue-headed Pionus flew into the trees above the lick (12 more were perched higher) and five minutes later the

first Pionus were on the lick, quickly followed by a Severe Macaw and three Yellow-fronted Amazons.

The moving picture that unfolded this morning was quite different. The birds were nervous: there was a hawk in the vicinity and later a highly disturbing predator, perhaps an eagle. Several times the parrots took off in alarm with a huge whoosh of wings. Then the lick might be empty for as long as 20 minutes, in contrast to the continuous activity of the previous morning. When the birds returned the sub-plots were absorbing. Two Severe Macaws were perched in a tree, the lower one, probably a youngster, was bobbing its head in food-soliciting mode. A group of eight or more Golden-crowned Conures kept close together and, at 6.35am, two Barraband's Parrots flew on to the lick with a sudden flash of scarlet. All this time a Horned Screamer had been perched in the top of a tree close to the lick. At 7.45am its mate flew in honking and landed a foot away. At 7.50am the first Green-wings put in an appearance. Soon 50 or more were perched warily in the treetops, squabbling, swinging, preening and peering. It was half an hour or so before they overcame their fear and flew onto the lick. What a dazzling sight they made as they gnawed at the clay or, in one case, lunged at an innocent little Golden-crowned Conure! At 8.53am the macaws sounded the alarm as their fifty



Blue-headed Pionus and Weddell's Conures are the early arrivals. Photo: Priscilla Old



Enrique, our guide at Sandoval.

Photo: Rosemary Low

pairs of wings took to the air. This became the signal for our reluctant departure - as Lin put it: "I wish I could have stayed forever".

We were to travel several hours on the Madre de Dios River to reach Sandoval Lodge. On disembarking we walked for half an hour through moist tropical forest to be paddled in a canoe through the narrow channel to the oxbow lake. A catamaran then took us across the lake. In the fading light we were served with potato crisps and banana chips and a delicious guacamole dip. What a nice touch!



Lin "I wish I could have stayed forever"

Photo: Rosemary Low

Built close to the edge of Sandoval Lake, the lodge has been described as the most scenic and wildlife-rich of the 15 rainforest lodges in the Tambopata region (see *PsittaScene*, February 2002). The rooms in which we stayed were located along a corridor leading off the main building. They were comfortable, with hot showers in the *en-suite* bathrooms and mosquito-netted beds with blankets. It was cool at night! Throughout the whole of our time in Peru insects were never a problem and I can honestly state that I get as many bites in my own garden as I received during a similar period in the forest lodges. As well as good accommodation, we also had excellent food and an outstanding guide in the form of Enrique who, incidentally, is no stranger to the UK. He has spent time working at the zoos in London and Jersey.

After a 5.30am breakfast (it felt like a luxurious lay-in!) we took a canoe-trip

At Sandoval Lake



The British Contingent, Colin O'Hara, Karel de Pauw and Krystyna Szulecka.
Photos: Rosemary Low



The American Contingent, Dick and Tanya Connor and Don and Priscilla Old.

across the lake for a walk in the forest with Enrique. An exciting moment came when we crept up on five Blue and Yellow Macaws feeding on palm fruits. As they flew off the strong light lit the golden hues of their plumage.

Inside the forest is a small lick sometimes frequented by a group of Orange-cheeked Parrots. Enrique asked us to remain still and went off to silently approach the lick. It was unoccupied. We moved on, as quietly as we could on the narrow trail. I was at the back of the line. I glanced upwards to see a pair of White-bellied Caiques at the top of a bare white tree. They were sitting in the sun, their heads a glorious vibrant orange. I had never seen this species in the wild before and it was the parrot I most wanted to see here, so this was the high spot of my day. I observed them until they flew, then moved on to find the rest of the group watching them further into the forest. Other parrots were flying overhead: Yellow-fronted Amazons, Blue-headed Pionus and noisy little *Brotogeris* parakeets, also certainly Cobalt-winged.

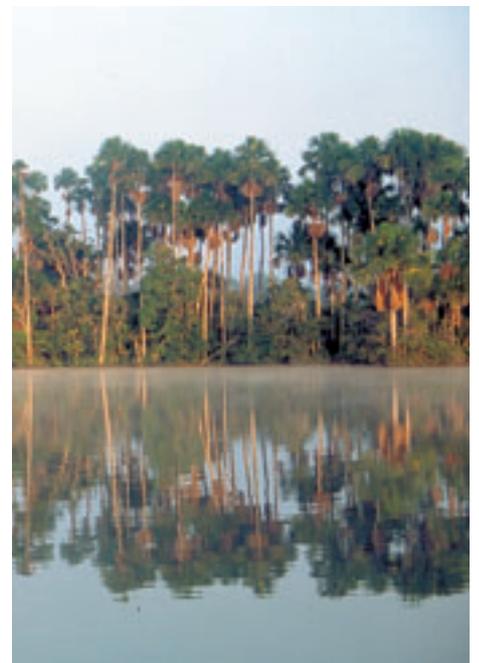
Back at the lodge I had an unforgettable sighting of a Brown-billed Aracari (a colourful small toucan) perched on a palm trunk a few feet from where I stood. After lunch four of us went out into the forest with Enrique and a local guide who told us about the forest plants and their uses. We went down to the stream and sat close to the hummingbird feeders. Soon two species of Hermits, Reddish and Needle-billed, and a pair of Fork-tailed Woodnymphs put in an appearance. It was so peaceful there, with only the soothing sounds of the water and the occasional whirr of hummingbird wings. In the late afternoon we went out on the lake to glimpse two rare giant otters. A pair of Yellow-fronted Amazons took this intrusion into their territory quite personally and, as dusk fell, they flew

around screaming insults at us. It was so typical of the feisty nature of this species! I cannot imagine Orange-wings, for example, behaving in this way! As we were rowed back, the setting sun cast an orange glow over the now tranquil lake; the Amazons had gone to roost.

We all regretted that the next morning was to be our last at Sandoval and the start of our journey back to the usual realities of life. I, for one, did not want to think about it - and the magic qualities of the lake in the early morning light soon dispelled such thoughts. At first the mist was hanging over the water and the *Mauritia* palms took on a ghostly appearance. As daylight crept over the lake the mysterious Hoatzins called their harsh cry and Severe, and Blue and Yellow Macaws flew in the distance, high above the palm forest. Tiny black and white



White-bellied Caique in the sun.
Photo: Priscilla Old



Early morning light illuminates the lake.
Photo: Rosemary Low

swallows swooped and dived above the lake surface.

Then the sun came up and the light had an ethereal quality that was a photographer's dream. The trunks of the palms that lined the lakeshore took on a golden hue. These palms provide nest sites and food for the Red-bellied Macaws (*Ara manilata*) flying overhead in pairs and trios and fours. We stopped near the shore to watch two feeding on the orange fruits. Nearby a Limpkin and a heron skulked at the water's edge. Brief glimpses of Blue-headed Pionus and Amazons flying above reminded us of the parrot riches we were leaving all too soon...

In the February issue Rosemary Low continues the story with the search for Red-fronted and Blue-throated Macaws in Bolivia



WPT Expeditions 2004

Join the World Parrot Trust and Tropical Nature Travel on our members-only expedition to the legendary forests of the Peruvian Amazon Basin, and the Red Mesa cliffs of northeastern Brazil, home to an array of incredible macaws and parrots



Parrots of the Peruvian Amazon

Our journey will begin at the ancient city of Cusco, high in the Andes. From this Inca capital we will travel over high alpine grasslands and down the eastern slopes into the lush humid forests of western Amazonia. We will stay two nights in the magical cloud forest where we have the opportunity to see quetzals, toucanets, umbrella birds and tanagers. We will visit a nearby lek to see the incredible Cocks-of-the-Rock gather to dance and call, in their spectacular daily ritual to attract females. From the cloud forest we will descend to the delightful Amazonia Lodge nestled in the humid foothills. Here we have the chance to look for pairs of Blue-headed Macaws and flocks of Military Macaws. Our journey continues by river to the lowland rainforests bordering Manu National Park. We will spend the next few days at the Manu Wildlife Center, rated one of the best lodges in all of Amazonia by *Condé Nast Traveler*, December 2002. Our mornings will be spent watching from a floating blind as dozens of Greenwing Macaws, scores of Blue-headed Parrots and other Amazon parrots descend in a raucous flurry of colour to eat clay from a riverbank cliff. The afternoons will provide many other exceptional opportunities! Both the March and October departures bring additional parrot and macaw sightings from the area's three canopy platforms, as well as other wildlife such as the Black Caiman, Giant Otters, tapirs, and many species of monkeys. Our March departure offers you the opportunity to see Greenwing Macaws, as well as Blue and Gold Macaws feeding their soon-to-fledge nestlings just yards away from our blinds. After four nights at Manu Wildlife Center we will return by plane to Cusco.

For the second part of our expedition we will visit the area of the Tambopata National Reserve along Peru's eastern border with Bolivia. We will fly from Cusco to the Amazonian town of Puerto Maldonado where we will board motorized canoes and head down the



Green-wing Macaws at the clay lick.

Photo: *Elyssa Kellerman*

Madre de Dios River and up the Heath River for a two-night stay at the Heath River Wildlife Center. Our mornings will be spent at the Heath River clay lick, which is attended by hundreds of Blue-headed Parrots, Amazon parrots and some Greenwing, Scarlet and Severe Macaws. This is also the only known clay lick visited by Peach-fronted Conures. The afternoon will be spent with our Ese' Eja Indian hosts searching the area around the lodge for various species of birds and monkeys. Our guide will also point out a variety of plants used for medicinal purposes in the daily lives of the Ese' Eja Indians. After our second morning at the clay lick we will return up river to the Sandoval Lake Lodge. We will have a full day to explore this beautiful oxbow lake and the surrounding forest. Here we will have the opportunity to see Red-bellied Macaws, bizarre leaf-eating Hoatzins, monkeys, Black Caiman and perhaps Giant Otters. Our trip ends with a flight back to Lima.

The two parts of this expedition have been designed to offer the best possible combination of diversity and intensity of parrot-watching experiences. However either part can be taken independently if so desired.

A Journey to the Land of the Blue Macaws

Join us for an opportunity of a lifetime! See the largest species of macaw, the Hyacinth Macaw, as well as one of the rarest species in the world, the Lear's Macaw!!!

In June 2004 the World Parrot Trust, BioBrasil Foundation and Tropical Nature Travel will take up to 8 lucky parrot enthusiasts to see these spectacular macaws. Our group will convene in Sao Paolo and travel by plane and bus to reach the dry grasslands that are home to these beautiful parrots.

Our trip will start in the interior of the state of Piaui in northeastern Brazil, where red mesa cliffs tower over sweeping grasslands, sprinkled with Mauritia palm groves and dry forest trees. Welcome to the Hyacinth Valley and Hyacinth Cliff Camps located in the heart of the wooded savannah ecosystem that covers much of central Brazil. Here we will have ample time to spend amongst the beautiful Hyacinth Macaw. Hyacinth Valley and Cliff Camps sit within a 10,000-acre reserve managed by the local conservation partner, the BioBrasil Foundation. This reserve is vital for the conservation of the wooded savannah ecosystem as lands to the south are being increasingly cleared for agriculture. This unique project employs former macaw trappers who now maintain and patrol the reserve and use their knowledge and expertise to share the natural diversity of the area with us. Just 15 minutes from the Camp, a large flock of Hyacinth Macaws can be observed each morning and evening as they gather to eat palm nuts. While at the Greenwing Valley Camp we will visit a blind strategically situated for excellent viewing of Greenwing Macaws as they gather daily to eat their favorite palm nuts. These macaws provide the main show but are ably supported by a cast of wildlife that includes Blue-and-Gold Macaws, Red-Bellied Macaws, Maned Wolves, tool-using Brown Capuchin Monkeys, South American Rhea (a large, ostrich-like bird), the Seriema, King Vulture, Tufted-Eared Marmosets and Black Howler Monkeys.

We save the rarest for last! Where few have been before, we are off to see the rare Lear's Macaw. From Salvador you will travel by bus to the remote viewing site. The landscape of southern Bahia is ruggedly beautiful dry scrubland, much like that of Piaui, but here the Lear's Macaw feeds on the



Hyacinths eating palm nuts.

nuts of the Licuri Palm. Not so long ago there were only a few Lear's in this region. With the shortage of palm nuts, this already small population of Lear's was forced into nearby cornfields where they were frequently shot. In order to boost the population of the Lear's Macaw and ensure their safety, a cooperative effort was made to increase the density of the Licuri Palms. It has been several years and now there are over 200 Lear's Macaws in this area. With donations from several organizations, including the World Parrot Trust, the Lear's viewing site now has a basic camp with platform tents and shared bath facilities, providing a strategic location to see the Lear's in the wild. The situation has never been better: this is truly an incredible opportunity to observe and photograph the Lear's Macaws.

Don't miss this opportunity to experience these rare macaws!

Pre and post-extensions will be available for Machu Picchu and other exiting destinations.

For more details, please contact Eliana or Elizabeth at: Toll free USA and Canada: 877 827 8350/ 877 888 1770
Phone/fax USA: ++ 803 933 0058. E-MAIL eliana@tropicalnaturetravel.com www.tropicalnaturetravel.com

The breeding colony of Burrowing Parrots in Patagonia

By Dr. JUAN F. MASELLO and Dr. PETRA QUILLFELDT

Parrots and cockatoos have become the most endangered order of birds in the world during the last few decades; 26% of the 350 species of parrots and cockatoos are at risk of global extinction while another 11% are near threatened. This situation is even worse in Latin America and the Caribbean; 31% of the parrot species are at serious risk of global extinction there.

The principal sources of threat arise from loss, fragmentation or degradation of breeding habitat, collection of birds for the live trade, introduction of exotic species, and persecution and hunting. Some key features of their breeding biology also contribute to the fragility of the group, including the long lifespan, breeding systems and colonial nesting. Parrots are also probably the most colourful family of birds, a phenomenon that has no doubt contributed to their persecution and popularity as pets.

For most parrot species basic biological data is still lacking, even though these are necessary for identification of extinction threats, monitoring of populations, evaluation of the conservation measures, and improvement of captive breeding programs.

Burrowing Parrots or Patagonian Conures

In Argentina, the highly gregarious Burrowing Parrot (*Cyanoliseus patagonus*) occurs from the Andean slopes in the northwest to the Patagonian steppes in the south. It generally inhabits open grassland,



5 week old chick.

but is also reported from wooded valleys with cliffs and farmland. These birds occupy the colonies one to two months before egg laying and leave the breeding site gradually as the young fledge. Adults excavate their own nest burrows by tunneling into the faces of sandstone, limestone or earth cliffs. The nesting pairs use burrows that they have dug in previous seasons, but they enlarge the burrows every year. Each burrow is occupied by a single pair. Burrowing Parrots do not use nesting material; they deposit their eggs on the sandy bottom of the nest chamber.

They lay one clutch per breeding season. The female incubates the two to five eggs for about 24 days while the male provides food. The young hatch asynchronously with an interval of one to three (usually two) days between subsequent nestlings, generating a size rank at the time of hatching. Nestlings from a brood fledge asynchronously, with an interval of two to three days. The young remain in the nest for about 60 days. After fledging, they are fed by the adults for approximately four months. Burrowing Parrots have a socially and genetically monogamous breeding system with intensive care by both parents.

Declining ranges

The conservation status and the distribution range of the Burrowing Parrot in Argentina were last studied at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s. No systematic monitoring has been carried out since. Formerly, these parrots were very common in Argentina, but now they are only regionally abundant.



Burrowing Parrot family at nest entrance.

They have suffered a clear retraction in distribution since the beginning of 19th century. In Argentina, the Burrowing Parrot has disappeared from the province of Córdoba and north of Buenos Aires. The decline in parts of Argentina is due to increasing persecution as a crop pest, conversion of grasslands to croplands, and trapping for the increasing live bird trade. Patagonian Conures, as they are known in aviculture, are or were among the most frequently sold parrots in Europe. In addition, projects of further trapping for trade are under consideration.

Some key features of their breeding biology also contribute to the fragility of the species: long lifespan, a socially and genetically monogamous breeding system and especially the habit of breeding in large and conspicuous colonies, can contribute to the fragility and decline of the species. It has serious difficulties in re-colonizing areas from which it had been displaced, making the species extremely fragile in a global sense.

An indication of its fragility of is the current status of the Chilean sub-species *C. p. bloxami* (previously *C. p. byroni*). It is considered at risk of extinction because of its drastic decline: a total of only 3,000 individuals was estimated to exist in the late 1980s. To our knowledge, only one very small colony of the Patagonian sub-species (*C. p. patagonus*) is legally protected (Reserva Punta Bermeja, Río Negro, Argentina).

Burrowing Parrots are officially considered

an agricultural pest (Argentinean National Law of Vegetable Health 6704/63). They damage grapes and olives, fruits of the native mesquite tree (*Prosopis alba*), peaches, pears and other temperate fruits, corn, sunflower and wheat and buds of forest plantations. However, except for some marginal agricultural areas and punctual events, damage is not intense. Despite this, lethal methods of control (such as nest poisoning, massive nesting habitat destruction, roosting tree destruction, use of poisoned bait, shooting of the birds) were carried out in various years, without objective quantification of real damage and adequate consideration of alternatives and consequences.

The colony at El Cóndor, Río Negro

Since 1998, we have been conducting a study of the breeding biology of Burrowing Parrots at the largest and most important colony of this species. The colony is located west of the village El Cóndor (or Villa Marítima El Cóndor or Balneario Massini or La Boca), 30km southeast from Viedma, in the province of Río Negro, Patagonia, Argentina. The colony covers 7.5km of sandstone cliffs. The westernmost kilometre of the colony (41°3'S, 62°48'W) is by far the most densely populated with 6,750 active nests. The habitat in the surroundings of the colony is primarily Patagonian steppe. Remarkably, after an extensive literature review on parrots breeding biology, this population appears to be the largest known colony of parrots in the world.



Reaching Burrowing Parrot nest by climbing.



A flock coming in to land on the cliffs.

This extraordinary world heritage, the largest known parrot colony of the world, has been seriously threatened during the last 25 years. The first serious aggression to this breeding site has been the spraying of sectors of the colony with Endrin (or DDT) in an attempt to reduce the number of parrots. This has probably been done during several years and the justification at that time was to protect crops in the region. Detailed information about this "control" campaign of the parrots breeding in El Cóndor is elusive and the impact on the colony difficult (and very expensive) to assess. Fortunately, this questionable method of "population control" stopped in the early 1980s.

The necessity of protection

During the 1990s a sector of the cliff, between the first and second kilometre of the colony, was dynamited for the building of a pedestrian and car access close to the beach down of the cliff (known now as Segunda Bajada del Faro or Bajada de Picoto). We estimate that about 800 nests were destroyed during the work. During the breeding season 2000-2001 this access for cars was enlarged. Cars can now reach the beach directly and a restaurant functions about 50m away from the first nests of the second kilometre of the colony. Very loud music and organised sports events are usual in the sector at the end of the breeding season (January). As a consequence, most of the nests close to both sides of the access were inactive during the following breeding seasons.

The colony at El Cóndor is highly disturbed every year in mid-December until January, during the holiday season, when the beach below the cliff of the colony is full of tourists and cars. Cars are authorised to drive along the beach, and hundreds of drivers park as close as 20 meters from the lowest nests of the colony. In this situation adult Burrowing Parrots of several sectors in the first kilometre of the colony can feed their nestlings only at high tide when people and cars disappear from the beach. In a typical weekend of January about 10,000 tourists visit the village of El Cóndor and the beach nearby the

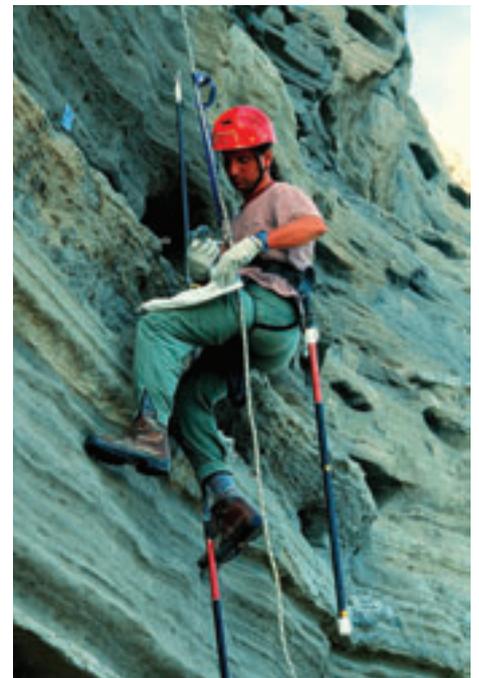


Burrowing Parrots on power lines close to the colony.

Burrowing Parrot colony. In addition, illegal motorbike and four-track races take place along the first and second kilometre of the colony.

Unfortunately, the attitude of a great part of the local people is negative with regard to the Burrowing Parrots breeding at El Cóndor. Local newspapers promote the idea that Burrowing Parrots are a severe pest. For most people making holidays at El Cóndor they are just noisy birds that disturb them during sunbathing. In some sectors of the colony, aggression from holiday makers to adult Burrowing Parrots bringing food to the nestlings occur almost every day in mid-December-January. Local police try to prevent people from killing birds by throwing stones, but the sector is big and there are few policemen. Local farmers shoot parrots during the breeding season on their private land, supposedly to protect crops. In addition, some local farmers also poison grain in order to kill birds, and some tourists shoot parrots during the holiday season for entertainment

In light of the outlined pressures on the colony we are trying to find a way to legally protect the largest known parrot colony of the world from these and other potential threats.



Juan checking chicks on the cliff face.

Even the Parrot

By SIR ALLAN RAMSAY

Even the Parrot is the title of a little book of precepts for children by Dorothy L Sayers I was given as a birthday present by my godfather. It aimed to inculcate the habits of godliness and good behaviour, consideration for others, respect for ones elders and betters. It is a nanny who does most of this - a rather 'plump and pleasing person' in Ernest Shepherd's drawings, like Little Buttercup in HMS Pinafore - but her efforts are seconded by a parrot. It is a very ethical book but whatever my godfather might have hoped the precepts made little impression since in my childish excitement I had looked forward to reading about a parrot called Even and was consequently disappointed.

Parrots - or more accurately, parakeets - were part of the Indian scene. Their screams filled the air as they contested the sky about the house with crows and kites. Arriving in England to begin my education at the age of seven I lived for a time with an aunt. She had married an artist who was interested in tropical birds and had converted a large walled garden into a series of aviaries. Among them were cockatoos and a brightly coloured macaw of which I was a little afraid. Feeding time, at 3pm, was always rather an ordeal as these birds sidled towards one. They did not seem to me to be the sort of birds that wished to pass on hints about good behaviour.

In the house was a Grey Parrot named Corky. It never allowed a feather to grow on its breast. It roamed about the place in a menacing pigeon-toed way, ready to nip. One never knew where one might find it, but it commuted mainly between the basement kitchen and the dining room, travelling in the lift in which the cook sent up the dishes. She would tug on the rope when they were ready and it was my job to pull them up. Corky might be there, sitting malevolently beside the Irish stew and cabbage or rice pudding. It would step out, descend to the floor by means of a strong cord placed there for the purpose and cross the carpet to the sideboard on to which it would quickly climb to survey the table over the top of a gently palpitating pinkish grey patch of goose pimpled flesh.

Unappealing though it was the sight was reassuring. It was when Corky descended that trouble was likely to start and one would cross one's ankles nervously waiting for the nip. It was a discriminating bird since never once to my recollection did it threaten either my uncle or aunt in this way.

Thereafter my acquaintance with parrots was limited to chance encounters in visits to zoos and pet shops. In Mexico they entered my life once again in a more substantive way. Mexico is full of parrots and the Sonora market in Mexico City is - or was - notorious for being an entrepot for the parrot trade. Parrots would be captured

in the forests of Yucatan or Guatemala and crated, to be brought in their thousands to be sold on. The most profitable outlet was said to be the USA.

Every diplomat has some extra curricular memory outside the pleasures and pains of his profession. In Mexico mine was parrots. I found myself frequently at the Sonora market, usually returning home with some bird that appeared to have suffered more than the others, and they had all suffered to a greater or lesser degree. There were parrots and parakeets of almost every variety, common and less common, obtainable from the Central American forests. Our house became a parrot sanatorium. One could have taken three or four times the number and still made no impression on the numbers passing through Sonora market to say nothing of the hundreds of lesser markets across the length and breadth of Mexico.

Parrots are sensitive and intelligent as well as beautiful. They are easily disorientated and their nervous systems can be irreparably damaged by unsympathetic treatment. Very few fully recover from the treatment they are subjected to in trapping and crating, a hundred or more packed into wicker or bamboo baskets in which many suffocate. They are not difficult to trap and experts use narcotics among other means to ensnare them. Parrots mate for life and if one of a pair is killed the other will not leave it.

Parrots make no secret of their whereabouts. They do not have to since they live for the most part among the forest tops, out of harm's way. Anyone who takes the trouble to climb one of the many temple ruins in Yucatan and Guatemala will be rewarded by the pleasure of seeing the brilliant threads of colour woven by parrots and other brightly coloured birds among the massed tree tops. They are easily located and make the task of the trapper easier by the noise they make when they go to roost and their habit of playfully shredding leaves and bits of bark around their roosting place. But not only are parrots threatened by illegal trafficking,



Bede the Red-lored Amazon enjoying the sunshine outside on his stand.

their habitat too is threatened by commercial exploitation which has laid waste to hundreds of square miles of tropical forest in the Amazon Basin and in Central America and other parts of the world. Such forests are literally irreplaceable since they grow on their own humus, built up over thousands of years of gradual decay which provided the essential anchorage and source of nourishment on the layer of volcanic rock lying beneath. When the trees come down and cattle are put to graze on the cleared spaces this humus is soon exhausted and the hope of ever regenerating the forests disappears for good since the conditions in which these primeval forests grew to maturity over millennia can never be recreated. The indiscriminate felling of hardwood forests in South East Asia presents a different order of problem but the effect on wild life is the same, all for the sake of sets of exotic doors in some new penthouse development.

That is the background against which my forays into the Sonora market were conducted. What all these parrots had in common was the ill treatment they had experienced since capture. Some were so deranged that there was no hope of recovery. The worst affected could be quickly identified since they had given up preening themselves. They and others were obviously quite unmarketable, so for every parrot sold many are discarded as unwanted and left to die. But all living things are extraordinarily tenacious of life and the sufferings of parrots have to be very great before they finally succumb. They need food and, above all, water and the crates of dead birds discovered from time to time at airports are usually the consequence of a cruelty and contempt for life so casual as to overlook even these essentials which seems to be the hallmark of the parrot trade.

When we left Mexico we took one parrot with us; he was called Bede. Unlike the majority of other parrots we attempted to rescue and rehabilitate, Bede was still a fledgling, packed into a crate with dozens of others. Somehow he had succeeded in struggling to the top where I found him sitting. He was a Red-lored Amazon (*Amazona a. autumnalis*). I paid a few pesetas and took him home where we reared him on a dropper, gradually weaning him to a teaspoon. As he grew he gained confidence. He loved company and would sit beside my desk at home while I was writing letters, pestering to be allowed to sit on my shoulder. Once there he would preen himself and settle down quite quietly, giving my hair an affectionate tweak from time to time. I found it quite easy to work with him sitting there. He also enjoyed sitting on my shoulder while we ate, though never on formal occasions, and became accustomed to taking a sip of wine when offered. But the treat he enjoyed most was to lie on his back on my wife's lap to have his tummy tickled.

Getting Bede to England required a very great deal of time and paperwork. After almost six months of representations and badgering we left for England. We had with us all the documents prescribed by the airline and the government departments of Mexico, the USA, UK and the Netherlands, a large folder of them in their own briefcase - and of course a parrot, travelling accompanied in his own cage and provided with a ticket.

Looking back on that journey now I can only think that my wife and I must have been extraordinarily naïve. It began to go wrong from the start, as anyone

experienced in these things might have expected. There were moments of high comedy and others of near tragedy as airline and government officials of two continents sought guidance over something for which in the experience of most of them there was no precedence. The flight risked being delayed at each stop as officials from various departments argued with each other. We were, for the most part, mere bystanders, and each time we set off on the next leg only by the skin of our teeth. Our difficulties over importing quite legitimately a single parrot must be seen against the relative ease with which illegal traffickers seem able to transport thousands wherever there is a demand for them. The clear inference is of a high degree of corruption and/or profitability which makes the risks involved worth taking.

Eventually we found ourselves outside Heathrow airport. There was a public transport strike and the taxi drivers were out in sympathy. But one stopped, on his way home, a parrot lover as it happened, attracted by the sight of Bede in his cage on top of a pile of suitcases. He took us home.

Bede died a few years later, quite suddenly, from a liver disease. I was abroad at the time. I thought for one stricken moment that it must have been those glasses of wine that we had shared which had undermined his constitution but I was assured that our mild indulgence had nothing to do with his death, indeed that a sip or two of wine could only have done him good. I still feel his loss very keenly.

Whatever the horrors of the parrot trade I admit I was a beneficiary in the shape of

Bede, so I am hardly in a position to complain, unless, like a reformed alcoholic it might be to say that I know what I am talking about. It was a very great privilege to have been on such intimate terms with a wild creature, to have acted in loco parentis and watched him grow into a handsome adult bird. Fascinating though the experience was I would much rather he had lived his life, as he was intended to, in the wild. Close as one gets to an individual creature in captivity - and Bede was scarcely ever confined to his cage - there is nothing to equal the pleasure in watching them in their natural habitat.

Having seen parrots in the wild, in Mexico, Guyana, the West Indies and Senegal, there is no doubt in my mind that the aim of the Trust to protect and conserve parrots in their natural habitat is the right one. It is due to their efforts that governments are coming round to this view, including in Mexico where I believe they have closed the Sonora market. There is money in it for them with the growth of interest in 'green' tourism because the lure of the tropical forest in its vibrant and extravagant beauty is a major attraction, and it is parrots in all their variety who help to make such places what they are, wherever they are found. Every gain in conservation terms is hard won. Reforms do not come easily, still less do changes in the mindset of those involved in trade in endangered species. Even when a gain has been registered there is no room for complacency, and organisations like the World Parrot Trust have to be vigilant at all times. For example, after years of an outright and all-inclusive ban, export quotas for several parrot species have been recently re-introduced, including for the Lilac-fronted Amazon (*Amazona finschii*), a threatened species.

Not all things disappear with dramatic suddenness and it might be decades before the various depredations to which wildlife is exposed begin to have a noticeable effect. Nevertheless, disappear they do and in what, in terms of evolution, is a shockingly short time. But like the parrot's delicate nervous system, the interdependence between apparently disparate species of flora and fauna is exceptionally fragile and can be all too easily destroyed.

Like the flamingo, the duck billed platypus, sloth and other wild creatures, parrots enchant us by their singularity which suggests either that their Creator has a sense of humour or that the evolutionary process is the antithesis of what we consider progress to be about. Either way we are the richer for the diversion that they offer us in our increasingly humdrum and stereotyped lives.



'I'll have the one with the yellow head' Amazons in this Mexican bird market have their head and neck painted yellow, because buyers prefer Double Yellow-headed Amazons
Photo: Michael Reynolds

Psitta News

Research on African Parrots

Professor Mike Perrin of the Research Centre for African Parrot Conservation reports as follows:

Louise Warburton has completed her doctoral thesis on the ecology and conservation biology of the threatened

their joint programmes with the Museum's of Malawi's Department of Ornithology, will be commencing a masters study of the status, ecology and conservation biology of Lilian's Lovebird (*Agapornis lilliana*) in Malawi. Larry has been training in the USA under the mentorship of Dr Gary Voelker, of the Barrick Museum and University of Nevada Las Vegas. His research will be supervised by Mike Perrin and Gary, when he returns to Malawi, to start his research in the new year. His project will be autecological, focussing on the general biology of the species, but will also compare and contrast the ecology and numerical status of the relatively common Lilian's Lovebird with that of the less abundant sister species, the Black-cheeked Lovebird.



A flock of Lovebirds in Kafue National Park.

Photo: Louise Warburton

Black-cheeked Lovebird (*Agapornis nigrigenis*) in Zambia. She will be preparing scientific papers and popular articles about these "African emeralds" while winding up her duties as the Co-ordinator for the Cape Parrot Working Group, before returning to the UK later in the year. The CPWG will now be administered by Birdlife South Africa, who is advertising for a new Co-ordinator.

Following Lu's seminal, successful studies on a rare African lovebird, two new field studies will be undertaken on lovebirds in southern Africa. Henry Ndithia, who is an intern with the Department of Ornithology, National Museums of Kenya, and undertaking a masters at the Institute of International Forestry and Nature Conservation, University of Gottingen, will undertake his field research project through the Research Centre for African Parrot Conservation, University of Natal (South Africa), association with the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, in Namibia. Henry will be studying the breeding biology and movements of Rosy-faced Lovebirds (*Agapornis roseicollis*), using nest boxes and small radio transmitters, using Lu's results as a foundation to pose new questions about lovebird biology.

Similarly, Lawrence Luhanga, who works for the Malawi Ornithological Society, and

In our aviaries at the RCAPC, Ros Malan is completing her B.Sc Hons study of the effects of dietary methionine and lysine on the reproductive biology and breeding success of Rosy-faced Lovebirds, sponsored by David and Vera Dennison of Shady Streams Bird Farms, AviPlus and *Avizandum*. The results are significant and informative and will be published later.

Gillian Blue has made excellent progress with her molecular (DNA) study to identify individual Cape Parrots (*Poicephalus robustus*). Results of her M.Sc. will be used forensically to prevent illegal trade, and the passing off of wild caught birds as aviary bred individuals. (Heather King is completing a similar study of African cranes).

Great-bill update

BY STEWART METZ

On a very recent trip to Seram, we saw literally hundreds of Great-billed Parrots (*Tanygnathus megalorhynchos*) flying in flocks. In fact, the price for them has fallen so low that they are rarely 'worth' trapping. On Gam Island in West Papua, they are considered both uncommon and hard to catch. These findings suggest a multi-factorial etiology for their rarity - and concomitantly, their high price - in the Jakarta markets.

WPT Members Only E-mail List

- Asking and answering questions about parrots, parrot care, and parrot conservation.
- Providing information on upcoming meetings and events that might be of interest to members.
- Updating members on the latest news from the field, faster and with greater depth than in *PsittaScene*.

Signing up is easy. Just send a message to wptmembers@worldparrottrust.org along with your name and member number (that's on your mailing label) and we'll send you a welcome letter with the details on how the whole thing works. Please give it a whirl, and we'll look forward to seeing you there!

Quakers eating grit

BY ROSEMARY LOW

Quaker (Monk) Parakeets (*Myiopsitta manachus*) foraging on the ground in New York were the subject of a short item in the August issue of *PsittaScene*. Jamie Gilardi wrote: "On closer inspection what looked like seed eating, then grit eating, proved to be geophagy - soil eating!"

I lived with introduced colonies of Quakers as my neighbours for more than seven years, first at Loro Parque, Tenerife, then in the mountains of Gran Canaria. It was not unusual to see them feeding on the ground, either on the lawn in front of the flamingo area at Loro Parque or, on Gran Canaria, on the road close to my house. In the latter location they could not have been eating soil; they were probably picking up grit.



I would like to remind parrot owners of the importance of providing their birds with grit. This habit is neglected by most owners and even denounced by some vets. Wild parrots of many species can be often observed eating grit from the ground, or from roads. It is for this reason that I believe our parrots should be given the opportunity to choose whether or not to ingest it. Many parrots do not have this choice.

USA Amazon trade proposal questioned

Thanks to parrot enthusiasts and concerned citizens from the world over - including many WPT members! - the US Fish and Wildlife received an enormous amount of input on their pending decision to reopen the importation of Blue-fronted Amazons from Argentina. Although they haven't yet released the comments, based on our discussions with many interested parties, it appears that the vast majority of the input was on the side of the wild parrots.

At the Trust we worked on two related initiatives, the first was a detailed scientific review of the proposal which was eventually signed by over 90 parrot researchers, and the second was a shorter letter submitted by over 30 non-governmental organizations, including some big names like the National Audubon Society, Conservation International, and Defenders of Wildlife. Both letters are available at www.worldparrottrust.org/aestiva.

We also inspired two original stories in the newspapers, the first was USA Today which ran one on the trade and one on homeless parrots in the USA. The second ran on the cover of the Washington Post and linked this parrot trade with a broader initiative of the Bush Administration to increase trade and hunting of Endangered Species as an effort to save them. Naturally this story was reprinted in some 20 newspapers across the country and inspired several editorials, some satirical, but all strongly condemning these initiatives.

The original stories are available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A10660-2003Oct10.html>
http://www.usatoday.com/life/2003-09-23-exotic-pets_x.htm.



Blue fronted Amazon parrots in cages for export, Argentina 1991.

Photo: Environmental Investigation Agency

While we can't yet say how they will decide, we hope this overwhelming input will help the Service do the right thing and work toward supporting conservation by means other than ill-considered harvesting of wild birds. Thank you all for your letters and support with this process. We'll keep you posted on this and related issues here in *PsittaScene* and on the Member's E-mail List.



Blue fronted Amazon parrot fledglings, Argentina 1991.

Photo: Environmental Investigation Agency

Dr Peter O Thomas
Chief, Division of Management Authority
US Fish and Wildlife Service
4401 North Fairfax Drive
Room 700, Arlington, VA 22203, USA

Dear Sir

I have just been made aware that there is a proposal being put forward which would allow Commercial imports into America of Blue-fronted Amazon parrots from Argentina. I view these proposals with very mixed feelings.

From 1950 to 1980 I was a leading UK importer and exporter of birds. In the 1970's I was operating five quarantine stations in England. I also set up a holding farm in Northern India after I found conditions were so bad for the birds. I also had the use of a large quarantine facility in the Far East.

My family have been in birds continuously since 1878, that is over 120 years. My youngest son now continues the tradition but we no longer deal in wild-caught birds. I have travelled the World very many times over many years collecting birds for shipment. Even in those days of mass shipments I had serious doubts about what I was involved in. Now I am retired I would like to look back on an interesting life with birds but all too often I think of all the bad things, such as the losses and the extreme cruelty. I have experienced really horrendous losses and the three instances that come to mind involved Hyacinth Macaws, Green-winged Kings and Red-vented Cockatoos, all now endangered species. I also remember most vividly the day before quarantine came into force in the UK. Many dealers were waiting to collect their last shipments pre quarantine. My shipment from Paraguay consisted of a large amount of Blue-fronted Amazons all of which had been suffocated. Fortunately my Hyacinth Macaws were alright. On many occasions I used to oversee consignments arriving at London Heathrow en route to the US. I had to arrange feed and water before onward shipment. I remember one shipment consisted of over 150 crates, truly a large amount of birds. Even at the time it was obvious that such shipments could not be sustained. As far as I am aware this was the largest shipment to pass through Heathrow.

Fortunately over the past fifteen years or so many countries have banned the export of birds, also CITES regulations has cut down on the excesses of the Trade. I feel that what we must do is to protect the parrots in their own environment and I would like to see far less birds in the trade. Wild-caught birds basically are not needed anyway as every bird magazine is full of birds for sale. In any case, with few exceptions, wild-caught birds do not make good pets.

In my retirement I also run a re-homing service for unwanted birds and animals. You would be greatly surprised how many I am offered. These range from finches to Macaws. At the present time I have two large Macaws, they are here because the owners didn't realise they were so noisy. People do buy birds on impulse but the novelty soon wears thin.

I venture to suggest that with my experience and background I would be qualified to put forward my views and opinion. I request that the proposal concerning the mass export of Blue-fronted Amazons from Argentina be rejected. I would like to think that they were being left alone to live their lives in their own environment.

I thank you for your attention in this matter.

Yours sincerely
Gordon Cooke

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All profits from sales help fund parrot conservation.



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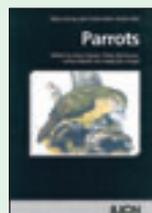
Hyacinth Macaw by Nicholas (25x31in)
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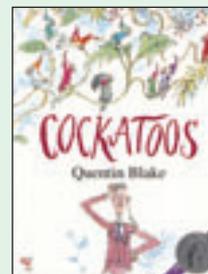
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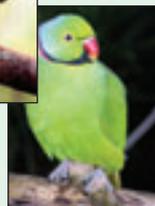
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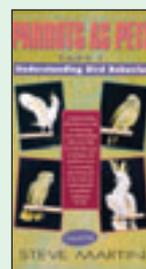
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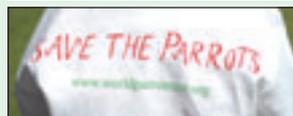
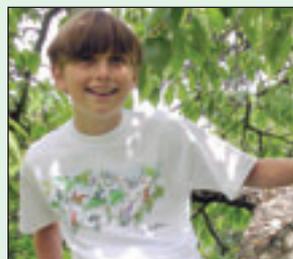
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Aims of the Trust

With thousands of members in over 50 countries, our branches work to achieve the stated aims of the World Parrot Trust, which are:

- **The survival of parrot species in the wild**
- **The welfare of captive birds everywhere**

To achieve these aims, we:

- Restore and protect populations of wild parrots and their native habitats
- Promote awareness of the threats to all parrots, captive and wild
- Oppose the trade in wild-caught birds
- Educate the public on high standards for the care and breeding of parrots
- Encourage links between conservation and aviculture

Member, Donation or Legacy

If you become a member of our UK Registered Charity/USA 501 (c) (3) non-profit organisation you will receive a new member package, four of these *PsittaScene* magazines and one free entry to Paradise Park Wildlife Sanctuary in Cornwall, UK per year with your membership card. You can also join our members only group email list and gain access to many other members for parrot information and support.

Each renewal year you will receive the quarterly magazines and one free entry into Paradise Park Wildlife Sanctuary (Twice winner of Good Britain Guide, Family Attraction of the Year).

100% of money donated to designated funds is spent directly on parrot conservation.

Please consider a donation or legacy to the Trust.



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Main: <http://www.worldparrottrust.org>,
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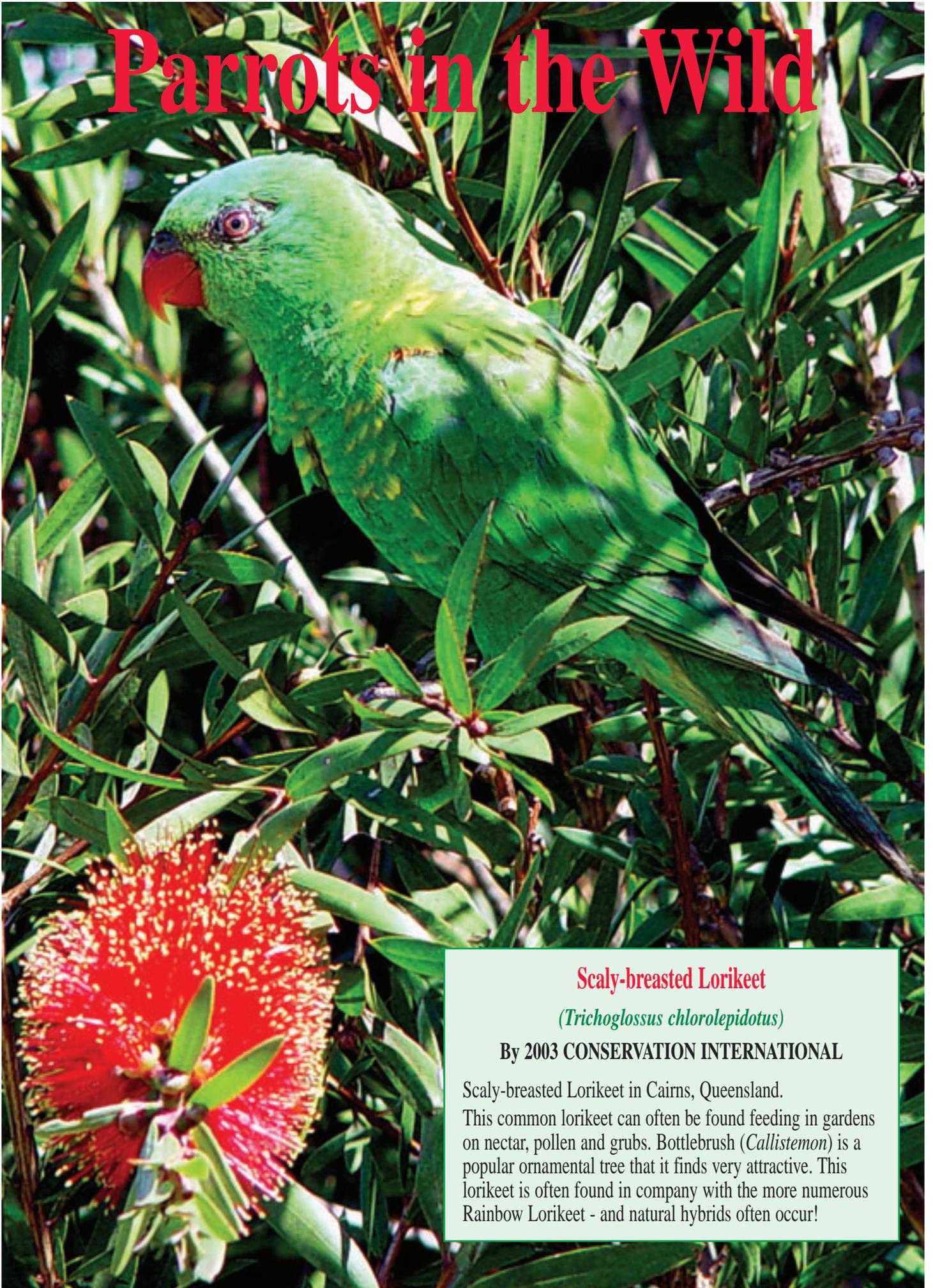
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Parrots in the Wild



Scaly-breasted Lorikeet

(Trichoglossus chlorolepidotus)

By 2003 CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL

Scaly-breasted Lorikeet in Cairns, Queensland.

This common lorikeet can often be found feeding in gardens on nectar, pollen and grubs. Bottlebrush (*Callistemon*) is a popular ornamental tree that it finds very attractive. This lorikeet is often found in company with the more numerous Rainbow Lorikeet - and natural hybrids often occur!