

PsittaScene



Twenty Years

www.psittascene.org



Saving Parrots

November 2009

Psitta Scene

World Parrot Trust
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from the director

As the end of the year approaches, I always look forward to one American holiday in particular: Thanksgiving Day. That's partly as it was inspired by a brief period of peace between our early immigrants and the Native Americans, and partly because the theme of the holiday is to encourage us all to recall and celebrate the many things we have to be thankful for. We, at the Trust, are deeply grateful for all the support we receive from members, donors and volunteers everywhere. Thanks to you, 2009 has been an exciting year for us.

At the end of last year, we launched a campaign to raise matching funds to meet a member's challenge for trade-related donations. We were thrilled to meet our goal in just 42 days, and inspired when something even more important emerged. As the year progressed we discovered and connected with a number of new and energetic partners working on the front lines of the bird trade from places like India and Nepal, to Brazil and Guatemala. With dedicated funds available, we were able to react immediately to their needs for technical and financial support to aid their work on enforcement, rehabilitation and release of parrots caught up in trade. In this issue of *PsittaScene*, you'll read about one of those partners - Belize Bird Rescue. They have tailored their program to the specific nature of the bird trade in that small Central American country and we are happy to support their work.

Building on last year's success and this growing network of effective projects, we are now launching a year-long "Fly Free Campaign" to ensure that this essential work gets done. Please read the details about the launch on page 19 and consider joining us in this exciting effort to end the trapping and trade in wild parrots. And stay tuned as we share more about these projects throughout the year at *Parrots.org*, in *Flock Talk*, and in the pages of *PsittaScene*.

From the World Parrot Trust, we thank you for your continued support, and we wish you and your families - feathered, furred and otherwise - a wonderful holiday season.

Jamie Gilardi
Director

on our covers

FRONT The Sun Conure (*Aratinga solstitialis*) is the classic example of a familiar parrot that is in reality quite rare in the wild. Two recent World Parrot Trust expeditions to Guyana reveal new information about their status in the wild. Decades of trapping have reduced numbers significantly and a recent split of the species makes the Sun Conure in Guyana rarer still. © Chuck Bergman

BACK The blind at the Posada Amazonas clay lick in Peru faces east and the favoured sections are normally in shadow. Here, a Yellow-crowned Parrot (*Amazona ochrocephala*) is momentarily silhouetted against the shadows. Orange-cheeked (*Pyrilia barrabandi*) and Blue-headed Parrots (*Pionus menstruus*) continue to feed on soil rich in minerals and clay. (See p14) © Alan Lee



Photo: © Chuck Bergman

Sun Conures Rising

By Toa Kyle

One by one each member of the large Sun Conure (*Aratinga solstitialis*) flock descends and enters the tree cavity. It's near dusk but their brilliant yellow bodies still stand out in the ebbing sunlight. Finally, only one individual remains perched in the upper branches of the roost tree, vigilantly scanning the surrounding hills. After a few minutes this bird too descends into the tree cavity to join the rest of the flock for the night. I smile to myself as I realize I am the first biologist to witness this tree cavity roosting behaviour for the species in the wild. Like many parrot species that are popular as cage birds, little is known of the natural history of Sun Conures.

CONSERVATIONISTS HAVE BECOME more concerned with wild Sun Conures due to the recent split of the species from the Sulphur-breasted Parakeet (*Aratinga pintoii*). Previously the Sun Conure's range extended from southern Guyana to the northern bank of the Amazon River, a distance of over 400 kms/250 miles. The split into two distinct species, however, drastically decreased the known range of this species. Coupled with intensive trapping in the 1970's and '80's, wild Sun Conures may now number in the hundreds of individuals. While the "discovery" of a new species is usually a cause for celebration, in this case it also signifies the precariousness of another and provides strong motivation to study and protect those birds that still persist in nature.

With this sense of urgency, I arrived in the village of Karasabai in Southern Guyana as a follow up to the work

initiated by WPT director, Jamie Gilardi, in May 2008 (see *PsittaScene* 21.1, Feb. 2009). The safest bet for observing wild Sun Conures is Karasabai. Elders in the village explained how in the 1980's locals would trap large numbers of Sun Conures and sell them to dealers who would visit periodically from the capital, Georgetown. On one such transaction in the late 80's, a dealer pulled a gun on villagers from Karasabai to avoid paying for a shipment of birds. Although no one was hurt in the incident, a collective decision was made by the community to immediately stop the trapping and sale of birds in the area. Though locals made this decision to protect themselves, their action protected what were possibly the last flocks of Sun Conure in Guyana. Over the next 20 years, populations of birds in other parts of the country were wiped out completely.



Photo: © Chuck Bergman



Photo: © Tom Kyle



Photo: © Tom Kyle



Photo: © Chuck Bergman

“Their roosting behaviour may help explain

THAT FLOCKS OF SUN CONURE roost in tree cavities year-round is the most important find of my trip to Guyana. In fact, their roosting behaviour may help explain how they were almost trapped to extinction before anyone noticed. By placing nets over the entrance of roost cavities at night, trappers can capture an entire flock of birds at once. Two of the three roost trees I located were in open settings. Given conspicuous neon-yellow birds roosting with easy-access roost cavities, one can begin to understand how the species' decline was swift and sudden. Although Sun Conures have evolved their roosting tendencies over the millennia (presumably as a defence from nocturnal predators), in the face of modern trapping techniques this behaviour almost caused their complete disappearance from the wild in less than 30 years.

Unique behavioural traits have spelled disaster for other parrots as well. Both Red-fronted (*Ara rubrogenys*) and Hyacinth Macaws (*Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*) readily descend to

A Sun Conure chick begging from its parents is a welcome sight in Guyana, the last stronghold of this vanishing species (top L). Peering out of a roosting cavity, one member of the flock (top R) surveys the pristine landscape (middle). "Sunnies" are on the rise in Guyana thanks to local people who love and protect them, welcome tourists and shun poachers (bottom L).

the ground to forage or drink from streams. Trappers duly noted this behaviour and proceeded to capture large flocks of birds by placing bait over nets at ground level. Removal of large numbers of birds at once has obviously tragic consequences for a species as the experience and knowledge of adult birds (as well as future breeding attempts) are lost forever. In the case of the Sun Conure, we need to find and protect roost trees before the trappers do.

DURING MY TIME WATCHING Sun Conures, I couldn't help thinking I was observing miniature versions of Golden Conure (*Guarouba guarouba*). I have spent over five field seasons studying these spectacular birds in the Brazilian Amazon (see *PsittasScene* 17.2, May 2005). Both birds are predominantly bright yellow, maintain flocks of up to 30 individuals and roost year round in tree cavities. The last trait is the most perplexing as no other neotropical parrot species is known to practice this sleep habit (though admittedly for most species basic natural history information is lacking). One would presume that the two species are related but genetic studies have shown that Golden Conure are more related to Red-shouldered Macaw (*Diopsittaca nobilis*) than any of the *Aratinga* parakeets. Perhaps there is something about being a bright yellow parrot that has created this peculiar roosting habit over time?



Photo: © Chuck Bergman

how they were almost trapped to extinction before anyone noticed.”

THE MOST ENCOURAGING TREND I witnessed on my visit to Karasabai is the apparent growth and expansion of the Sun Conure population found there. Following the trapping ban of the late 80's, birds were only observed on the Ureng River, around an hour northwest of Karasabai. On my last day in the field I visited the manioc plot of my guide, Francino. The plot was found in a forested area a half hour's walk north of town. Francino, a gentle Makushi indian in his 50's, told me he used to observe Sun Conures in this area up until the mid 80's, after which he never saw them again. In 2006, Francino regularly began to see two birds in the vicinity of his farm and in 2008, up to three separate, small flocks. Not only did we observe Sun Conure during my brief visit to his plot, we also located the roost for a flock of four birds made up of two adults and two juveniles. It would thus seem prudent to assume that these birds descended from the initial surviving Ureng River flock and are now re-colonizing areas that other Sun Conures had been trapped out of in past decades. Great news for the future of these stunning parrots though it is important the educational work is done with surrounding communities as we cannot assume others will be as receptive to protecting wild Sun Conure as the people of Karasabai are.

Much work still needs to be done to preserve the last wild Sun Conures in perpetuity. One event

transpired this year that may bode well for their future though. The Raposa do Sul indigenous reserve is located in the northeast corner of Roraima, the only state in Brazil where Sun Conure are found. It may hold the greatest number of Sun Conure in the wild but is also home to violent conflicts between natives and squatters over gold deposits and rice farming. I was actually prevented from passing through this area by military police, who maintain a permanent outpost in the middle of the reserve. Apparently even Brazilian biologists have an extremely difficult time obtaining permits to research in the area. In a landmark ruling in March of this year, the Brazilian government voted in favour of the natives' land rights and ordered the removal of all squatters from the reserve (unfortunately a rare event in Brazil). While it remains to be seen if researchers will be able to work in this area in the near future, we hope that the removal of the gold miners and rice farmers protects Sun Conure habitat within the reserve and the birds are free from trapping pressures. From a conservation perspective, we hope that with Sun Conures it is not a case of too little, too late.



Toa Kyle led WPT's Blue-throated Macaw Project for many years in addition to his work on Golden and Sun Conures. He has recently relocated to Australia where he hopes to continue parrot conservation work.

Sun Conures used to be considered wide-ranging throughout northern South America. However, recent research determined that there are actually two species. *A. solstitialis* (above) is now restricted to Guyana and far NE Brazil. *A. pintoii* (the Sulfur-breasted Parakeet) is found in NE Brazil, in N Para and NE Amazonas states.

A very rapid population decline has occurred in the last three decades due to trapping for the pet trade. Unsustainable harvests have extirpated this parrot from much of its former range, placing it in urgent need of protection.

A. solstitialis may now number in the hundreds in the wild and is listed as Endangered in Guyana. The WPT is working to encourage protection and recovery of this species. Two recent expeditions revealed remarkable new information about the biology and behaviour of this species, including the first evidence of communal roosting in tree cavities.



Millions of Gifts for the Gods

By Jonathan E. Reyman, Ph.D.,
Illinois State Museum



Photo: © Aaron Gonzales

July 14, 1970, Cochití, New Mexico:

As I prepare to leave at the end of the annual Cochití Pueblo Feast Day dances, I am approached by an acquaintance, Fred Cordero - a short, wiry, middle-aged man. We briefly discuss the dance, and then he asks, "Can you get us macaw feathers?"

"No. I don't know where to get them. Sorry."

"It's okay. Possibly you will think of something."

February 2, 1982, Ottawa, Illinois:

In the Hillside Pet Shop to buy rawhide chew bones for Justin, my Brittany Spaniel, I see a sign in one corner of the store. It reads, "Corby's Corner," and beneath it perches a Scarlet Macaw. The floor is littered with feathers. Fred Cordero's question from 1970 inexplicably pops into my mind.

I pay for the chew bones, introduce myself, and ask, "What do you do with Corby's feathers?"

"Why?"

I explain that Pueblo Indians in New Mexico and Arizona use macaw, parrot, wild turkey, and other feathers for religious ceremonies, as they have for more than 1,000 years. Bob Steffel, the shop owner, says he throws the feathers away.

"Would you save them for me to give to the Pueblos?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied simply.

Jasmine Gonzales of San Ildefonso Pueblo in New Mexico wearing Blue-and-Yellow Macaw from the Feather Distribution Project and eagle feathers which come from other sources. The white overdress is accented with embroidered designs and yarn tassels in the sacred color red.

June 24, 1982, Cochití, New Mexico:

During a research trip I visit Fred Cordero. After mutual greetings, conversation and lunch, I hand him a long package. He opens it and his eyes widen as he sees several hundred macaw and parrot feathers.

"Aieeee!" he exclaims loudly. He then takes a breath from the feathers to absorb their spiritual power, thanks me, and says, as though our previous conversation occurred only a few days earlier, "You thought of something."

The Feather Distribution Project had begun.

SINCE THE PROJECT was founded in 1982, some eight and a half million wild turkey, macaw and parrot feathers have been distributed to all 31 Pueblo villages in Arizona and New Mexico (Map on Right). It's interesting to note that at the start of The Project, the Pueblos generally did not distinguish between macaws and parrots. Most languages had only one term for both. This caused problems when trying to provide the specific feathers requested, e.g., macaw tails vs. Amazon Parrot tails. Macaw feathers are generally much more important than parrot feathers and the distinction provides clarity for both donors and recipients.

Native peoples in the Southwest, especially the Ancestral Pueblo peoples from whom today's Pueblos in Arizona and New Mexico are descended, have used macaw, parrot, wild turkey and other feathers for religious rituals for more than 1,000 years. Wild turkey feathers are the most important feathers used on a daily basis and constitute about two-thirds to three-quarters of the feathers provided by The Feather Distribution Project.



A Native American Church peyote fan made from Amazon Parrot tail feathers.

SINCE NO MACAWS OR PARROTS, except the Thick-billed Parrot (*Rhynchopsitta pachyrhyncha*), were indigenous to the Southwestern United States, ancient traders carried the birds and their feathers into the Southwest from what is now northern Mexico. The Pueblos did domesticate wild turkeys starting perhaps 1,500 years ago and raised them in their towns and villages for centuries. A few Pueblo people still raise turkeys, but the loss of suitable habitat means there are not enough wild turkeys for their ceremonial needs. And the international border between the US and Mexico means that people can no longer freely carry macaws, parrots, or feathers from Mexico into the Southwestern states. Nevertheless, thanks in part to this project, visitors today can see macaw, parrot, and turkey feathers in use as they watch age-old Pueblo ceremonies.

To date, the Pueblo Indians and Native American Church members throughout the United States have received almost three million macaw and parrot feathers free-of-charge from The Feather Distribution Project to maintain traditional cultural activities. The project neither buys nor sells feathers; all feathers we receive are given away. Zoos, bird clubs, breeders, individual bird owners, and bird rescue facilities donate macaw and parrot feathers. Many of the zoos and other donor organizations are shown on the project's Web site.

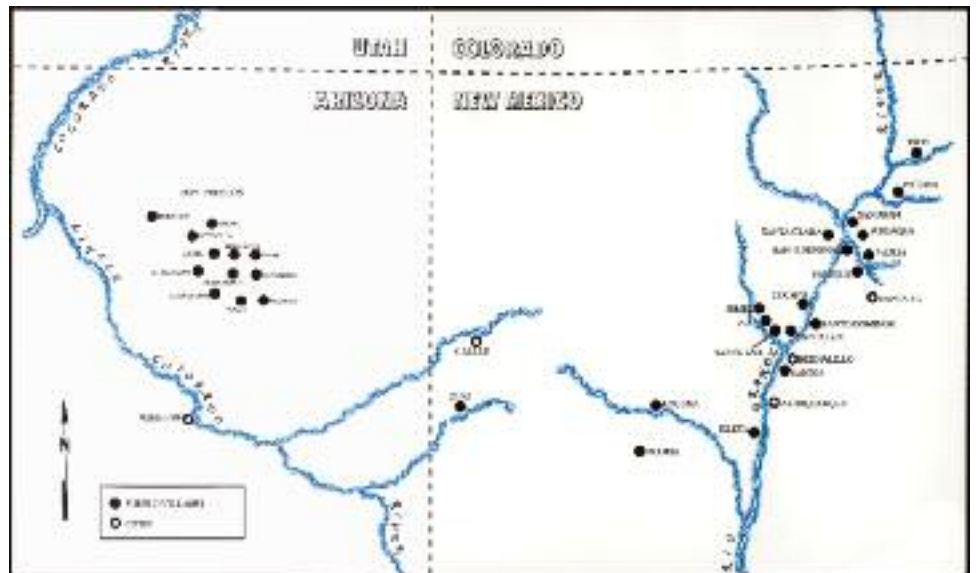
THE FEATHER DISTRIBUTION PROJECT has three goals, all related to conservation. The first goal is to provide macaw, parrot, and wild turkey feathers to Pueblo Indians, Native American Church members, and other American Indians for use in religious

ceremonies. This helps them maintain and preserve their traditional cultural practices and ensures their right to Freedom of Religion under the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. The project does not provide feathers from federally protected species such as eagles, hawks, and other raptors, or from federally protected migratory and passerine species. We have a permit from United States Fish & Wildlife Service to distribute feathers from captive bred and raised macaws and parrots. The collection and distribution of wild turkey feathers from legally hunted birds recycles a resource that would otherwise be discarded. By collecting and distributing macaw and parrot feathers free-of-charge we lessen the dependence of Native Americans on the commercial market



This Hopi prayer plume incorporates a single tiny Blue-and-Yellow Macaw body contour feather. Prayer plumes accompany requests for health, rain and other blessings.

Thirty-one Pueblo villages in the American Southwest receive feathers from the project.





The annual Zuni Harvest Dance uses hundreds of macaw tail feathers (right). While such feathers are prized, the Sandia Pueblo man's head bundle (far right), made from cut and trimmed broken and damaged feathers, demonstrates that all feathers are precious.

Photo: © Troydon Chavez.

for these feathers, thereby reducing the market for feathers from illegal sources.

This leads to the project's second goal: To reduce and eventually eliminate the smuggling of macaws and parrots, at least to the United States, and, in turn, to lessen the destruction of native bird populations and their habitats in Latin America. Again, the emphasis is on conservation of resources; by giving away feathers, we hope the commercial market for birds and feathers declines to the point that capture and killing of birds and destruction of habitat are not profitable.

The third and final goal is to eliminate feather plucking by Pueblo macaw and parrot owners by providing them with the feathers they must have so that they will use only molted feathers from their own birds. Plucking is both painful and harmful to birds. The project will provide twice as many feathers as the birds will molt during the course of a year if Pueblo bird owners promise not to pluck feathers and agree to let us check the birds during our periodic visits to the Southwest.

What happens to all these feathers?

Most – 99% – are used in traditional ceremonies for Pueblo ritual masks, clothing, altars, and other objects. The most valuable and prized feathers are the Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao*) center

tails and the white-tipped feathers from Merriam's Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo merriami*), but all feathers are precious. Even cut and trimmed broken or otherwise damaged feathers that would otherwise have been discarded are conserved and used for important ritual objects. Most macaw and parrot feathers are used to make objects that last for years. However, wild turkey feathers on prayer sticks and prayer plumes placed at shrines with requests for rain, health, farming success, and other blessings are used only once. This is one reason for the large and ongoing need for turkey feathers.

A FEW FEATHERS have quite different uses. Years ago we received thousands of domestic chicken feathers dyed almost every color imaginable, including psychedelic yellow, orange and green. Pueblo and Native American Church members wouldn't use them: they weren't "natural." So we offered them to the American Indian Dance Theater, which accepted them to add "flash" – bits of bright color – to tips of dance bustles, headdresses, and other costume parts. No feathers are wasted, even dyed chicken feathers!

The Hopi and some other Pueblos use feathers from Australian and South Pacific species such as cockatoos and cockatiels and damaged feathers unsuitable for ceremonial use to

instruct children in the making of ritual clothing and objects as part of their enculturation as tribal members. Native American Church members use cockatoo and cockatiel feathers and those from other exotic species for fans and other ritual objects. All feathers are precious, and all are used one way or another.

BIRDS AND FEATHERS have great symbolic significance. For example, Scarlet Macaws, specifically the colors on their shoulders, represent the rainbow, an important phenomenon in an area of scarce water. The Blue-and-Yellow Macaw (*Ara ararauna*) embodies many paired meanings: male (blue) vs. female (yellow), night (blue) vs. day (yellow), east (yellow) vs. west (blue), and much more. Turkeys live on the ground but roost in trees and so connect Mother Earth with Father Sky and the Upper World. From a ceremonial and also an everyday perspective, birds and feathers make Pueblo and Native American Church life possible. Native Americans' freedom to live according to the precepts of their beliefs is a fundamental right to be guarded just as we guard constitutional rights for all Americans.



Jonathan E. Reyman, Ph.D. is Curator of Anthropology at Illinois State Museum Springfield, IL. He and his wife, Laura, have a rescued Catalina Macaw, Chip, whose feathers are used at Acoma Pueblo and by Native American Church members.



Photo: © Doug Carr, Illinois State Museum Staff Photographer

FEATHERS FROM USA DONORS WANTED

Donors outside the US need a permit to send feathers to the Feather Distribution Network. Our US Fish & Wildlife permit specifically states that we may receive feathers only from US captive bred and raised birds.

WHICH SPECIES?

Feathers from all macaw and parrot species and from ducks and turkeys (legally hunted in season) are welcome, valued and utilized. Please NO raptor, (eagles, hawks, owls), blue jay, cardinal, woodpecker, or other federally protected migratory and passerine species.

WHICH FEATHERS?

All macaw and amazon parrot feathers from tails and wings to body contour feathers of at least 2". Broken and chewed feathers are gladly accepted (see above).

Scarlet Macaw shoulder coverts are particularly sought. African Grey tails, conure tails, ring-necked and Alexandrine Parakeet tails (but not budgies), Eclectus tails, cockatoo tails (especially the Red and Black and Yellow and Black species), heritage turkey feathers such as Boubon Red, and all wild turkey feathers, Mallard Duck wings or wing feathers. Again, gamebirds must be legally obtained.

PACK:

Carefully in a strong box, padded envelope, or mailing tube. Washing isn't necessary but sorting helps.

SHIPPING:

Send by US Mail (least expensive class). If UPS or FedEx prove less expensive please indicate the cost as charges do not appear on the label. We reimburse postage unless directed otherwise.

SEND TO:

Dr. Jonathan E. Reyman
The Feather Distribution Project
Illinois State Museum
Research & Collections Center
1011 East Ash Street
Springfield, IL 62703-3500
reyman@museum.state.il.us

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Go to www.wingwise.com/feather.htm



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Born *to be* Wild

By Nikki Buxton

Photos By Nikki Buxton & Jerry Larder

The cacophony of 24 Amazons performing their wake-up routine beneath our window sends us careering into the new day; ready or not. We are bullied from our bed and forced to enjoy coffee on the veranda whilst two cavorting parakeets and a stately Blue-head (*Amazona farinosa*) circle the house, and a grounded Red-lored (*Amazona autumnalis*) nibbles gently on my ear.

THUS BEGINS THE DAY: feeding, cleaning, observing, writing, checking, feeding again... I was promised a dream retirement in our little corner of Belizean paradise – growing vegetables and growing old. Instead, we have become exactly what everyone who gets the parrot bug swears they will never be, and yet always are: besotted, consumed and totally enslaved.

April 2004. Jerry and I had been in Belize only a few short months when we were offered baby parrots. The shock of peering into a bucket at two bald little Red-lored chicks was a defining moment for me: the idea that anyone would take a bird from its mother had never entered my head. Of course we bought them – anything to get them out of that bucket. They cost us \$50Bz – around £6 or \$12US each: two days wages for the poachers.

WE HAD NEVER CAGED ANYTHING in our lives and we weren't about to start now. Bonnie and Clyde, and our subsequent addition of FatBelly Jones, the Aztec Parakeet (*Aratinga nana*) rapidly took over our lives, our home and anything chewable. The days of their introduction to the Great Outdoors were ones we will never forget. We learned valuable skills such as climbing trees and ladders, barrelling through the jungle yelling and cawing like lunatics and running whilst looking skyward (not easy - try it). The birds soon got the hang of

[1 & 2] Red-lored Amazon 'Clyde' enjoying one of his first rainbaths as a wild bird. Acquired out of pity as a chick, he and his sibling were raised and eventually released. They became the accidental beginning of Belize Bird Rescue. [3] Blue-head (Mealy) Amazon, 'Blue' flies around the house, his wings not quite fully regrown. [4 & 5] White-fronted Amazons 'Mick' and 'Titch' when they first got to know each other (love at first sight) and finally on release – an amazing day! Many birds pair up during rehabilitation. One waited on soft release for days for a friend. [6] Main Aviary at Belize Bird Rescue.



'Perky' an Aztec Parakeet.

flight and safe landings and settled into an easy routine of playing outdoors and returning home to roost on the shower rail. Bonnie and Clyde began to fly further afield, staying out for three or four nights at a time, until eventually around mid-December, they just stopped coming back. We had mixed feelings: we missed them desperately, but hopefully we had accomplished what we set out to do and they were wild birds again. Jones stayed with us for three years. She never lost her love of Red-loreds and periodically would leap up, squawking like crazy and take off after one or another of our recent releases: a wonderful way of keeping track of them. One very sad day in 2007 she failed to return home. We like to think in her short life as a free bird she

was more fulfilled than if she had been protected from natural dangers by a cage.

A few months after Bonnie & Clyde's departure, a villager gave us her unwanted pets. We had no idea at the time that as captive 2-year old birds they were classed in the scientific world as "unfeasible for release". In our minds, they were in their natural environment, they were probably hatched in a nearby tree, they were never more than caged wild animals, and we had no reason to think they would not revert to wild status given adequate time and conditions. Within a few hectic months, we had another 5 birds back in the wild.

Over the years our reputation as mad bird people spread and we managed to beg borrow and steal many more parrots. Since purchasing those first two birds, we realised we were part of the problem, and resolved never again to pay for parrots. It's a hard road to take, especially when a few dollars would secure a birds' freedom. But trading in wildlife creates demand and it is illegal, even if enforcement is sporadic and largely impractical.

ONE OF OUR FAVOURITE SUCCESS STORIES is that of Stevie, a 2 year old Red-lored driven crazy by his chicken cage-mates. Stevie was named after Stevie Wonder, as he would sway from side to side on his perch performing figure-8's with his head. Stevie the Parrot clucking his latest rendition from a nearby tree became a source of great amusement to our workers. Eight months later he was on his way as a wild bird, returning like clockwork after every nesting season for another 4 years. On one amazing visit he was accompanied by his rather nervous family: it was then we realised we were doing something worthwhile.



“Wing-clipping is our biggest heartache and our biggest headache”



WE LOST OUR FIRST BIRD IN 2008 and we were devastated. I misjudged the flight ability of a White-fronted Amazon (*A. albifrons*) and she was killed by a raptor. We will always feel sickened by what happened to Connie, but it made us think carefully about what we were doing. The rehab and release method we used worked, we just needed the right facilities. From this accidental beginning came Belize Bird Rescue with a large flight aviary, 2 intermediate aviaries and 7 indoor cages so we can get to know our little guys before we throw them out into the trees. We will doubtless continue to grow as more birds arrive at our door.

Although our primary goal is the liberation of maltreated captive birds, we have to accept that Belizeans will always want parrots as pets and generally speaking have no idea how to care for them properly. A typical response to “How long should Polly live?” would be anything from 100 days to 5 years. Here, parrots are a disposable commodity; they literally do grow

on trees. Trapping and keeping wild parrots is illegal, but as with most cultural practices, the law is generally disregarded.

THE AVERAGE WILD-CAUGHT CHICK faces a pitiful existence, permanently caged and fed through the bars on a sporadic diet of tortilla and white corn. We have seen cages where the door has been closed for so long, it will no longer open properly. Literally adding injury to insult, almost all Belizeans clip their bird’s wings as they believe it makes their parrot tame. The only ones we get that have full plumage are from the rusted-shut cages, having re-grown inside their prison.

Wing-clipping is our biggest headache and heartache. We have never seen it done properly and are desperate to make owners understand the consequences of over-clipping. Working with a clipped bird is tricky: breast and beak injuries are a real danger, but with enough time and care even birds clipped as chicks will become accomplished flyers. Belizeans also tend to be

scared of their birds and don’t want to get bitten, so parrots are rarely handled. Polly’s only job is to look and sound pretty. Sadly though, these birds know exactly what they are. All day they hear wild parrots flying overhead, every mating season they have the strongest natural urge to breed and, almost without exception, they are contained in cramped, squalid conditions, isolated and neglected until they die prematurely of malnutrition, sickness, or just plain misery.

ON THE BRIGHT SIDE, Belize is by no means a lost cause. On the contrary, it is a rare and beautiful place – a small country with a stable government and an environmental policy that places 44% of its territory in protected areas. Half of the 300,000 strong population are still in school, which represents a golden opportunity for environmental education, but we need to move fast if we want to positively influence the next generation. In traditional “interfering gringo” fashion, we nibble away at the attitudes and misconceptions Belizeans have toward their



[7] Three Red-lored Amazons experience their first real trees in the aviary. [8] 'Chac' and 'Chell' were owned by a family who let them fly free until they were captured, clipped and caged by a neighbour. [9] 'Chac's' severe wing-clip is typical – most Belizean's clip their bird's wings in this manner. [10] 'Spike' suffered 2 years in a cage underneath two other birds. A severe neglect case, he over-groomed the plumes on every feather. Still, despite being clipped as a chick and never having flown, he became a very accomplished flier. [11] Flight training pre-release.



birds, both as pets and as a natural resource essential to the country's thriving tourism industry. If, through education, we can improve the quality of life of captive parrots, then we may extend their lifespan and thereby reduce the turnover of wild-caught "replacements".

ALL OF THE 9 RESIDENT SPECIES OF Psittacines are victims of the local pet trade and we have witnessed their price climb annually as availability dwindles, which can only encourage more poaching. A Red-lored chick now fetches around \$100 Bz, a Mealy Amazon (*A. farinosa*) upwards of \$400 and the endangered Yellow-heads (*A. oratrix*) were so scarce this year, we heard there were none for sale in the north of the country at all.

In our utopian dream-world, rigorous implementation of existing legislation would stamp out the pet trade overnight, but that takes money and resources that

the government simply doesn't have. This year, in a monumental stride forward, Belize's Wildlife Department doubled its workforce by appointing a second Wildlife Officer. The two of them have now launched a campaign against captive wildlife and will increasingly bring confiscated birds to us for rehabilitation.

TO DATE WE HAVE SUCCESSFULLY released 27 parrots and have 28 more at various stages of the 12 to 24 month rehabilitation process. Five years after those first releases we are still learning - the wilful intelligence of the Amazons certainly keeps us on our toes. Where release is concerned, we have our critics, especially amongst pet owners. But we have gratifyingly more evidence of success than of failure: encouragement indeed as time runs out for the parrots of Belize, where a bird in the wild will always be worth a hundred in a cage.



About BELIZE BIRD RESCUE

Belize Bird Rescue is a non-profit organisation operating on a private reserve within the Cayo District of Belize. Since its accidental beginnings in April 2004, the organisation has been owned, operated and financed by UK-expat Belizean Residents, Jerry Larder & Nikki Buxton. They began "rescuing" birds in April 2004 with the arrival of two Red-lored Amazon chicks and as of mid-2009 have cared for 72 birds and made 40 successful releases, of which 27 are parrots.

Parrots are a particular concern for Belize Bird Rescue, as the local pet trade and ever-increasing human encroachment on nesting sites reduces population numbers of several of Belize's parrot species to potentially unsustainable levels: for example, Belize is one of the last strongholds of the endangered Yellow-headed Amazon (*Amazona oratrix*): the bird of choice as a family pet and still regarded by farmers as a major crop pest.

For more information or to donate visit www.belizebirdrescue.com

Discovering Clay Licks



Article and Photos
By Alan Lee

>> *When I first arrived in South America* seven years ago, I had not heard of parrot clay licks. I had no idea that the forests of the Amazon concealed this remarkable phenomenon – parrots descending to patches of riverbank on a daily basis to eat clay. Although many species of parrot have been recorded eating dirt in various parts of the world, nowhere is it as regular and spectacular as on the ‘colpas’ of Peru. The soil, which is high in sodium, binds natural toxins in their diets.

Blue-and-Gold Macaws watch a departing flush of Mealy Parrots and one stunning Orange-cheeked (right). A big flush from the clay lick is a sensational experience – an alarm call, a millisecond of silence and the cliff erupts with colour and noise.



Why Eat Soil?



Parrots eat soil in many parts of the world, and we're learning about fresh discoveries of "geophagy" or earth-eating every year. So far, it's not exactly clear why they eat soil, although it appears to provide them with biologically important minerals and clays which have the potential to neutralize some of the toxins in their food. Since captive birds have diets that have adequate minerals and no toxins, it is unknown if these birds would benefit from eating clays. Many birds do seem to enjoy it if it is made available.

Peruvian clay licks are the best known and most often visited as they are both well protected and attract large numbers of spectacular parrots.

I HAD NOT BEEN LONG IN SOUTHEASTERN PERU as a Resident Naturalist at the Tambopata River's first ecotourism lodge – Explorer's Inn – when I got my first chance to visit one of these sites. My first experience, at what is a fairly minor clay lick by the region's standards, left me awestruck. The 'colpita' is a clay bank approximately 6m (20 ft) high and 15m (50 ft) wide. On this fairly small area of clay hundreds of Dusky-headed Conures (*Aratinga weddellii*) vied for space with Blue-headed Parrots (*Pionus menstruus*). These two smaller species were easily displaced by the larger birds: Mealy Amazons (*Amazona farinosa*), Yellow-crowned Amazons (*A. ochrocephala*) and Severe Macaws (*Ara severa*).

Somewhere in the hum of wings and bitter squawk of a parrot jostled off its position, I'd catch a flash of bright red. It was like trying to catch a glimpse of the region's dazzling blue Morpho butterflies. It turned out that I was seeing the underside of the wings of the Orange-cheeked Parrot (*Pyrilia barrabandi*), a lot shier and less common at the clay lick. When I finally fixed my binoculars on one perched precariously next to a Mealy Amazon more than

twice his size, my heart was stolen. The beautiful white-rimmed eyes, black head, with blushing cheeks contrasting with the emerald green body made this parrot my favourite of the region's twenty species, and has been so ever since.

Unfortunately I could not enjoy the view forever; one of the many flushes soon had all the parrots flying up over the river in a multi-coloured blur of wings and great cacophony of calls.

Sometimes these flushes are due to disturbances we can identify from the blind – a passing boat, low flying vulture or an approaching Tayra, but often there seems to be no cause at all; just mass paranoia. Sometimes the fear of coming to the ground to feed is so great it would keep the birds away completely. There was always suspense amongst us observers: Would we be treated to an unrivalled visual spectacle or would our 4 am wake-up and hour long wait on an unpadded wooden bench be in vain?



Other clay lick sites have been discovered in Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador and Mexico. Outside the New World, clay licks have also been found in central Africa and Papua New Guinea.

Visit WPT's YouTube channel to see videos of parrots eating soil in the wild!

www.parrots.org/claylick

Visit www.macawmonitoring.com for more of Alan's photos.

- WPT

Macaws are the headliners of the Peruvian clay licks. They build suspense by gathering in the nearby trees to frolic, often for hours, before descending to the bank to eat clay.



Hundreds of White-bellied Parrots, Red-bellied, Red-shouldered and Blue-and-Gold Macaws gather to eat dead palms near Lake Sandoval. Like the soil of the clay licks, this palm is also high in sodium.

>>> WITH RUMOUR OF BIGGER AND BETTER clay licks, I was itching to get upriver. My chance came at last to go as an assistant guide on a special camping trip to a big colpa named 'Chuncho'. And big it is! Located half an hour upriver by boat from the last park control post and human settlements, it's up to one kilometer (.062 mi) long, and ten meters (32 ft) high. And the number of birds that visited the next sunny morning was beyond my ability to count.

All the species I had become used to seeing were joined by dozens of White-eyed Conures (*Aratinga leucophthalma*) and the first Green-wing Macaws (*Ara chloropterus*) appeared in the trees. It was several hours before they started to drift to a long Shebon palm frond over the clay. I was concentrating so much on this build up I had missed the arrival of some Scarlet (*Ara macao*), and Blue-and-Gold Macaws (*Ara ararauna*). When they did finally all come down, the visual spectacle of swirling primary colours was addictive. I wanted more.

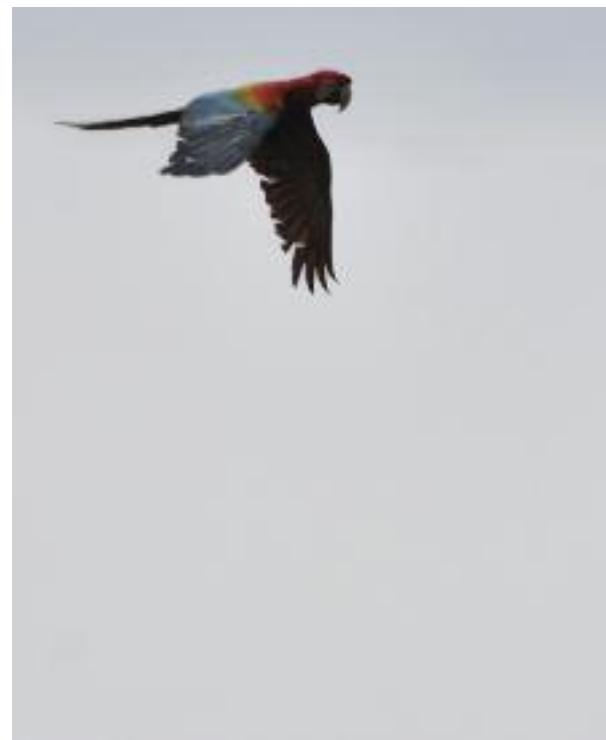
DURING MY GUIDING TIME at Explorer's Inn I had heard about the Tambopata Macaw Project, which took volunteers to help monitor various aspects of macaw ecology at the Tambopata Research Centre (TRC). I applied and was successful, but I was initially

disappointed to hear that I would be posted at Posada Amazonas, a community owned lodge downriver from Explorer's Inn. The clay lick here, 'Hermosa' (meaning beautiful) is intermediate in size. My disappointment was short-lived however, as Posada turned out to be special for many reasons. The viewing blind was just 30 m (100 ft) from the face of the clay lick allowing great close up experiences with the Green-wing Macaws. Here I was also introduced to a clay lick hidden in the forest interior. The blind there is also very close, allowing intimate views of Blue-headed Parrots and Mealy Amazons.

After a month at Posada I finally got to travel to TRC and the 'Colpa Colorada' (Red clay lick). It was a dream come true – it was January and we were counting upwards of 400 Mealy Amazons, 400 White-eyed Conures and 400 more of the biggest mix of parrots I'd ever seen at a clay lick. Of the twenty species recorded in the surrounding forests, all but the Rock Parakeet (*Pyrrhura rupicola*) has been recorded on the clay lick at some time in the history of monitoring by the Tambopata Macaw Project. Fifteen species

Despite their generally cautious coexistence, Scarlet Macaws can't resist mobbing an unsuspecting Yellow-headed Vulture.

visit regularly. One of these is the endangered Blue-headed Macaw (*Primolius couloni*), a Peruvian near-endemic. It only appears on the lick in small numbers and one has to search the multitude of Red-bellied (*Orthopsittaca manilata*) and Severe Macaws carefully, or listen out for their nasal call. The near threatened Amazonian Parrotlet (*Nannopsittaca dachyilleae*) can sometimes be seen, along with Dusky-billed Parrotlets (*Forpus modestus*), at a section further up from the main





Thanks to the establishment of the Las Piedras Biodiversity Stations and support from Biosphere Expeditions, the clay lick on the Las Piedras River now supports the highest numbers of Green-wing Macaws of any clay lick I have seen.

clay lick. But apart from the sheer diversity of parrots, one of the unforgettable experiences is the large mixed flocks of Blue-and-Gold, Scarlet and Green-wing Macaws. Up to 200 individuals gather from mid-morning onwards, a spectacle that is a privilege to behold.


I HAVE NOW VISITED many other clay licks. Each one is unique and distinct in the mix of birds

that it attracts. As one travels east species diversity drops off. The eastern most clay licks we know of in Alta Floresta, central Brazil, are only visited by Crimson-bellied Conure (*Pyrrhura perlata*).

A few years ago Biosphere Expeditions, a company that integrates ordinary people into scientific survey work, contracted me to head up

the Las Piedras River to help monitor the impacts of boat traffic on colpas. The boat traffic was generated by a boom in the mahogany trade. The loggers drift their wood in rafts down the rivers and to sustain themselves during their weeks long journey they often hunt riverside wildlife, including macaws on clay licks. Despite the hunting I was impressed that this river still has a high density of parrot clay licks.



Still, conservation success stories like that are few and far between. There is great concern about increasing deforestation following the paving of a highway through the Tambopata area, bisecting the protected areas of Manu and the Tambopata National Reserve. Associated deforestation will isolate areas used by Blue-and-Gold Macaws, with unknown consequences on local populations. And the market for the hardwoods of macaw nesting trees continues to increase. How long we will continue to witness these awesome natural spectacles is of grave concern to conservationists and the ecotourism industry. A visit to the clay licks is highly recommended for anyone with an interest in parrots or amazing wildlife spectacles. Just be careful – they can also be addictive! 

>> Alan Lee is completing his PhD titled "Landscape Level Effects of Clay Licks on Parrot Abundance and Ecology" at Manchester Metropolitan University (UK).

Psitta News



Photo: © Susan Eaton



Photo: © R. Martin & S. Williams



Photo: © J Gilardi

Parrotevents

IAATE Annual Conference

March 3-6, 2010. Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA

The International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators (IAATE) 2010 Conference will provide a wonderful opportunity to learn more about avian training, show content, educational messaging, enrichment ideas, avian health and welfare from the leading authorities in the industry. Get ready for conference trips, workshops, visit the Rio Grande Zoo and Aquarium, and we are bringing back the Training Panel.

Featured speakers include Stephen Bodio, author of *Eagle Dreams* about the Kazakh horsemen of Mongolia and Susan Friedman, an expert in applied behavior analysis (ABA) and its use to improve the quality of life for animals.

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Thankyou

Birthday Choices

Austin is 8, in grade 2, in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. He has always shown a real connection to birds, especially parrots. As the second born, he got the hand me downs from his brother which included a beany baby parrot. The first day he was born, he found his thumb, the second day his hand grasped the tail of the parrot, and it really hasn't left him since.

This year, instead of gifts for his birthday, Austin chose to ask friends and family for donations so that he could support one of his favorite causes. After studying the World Parrot Trust website he chose to send his birthday donations of \$100 to support the Blue-throated Macaw project. According to his mother, he looked to see which projects were reporting the least amount of birds. Thanks Austin!



Facebook

Want to do something for the greater good? Especially on your birthday? This year, instead of asking for gifts from your family and friends, ask them to donate to the World Parrot Trust through the online social network – Facebook. It's easy, and you'll be giving the ultimate gift for millions of parrots around the world.

Recently a Facebook member named Jade L. used the Birthday Wishes application to ask his friends to support the WPT. So far this request has raised about \$663 in new donations for the Trust.

To send your birthday wishes, simply register or log into your Facebook account and then visit this link:

http://apps.facebook.com/causes/birthdays/new?cause_id=10094. Fill in the required information and then send to your facebook friends.

Bestwishes

Congratulations Drs. Martin and Williams!

Sam Williams and Rowan Martin have now finished their Ph.D. thesis research for the University of Sheffield in England.

The World Parrot Trust congratulates Drs. Williams and Martin on this outstanding achievement. We were pleased to support their field work on the Yellow-shouldered Amazon (*Amazona barbadensis*) on the island of Bonaire in the Caribbean.

Rowan (left) studied the species' strong monogamous pair-bonding and is already on a Post Doc in South Africa. Sam (right) focused on the key limiting factors that influence the Amazon's survival. He is heading back to Bonaire to continue his conservation and research work.

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WPT Fly Free Campaign takes Flight

BUILDING ON OUR LONG-TERM COMMITMENT to end the trade in wild caught parrots, the World Parrot Trust is happy to announce the launch of the Fly Free campaign.

Fly Free will highlight the destructive practice of capturing wild birds for the pet trade, and gain worldwide support to end it. The focus will be on three types of direct action: enforcing wildlife laws, confiscating parrots from traders, and releasing these birds back to the wild.

The trade in wild caught birds has imperiled dozens of species around the globe and caused untold suffering and loss of millions of birds. Thanks to the work spearheaded by the WPT in the EU, much international trade has now been shut down, but countries in Asia and the Middle East are still actively importing wild caught birds. In places where parrots occur naturally, trapping continues to supply this demand as well as the domestic pet trade. So, ending exports from the few remaining countries in Africa, Asia, Central and South America is the final hurdle in ending the trade in wild parrots permanently.

The Trust continues to expand our international network of groups committed to ending the bird trade. Working with regional partners in India, Indonesia, Cameroon, Kenya, Brazil, Guatemala and Belize, we will encourage the adoption and

enforcement of strong legislation to protect the birds, and support the prosecution of those breaking the laws.

The Fly Free campaign will provide logistical and operating support for these groups and will work to rescue, rehabilitate and release birds caught in the trade. Through their individual stories, these birds will act as ambassadors for their kind, sending a powerful message to would-be trappers, to law enforcers and to the general public. Ultimately, confiscating and freeing birds helps stop trade itself, and highlights the inherent value of these birds in the wild.

The Trust has launched a new website to draw attention to the campaign. It will feature videos and blogs to deliver updates from the field and provide supporters with an opportunity to directly help return parrots to the wild.

The WPT welcomes all supporters – please help us make this an outstanding success and end the wild caught bird trade forever.

Learn more: www.parrots.org/flyfree

Working with partners in parrot exporting countries, the Fly Free campaign will focus on enforcement of wildlife laws and confiscation and eventual release of birds caught in trade.



Photo: © Limbe Wildlife Centre



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Parrots in the Wild

