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PsittaScene

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Blue-throated Macaws

Companion Parrot Workshop Series

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Cover Picture By © BILL KING 2002

Adult Blue-throats often perch at the nest site like this for long periods before entering the cavity. Clear photos like this one enable individual recognition of the facial feather lines. By analyzing these photos over time, researchers can potentially determine how long pairs stay together, how often they use the same cavity, whether non-pair birds visit the nest site, etc. without the need to trap, handle or band the birds.

Bolivia's "Bluebeards"

the road to recovery for the world's rarest wild macaw

Text and Photos By JAMIE GILARDI, except where noted.

Far too many parrot species hover on the verge of extinction. With the last wild Spix's Macaw gone, the Blue-throated Macaw now holds the dubious distinction of being the world's rarest wild macaw. What's really unique about this bird is its history over the past 50 years. For decades, western researchers could not find it in the wild despite many serious searches by scientists, parrot enthusiasts, and others. Only in the 1990's was the Blue-throat "re-discovered" when Dr. Charles Munn posed as a filmmaker and hired a trapper to take him to a nest in northern Bolivia. With most of the wild birds already captured for the international and domestic pet trade, it was very nearly too late to save the wild birds from near certain extinction.

Today we find ourselves in the odd situation of having many hundreds, possibly thousands, of these stunning birds in captivity, and only a few dozen left in the wilds of northern Bolivia. As we've just completed our third major season of field work with the Blue-throats - or 'bluebeards' as they're called locally - we thought it timely to provide news of the current situation for the birds in the wild, for those in captivity, and the prospects for ensuring the bird's safe recovery back from the brink of extinction.

As we reported in *Feb 2002, No. 50 PsittaScene*, our immediate goals remain to locate, protect, and encourage the survival and successful breeding of the wild birds. Clearly, each surviving wild pair is incredibly important for the species because they have generations of acquired knowledge of breeding sites, feeding sites, predators, competitors and the like. And as many studies have now shown, to be a successful wild parrot, each bird must develop a number of essential survival skills through years of experience and social learning. Every successful nesting attempt puts more birds where they are most able to contribute to the recovery of the Blue-throated Macaw (*Ara glaucogularis*) - that is, in the wild. So our highest priority could therefore be classified as a "search and rescue" mission, that is, to find all remaining pairs, determine what their nesting options are, work with the local residents to help them protect the birds and their nest sites, and finally, to do everything in our power to help them produce healthy surviving chicks each year.

Although one normally envisions Macaws living in tropical rainforest, these birds inhabit something more akin to an enormous swampy cattle pasture about the size of Wales or twice the size of Connecticut, depending on your frame of reference. It is a spectacular area in the state of Beni in northern Bolivia, which absolutely teems with wildlife despite the longstanding practice of intensive cattle ranching. With enormous crocodile-like caiman, capybara, Jabiru storks, and

A classic "isla" habitat in Bolivia's Beni department. Although most of these "islands" were formed naturally and are surrounded by water only in the wet season, some of the most perfectly circular ones are thought to have been created by early Native Americans called the Moxos. The understory is often open with very little vegetation.

As the smallest known cavity entrance, this nest has provided a model for nest entrance dimensions which will allow Blue-throats to enter, but exclude the other larger macaws - namely the Blue and Gold and Greenwinged Macaws.

ostrich-like Rhea, large and impressive wildlife are everywhere. Because a good deal of the Beni is flooded for many months of the year, we have focused our field efforts from June through December, the driest months. Although travel by dirt road is sometimes feasible, we have found that off-road motorcycles and travel by horseback are the most effective means of transport for field workers. That said, hitching the occasional ride in landowner's small plane has proven extraordinarily helpful as well.

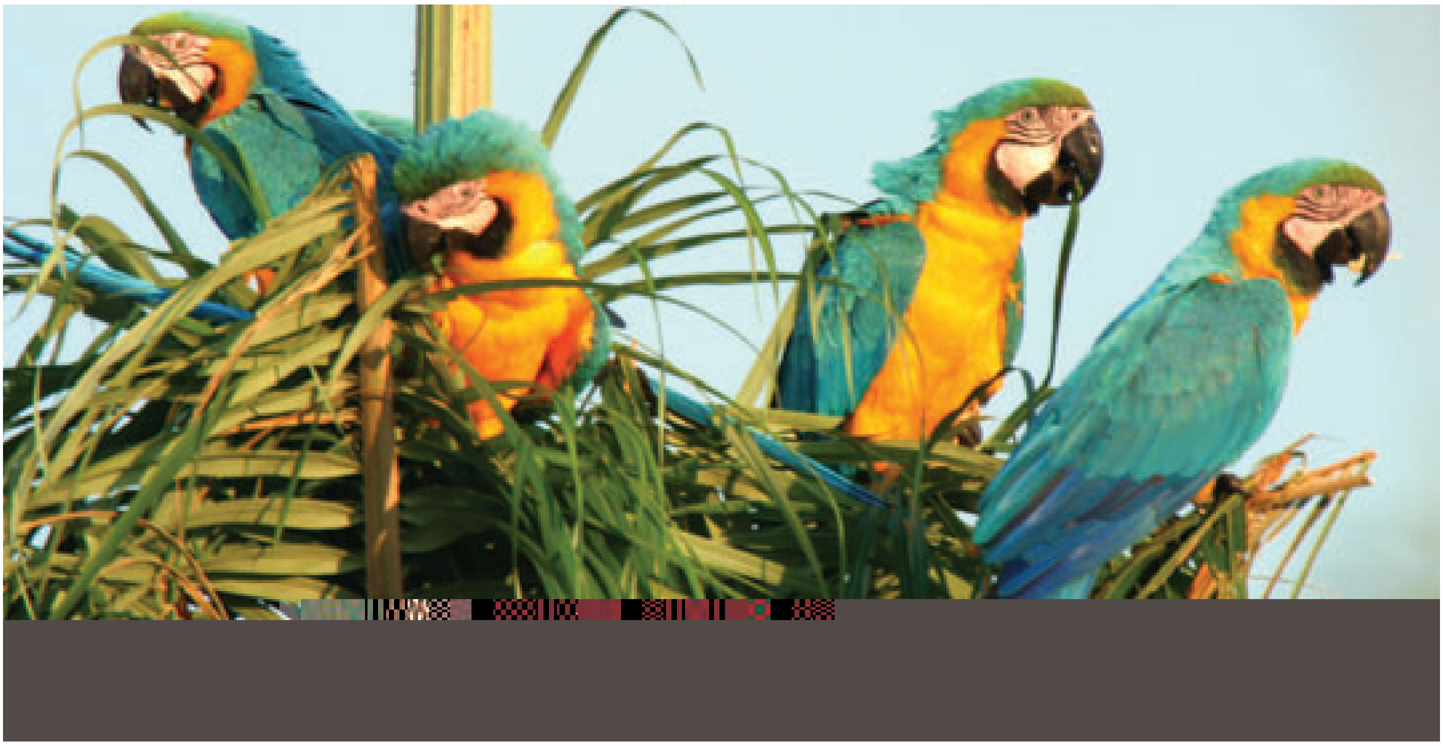
So, starting in earnest in 2002, we purchased two second-hand motorcycles and our Bolivian field team set off to check on all known sites where the Blue-throats were known to occur as well as chasing down as many rumored sites as possible. This team then consisted primarily of Felman Cuellar (aka "Pocho") who first lead Dr. Munn to the birds in 1992, a local who has decades of experience working with parrots in the Beni, and a second Bolivian named Andres Szabo who has worked both in Bolivia and Peru on parrot conservation projects. With Pocho's local experience and knowledge of the Blue-throats and Andres' broader experience with Macaw conservation work, the team was able to visit most of the historic breeding sites and effectively document the conditions on the ground in terms of habitat, human activity, threats from predators, and other issues which might prove crucial to successful breeding. As expected, the challenges are many in number and vary both from place to place and from year to year.

Both the better know Blue and Gold Macaw (*Ara ararauna*) and the smaller Blue-throated Macaws naturally occur in the Beni, and both eat similar foods and nest in similar types of trees. An interesting fact about large palm trees is that when the crown dies, the trunk is quickly hollowed out by enormous grubs about the size of a long human finger, and the hollow trunk soon becomes an ideal Macaw nest site. (The grubs, incidentally, are considered a delicacy by locals who hold them by the head and eat the remainder of the writhing beast in a single bite.) It's not yet known whether Macaws also eat the grubs, although they do eat similar larvae like those of the soldier fly, so it's quite possible they indulge in these as well - food and lodging in one fell swoop, if you will. More intriguingly, both these Macaws eat the palm fronds to such a degree that in some cases they can kill the entire tree, which then inevitably goes through the grub-hollowing process and becomes a potential nest site. Whether they do this intentionally as some have suggested, or one of their foraging habits just happens to create future nest sites remains to be determined.

As anyone who's attempted to breed a parrot knows well, many of these birds show quirky and inexplicable behaviours around the nest. In the Beni, the two Macaw species require very similar nesting sites, and as Dr. Katherine Renton observed just over the border in Peru, the larger Blue and Gold Macaws are known to aggressively challenge nesting pairs of their own kind, in some cases pulling chicks from their nests and temporarily taking over nest sites. And as we've reported previously, pairs of the Blue and Gold sometimes show far too much interest in active Blue-throat nests, although we've recently seen evidence of the smaller Blue-throats rising to the challenge and successfully driving off the bigger birds.

Although competition for nest sites is often discussed with any cavity nesting birds, when researchers have looked for factual

Photo: Bill King



A family of Blue and Gold Macaws devouring the new fronds on a palm. If they consume the central cluster rising behind them, they will kill the tree and perhaps make a future hollowed cavity for future breeding. You may recognize this same family from a scene in PollyVision!

evidence of nest sites being limited for parrots, they tend to come up empty handed. That is, they find that there are lots of available cavities out there, which go unused. The issue may be slightly more complex than just physical dimensions however. Anyone watching young children playing in small groups has observed that the most interesting toys are those that are being played with by others, and I suspect there is a parallel here in parrots' views about what makes a cavity attractive. Sure there may be lots of cavities around, but the most interesting ones are those that are being explored or actively used by other parrots.

Regardless of what motivates the birds, the fact remains that we see relatively frequent interactions at nest sites which are likely to cause frequent nest failure for these threatened Blue-throats. Consequently, with help from Mark and Marie Stafford of *Parrots International* and their captive birds, we've explored the possibility of exploiting the difference in body size between these species and providing cavities with openings too small for Blue and Gold, but just barely large enough for the smaller Blue-throats. In 2004, one of the Blue-throat's natural cavities was even smaller than predicted from these experiments, allowing us to take this approach a step further and make cavities even more exclusive. We've also deployed a series of artificial cavities in areas where the Blue-throats breed in hopes that making ideal cavities super abundant will facilitate the breeding output of the remaining wild Blue-throats. In one instance, a pair was seen exploring and excavating an artificial cavity this year, and another of these cavities was used by a pair of Macaws in 2003, but alas, it was a Severe Macaw (*Ara severa*) which took up residence in the cavity.

In addition to locating, protecting, and monitoring nest sites, our field team in 2003 initiated detailed studies of the Blue-throats foraging patterns as well as researching seasonal availability of the palm fruit on which they depend. With generous and growing support from donors in the USA and UK, Pocho and Andres were joined by a parrot researcher from Canada named Toa Kyle, who has worked on a number of other endangered parrots such as Golden Conures (*Guaruba guarouba*), Lear's (*Anodorhynchus leari*) and Great Green Macaws (*Ara ambigua*). With Toa joining the team, we've now been able to add these additional habitat analysis components to our team's goals, as well as contributing years of parrot field experience to the project. Not surprisingly, the team is now discovering that the diets of these birds are more complex than was once thought, and in 2003 anyway, learned that the availability of palm fruit can be unpredictable and may cause major disruptions in breeding.

One of two successful nests in the 2004 season. The metal flashing protects the eggs and nestlings from reptile and mammal predators in this (very low) nesting cavity of Blue-throated Macaws. The climber at the top Jairo Moreno places the chick in the bucket and lowers it to the ground for measurement and health inspection by Toa on the ground. (Inset): chick awaits health check.

As with every conservation effort, the success of the species recovery will depend heavily on the cooperation and collaboration of a large number of players. In the fall of 2003, then director of the state department of natural resources, Dr. Alex Ferrier, suggested that the two teams working on Blue-throats in the wild - ours and a team from a local NGO called *Armonia* and supported by the *Loro Parque Fundacion* - should host a joint workshop to help organise and publicise the efforts to save the species. By inviting all landowners, researchers, tour operators, and other interested parties to gather, discuss, and decide on what needs to be done and which groups would be involved with each task, the workshop proved a very educational and inspiring experience for those involved and was the first gathering of its kind for this species.

Since that time, a number of additional meetings have been held to help foster cooperation between the interested individuals, NGO's, and government agencies. For a multi-faceted conservation effort such as this one which naturally includes law enforcement at the local, national, and international level, education

On our walk back to camp I thought of what a long process it's been getting to this point, namely working with two Blue-

Toa weighing a "bluebeard" chick for the last time prior to fledging. Repeated measures of body weight are essential for monitoring healthy development. (Inset): As we have found in many parrot cavities, the upstairs is often occupied by bats. In addition to deterring them from the macaw nests, this chick also required extensive and repeated removal of bat faeces from the head and beak.

abundance of these trees (incidentally the seeds of which are a powerful hallucinogen taken by native shamans and new age hippies alike), this island was a veritable parrot breeding colony. We found 16 potential nests in this island, the majority of which were Chestnut-fronted Macaws (*Ara severa*), followed by Blue and Golds and lastly Greenwings (*Ara chloroptera*). It was precisely the presence of these other parrots that initially occupied our time with this nest. On numerous occasions other macaw pairs would fly to the nest entrance and begin poking their heads inside. Whether the presence of these other birds was due to a mere curiosity or the desire to toss out the chick didn't interest us at this stage. Any parrots observed near the Blue-throats' nest would receive the slingshot and mud ball treatment. Given their high intelligence, these other parrots quickly learned that this particular nest was off limits.

The first time we climbed a Blue-throat nest to check on its contents was by far the most exciting and terrifying event of the entire field season. Exciting because no researchers had ever done it before, likewise terrifying. Would the pair abandon their nest once they'd seen us handling their chick? Based on work with other macaw species, we didn't think so but this was still unchartered territory. I can remember the thrill I got when Andres peered into the nest and yelled down to me that there was one small chick inside. Not the two or three chicks I'd hoped for but

Although not called for in this season, augmenting the diets of growing chicks may prove vital to their survival, particularly in clutches of more than one youngster.

In the wet season, travelling across the Ilanos often requires a horse as the water is often waist-deep. Here Toa is visiting a palm island to check on a nest just prior to the chick fledging.

after all the past nest failures this season, one Blue-throated chick was golden. A quick inspection of the four-day old chick showed that it was in good health, despite suffering from some form of body mite. The mites were no doubt introduced to the nestling from its parents, as we'd observed both adults repeatedly scratching themselves during this period, their scratching being directed at the skin as opposed to the usual feather preening. After taking the chicks' weight and removing the mites, the chick was quickly returned to the nest (this probably represented the first time in the history of the species a chick was taken from the nest and then put back!). Following a tense two hour wait in the blind, we finally observed the nest pair entering the nest. No abandonment, great news for future nest work. We found with subsequent nest work the nest pair would enter the nest earlier, sometimes only 20 minutes after we'd finished checking on the chick, again demonstrating the ability of these birds to tolerate our presence around their nests.

Eventually, we had our nest work routine down to under 25 minutes, making it possible to visit the nest in the early morning whilst the parents were off foraging and vacate the area prior to their return, thus minimizing any potential stress created towards the adults. When the chicks were small, less than 400 grams, we performed nest checks twice a week. However, as the nestlings grew, so did their claws and vocal chords causing us to limit our nest work to weekly visits. The detection of the botfly infection in one of the chicks late in the nesting season demonstrates the importance of maintaining these checks throughout the nesting period.

I'm proud to report that both chicks from each nest fledged in late January, a 12-13 week period in the nest, similar to other large macaw species. In some ways it's strange to reminisce about all the flat tires, legions of mosquitos, mud and bad food we've endured the past seven months to watch those two chicks flying with their parents. All that work for a mere two birds? Then I remind myself that we're dealing with the most endangered wild macaw and for our first season of nest work, two chicks is something special. How many offspring might these two birds raise during the course of their adult lives? Many, we might hope but after what we've learned this past field season, hope is simply not enough for this species. Leaving the birds to 'the forces of nature' does not guarantee them any form of security in the near future. Pressures from predators, parasites, nest competition from other parrots, even physical factors such as nest flooding due to heavy rains represent serious obstacles to Blue-throat recovery. We aim to build on these experiences and apply them to the upcoming breeding season. By enlisting the aid of students from UTB (the local university in Trinidad) and other volunteers, we can put more people into the field to better care for every nesting attempt by Blue-throats. Each of which is so important to the survival of Blue-throated Macaw in the wild.

At 8 weeks of age, downy breast feathers begin to be replaced.

One of two pairs of Blue-throats known to have fledged a chick in the 2004 breeding season. These birds had the delightful habit of spending hours outside the entrance of the nest - just visible to the left - where they would preen themselves and one another, chat with neighbouring macaws and keep an eye on their nearly fledged chick. And the chick would likewise keep an eye on them from one of the three entrances to the cavity.

The future of wild Blue-throated Macaws may lie in the hands of dedicated, young Bolivian conservationists, such as Jairo Moreno, shown here holding a 10 week old chick. This chick fledged successfully two weeks later under his watchful eye.

Our Blue Crew - Ready for Action!

By JOANNA ECKLES,
Photos By Natural Encounters Inc.

This issue of *PsittaScene* provides an in-depth picture of the fieldwork underway to locate, protect and assist the wild population of the highly endangered Blue-throated Macaw (*Ara glaucogularis*). Years of planning and preliminary work have finally come together in the field and it feels that it might yet be possible to bring this species to a less critical level. At the same time we have been moving forward with other components of this project, namely working with captive birds, which may prove to be of some importance in the future.

Curious Blue-throated Macaws in their large flight at Natural Encounters (NEI) in Florida, USA.

The connection between captive birds and their wild counterparts has been discussed often in the pages of *PsittaScene*, among our members, and in meetings of parrot enthusiasts the world over. There is no question how important each population is to the other. But generally the two don't mix. Captive birds rarely play a direct role in the conservation of their wild cousins. Captive breeding and release have typically not been strong components of parrot conservation as for most species other actions are simply more effective. Not withstanding, captive breeding and release have served vitally in the remarkable recovery of species like the Echo Parakeet (*Psittacula eques*) - from a dozen birds to several hundred. For others, like the African Grey Parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*), captive breeding may never be a viable part of the recovery picture. For the Spix's Macaw (*Cyanopsitta spixii*), it is now the only option.

We have long looked at the beleaguered Blue-throated Macaw as one species that just might be bolstered by the large captive

The 20' x 30' x 15' flight houses the initial 11 birds acquired by World Parrot Trust in late 2002 and housed at NEI.

With NEI we are currently focusing on the design and construction of additional facilities as we finalise the acquisition of another 17-20 birds in the next year.

The Blue-throated Macaws settling in to their new facility.

population. With the wild population down to perhaps 100 birds and a captive population many times that it makes sense to look at how those captive birds may fit in to the species recovery plan. Last year we had the fortunate opportunity to partner with our long time supporter, Steve Martin and his staff at Natural Encounters (NEI), to procure a small captive population of Blue-throated Macaws. In December 2002 we acquired 11 captive-bred birds with the potential for breeding and release in mind. We are indebted to Steve and his crew from NEI who have taken on the care and management of the birds from the start. They built a large flight for them and put them through a variety of medical assessments. They hauled them in and out of their hurricane shelter last summer as three different hurricanes devastated their property. They rebuilt and repaired and are graciously maintaining these awesome birds as we continue to assess the potential for a captive breeding and release program.

Assuming such a program is determined to be a viable addition to the multi-faceted work taking place in the field, the captive birds will move to Bolivia and the rest will be done in-situ. At this time there are still many unanswered questions. We are investigating potential sites for holding and breeding in Bolivia and investigating any potential risks. All of these birds and those that continue to join the captive flock will be assessed for their potential for release. More likely, they will serve as founder birds and their progeny will help sustain this stunning species into the future. We will keep you informed as this component of the recovery program continues to evolve in the coming months.

Thanks to the dedicated staff at NEI who have helped in fundraising, building facilities, and caring for these birds and helping them adjust to their new facility.

The Blue-throats in their transport carriers ready for release into their new facility.

Companion Parrot Workshop Series

The Art and Science of Training Companion Parrots

By PRISCILLA OLD, Photos By STEVE MARTIN

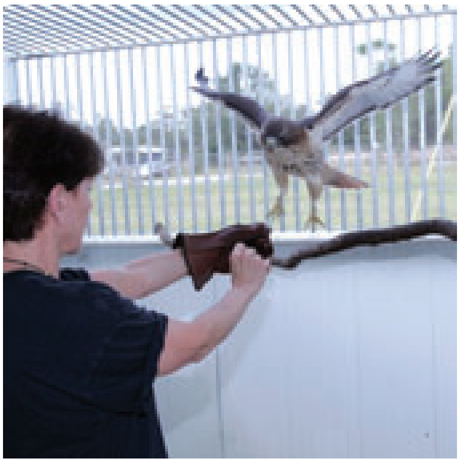
How can I describe a workshop (*PsittaScene Vol 16 No 3 Aug 04*) that changed my relationship with my birds so completely? It was a huge leap, and one that I never envisioned ahead of time. My involvement with captive-raised parrots has led me to many educational conferences and exposed me to what I thought was humane treatment of my parrots. In my previous training there was basically one-way communication. I showed / told the bird what I wanted it to do, and expected the bird to respond in kind. If that didn't happen, I applied one of the many methods I'd learned to get the results I wanted. The introduction of two-way communication, which is a basic premise of Positive Reinforcement, has changed my outlook.

I often wondered why one of my birds would come right out on my hand 95% of the time, but now and then I'd reach for her/him and receive a zap of a bite? Now I don't ask why, but I read the body language - the behaviour - and I believe what my birds are telling me with their body language. I don't try to analyse "why" - just isolate the behaviour, what reinforces that behaviour (the consequence), and what transpires immediately before the behaviour occurs (the antecedent). With these tools in hand, I can then set out a plan to change the targeted behaviours that I'd like to change.

I learned these skills during a workshop offered by Susan Friedman and Steve Martin, which was titled, The Art and Science of Training Companion Parrots Workshop. It was offered in two sessions.

Sometimes work starts from outside the cage.

The first was a 2-day introduction to Positive Reinforcement. It was presented at an Orlando, Florida hotel. Steve demonstrated how he uses positive reinforcement training from his professional training aspect; Susan started us on our road to understanding the theory and labels from within the scholastic world.



Red-tailed Hawk flying to student's glove.

The second session was a 5-day workshop at Natural Encounters' bird ranch in Winter Haven (NEI). There, sixteen participants heard lectures from Susan and Steve each morning and afternoon, followed by two hours of hands-on training. This combination was great because the lectures gave us the foundation we needed and the hands-on experience gave us the training that can't be replaced by the classroom.

Each group of four participants was assigned to one of NEI's senior trainers. The first night we were in Winter Haven, Steve offered a list of birds that were available for training. Each person chose one or two birds they wanted to work with, and each group chose two or three as well. Several people asked to work with raptors.

Showing a young Scarlet Macaw the reinforcer. Working to get him onto the scale.

I hadn't considered this, and truly enjoyed the exposure I had with them. When I return for another workshop, I will definitely ask for more work with raptors.

The next morning we decided what behaviour(s) we wanted to teach our birds. Some of us chose very utilitarian behaviours, while others chose more complicated ones. The atmosphere at the workshop is very amiable and non-judgmental, and you can try anything. Some of us started out thinking we would accomplish this, this, and this; some of us had no idea what we wanted to try. Some had to change birds; some had to change what they were trying to do with the bird(s.) It was very fluid and very positive.

Often the birds themselves determined the behaviours. For example, if you were working with an older bird that had not been handled for a long time, you might train him to simply step up - or to come out of the cage - or to step onto the scale. If you were working with a ground bird, you wouldn't try to fly it. Others trained their birds to go into cages and carriers - to fly in a circle - to wave - or pull up a chain to get a treat cup - or take an item from the trainer, turn around on a given area of the perch, run across the perch and drop the item into a dish. This last chain of behaviours was learned by "Ike," a Kea (*Nestor notabilis*), who won over all our hearts. He learned so quickly that he constantly amazed us. At one point he

Training Wizard the Red-fronted Macaw to climb a chain. He learned to climb the free hanging chain from the floor to the perch.

Wizard almost to the top of the chain.

forgot to make his turn, so he picked up the object (a metal washer) from the dish, ran back across the perch, made his turn, and returned to the dish. As I said, he amazed us.

My group was lead by Wouter, a young trainer from Holland. After we worked with each bird we would talk about what had transpired - what had gone well, and what we might improve upon. The group would watch each person work with their bird. This helped us see what was transpiring with others, and would give us the opportunity to see what was going well and what could be improved. So we weren't only learning with our own bird - we were learning as our group worked. Sometimes we would have a chance to observe another group working, as well. All of us flew Scarlets, Greenwings, and raptors between us.

The last afternoon of the workshop was "Show and Tell" time. It was great fun, and a chance for attendees to show off what they'd accomplished with a bird they'd never seen until five days before. I am not comfortable with being in front of a group, but I managed to show off my little Severe, Velcro, with great success. And, as the afternoon went on, we saw the results of the week's work and thrilled at the overall success of the group. We had many laughs, especially when the "trained" goats were worked.

As we left the ranch, our group of four from Michigan felt very positive about the whole experience. None of us had ever been in such a positive learning atmosphere. None of us wanted to leave, but we all wanted to have our birds with us. We were going back to 13-degree weather after enjoying 70's and 80's for a week. It was a hard trip home!

Following are some examples of how this workshop has helped my work with my own birds.....

1. I learned that I had been approaching my birds in a very cavalier manner. I would reach for them - expecting them to WANT (no 2-way communication considered) to come out of their cage, for example - and as soon as a toe was on my finger, I'd be on the move.
2. I'd been approaching them by bringing my hand up from below - very unsettling to the birds. When Wouter pointed this out to me, I actually practiced holding my hand flat and offering it from my chest out toward the bird.

These two things have made a tremendous difference in the security my own birds display when I pick them up. Besides offering a very steady hand, I let them step fully onto my hand - with both feet - before I start moving - constantly being aware of the bird's comfort level.

Our birds have become more active since I've been working with them. They are learning to learn, as we were told would happen. It is very gratifying to see this occur with your own birds.

At NEI they "station" their birds. In every case where a bird had received any

Sometimes we need help. Always expect the unexpected.

This is Julio, the Roseate Cockatoo (Galah) learning to go into his carrier. He learned to run into it by the end of the week.

This is a picture of a Scarlet being trained to fly in a full circle. At this point he is flying from the instructor (to left) around the metal pole, and landing on the student's hand.

Training Grover, Hyacinth Macaw, to retrieve items (plastic rings in this case). A similar chain of behaviours is used in Steve's conservation show when Crows and Ravens fly into the audience to retrieve donations, then put them in a box on stage.

training, it went to the "station" perch as the trainer approached the cage if it wanted to come out of the cage. They never take a bird out of its cage while it's hanging from the top or side of the cage, and it's never allowed to leave the cage on its own. This station training was the first thing I started working on with my own birds.

Here is an example of my own results while training several of my birds to go to their "station" perch. However, first let me explain that I had been shaping "stationing" by reinforcing the bird:

- when it looks at the perch,
- when it puts one foot on the perch,
- when it steps fully onto the perch with both feet,
- and when it stays until asked to step up.

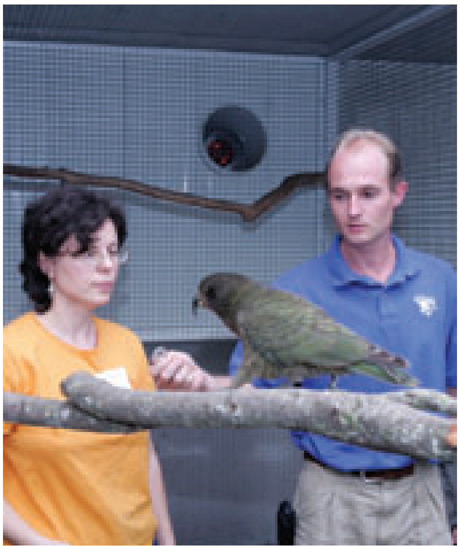
We have a 5-year-old Congo African Grey (Sparkle.) The pre-workshop Sparkle was: I approached the cage, opened the door and she would be hanging on the cage door, or from the top of her cage and put her head down to be petted, or try chewing on fingers - or strike out if the mood hit her. I would go into any number of contortions to get her onto my hand to put her on her play stand.

Well, I decided to "tackle" her with my newly found workshop skills, along with several of our small birds. I've been concerned because I haven't found a food treat that works as a reinforcer for her. However, a few days ago I went to get her out of her cage, and she went into her usual routine. I closed the door after showing her a perch I wanted her to stand on. I held a pine nut near the side of the cage above the perch. She looked at the pine nut and me, promptly turned her back, and went to the top of the cage to hang upside down some more. I went to the next bird in the room (another CAG -who went to her station,) took her out, reinforcing her with a pine nut, and put her on her stand in the living room.

When I returned to the bird room to get my little Severe out (who also goes to his station,) there was Sparkle standing on the desired perch waiting for me to return. I almost shouted with delight - but I didn't. I calmly went to the cage, stepped her up and walked her to her stand, with much praise and a pine nut.

There is an ample reading list for anyone who is interested in starting along the path of Positive Reinforcement with their parrots. One of the easiest books to read is, "Don't Shoot the Dog" by Karen Pryor. It gives great examples of how Positive Reinforcement is applied in all areas of one's life. The author is a well-known dog trainer, and her approach to training follows the Positive Reinforcement methods.

This is Ike, the Kea, learning the cue to turn. He learned to take an item (a washer), turn in only the left area of the perch, run across the perch the full width of the cage and drop the washer into a metal dish. Ike learned this whole routine in an amazingly short time.



Ike learning to take the washer from trainer as student observes.

Ike going back to the starting point to get another washer.

Lilac-crowns return home!

In discussions with the US Fish and Wildlife Service about the illegal trade along the Mexico-USA border, the Trust learned that a large number of Lilac-crowned Amazons were recently confiscated and were soon to clear quarantine. As the Service was receptive to the idea of repatriating the birds, we contacted colleagues south of the Border - especially Dr's. Katherine Renton and Ernesto Enkerlin - to determine the conservation value and the feasibility of such a transfer. **The proposal was supported by the Mexican Subcommittee for Parrot Conservation who liaised with Mexican government officials to arrange the transfer and reception of the birds in Mexico.** As there are many ways that such initiatives can go awry, for the birds' sake, we're especially pleased that this transfer worked out so well. Read on for the rest of the story...

Service Returns Smuggled Birds To Mexico

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service,
December 23, 2004

Ninety rare parrots, all smuggled into the United States for the black market pet trade, were returned to Mexico by Federal authorities on December 20, 2004, at Otay Mesa, located south of San Diego on the U.S./Mexico border. The parrots, which were recovered during two U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service investigations of bird trafficking, are species native only to Mexico that are protected under international treaty and U.S. and Mexican law.


Photo Courtesy USFWS

"We were pleased to send these birds home where they belong and hope they may eventually thrive again in the wild," said Kevin Adams, Chief, Office of Law Enforcement. "Their recovery in the United States and return to Mexico reflects a shared commitment to wildlife conservation in both countries."

"Such enforcement partnerships were essential to rescuing the repatriated birds from the illegal trade," Adams noted. The birds, which included 68 lilac-crowned Amazon parrots and 22 red-headed Amazon parrots, were among those seized in two separate foiled smuggling attempts earlier this year that involved interagency assistance. Prosecutions in both cases are being handled by the U.S. Attorney's Office in San Diego.

In one incident, the defendant, who has pleaded guilty to smuggling and wildlife trafficking charges, was under surveillance by Service special agents before his arrest. CBP inspectors stopped the suspect at the San Ysidro border crossing on August 28 as he was returning from an overnight trip to Mexico; they discovered 128 birds hidden in the side panels and under the rear seats of his pickup truck.

As officials at the repatriation event pointed out, parrots and other wild birds remain a target for smugglers, despite efforts to meet consumer demand for these exotic pets through captive breeding. Illegal trade and loss of habitat have depleted many wild populations.

Bird smuggling also represents a potential threat to the health of poultry and people. Wild-caught parrots may carry psittacosis, which can infect humans, and exotic Newcastle disease, a rapidly transmitted avian virus that spreads easily to poultry. An outbreak in the fall of 2002 forced the destruction of more than 3 million chickens in California, Nevada, and Arizona.

Road to ruin for rare parrot

By © 2004 BirdLife International.

Working together for the world's birds and people

The globally threatened St Vincent Parrot, national bird of St Vincent and the Grenadines, is under threat from a cross-country road funded by the Taiwanese Government.

The St Vincent Parrot (*Amazona guildingii*) is classified as Vulnerable by BirdLife. The species has recovered slightly after the population declined to critically low levels in the 1980s. Habitat loss, hunting for food, and trapping for the cage-bird trade were the principal causes of this species' decline. However the entire population still only numbers around 800 birds.

The new road would irreversibly damage the remnants of primary rainforest on which the parrot depends, and open it up to further encroachment by illegal loggers and marijuana growers.

No Environmental Impact Assessment has been carried out, as is required under recognised international standards. An Environmental Investigation and Cataloguing study, prepared earlier this year, has not been made public, although a local environmental group, Friends of the Environment / St Vincent and the Grenadines (FOTE/SVG), has obtained a copy.

The study warns that the road threatens the parrot and other endemic biodiversity, puts the island's growing ecotourism industry in jeopardy, and will interfere with an important watershed. It also warns of an increased risk of landslides in an area which only recently (November 2004) suffered from land and mudslides after heavy rain.

For more information please see birdlife.org/news/news/2004/12/st_vincent.html

WPT Spain

WPT SPAIN is organizing the "II Conference on Care and Conservation on Pet Parrots" on the 10th and 11 th of June at the Universidad Popular de Alcorcón in Madrid. Those wishing to attend should contact spain@worldparrottrust.org or call 619.847.414. Fee: €30 + €5 (for those interested in attending the toy workshop). The funds raised will go for a parrot project!

Unprecedented spread of avian influenza requires broad collaboration

FAO/OIE/WHO calls for international assistance**,**
http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2004/pr7/en/

27 January 2004 | GENEVA/ROME/PARIS
The spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza in several areas in Asia is a threat to human health and a disaster for agricultural production, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the World Health Organization (WHO) said in a joint statement today.

Although it has not happened yet, the so-called "bird flu" presents a risk of evolving into an efficient and dangerous human pathogen, the three agencies warned.

The possible widespread occurrence of avian flu in animals in developing countries represents a significant control challenge. FAO, OIE and WHO appealed to donors to address the global threat from avian flu and to provide funds and technical assistance to countries to help eliminate this threat.

WPT leads 230 Groups Urging an End to the EU's Wild Bird Imports

By JAMIE GILARDI

Building on the momentum generated by the petition delivered on World Parrot Day, last summer we had the growing sense that there was (and is!) widespread support for such a ban among the conservation, welfare, veterinary, and even poultry organizations around the world. We decided to formalize this support to give the EU a sense for the breadth of interest and concern about their wild bird imports. In early December 2004, we delivered this document which we dubbed the "Wild Bird Declaration" to all EU member states, appropriate ministers, and select Members of the European Parliament. The Declaration was drafted with help from Defenders of Wildlife and the Species Survival Network, and was ultimately endorsed by over 230 non-governmental organizations. Additional information and the declaration itself are available on the front page of the WPT site at worldparrottrust.org.

Photo © 2004 Bowles / Erickson

International commercial trade in the Lilac-crowned Amazon was recently outlawed in response to widespread declines due to overharvest for the pet trade.

Having the support of much larger and more powerful organizations such as the Audubon Society, Greenpeace, Defenders of Wildlife, the RSPCA, International Fund for Animal Welfare, and Friends of the Earth Europe, and many others, has helped this Declaration generate the kind of attention and response we never could have achieved on our own. Partially because of the EU structure and partially because this campaign focuses on three separate issues - conservation, welfare, and infectious disease risk - we're now working together to approach various branches of the EU government to help them better understand the current situation and encourage them to take action to stop the imports. We're also working at the national level in several countries like the UK, NL, and Belgium as some of these governments are motivated by these same concerns.

Photo © Jan Rodts, Birdprotection Belgium

For every live bird in the EU pet shop, several wild birds die during capture or transport, such as these bee eaters dead on arrival in Africa.

Recently, the Environment Minister from Belgium took the initiative to present a proposal based on the Declaration to the Environment Council in Brussels - a gathering of the Environment Ministers from all 25 EU Member States. Although decisions were neither expected nor taken at this meeting, having this issue presented at such a high level at this early stage is most welcome: http://news.scotsman.com/latest.cfm?id=4230833.

Also in early March, a member of the UK Parliament, Mr. Andrew George MP, presented an "Early Day Motion" to the Parliament calling on the UK Government to work with other member states toward an end to the commercial importation of wild birds. We were delighted to see that Mr. George went to the trouble of collecting 56 additional MP's signatures for this Motion: see http://edm.ais.co.uk/weblink/html/motion.html/ref=643

The emergence of an extremely dangerous strain of avian flu in Asia has done a great deal to put the issue of the bird trade to the front pages of the world's papers. In response to the outbreak, the EU banned the imports of all birds and bird products from much of Asia early last year, including all wild birds. The one case of the dreaded H5N1 entering the EU was in a shipment of wild eagles from Asia which arrived in Brussels airport in the passenger cabin of a commercial flight. Events like these really help underscore with policy-makers just how threatening this trade really is and hopefully will bring this issue the attention we feel it deserves. The good news in this case is that this Asian ban has now inadvertently saved the lives of many hundreds of thousands of wild birds!

I just returned from the UK, NL, and Belgium where WPT (Cristiana Senni from WPT Italy, Ruud and Ria Vonk from WPT-Benelux, and myself) had a series of productive meetings with both supportive NGO's as well as various offices of the European Commission. I've been repeatedly amazed at how complicated these structures are, but we've already seen a number of positive steps toward the ending of the wild bird trade. After years of hard work on this issue, we are now delighted to be entering a phase in this campaign where we as a group of organizations can put all our combined knowledge, experience, and energy to work at the level where the decisions are made.

We very much appreciate all the support we've been getting on this campaign for the past few years, and we look forward to reaching out for additional help from members and supporters as we proceed and as opportunities present themselves.

Dust bathing in Pacific Parrotlets (*Forpus coelestis*) in Western Ecuador

By WERNER LANTERMANN

Dust bathing or sand bathing is obviously very rare or nearly absent in parrots. SMITH (Ibis 1975,117:18-66), who realized a systematic survey on all the then known anatomical, physiological and behavioural aspects of parrots reported, that most species of parrots bathe either in wet foliage, in the rain or in standing water as a feather maintenance activity. No record is mentioned there, that parrots bathe in the dust or sand on the ground. Meanwhile there are few (internet-) references, that at least two species, the Vasa Parrots (*Coracopsis*) from Madagascar, sunbathe on the ground and are also said to enjoy dust bathing.

During my different study trips to Ecuador in the 1990s we also attempted a detailed visit to the Machalilla Nationalpark (30.4.1994) located at the west coast of the Ecuadorian lowlands. For the night we stayed in the former eco-tourist hosteria “Alandaluz", where all “buildings” and “sleeping rooms” were built from natural material. So the houses resembled lake-dwellings or tree-huts. The air went smoothly through the hammock in the night and all the sounds from outside came directly to our ears.

When we woke up early the next morning our first attention was taken by the whistles and sounds of Pacific Parrotlets (*Forpus coelestis*), which we hadn’t expected in that place. A small group of 4 to 6 birds was living around our huts, and obviously two of them had a nesting or sleeping place in a bamboo cane (with a diameter of about 10 cm), that was used as a pile for the electricity supply. An observation of interest was the fact that these little parrots performed detailed sand or dust bathing procedures like sparrows on the ground. Especially one female was observed nearby the huts to lay with the belly in the warm dust, a little bit on the side (to take a sunbath?), then stood up, whirred with the wings whirling up the dust, so that the whole body was covered with it. The dust bath lasted about six minutes. - What are the reasons for such an extraordinary behaviour?

It was not obvious from literature, whether parrotlets have a prominent oil gland, a reduced oil gland and / or only powder downs instead of it. If they have an oil gland, the sand bathing could be in relationship to it: some ornithologists think that the cleaning oil, normally necessary to keep the feathers in a good condition and to make them more flexible, has to be changed from times to times. And while dust bathing, the oil is sucked up by the dust, making it easier to remove from the feathers. The birds can get rid of the oil by simply shaking out the dust from the feathers.

But the primary purpose why birds bathe in the dust is thought to be to clean the feathers and get rid of ectoparasites - a group of infinitesimal creatures (including mites, lice and fleas) that dwell on or near the skin. Ectoparasites usually exist in two forms: blood parasites that live on the skin itself, and skin parasites that reside in the tiny spaces between feathers. Probably the populations of these microscopic animals decline after a vigorous dusting session. It is supposed that ectoparasites breath through their exoskeletons and the dust probably clogs pores in those exoskeletons, killing the parasites. - We couldn’t find specific reasons for the dust-bathing behaviour in just those small parrots at the west coast of Ecuadorian South America.

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**

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Please visit our new dedicated online store for US supporters! You can visit directly at **www.parrottrustusa.org** or link from the US flag on our primary website www.worldparrottrust.org. With hours upon hours of help from our friend and supporter in Canada, Steve Milpacher, we opened this store in December to make joining, renewing, donating and shopping easier for our many supporters in the USA. We appreciate your years of bearing with us as we converted British Pounds to US dollars and shuffled orders (and merchandise) from the UK to the US. Now we are able to set prices that do not fluctuate with the exchange and perhaps try out different merchandise without guaranteeing that we have duplicate items on both sides of the ocean. The site is working beautifully - please visit - renew your membership, buy that awesome PollyVision that everyone is talking about, hook your friend or neighbor up with a new shirt or book. We hope you will find the site easy to navigate and pleasing to view and hope you will visit and send your friends often.

WPT International Contacts

United Kingdom
Michelle Cook, (Administrator), Glanmor House, Hayle, Cornwall, TR27 4HB UK.
Tel: (44) 01736 751026 Fax: (44) 01736 751028,
Email: admin@worldparrottrust.org

Africa
Vera Dennison, PO Box 32, Link Hills, Natal 3652, South Africa.
Tel: (27) 31 763 4054 Fax: (27) 31 763 3811,
Email: africa@worldparrottrust.org

Asia
Catherine Carlton, Hong Kong
Tel: (852) 9235 6300, Email: asia@worldparrottrust.org

Australia
Linda Adam, Sydney, NSW Australia. Tel: (61) 2 8901 4207,
Email: australia@worldparrottrust.org
Mike Owen, 7 Monteray St., Mooloolaba, Queensland 4557, Australia.
Tel: (61) 7 5478 0454

Benelux
Jacques Gardien (Mem), Laan van Tolkien 51, 5663 RW Geldrop, The Netherlands.
Tel: (31) 40 2850844, Email:benelux@worldparrottrust.org
Belgium enquiries: Romain Bejstrup (32) 32526773
Netherlands enquiries: Ruud Vonk (31) 168472715

Canada
Michelle Cook, (Admin), Glanmor House, Hayle, Cornwall, TR27 4HB UK.
Tel: (44) 01736 751026 Fax: (44) 01736 751028,
Email: admin@worldparrottrust.org

Italy
Cristiana Senni, C.P.15021, 00143 Roma, Italy.
Email: italy@worldparrottrust.org

Spain
Gemma Cruz Benitez, C / Enrique Granados, 5 ch. 4, 28290 - Las Matas, Madrid, Spain. Tel: (34) 619 847 414 Email: spain@worldparrottrust.org

Sweden
Dan Paulsen, Tjelvarvagen 28, S-621 42 Visby, Sweden.
Email: sweden@worldparrottrust.org

Switzerland
Lars Lepperhoff, Lutschenstrasse 15, 3063 Ittigen, Switzerland.
Tel: (41) 31 922 3902 Email: switzerland@worldparrottrust.org

USA
Joanna Eckles, PO Box 353, Stillwater, MN 55082, USA.
Tel: (1) 651 275 1877 Fax: (1) 651 275 1891,
Email: usa@worldparrottrust.org

WPT Web Sites:
USA Store: http://www.parrottrustusa.org
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Parrots in the Wild

Red-fronted Macaws

Ara rubrogenys

By JAMIE GILARDI

A pair of Red-fronted Macaws guarding their nest site in Bolivia - stay tuned for a full story on our efforts to conserve these stunning birds in the next issue of *PsittaScene*.

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