PsittaScene

Magazine of the World Parrot Trust

Winter 2023

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World Parrot Trust

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ABOUT THE WPT

Capture for the live-bird trade, habitat loss and other factors put wild parrots at risk. Nearly 30% of all parrot species are considered by IUCN to be at risk of global extinction.

As an international leader in parrot conservation and welfare, the World Parrot Trust works with researchers, in-country organisations, communities and governments to encourage effective solutions that save parrots.

Since 1989 the WPT has grown to become a global force that moves quickly to address urgent issues and support long-term projects. Over that time WPT has led or aided conservation and welfare projects in 45 countries for more than 80 species of parrot.

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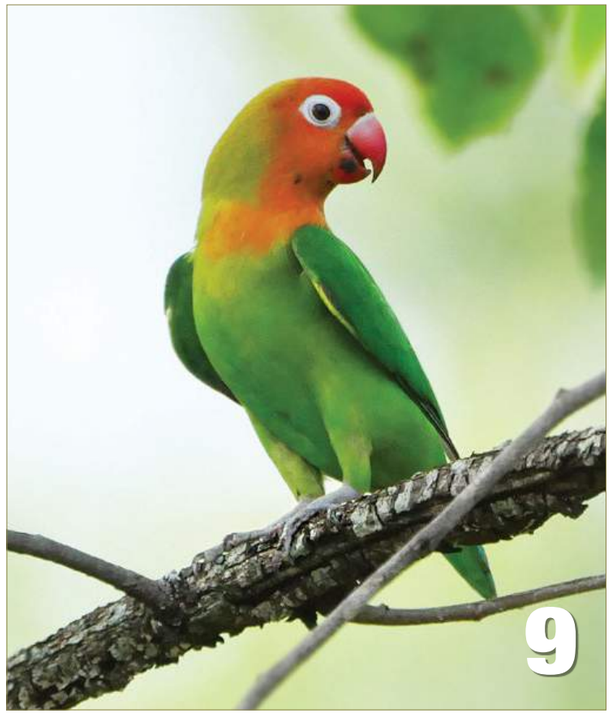
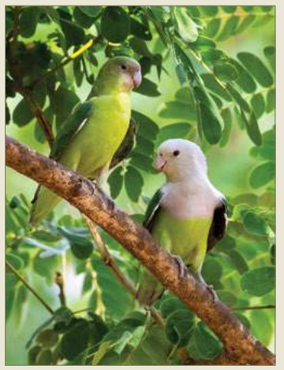


ON THE COVER

Grey-headed Lovebird *(Agapornis canus)* female (top) and male (bottom). These lovebirds are native to Madagascar and introduced to Comoro, Seychelles, Rodrigues and Réunion islands.

Photo © blickwinkel / Alamy Stock Photo

Learn more in ***Lovebirds: What We Know and Don't Know About Their Lives and Why it Matters***, Page 9.



Partner Spotlight:

Founded in 2004 by Nikki Buxton and Jerry Larder upon rescuing two very young parrot chicks from the illegal wildlife trade, **Belize Bird Rescue** (BBR) has since expanded their facilities and staff to become the country's only multi-species avian rescue centre. Situated on a privately owned 50-acre river-front wildlife sanctuary, BBR works with a variety of resident and migratory birds but their primary focus is native parrots, which account for 70% of their rescues.

The team at BBR has successfully rescued, rehabilitated, and released over 1,000 parrots back to the wild. Working in collaboration with the Belize Forest Department, they have implemented a licensing programme to tag and monitor wild birds already in captivity, which will prevent any new parrots entering the illegal pet trade.

One of the most endangered parrots in Belize is the Yellow-headed Amazon. These parrots are highly coveted for their ability to mimic human speech, which makes them vulnerable to poaching. They also face threats like severe weather events and fires, as well as conflicts with farmers and crop producers. BBR works with partners such as the Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE) and Belize Bird Conservancy to monitor and protect the nests of Yellow-headed Amazons in southern Belize. They also identify and rescue any chicks that would not be able to survive in the wild.

In addition, by engaging in various outreach and education activities such as school presentations, media interviews, billboard and information campaigns, and online events, BBR aims to raise awareness and change attitudes about the importance of protecting parrots and their habitats.

The Belize Bird Rescue is an inspiring example of how dedicated individuals can make a difference for birds in need. You can learn more about their work at **belizebirdrescue.com** or find them on social media.

Yellow-headed Amazon © Frank Fichtmüller, Getty Images

Released Yellow-headed Amazon in the wild © Fotoatelier Hahn

YELLOW-HEADED AMAZONS:
Staying one step ahead

by Nikki Buxton, Director, Belize Bird Rescue

A recent conversation with Mario Muschamp, TIDE's Head Ranger at Payne's Creek National Park, filled me with delight and hope for the future. Our Yellow-headed Amazons released in the early years of the hand-rearing programme now have chicks of their own.

There is no better news, and it marks the project as an unequivocal success.

Back in 2014, in conjunction with Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE), we began a test program with six Yellow-headed Amazon chicks *(Amazona oratrix belizensis)*. Through their vast experience, the TIDE Rangers identified four chicks that would fail to fledge due to threats such as poaching, predation, illness and nest over-crowding, plus we received an additional two nestlings that had been surrendered to us shortly after being poached.

With only the bare bones of a plan to raise them and put them back into the Protected Area, we embarked on what would be a ground-breaking program that has seen the return to the wild of 138 endangered and endemic Yellow-headed Amazon fledglings that would otherwise have perished or entered the illegal pet trade. In the absence of any suitable models to follow, we had to wing it (pardon the pun). We knew we needed to keep these chicks far from our ex-captive rehab patients whose vocal habits picked up from their human owners would be irresistible to a developing chick.

The hand-rearing followed the now familiar protocols we use with all parrot species we raise, albeit with extra caution not to make any sounds around the Yellow-headed chicks. We found to our cost that even grunts, coughs and a casual 'okay' could be mimicked by this charismatic species while they are still 'in diapers'.


© Sara Thorarensen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© Nikki Buxton

Left, top: Healthy and strong chicks starting to grow feathers.
Left, bottom: Syringe-feeding fledglings.
Right: Attempts to catch birds inside large flight.


BBR staff supplementally feeding released birds © Conch Creative

As soon as they fledged they were relocated to a specially constructed flight aviary in a forested part of the property, away from our day to day activities and any human-sounding noises, be they parrot or people generated. We had built a gorgeous enclosure for them 60' wide by 60 deep by 30' high. It was magnificent and the birds flourished in the space.

Our weaning process is the same for all parrot species and has worked well for us for many years. If it ain't broke, don't fix it, as they say. Once the parrots fledge, we cease tubing the food directly into the crop, and instead use the gavage tube to neatly deliver food into their mouth. We will only offer food to birds at one particular perch, and if they don't come to that specific perch to eat, then they don't get fed. They soon get the hang of it. It's now their choice to turn up for chow or not, and once sated they fly off without a thanks. Although on the face of it we may appear to be habituating them, but with strict rules dictating how and when they are fed, once they are weaned they lose all interest in us and become an independent flock.

The feeding platforms in the aviary are about 12 feet off the ground, accessed by outer ladders and hatches. The birds get the same varied diet of fruits, veggies, seeds, legumes, nuts and pellets as all of our parrots. We don't attempt a wild diet as we simply don't have the trees in our area to harvest the necessary fruits. Even if we did, we are unlikely to have access to sufficient browse to sustain them through their rehab period and there would be unacceptable and unnecessary deficiencies. They do get enrichment branches and some wild fruits, but we know that the Rangers introduce the natural foods during the pre-release period, which works well enough to show them the way of the wild.

Prior to this ground-breaking program, the majority of our hand-rearing and release efforts were with the more common species of Belize's parrots such as White-fronted and Red-lored Amazons that had been in the hands of the public and had clipped wings or poor feather condition through bad diet. These birds need at least 18 months of rehab to moult into a new set of feathers under our balanced diets. The extracted Yellow-headed chicks however were pristine, so we thought why not release them sooner?

For several reasons we decided to release our first group in December 2014, at around 8 months old. We had built a 15' x 20' soft-release enclosure in the pine savannah of Payne's Creek National Park where the chicks had been hatched and extracted, and we were on course to release before Christmas. Unfortunately we had done such a great job of wilding the birds that we hadn't factored in how this would affect catching them for transfer to the release site. We waved our puny nets around and the birds perched on the rafters 30' above our heads and stared with disdain at our attempts to reach them.

After various trapping systems failed, we ended up building a make-shift frame inside the aviary which we could stand on while we chased the birds with long sticks, until eventually netting them. It was stressful for everyone and another lesson learned.

After spending a couple of weeks acclimatising at the release site, the six fledgling Yellow-headed Amazons were released. We band all of our parrots when they first arrive, with a stainless steel numbered leg band for identification during rehabilitation and as a visual indicator of a released bird in the field. We realised quite soon after release that the timing was all wrong. There were no adult birds visiting the release area. Yellow-headed Amazons nest in pine tree cavities and forage in adjacent broadleaf forests. Outside of the breeding season they have no reason to return to the pine habitat, especially as there are very few savannah trees in fruit at this time. The babies were all alone and directionless - not a great combination for inquisitive parrots that were accustomed to humans delivering plates of food every day. The rangers were forced to continue the supplemental feeding and the birds stuck close to the enclosure, just half a mile or so from the Ranger Station and the relative familiarity of people. It was far from an ideal start to their release. It wasn't until February of the following year that the wild adults returned and the fledglings were considered fully released and integrated with the wild flocks. We continued to repeat this mistake for a couple more years, partly because it did eventually work, however clumsily, and partly through pressure from agencies to release amid fears that we would be perceived to be 'keeping' the birds.

Finally, in 2017 we held off on the December release, and instead the 10 chicks we had hand-raised that year remained in their rehab aviary for those awkward transitional months. In April 2018 with the help of the Rangers, we finally hit upon the sweet spot for release. The wild flocks had returned to the area, they were paired up and had staked their claim on their nests, and the non-breeding birds were flocking to the area in sentinel attendance. With less than 10 acclimatising days in the pre-release, our eager babies took off without a backward glance and were absorbed into the flock. Other than their leg jewellery they became indistinguishable from the wild birds, although Mario says they have an accent! Galvanized by this success, 27 at-risk chicks were extracted that same year, and were returned to the savannah the following breeding season. We finally had our protocols for a slick and effective system: a rolling program of extraction, rehabilitation and release.

Over the years we have made modifications to our catching system and the rehab and release enclosures, refined our diets and protocols and learned from both mistakes and successes. We have reports of our hand-raised birds breeding with each other and with the wild parrots.

The Rangers have seen them successfully fledge chicks, we know they forage at least 15 miles from these nesting grounds and many if not most of them are surviving and thriving.

For us, the most important outcome from this program is that it prevents chicks entering the illegal pet trade and brings them into rehabilitation at a developmental stage that almost guarantees a rapid and successful release. Of course it would be better if we could leave them to fledge naturally, but while poaching remains lucrative and there is a demand for the chicks, extraction is a justifiable solution. A combination of conservation, education, awareness and enforcement continue to make inroads on the numbers of birds entering the local pet trade, but the economic drivers and engrained cultural practices remain fierce competition to our efforts.

Additional threats such as illegal logging of nest trees, habitat encroachment in general and climate change driven natural disasters compound the pressure on the viability of our populations. Recently, a more sinister practice within a particular organised community is entering the field, as we hear that both eggs and chicks are being removed from the pockets of unprotected nesting sites across the country and are being trafficked internationally. Staying one step ahead of poachers is exhausting and will always be a challenge and a drain on precious resources.

In 2024, funding permitting, we are planning a country-wide monitoring and extraction program to address these new threats, plus a population count building on the 2016 survey which assessed *A.o. belizensis* at fewer than 1,600 individuals.

We really hope we will see an increase in that number as a reflection of conservation efforts over the last eight years, but we are also aware that these reports of poaching outside of the Protected Areas could negatively impact the numbers. It is important data to gather, especially as it's known that the Belize subspecies is truly unique, that *oratrix* numbers outside of the country are pitiful, and Belize is truly the last major stronghold of this charismatic bird.

Perching in the rafters of our 'bush aviary' are 11 young Yellow-headed Amazon parrots. Their unconventional start to life will lead to their freedom in just five more months. Their presence in this enclosure means 11 fewer birds in the pet trade and 11 more birds whose release will contribute to the survival of a persecuted species who are quite literally being loved to death. We perform our ritual head-count as we deliver their daily food plates, ignoring their curious but cautious gaze.

It's been quite a journey for these chicks, but one thing is for sure, this path was infinitely preferable to their alternative destination. For us, this process is gratifying, uplifting, joyous and unbelievably rewarding. And it never, ever gets old.

Our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who has contributed to the rehabilitation and conservation programmes of Belize Bird Rescue. We simply cannot do what we do without you.

NIKKI BUXTON HONOURED BY IFAW

WPT partner Belize Bird Rescue (BBR) is the country's only multi-species avian rehabilitation centre and wildlife sanctuary. The facility rescues each year include many parrots, some endangered. The rescue's Founder and Executive Director Nikki Buxton was awarded the prestigious Animal Action Award from the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) in October 2023 in London, UK. She was one of the first international winners, from a field of 470 nominees.

BBR's Buxton has worked for more than 20 years to find solutions to avian wildlife poaching and conflict situations while being mindful of cultural practices and sensitivities. The IFAW is a global non-profit whose mission is to help animals and people thrive together.

There are few parrots that have gained popularity as companion birds like lovebirds. They are well known for their beautiful colours, clown-like appearance and affectionate behaviour.

However, many mysteries remain about the wild lives of the nine species of lovebirds found across sub-Saharan Africa.

LOVEBIRDS:

What we know and don't know about their lives — and why it matters

by Sascha Dueker,
WPT Lovebird Conservation Coordinator

We recently brought experts together, ranging from field biologists to conservation practitioners, to help review what we know, what we think we know, and what we need to know about wild lovebirds. In this article I aim to give a short overview of what we found and a summary for each of the species, all before you dive into your own copy of the full research article just published in the journal Ostrich – Journal of African Ornithology, Volume 94, 2023.

It has been almost a decade since a similar review paper focusing on the 'larger African parrots' was published (Martin et al. 2014). WPT's Africa Conservation Program director, Dr Rowan Martin, and colleagues focused on all the non-lovebird parrots, leaving lovebirds to wait until it's their turn to shine.

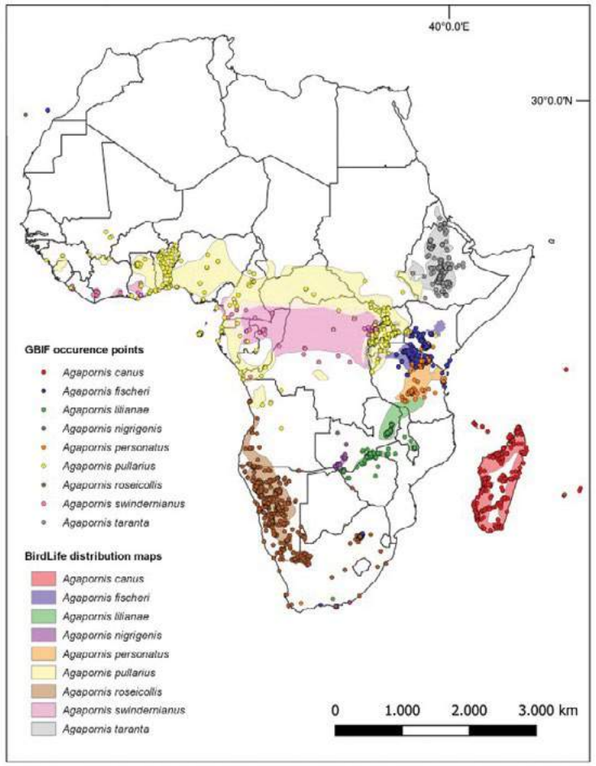
Fischer's Lovebird © David Des Rochers

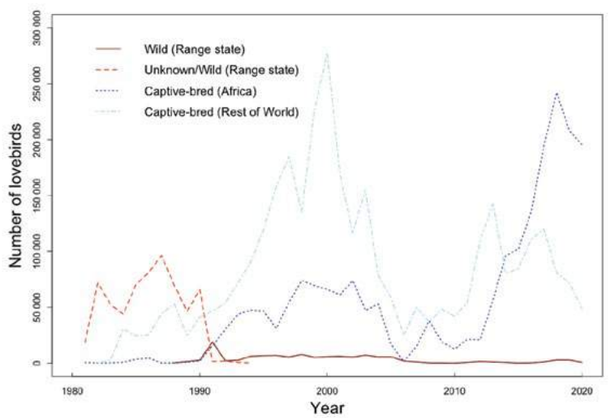
On the face of it, all nine lovebird species are quite similar: identical in size and seemingly only differing in their colours. Most of the species (eight out of nine) occur in sub-tropical to tropical and drier regions of sub-Saharan Africa (with the Grey-headed Lovebird endemic to Madagascar), whereas the Black-collared Lovebird is the only representative occurring in lowland rainforests. In most of the species the male and female look alike and, like their larger relatives, they prefer cavities as nests. An interesting difference is that lovebirds construct distinguishable nests inside their cavities, something not often seen in the parrot world.

Housing can reach beyond the cavities inside of trees: some species, such as Rosy-faced Lovebirds, have been reported to use hollows in rock cliffs as well as weavers' nests; others, such as Red-faced Lovebirds, have been observed using empty termite mounds. Fischer's and Masked Lovebirds in Tanzania have been seen with nests under the roofs of houses. We found a pair of Masked Lovebirds building their nest in a local church near Dodoma in Tanzania (hopefully this proximity to God will lead to fledgling success!). The flexibility in finding suitable cavities, however, also allows these two species to successfully populate cities where they have (often accidentally) been introduced.

We found a strong divide in research attention, with most published studies concerning lovebirds in southern Africa (a similar pattern to that observed by Martin et al. (2014) for the larger African parrots). This includes Lilian's (or Nyasa) Lovebirds and Black-cheeked Lovebirds of the Zambezi River basin, followed by Rosy-faced Lovebirds, which occur in the driest regions of southern Africa. For the remaining species we did not identify any studies in peer-reviewed publications focused on aspects of their ecology, although important studies of the status and ecology of some species, such as Fischer's Lovebirds, were covered in theses and reports.

Several species and many populations remain largely unstudied in the wild, which is remarkable given how familiar and widespread they are in captivity. We need to change this and hopefully this publication will be a catalyst for current and future scientists and conservationists to lay focus on these charismatic little African parrots before it is too late.





Meet the lovebirds:

Masked Lovebird
(Agapornis personatus)

Although well-known in captivity, this species is largely unstudied in its wild habitat. Our recent field survey in 2022 found a flock that included some blue-coloured individuals living among the naturally green-yellow birds. Certainly a rare occurrence! Although international trade of wild Masked Lovebirds has largely ended, the trapping and selling of these birds at the roadside is still going on and has led to flocks becoming established within the Fischer's Lovebird's range.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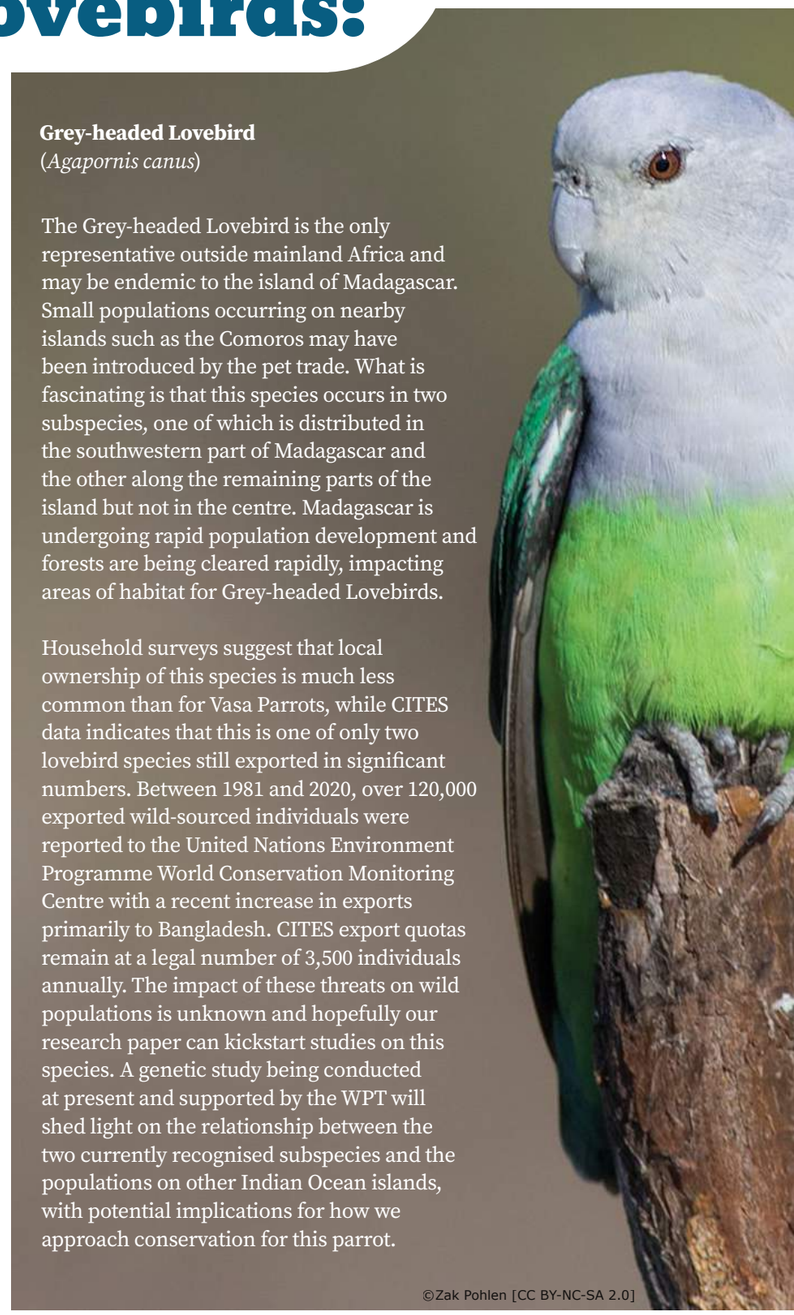
Red-faced Lovebird
(Agapornis pullarius)

The Red-faced Lovebird is known in captivity, though it is not as popular as some of its relatives. Unusually among lovebirds, the males and females do not look alike, and this suggests they may have an interesting breeding system. This could be linked to their unique (among lovebirds) habit of nesting in termite mounds. They are trapped and sold locally for the pet trade in West Africa, as well as exported legally to several countries. The impact of this trade on wild populations is unknown.

Grey-headed Lovebird
(Agapornis canus)

The Grey-headed Lovebird is the only representative outside mainland Africa and may be endemic to the island of Madagascar. Small populations occurring on nearby islands such as the Comoros may have been introduced by the pet trade. What is fascinating is that this species occurs in two subspecies, one of which is distributed in the southwestern part of Madagascar and the other along the remaining parts of the island but not in the centre. Madagascar is undergoing rapid population development and forests are being cleared rapidly, impacting areas of habitat for Grey-headed Lovebirds.

Household surveys suggest that local ownership of this species is much less common than for Vasa Parrots, while CITES data indicates that this is one of only two lovebird species still exported in significant numbers. Between 1981 and 2020, over 120,000 exported wild-sourced individuals were reported to the United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre with a recent increase in exports primarily to Bangladesh. CITES export quotas remain at a legal number of 3,500 individuals annually. The impact of these threats on wild populations is unknown and hopefully our research paper can kickstart studies on this species. A genetic study being conducted at present and supported by the WPT will shed light on the relationship between the two currently recognised subspecies and the populations on other Indian Ocean islands, with potential implications for how we approach conservation for this parrot.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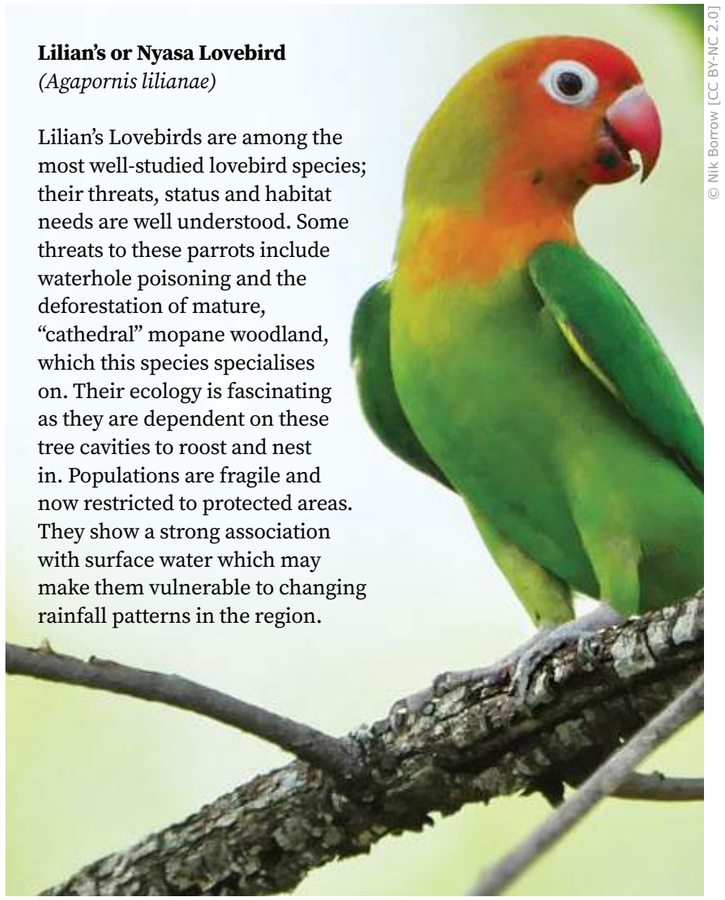
Lilian's or Nyasa Lovebird
(Agapornis lilianae)

Lilian's Lovebirds are among the most well-studied lovebird species; their threats, status and habitat needs are well understood. Some threats to these parrots include waterhole poisoning and the deforestation of mature, "cathedral" mopane woodland, which this species specialises on. Their ecology is fascinating as they are dependent on these tree cavities to roost and nest in. Populations are fragile and now restricted to protected areas. They show a strong association with surface water which may make them vulnerable to changing rainfall patterns in the region.



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Black-cheeked Lovebird
(*Agapornis nigrigenis*)

Similar to the Lilian's Lovebirds, Black-cheeked Lovebirds inhabit and depend on mopane trees, relatively close to the distributional range of the Lilian's Lovebirds having been in the past believed by scientists to be a subspecies of *A. lilianae*. Black-cheeked Lovebirds currently occur in only two small populations in the wild and are listed as most threatened of all lovebirds on the Red List of endangered species (IUCN). Due to captive breeding there are substantial numbers of Black-cheeked Lovebirds and genetic studies underway will show if and how these could be useful for bringing back these brightly coloured birds to areas where they have already vanished.

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Fischer's Lovebird
(*Agapornis fischeri*)

Similar to the Masked Lovebird, and also endemic to Tanzania, the Fischer's Lovebird has experienced the highest volumes of past trade with almost half a million individuals trapped in the 1980s. Concerns about the impact of this trade on wild numbers prompted a study in the early 1990s, which led to the end of legal trade and its categorisation as IUCN Near Threatened.

Surveys conducted in 2022 suggest that healthy populations persist in some locations but that they are closely associated with specific vegetation types. Large-scale trade also led to their expansion into new areas outside of their original distribution (e.g. southern Kenya), however a Kenyan lovebird geneticist shared that all populations there originate from trade and consist of hybrids between *A. fischeri* and *A. personatus*. The expansion of agriculture in some areas in Tanzania has removed natural barriers between Fischer's and Masked Lovebirds, creating novel hybrid zones with unknown consequences for the integrity of both species. Genetic studies underway will further clarify the situation and pave a way for future research and conservation on this species.

Black-winged Lovebird
(*Agapornis taranta*)

Also called "Bergpapagei" (mountain parrot) in German, this parrot occurs further northwest in Africa in Ethiopia and Eritrea. As the German name suggests, they can be found in slightly higher altitudes. Why? Again, we simply don't know yet. This parrot is as much understudied as some of its cousins - another lovebird that needs more research attention. A recent study suggests their habitat being threatened by invasive and fast-growing Australian eucalyptus trees.

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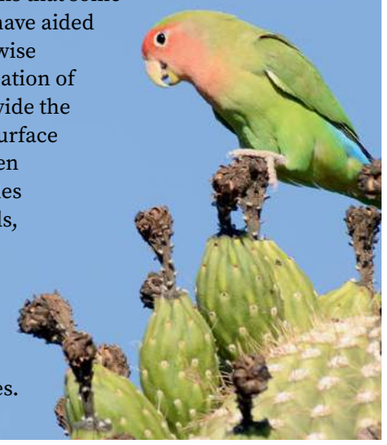
Rosy-faced Lovebird
(*Agapornis roseicollis*)

Rosy or Peach-faced Lovebirds live in the driest areas of all the lovebirds. While potentially being hit hard by rising temperatures and changing rainfall patterns from climate change, there are indications that some aspects of human activity have aided their expansion into otherwise inhospitable areas. The creation of boreholes in dry areas provide the lovebirds with accessible surface water. Buildings and wooden electricity poles, where holes are excavated by other birds, provide nest cavities. They also benefit from taking over the nests of weavers that sometimes build around these poles, which they can then use as cavities.



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Black-collared Lovebird
(*Agapornis swindernianus*)

This secretive species is the only truly forest dwelling lovebird and the only species for which there are no self-sustaining populations in captivity. Few photos exist of this species in the wild and there are only a handful of distribution records in databases. A truly wild bird! Their presumed range is relatively large and as they are dependent on lowland rainforests, this covers several countries in tropical West and Central Africa. We could find little information on the basic ecology and natural history of this species. With these requirements and with higher deforestation rates in those areas, we urgently need to study this species before it is too late and the few pictures that exist online will be the only ones future generations ever get to see of this bird. There may even be more than one species out there waiting to be discovered.

PAOC 2022

After submitting this paper, the research results were presented by Sascha Dueker at the Pan African Ornithological Conference (PAOC) in Nov 2022 at Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe. After a long wait due to the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers from all over Africa and across the globe gathered to present research and conservation work. Luckily, field work is often done in remote and isolated places, which had generated quite a bit of fascinating research being conducted despite the hurdles of pandemic lockdown on the continent.

This ornithological mega-event further allowed several of the co-authors and lovebird researchers to meet in person (many of us for the first time) to discuss urgently needed conservation and research. WPTs Lovebird Conservation Officer Dr. Tiwonge Gawa and Lilian's Lovebird specialists from the Zambezi River Basin organised a symposium on mopane woodlands, the habitat these birds depend upon. The entire unforgettable week was an important step to further the research work on this continent.

Sascha Dueker, Tamara Chirwa and Tiwonge Gawa present their research findings.

LINS ECOLOGICAL FARM:

The work of saving Brazil's parrots continues

Article by André Saidenberg DVM, PhD, WPT Brazil Manager
Photos © Ivan Tadeu

In the article *Until They Can Fly Free Again: Parrot Rehabilitation in Brazil* in the Summer 2021 issue of *PsittaScene*, we highlighted the activities of the three WPT-supported rescue projects in the country: the Caatinga Parrots Project, ASM Cambaquara and Lins Ecological Farm. Here we focus on Lins' work.

Lins Ecological Farm is located in the state of São Paulo in southeast Brazil. Farm owner and heart of the project Ivan Tadeu is a neurosurgeon who has dedicated his spare time to helping birds, including toucans, songbirds, macaws and the Amazons from central Brazil. Thanks to his rehabilitation program and a project to restore natural vegetation and trees to the facility's property, Lins has had many success stories, including the released parrots using the farm's protected trees as roosting and breeding sites.

The project continues with progress on a number of fronts. Ivan is documenting all of the many activities on the farm with a GoPro camera that was funded by the World Parrot Trust (WPT). WPT funds were also sent to build an important intermediate flight that will accommodate birds that need a smaller space and more time than others to be able to adapt after confiscation. The objective for the birds is to build up muscle and flight skills so that they become capable release candidates to fly free on the farm. Several nest boxes of different sizes (from conure to amazon parrot size) that were set up around the farm have been visited by the different parrot species that have been released on the farm, such as Golden-capped Parakeets (*Aratinga auricapilla),* White-eyed Parakeets *(Psittacara leucophthalmus),* Red-shouldered Macaws *(Diopsittaca nobilis)*, passerines (a taxonomic group that includes songbirds and wrens), and others. However, it is the Blue-fronted Amazons that really make the boxes their homes; they have been laying many eggs and successfully fledging a respectable number of chicks (an average two to three per nest). Up to 10 active nests were recorded this year.

WPT-funded aviary under construction

Left top: A released Blue-fronted Amazon and its chick.
Below, left: An Amazon chick being treated for botfly infestation before being returned to the nest.
Below,right: A nest box is installed on a pole.
Right, top: Released Blue-and-yellow and Red-and-green Macaws returning to supplementary feeding stations at the farm.
Right, bottom: Blue-and-yellow pair with chicks.

One of the nests monitored had up to six eggs, but it was revealed to be from a Whistling Duck *(Dendrocygna viduata)*. In another, a severe botfly infestation was observed in the two chicks, both of which were temporarily taken from the nest to remove the annoying and potentially dangerous parasites. We shared information with Ivan on how to prevent/repel these insects and treat the chicks.

In addition, there were individuals of two macaw species that were rescued in the past year: six Blue-and-yellow Macaws *(Ara ararauna),* and a lone Red-and-green Macaw *(Ara chloropterus)*. The macaws' progress is in the early stages still, as they were released at the beginning of the year and nest boxes of appropriate size still need to be installed. Happily though, success was already observed while they were still in rehabilitation: a pair of Blue-and-yellow Macaws raised two chicks to the juvenile stage that were adapted to the release flight and were released at the beginning of this year.

For the sole Red-and-green Macaw, the plan is for her to remain at the farm until other individuals of her kind are received through confiscation or as a consequence of other human-wildlife conflict. The resulting group will eventually be released on the property. Red-and-green Macaws had disappeared from this area of their range, so the reintroduction will be a welcome start to repopulating the forests there.

The work being done here has provided a basis for rebuilding wild populations that are declining or have disappeared, has saved individual birds from injuries and the horrors of the trade, and set in motion the reforestation of previously degraded land. The efforts of this generous neurosurgeon will echo in the forest with the calls of free birds in years to come.

PARROT CONSERVATION GRANTEES: ACHIEVING POSITIVE RESULTS FOR PARROTS

In the previous issue of *PsittaScene* we updated you on preliminary work results completed by a number of our Parrot Conservation grantees, supported by the joint WPT/NECF initiative. Here we continue with more good news.

Aves Argentinas

Vinaceous Amazons *(Amazona vinacea)* are native to Brazil, northeastern Argentina and southeastern Paraguay. They are found in tropical and subtropical mixed evergreen forest, humid coastal forest and woodlands. This Amazon species is one of the most endangered, with wild numbers at a low 1,000-2,500 mature individuals. They are threatened by habitat degradation and continued trapping. Fortunately, help is at hand with Parrot Conservation Grants awardee Aves Argentinas putting into action critical measures to protect the Vinaceous Amazon's Atlantic forest population. Their project aims to increase nesting success through strategically placing artificial nests and closely monitoring, with the help of community members, the birds' behaviour around them. The team will also identify and watch natural nest cavities. Local people are becoming involved in Vinaceous Amazon conservation in other ways: the yearly Fiesta Provincial del Loro Pecho Vinoso is boosting the parrots as a symbol of cultural identity. With the help of a young student ranger, the team is also building an interpretation centre near Tobuna Village School that will highlight the threats facing wild populations and how to help save the species. A well-attended survey was carried out by groups of observers spotting the birds at different points for three days. Volunteers, field technicians, park rangers, San Pedro Ranger School students and representatives of the local communities all participated in the count. The activity provided much-needed data on the wild population plus valuable training for the students. The groups counted at least 247 birds, about ten percent of the world's population.

Centre for Environment, Forest Conservation and Research (CENFOR)

Timneh Parrots *(Psittacus timneh)* are IUCN-Endangered in the wild. Their restricted range covers parts of Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Ivory Coast and a number of islands off the coast of Guinea-Bissau. There have been population declines and possible local extinctions across the range. Trapping for the wild bird trade and habitat loss, serious in some regions, are the likely causes of these declines.

CENFOR, a Liberia-based organisation dedicated to promoting conservation, management and sustainable use of the country's biodiversity, is working in conjunction with the Forestry Development Authority and the Ministries of Justice and Education on a project to bring attention to Timneh Parrots in Grebo-Krahn National Park (GKNP) in southeastern Liberia. There they will collect data on the parrots' numbers and the threats to them, and provide support for local law enforcement to prevent trapping, which is illegal. Their activities of late include organising awareness campaigns in two communities, establishing school wildlife clubs, distributing and analysing questionnaires uncovering threats, presence and abundance of the Timneh Parrot from people in five chiefdoms around Grebo-Krahn National Park.

The team will also help law officials to enforce wildlife laws for the parrots' protection, collaborating with GKNP officers and others to oversee and carry out policing operations to control poaching and trafficking in Timneh Parrots. Two operations have been completed to date, which led to the timely rescue of 72 Timnehs and two poaching convictions.

Top: Engaging with students at wildlife clubs.
Bottom: Conservation education and awareness raising held in the District Hall, Bilibo. *Photos © CENFOR*

Bosque Nuboso A.C.

The Lilac-crowned Amazon *(Amazona finschii)* has a current population of between 7,000 and 10,000 individuals on the Pacific slope of Mexico. A few feral populations also make their homes in native and exotic trees in and around Los Angeles, California, USA. Large scale habitat loss and trapping have put the wild population into a very rapid decline.

In Mexico and the USA it is one of the parrots most confiscated from trade. In addition, landfall by Hurricane Patricia in 2015 resulted in the loss of nearly two-thirds of nest-sites that reduced the birds' breeding success rate, which by 2019 had yet to recover. The Sierra de Atoyac in the state of Guerrero has one of the largest populations, but the species' ecology and distribution there are largely unknown. Researchers are concerned that trapping will lead to Lilac-crowned Amazons becoming locally extinct and to that end have begun an urgent survey of the area. Mexico organisation Bosque Nuboso A.C. received a Parrot Conservation Grant to uncover new data about the Sierra de Atoyac population.

The team discovered a key roosting site and identified possibly another, found important food plants, noted priority tree species for nesting and tracked daily movements of a population of more than 100 individuals. It was discovered that the parrots change their foraging sites daily. Crucially, the team identified two key threats to the parrots' survival: climbing prices for trapping and selling, and the potential for lethal human-wildlife conflict due to reports of crop damage.

Top: Flock of Lilac-crowned Amazons observed during population count.
Bottom: Inga *sp.* seed pod, identified as a possible food source. *Photos © Bosque Nuboso A.C.*

Byron Ssemambo, London Southbank University

The emblematic Grey Parrot *(Psittacus erithacus)* is found in fragmented forests throughout West and Central Africa. It is extinct in Benin, extreme southwestern Nigeria and southeastern Ghana. Its current population is unknown.

Koome, a small island in Lake Victoria in the Mukono district of Uganda, has intact primary forests that are important for Grey Parrots. Unfortunately, harvest for charcoal burning and firewood and felling for agriculture are diminishing the forest and threatening the parrots. Hunting for traditional or medicinal purposes and the wildlife trade are continuous and are also accelerating population declines.

Byron Ssemambo of London Southbank University is a researcher aiming to understand the Grey Parrots' ecology, conservation status and people's perceptions of the birds on Koome. He has mobilised communities, Mukono District Environment Officers, leaders and wildlife monitors to attend an awareness event drawing attention to the issues afflicting Greys. The workshop also provided residents a means to exchange experiences and views on Greys, and their expectations from the meeting. Ssemambo and his team not only learned why the parrots are at threat, but also that livelihoods for poor people living around the forested areas are being severely affected.

Participants learned of the potential positive impacts of conserving parrots, including ecotourism, improved participation in research studies and restoring forest for the benefit of people and wildlife. The team also trained select community monitors to use survey tools and data collection procedures. These monitors were taught Grey Parrot behaviour, ecology, habitat and diet.

The successful event reached an impressive 150 people. At its conclusion, a group of 10 farmers was selected to begin reforesting the area by planting over 160 native tree seedlings along the forest boundaries of Koome Village.

Top: Attendees listen during the awareness meeting on the conservation of Grey Parrots on Koome Island.
Bottom: One of the selected participants on Koome Island planting an indigenous tree seedling in her garden.
Photos © Byron Ssemambo

KURA: the Queen's bird

Article and photos by Luis Ortiz-Catedral, Ph.D
WPT Director, Oceania Region

ATIU! **calls the Air Rarotonga flight attendant. I look up, close my laptop and walk towards the boarding gate, along with six other passengers. Our tiny plane takes off, giving us the last views of the majestic Ikurangi and Te Manga peaks as we wave goodbye to Rarotonga. We head NE towards Atiu, also known as *Enuamanu* (land of birds).**

Atiu has an old, eroded volcanic mountain in its centre, surrounded by *makatea* (a raised fossil reef). The island is modest in size, about 30 km^2, and wonderfully tropical.

May 2023 Cook Islands, South Pacific

Atiu is also free of ship rats, one of the main threats to biodiversity on islands in the South Pacific. On arrival there's cheer at the small airport. "Luis!" Someone shouts my name; it is Jackey Kuraia Tanga-Matakino, my ride to Atiu Villas, my base for the next week. Jackey puts a fragrant garland of flowers around my neck, an *'ei*. By far the loveliest welcome I have had at an airport. Ten minutes on this island and I'm already in love with the place. "You are the only visitor" says Jackey as she starts her truck. The last group of visitors to Atiu left on the same plane in which I arrived with six Atiuans. The next group is not due on the island for another four days.

So here I am, the only visitor to a remote tropical island, in search of the Kura, also known as the Kuhl's or Rimatara Lorikeet *(Vini kuhlii),* a bird that binds two queens, two islands and their people. With support from the Pacific Development and Conservation Trust, I'm visiting the Cook Islands to meet local conservationists in order to kickstart a project that will help us continue the conservation of the Kura.

My search for these birds starts in the gardens of Atiu Villas, the property of Roger Malcolm, a long-time resident of Atiu. It can hardly be called a search; Kura are flying above the bungalows as I prepare my backpack. I step onto the verandah and I see a pair of Kura balancing upside-down on impossibly thin branches, or at the end of palm leaves, calling loudly. Another pair feeds on the flowers of a nearby tree. Kura, like other lorikeets, have elongated papillae at the tip of their tongues, making them brush-like. This appendage comes in handy to harvest pollen and nectar, which constitutes their main diet, plus the sugary flesh of mangoes, guavas, papayas and other fruits.

As it turns out, Kura are very common on Atiu nowadays. "I enjoy them," says Roger. "Even though sometimes they eat the mango I wanted to eat. I hope the Kura remains here, and that we manage to keep out the ship rat from Atiu."

On my first day I explore the SE side of the island, making observations about the feeding habits of the Kura as well as their numbers. Before long I come across a pair of them feeding on banana nectar, which gives me the opportunity to observe at close range these beautiful birds. Kura truly are winged rainbows. I distinguish ten shades of colours in their plumage: scarlet, purple, dark green, yellow, blue, pale green, mauve blue, lime green, grey and aquamarine.

Many have fallen under the spell of the Kura's feathers. The species used to be widespread in French Polynesia and the Cook Islands up to the 1700s. Their bright red feathers were highly sought after for the elaboration of headdresses and other adornments. Red feathers are highly prized across the South Pacific, and historically the trade of feathers, skins and live birds of various species between distant islands was a common practice. The Kura was no exception, with some birds taken to Kirimati, Tabuarean and Teraina in the 18th century. By the 1820's however, Kura were extinct in the Cook Islands, indicating that historical hunting for feathers prior to the establishment and spread of ship rats might have pushed the species to extinction in this archipelago.

On Rimatara, an island in French Polynesia, the same species is known as *'Ura.* There the bird would have followed a similar fate had not been for a royal taboo set up by the Queen Tamaeva V in 1900. This taboo forbids anyone from hunting or hurting the 'Ura on Rimatara and is beautifully summed up in her song: "*Kia uanga, kia ruperupe e rau te tuatau*!" (It should multiply forever and ever). "It is a very special bird to them (Rimatarans)" says Gerald McCormack, from the Natural Heritage Trust in Rarotonga. In the 1990s, Gerald made significant recommendations for the preservation of the 'Ura on Rimatara, including constant vigilance to prevent the arrival of ship rats. While the royal taboo protected them from overharvest for its feathers, ship rats represent a modern threat to this and other island endemics. For this reason, inspection of cargo and ongoing monitoring for signs of ship rats is essential. Gerald also made recommendations for investigating the 'Ura's population trends and finding a potential island, also free of ship rats, to establish an insurance population. This approach has been very successful in the conservation of species in New Zealand since the 1970s where offshore islands free of predators are now havens for thriving native species.

> ***At that moment I realize that not only does George know the birds of Atiu, but also that the birds of Atiu know him.***

Besides being ship rat-free, Atiu is part of the historical distribution of the Kura, making it a strong candidate location for an insurance population. After long planning and deliberation, the people of Rimatara agreed to gift 27 birds to establish a second population on Atiu. The delegation that accompanied the birds on their journey to their new home included the late Ada Rongomatane, *ariki* or Queen of Atiu. "The bird was gifted not only to Atiu, but importantly to the Queen" says Gerald. "This is a bird that was given by the people of Rimatara to Ada Rongomatane, and it is not meant to be given to anybody else. It is her bird." From that founding flock released in 2007 on Atiu, the population has grown to several hundred individuals.* When asked about his hopes for the Kura into the future, Gerald says: "That it will stay in the islands of Rimatara and Atiu, and that there will not be a ship rat invasion on either of those two islands". The hopes of Roger and Gerald strongly echo the wish of the late Queen Tamaeva V.

I spent most of my third day on Atiu with George Matearíki a.k.a Birdman George. George is a

**Rimatara Lorikeet: Population re-established on Atiu island after 200 years (Alan Lieberman and Gerald McCormack, Winter 2017 PsittaScene)*

Opposite page: "Birdman George" Matearíki calling to the Kura.
Top, left: Kura feeding on the pollen of a banana tree blossom.
Top, right: Miss Cook Islands 2017 Alanna Matamaru Smith in her Kura costume.

significant figure in the conservation and environmental education movement in Oceania. He is one of fifteen 2023 Global Biodiversity Hotspot Heroes, recognized by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund. Together with Roger, Gerald, Ada Rongomatane and many others, George was part of the team which brought back the Kura to Atiu. He was also instrumental in the successful translocation of the *kakerori* (a type of flycatcher) to Atiu in 2001. He is a self-made botanist, knowing every plant on the island, their uses, life cycles as well as their Ngāpūtoru, English and scientific names. But away from the limelight is where you find George in his element.

We are walking quietly in a stretch of *Makatea* forest, a labyrinth of fossilized coral covered in a filigree of ferns under the canopies of ancient trees. Without warning George lets out a haunting *wooo-woo-wo-wo-o-o-o-o*. A few seconds later, a *kukupa*, the Rarotongan fruit dove, replies. We can hear its wings flapping as we look around. The bird finally comes into view. Turns out George also speaks "bird." Later, in a coconut plantation he makes squawky sounds using his fist gaining the attention of two Kura, which approach us almost immediately, zooming down from the canopies. George laughs. "Come say hello!...Oh, you are a juvenile," he tells to one scraggy little Kura. At that moment I realize that not only does George knows the birds of Atiu, but also that the birds of Atiu know him.

With exceptional detail, George explains to me the habits of Kura, their preferred feeding and roosting trees and the importance of their feathers in Atiuan culture. "Kura are worth more than gold," he says. Later, as we sit down for lunch George tells me about the expedition to bring Kura from Rimatara, "I was proud to be on the expedition to bring back the Kura to Atiu. My dream is for this bird to flourish on our island." Another echo of the song of Queen Tamaeva V.

Back in Rarotonga, I meet with Alanna Matamaru Smith, Conservation Programme Manager of Te Ipukarea Society. Alanna leads conservation education and environmental awareness campaigns in the Cook Islands. Alanna also holds the 2017 title of Miss Cook Islands. She transformed into the Kura during the pageant, by wearing a dress made entirely of leaves and flowers, "To represent my Atiuan lineage as well as my passion for conservation."

As Alanna and I brainstorm potential approaches to collaborate and enhance the conservation of the Kura, she stresses the importance of community awareness and the continued surveillance for ship rats on Atiu. "Kura could disappear in the blink of an eye. Keeping Atiu ship rat-free is key so these birds can live in harmony and increase their population numbers."

NEWS

WPT expands efforts to dismantle parrot trafficking networks

In December, WPT attended the 34th meeting of the Interpol Wildlife Crime Working Group in Lyon, France. The gathering was a chance to meet colleagues face to face and forge new connections with law enforcement agencies from around the world, as well as learn how WPT and partners can better support efforts to end illegal trade in wildlife. Illegal trafficking is a major threat to parrots and Interpol is an important platform for the coordination and support of law enforcement operations.

In 2023, Interpol's Operation Thunder led to the seizure of 1,370 live birds, including many parrots.

Learn more about Interpol's Operation Thunder: tinyurl.com/op-thunder

Indonesian authorities intercept protected bird species concealed for travel in cardboard boxes. *Photo © INTERPOL*

United for Wildlife Summit
WPT representative attends conference in Singapore

The World Parrot Trust's Indonesia Coordinator, Angela D'Alessio, attended the United for Wildlife annual Global Summit on November 6th and 7th in Singapore. The two-day event highlighted challenges and success stories from Southeast Asia and beyond with leaders from many sectors sharing ground-breaking efforts and best practices in fighting the illegal wildlife trade crisis.

The WPT is proud to be a loud voice for parrots in global efforts to end illegal wildlife trade and has been a member of United for Wildlife since 2022. United for Wildlife was founded by HRH Prince William and The Royal Foundation to protect endangered species from the horrors of trade. At its core, United for Wildlife fosters global collaboration in the private sector to stop the trafficking of wildlife products. It does this through two bodies: a Financial Taskforce and a Transport Taskforce. These working groups bring together some of the world's largest businesses in the transport and financial sectors to break the chains of the illegal wildlife trade.

Dr. Rowan Martin, WPT's Director of Africa Region and Bird Trade said: *"The announcement at the United for Wildlife Summit of a new international collaboration initiative to detect and prevent the financial activity linked to wildlife crime is very encouraging. Disrupting the illicit financial flows, on which wildlife traffickers depend, will be a major boost to efforts to tackle global trade in threatened parrots and other wildlife."*

Learn more about United for Wildlife: unitedforwildlife.org

CITES Meeting: Progress Made in Addressing the Trade in Parrots

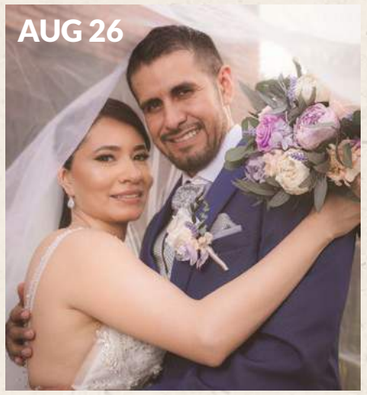
In November 2023, WPT attended the 77th meeting of the CITES Standing Committee in Geneva. The meeting addressed a number of concerning issues relating to the trade in parrots, and WPT was there to make sure the voices of wild parrots were heard loud and clear. Among the issues discussed were a concerning uptick in the trafficking of Lear's Macaws *(Anodorhynchus leari)*, the management of bird imports into Bangladesh, the need for stronger legislation to prevent the trapping of Grey Parrots *(Psittacus erithacus)* in DRC, and the commercial trade in extremely rare and protected parrots from breeding facilities in the EU.

WPT shared with delegates the results of investigations and research and the first-hand experience of our partners in the field to support decisions made on the best available evidence. At the meeting, important strides were made in addressing the trade in parrots and other birds in South Asia, with Bangladesh agreeing to suspend imports of CITES birds while they implement a number of measures to improve the regulation of trade. Last year, working with investigators from the BBC, WPT exposed how traffickers in Bangladesh exploit the weaknesses in permitting systems to traffic Grey Parrots.

WPT Weddings!

2023 was a year of joy for many in our family! All of us at the WPT couldn't be more delighted. May you all have many years of bliss and prosperity.

Tanya *(Project Leader, Puerto Rican Parrot Recovery Project)* & **Alberto**



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PARROTS IN THE WILD:
Red-spectacled Amazon
(Amazona pretrei)

These parrots are found in a restricted range in SE Brazil, in Rio Grande do Sul and SE Santa Catarina, with isolated populations reaching E Paraguay and NE Argentina. They are listed as Vulnerable by the IUCN due to habitat destruction and trapping.