

the Golden Birds of the Lost world

“Yellow, yellow, yellow! The whole tree was yellow. I thought the tree was full of flowers.”

By Charles Bergman

BARELY ABLE TO CONTAIN HIS EXCITEMENT, our guide Andrew Albert was describing the first time he saw a particular flock of Sun Conures (*Aratinga solstitialis*)—golden birds that are both exquisitely beautiful and extremely rare.

The poetically-named Sun Conure is also called, more prosaically, the Sun Parakeet. These long-tailed parakeets are named for the sunny gold of their bodies, burnished with a fiery red and orange. They are like a glowing sunrise in miniature.

Until very recently, the Sun Conure was considered common in the wild. Scientists thought its range was huge, from the Amazon River in Brazil through the Guiana Shield in the remote northeast of South America. That perception, though, may have been a reflection of the Sun Conure's popularity in captivity. It's common as a pet, with thousands in the United States.

But when scientists began studying the Sun Conure, it seemed to disappear right before their eyes. It was not as widespread as thought, and could not be found in the wild. Then reports surfaced of this particular flock in southern Guyana – the same flock that made Andrew bloom in spontaneous poetry. As it turns out, Andrew was describing the last known flock of wild Sun Conures. These beautiful and beloved birds have suddenly become some of the rarest birds in the world.

We had come to find this same flock—the last of the Sun Conures (left).

I was with Dr. James Gilardi, Director of the World Parrot Trust. A tall man in his mid-forties, Jamie (as he likes to be called) is an expert on both parrots and the global trade in wild birds. His goal was to document these birds for science, as part of the re-evaluation of the

species—both its taxonomy and its conservation status—that is currently underway. If we found the birds, Jamie's big question was: How many are there?

This scientific expedition also had the feel of an exciting adventure. Andrew's town, Karasabai, is located in southern Guyana, where the great savanna of the Rupununi rises into the foothills of the Pakaraima Mountains. The area of tall grasses and moist forests is a biological bonanza, one of the great wild areas of South America, and even the world. Guyana is barely the size of Great Britain, yet supports over 800 bird species. In the remote south of the country, the Rupununi prides itself on many of the largest animals of their kind in the world—from largest fish (arapaima), to largest ant; from the largest anteater to the giant river otter. For these creatures, it's sometimes called the “land of giants.”

The area is still largely undiscovered by the outside world—unique, misty, mysterious. It's also a mythic landscape. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle located his novel *The Lost World* in this region. Still earlier, the great Elizabethan courtier and explorer, Sir Walter Raleigh, invested this place with desire, believing that here he would find the great wealth of “El Dorado,” the golden one. We had come looking for another kind of wealth—biological gold. We were looking for the golden birds of this lost world.

FOR THE MACUSHI AMERINDIANS WHO LIVE here, like Andrew Albert, this is not a “lost world,” of course. It is their home and heritage. His lovely village of Karasabai is near the Irenga River, which flows out of the mountains and forms the boundary here between Guyana and Brazil. One of the “toshaus” or captains of the village, Elvis Edwards, was our guide in our search for the conures just a few miles up the river.

A witty man, Elvis has lively eyes under his camouflage hat. We rode in his boat through rising hills on either side of the river. I asked Elvis if he thought we would find the conures. “Everyday,” he said. “They come to the farm everyday.” Could it be so easy to find one of the rarest birds in the world?

Also with us was Shirley Melville. A former Member of Parliament in Guyana, Shirley has a round face and a perpetual smile. She is one of the best connected people in Guyana, and said that she left Parliament so that she could work more directly on social and environmental issues in the Rupununi.

Shirley told us that the Sun Conure had been one of the most popular birds in the wild animal trade. It remains legal to trade in wild animals in Guyana, and the Sun Conure's popularity made it one of the highest demand animals in the country. Hundreds of conures were shipped out of this region at a time. Guyana was virtually trapped out, with trappers going into Brazil to find more. Still, people believed that there were many more conures in remote areas of northern Brazil.

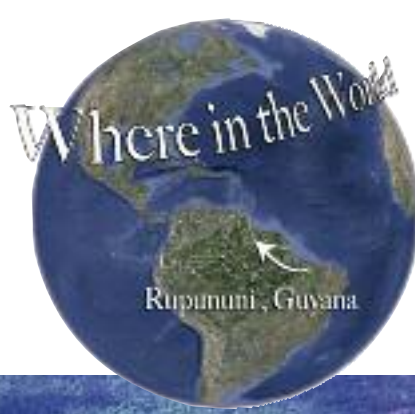
“I have never seen an uncaged conure,” Shirley said in the boat. “The biggest trapper here died in the late 90s. The numbers then were already low. A few years ago I walked through this area to convince people to stop trapping – to raise people's consciousness.”

The river narrowed and Elvis pulled our boat up to the shore beside some small canoes. We hauled our supplies to a modest compound of three small buildings. We hung our hammocks in a structure with a pitched roof and no walls.

Elvis led us up a small hill. We stood in a field of cassava plants, under the slender shade of a papaya tree. It was scant relief from the fierce sun.



Photos: © Jamie Gilardi



(Right) Most of Guyana remains forested and impressively pristine, with only rare glimpses of the presence of humans. (Above) Shirley Melville enjoys the wilderness she's helping WPT to protect. (Far right) The small farm where we stayed, surrounded by forest. The hill in the background is Brazil.



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WE SAW THEM IMMEDIATELY. A flock of glittering birds screeched low and loud across the field, and disappeared into the thick forest that climbed up the steep hills behind the farm. A second, smaller group followed immediately behind them.

Jamie and I counted: 26 birds in the first, and 15 in the second group.

“They are really flashy birds,” Jamie said. “Unmistakable. Their bodies really glow.”

Elvis turned to Jamie. “So are they rare?” He asked. “Are they the rarest bird in the world?”

“Excellent question,” Jamie said. “The short answer is yes, they are one of the rarest wild parrots in the world. And that makes them one of the rarest birds.”

The longer answer is a fascinating story. Recently, Dr. Luís Fábio Silveira, an ornithologist at the University of Sao Paulo, began to look carefully at Sun Conures. His conclusions changed everything. Studying 395 specimens in museums all over the world, he concluded that the species should be split in two. He noted that the specimens for the Guiana Shield (northern Brazil and southern Venezuela, Guyana, and Surinam) were widely separated geographically from those along the Amazon River. The birds from the Amazon are different: they have more green on their backs, and the yellow and red on their bodies and heads are much paler.

Dr. Silveira published his findings in highly-prestigious journal *The Auk* in 2005, arguing that the species should be split. The Sun Conure, *Aratinga solstitialis*, is in the north and includes the birds we found near Karasabai. He named the southern species the Sulfur-breasted Parakeet, *Aratinga pintoii*, honoring an earlier Brazilian ornithologist whose note in a museum led Dr. Silveira to compare the specimens.

No one noticed the distinction earlier because, says Dr. Silveira, the Amazon specimens are mostly in Brazilian museums, whereas the specimens from the north, like Guyana, are mostly in museums in Europe and North America. They were hard to compare.

Dr. Silveira’s study inevitably focused attention on the Sun Conure in the wild. Researchers looked for them, and found none. “They had suffered a huge reduction in numbers,” Dr. Silveira said. “The situation is critical. The flock you saw is the last one in the wild.”

Two months after our visit to Guyana in search of this flock of conures, the IUCN concluded its taxonomical review by approving the split in the species. And the suddenly-isolated Sun Conures were also officially listed as “endangered.”

Dr. Silveira’s research has revealed how valuable the flock in Guyana now is. It is literally and figuratively golden.

On the farm, we watched several conures high in a gnarled tree. They rose up and flew across the river into Brazil.

“It’s truly a multi-national flock of birds,” Jamie said.

“Tomorrow, they’ll be back,” Elvis said to us. “They’ll come down close. Tame, tame, tame. You’ll see.”

WE WOKE IN OUR HAMMOCKS the next morning to a cool fog and red howler monkeys roaring in Brazil. The conures got active early. We could hear them shrieking in the twisted trees just up the hill from the cassava field.

Elvis said the birds come down into the fields about 9 a.m., when we could see them close up. Jamie and I were in the field early, below a dead tree.

At 9:10, a group of four Sun Conures landed suddenly in the bare branches of the dead tree, as if on cue. They flew away immediately, but when we turned around, another group of about eight birds was feeding in the low bushes on the other side of the cassava field. More birds were on the branches of a cecropia just above them.

At close range, the birds were breathtakingly beautiful. I had seen photographs, but I was not prepared for the radiance of the birds. Their long tails and their mossy-green wings were both edged in royal blue. But their bodies were what defined them. They are like flakes of the flaming sun. Even



The juvenile Sun Conure, *A. solstitialis* (above right), has pale green on the throat and chest and less orange on the face and head than the adult (above left). This is important because the Sulfur-breasted Parakeet, *A. pintoii*, looks like a juvenile *A. solstitialis*. These similarities and differences were important in the initial confusion which lumped them, and in clarifying the recent split.



These young birds are mock fighting and seem to have no clue that their family represents about 10% of the known birds of their kind left in the wild.

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in the dull light of this foggy morning, their yellows and reds shimmered and shined.

Jamie pointed out that several of the birds were young ones. "See the green on their backs," he said. "As they mature, that becomes yellow." The young were playing with each other, nipping at each other's feet, and begging from the adults with wings quivering.

"The population is reproducing, and that's not always the case with rare parrots," Jamie said. "A positive sign."

In addition to documenting numbers, Jamie was also considering conservation projects for these parakeets. "The question is to decide what might be worth doing," he said.

Jamie noted that the habitat was abundant in the area. "Pristine," he said. "And there's tons of it. It was the trade that did these birds in, not habitat loss. This particular flock is well-established."

"Almost anything is possible, though," he said. "We'd partner with the local village or a local NGO, tourist lodges in the Rupununi, the government. Maybe we could release captive birds in other areas to help the species recover."

As beautiful as the birds were, they were also irresistibly curious and charming. They were unperturbed at being so close to us. They often looked at us with a wide-eyed gaze, at once intelligent and innocent.

They stayed in the field for an hour or so, feeding and playing, as Elvis had predicted. Then they flew higher up the rugged slopes of the high hills. Elvis said they would be around all day, until mid-afternoon, when they would fly over the hills for the night.

Why was this flock at this farm? Where had it come from? Jamie said it's hard to know for sure. But Elvis offered a theory. "I think these birds were trapped out in the 1990s. Maybe then some escaped from trappers. They re-populated and that's why they're here."

SOME REPORTS HAD SUGGESTED that this final flock of Sun Conures might have as many as 200 birds. We searched the area for three days and saw about 60 birds. As Jamie pointed out, we did not always know if we were counting new birds. Both the World Parrot Trust and Dr. Silveira are beginning more extensive surveys in northern Brazil for more conures.

As we searched the area, we had exhilarating, close experiences not only with Sun Conures, but also with giant anteaters and jabiru storks. I have also seen giant river otters up close in the region. The Rupununi must be one of the great and still-undiscovered wild places of South America. Shirley agreed saying, "I really feel the Rupununi is number one in conservation in Guyana."

She told us that the Guyanese government had just listed the Sun Conure as endangered. With this "endangered" status locally and the revised

listing from the IUCN, the Sun Conures will be better protected from trapping and the trade.

Perhaps the best news for the Sun Conures of southern Guyana is that Elvis, Andrew, and others in their village increasingly realize they are the guardians of a living treasure.

I asked Elvis what he sees when he looks at these conures.

"I see the beauty of the universe," he said. "Now we are having our eyes opened to the value of each and every parakeet. They will be here all the time if we don't trap. I'm totally against bird trapping. I'm in favor of bird watching."

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