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RELEASE FOR RESTORATION

BY JAMIE GILARDI

EXACTLY A DOZEN YEARS AGO, I wrote a *PsittaScene* article called “Breeding Parrots for Conservation.” In it, I reviewed how likely it was that captive bred parrots would make a direct contribution to the conservation of parrots in the wild. In a nutshell, the conclusion in May 2001 was that yes, it’s possible, but only in very exceptional cases. Re-reading the piece today, I’m relieved that it wasn’t entirely off the mark, but I’m also impressed by two fundamental things we’ve learned in the intervening years – one a bit disconcerting and the other very encouraging.



FIRST, THE SAD NEWS: Time and again, researchers are finding that parrots they thought were doing fine in the wild aren't nearly so well off as had once been believed. In some cases there was just no information; in some cases counts weren't terribly accurate. In others, what was thought to be one species turned out to be two, with one of the two turning out to be quite rare. For very familiar birds like Sun Conures, Timneh Grey Parrots, Thick-billed Parrots, Citron-crested Cockatoos, Yellow-naped and even Mealy Amazons, the real numbers of known birds in the wild are proving to be surprisingly and disturbingly low. To make matters worse, the remaining birds are often spread out over large areas in severely fragmented habitats.

Life history can add other challenges. Many parrots take a long time to start breeding, not all adults breed each year, and they are notoriously picky about selecting mates. All things considered, the reality is that while several hundred birds in the wild might look like a healthy population, in reality, it equals a small number of productive breeding pairs. Offspring may or may not be able to find (and accept) suitable mates, essential to new breeding and eventual recovery.

SO WHAT'S THE GOOD NEWS? In the past decade, we at WPT have learned that starting new parrot populations where they've been driven to extinction is proving to be, not just possible, but far easier than we had ever imagined. Of course, it depends on appropriate planning, coupled with careful selection and preparation of the birds. How did we learn this? Honestly, as a result of trade itself. One of the great ironies of the trade in wild parrots is that this otherwise tragic tradition has helped us learn how best to utilize release for restoration. Thousands of parrots of dozens of species have been confiscated from trade. Those birds have opened our eyes to just how successful releases can be. We've learned in example after example that released birds don't just survive, they thrive, adapting quickly to wild local foods and going on to breed successfully to start new and growing populations.

WITH HINDSIGHT it's easy to see examples which were pointing in this direction all along. The most obvious are cases of birds which have been accidentally introduced well outside their historic ranges... birds now referred to as "feral" parrots. While many of these are common species like Monk and Ring-necked Parakeets, others are endangered in their native habitats such as Lilac-crowned Amazons,

Yellow-crested Cockatoos, and even Congo African Greys. The fact that they survive and breed despite their accidental introduction into absolutely inappropriate habitats tells us a lot about the prospects of carefully planned releases of select, well-conditioned birds into their natural range.

THANKFULLY, the past twelve years have brought important lessons. We're now delighted to include confiscated and captive bred birds in conservation efforts more broadly than expected. In this issue alone, you can see applications of this tool to the restoration of Scarlet Macaws in Honduras, the repatriation and planned release of Congo Greys in Uganda, and most thrilling for us, the first transfer of captive-bred Blue-throated Macaws back to Bolivia to aid the recovery of this critically threatened species.

IN THE END, it was the release of confiscated birds which helped us refine the key components of this new tool and forced us to ask ourselves the following question: if we can successfully release common birds from trade, why not apply the same tool for seriously threatened birds as well? Clearly the answer is that we can, we should, and we are!

