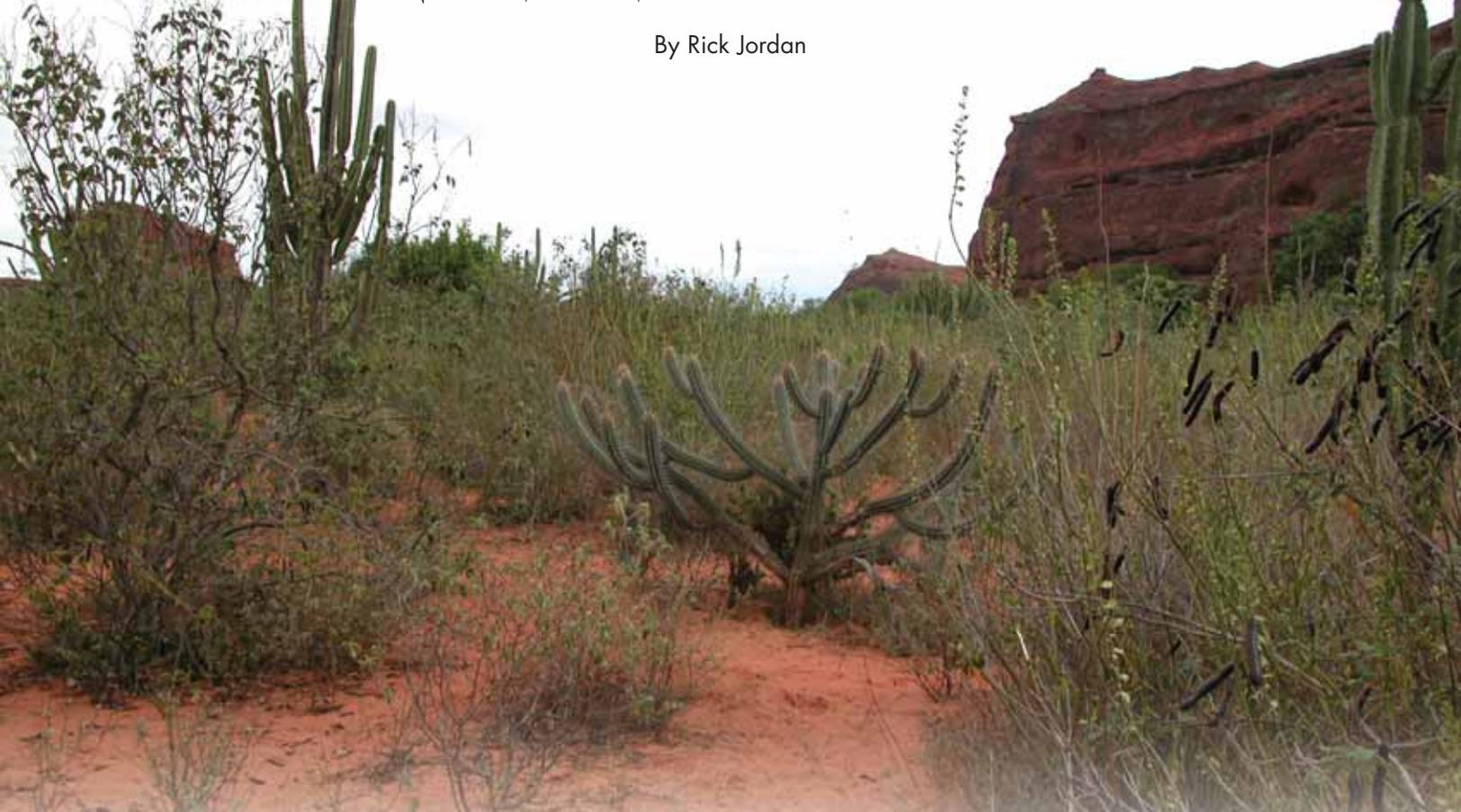


HELPING TO SAVE THE LEAR'S MACAW IN THE WILD

By Rick Jordan



In November of 2004, Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renováveis (IBAMA), the Brazilian governmental agency responsible for conservation of natural resources, organized and held another official meeting of the Lear's Macaw Conservation Committee. The meeting was held in Praia do Forte, Brazil, near Salvador, at a convention center and Eco Resort. A total of thirty-four representatives attended the meeting to make decisions that may affect the future existence of Lear's macaws in the wild.

Although current conservation priorities are focused on conserving wild Lear's macaws, there are several birds in captivity in Brazil and a handful of legal birds outside of the country. Therefore a captive breeding program is planned for the few birds that cannot or will not be returned to the wild. The owner of the Eco Resort, Wilhelm Hermann Klaus Peters, has donated some land to IBAMA where a quarantine station is now being built, and where a captive breeding facility will be built for Lear's and Spix's macaws in the near future. Several non-governmental organizations

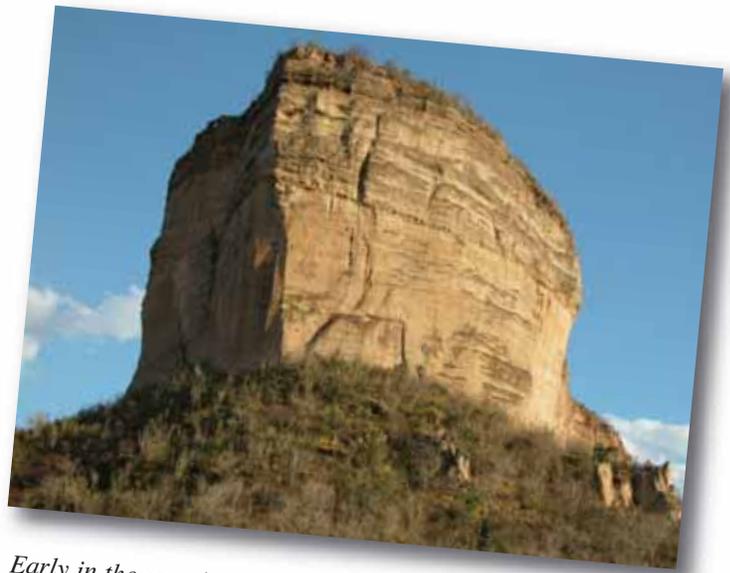
are now participating in the funding, planning, and construction of facilities in Praia do Forte.

Brazil is home to several of the world's rarest parrots. Probably the most well known is the Spix's macaw, now extinct in the wild and found in captivity in only a few collections around the world. But there are other parrots that also face the threat of extinction everyday in this magnificent country that is so rich in biodiversity. The Lear's macaw (*Anodorhynchus leari*) strongly resembles its better known cousin, the Hyacinth macaw (*Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*), but is smaller in size, more turquoise in color, and has a white eye-ring within the periophthalmic ring not found in *Hyacinthinus*. Today there are an estimated 450 to 500 Lear's macaws still flying free in Brazil. Pressures from illegal trapping are still a threat to this species, and this is one of the things that the committee has discussed in length. Hopefully in the near future the penalties for touching wild Lear's macaws without a permit will leave the violators searching for three-fingered gloves.

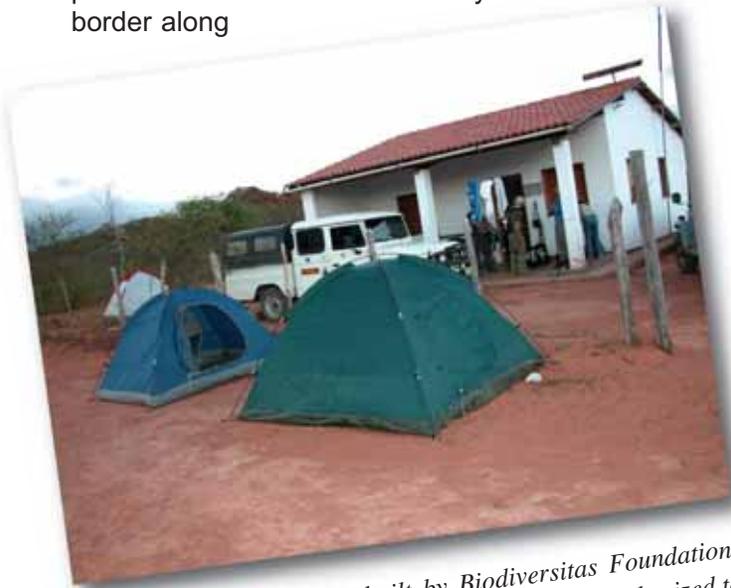
To find Lear's macaws in the wild, you would

As you can see in the photo above, the habitat in the Bahia region of Brazil is beautiful, but certainly not one where you might expect to find neotropical macaws.

have to venture into the State of Bahia in northern Brazil. Only two known populations exist in nature, and both of them are in the Highlands of Brazil. The terrain is not travel friendly, so a four-wheel drive vehicle is highly recommended. Forget about a map, because the Lear's macaw lives in areas where the roads end, and where maps won't do any good. It's highly unlikely that you will see any road signs directing you in the right direction, either. As a matter of fact, if you are heading in the right direction, you won't see a paved road for many hours - only widened horse paths where cars and trucks now travel between the small towns of the region. If you can manage to avoid falling deep into some ravine or pothole, the sights along the way are magnificent. You'll see cactus plants taller than the houses they border along



Early in the morning, just after the sun comes up, the cliffs of the Highlands of Brazil are alive with the screeching sounds of amazons, conures, and macaws.



One of the field stations built by Biodiversitas Foundation. These stations are used by the scientists that are authorized to work with the Lear's macaws in Brazil.

the pathways, and distant cliffs that jut majestically out of the earth, creating a scene you might expect to see from the camera on-board the Mars explorer.

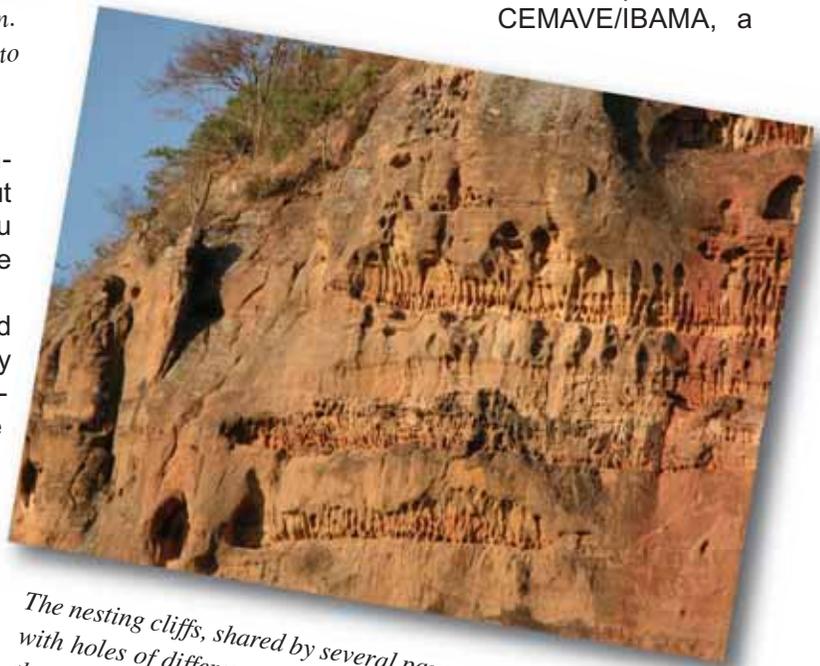
There will be no shortage of goats, cows, and horses along your way, and you'll probably get many friendly waves from the villagers as your noisy four-wheeler distracts them from their daily work in the fields and private gardens. An occasional town will appear right before your very eyes, and I'd suggest you stop and get a drink of water or soft drink, because it may be hours before you see another place to do so. Wear a big smile when you go into town; the people are curious about you because they don't often see strangers passing through. But make no mistake - if you are there to illegally trap Lear's macaws, you will be stopped. The ranch own-

ers and townspeople

of the area have a keen eye for bird snatchers, and most of them are protective of their native birds.

In early December 2004, I was fortunate enough to be escorted into the Bahia with a great group of biologists and other interested committee attendees. We were crammed into three vehicles and drove for hours and hours in the hot Bahia sun, but our goal was to see the Lear's macaw in its native home, far away from human intervention. I was honored to have some of the most important field biologists in Brazil to show me around.

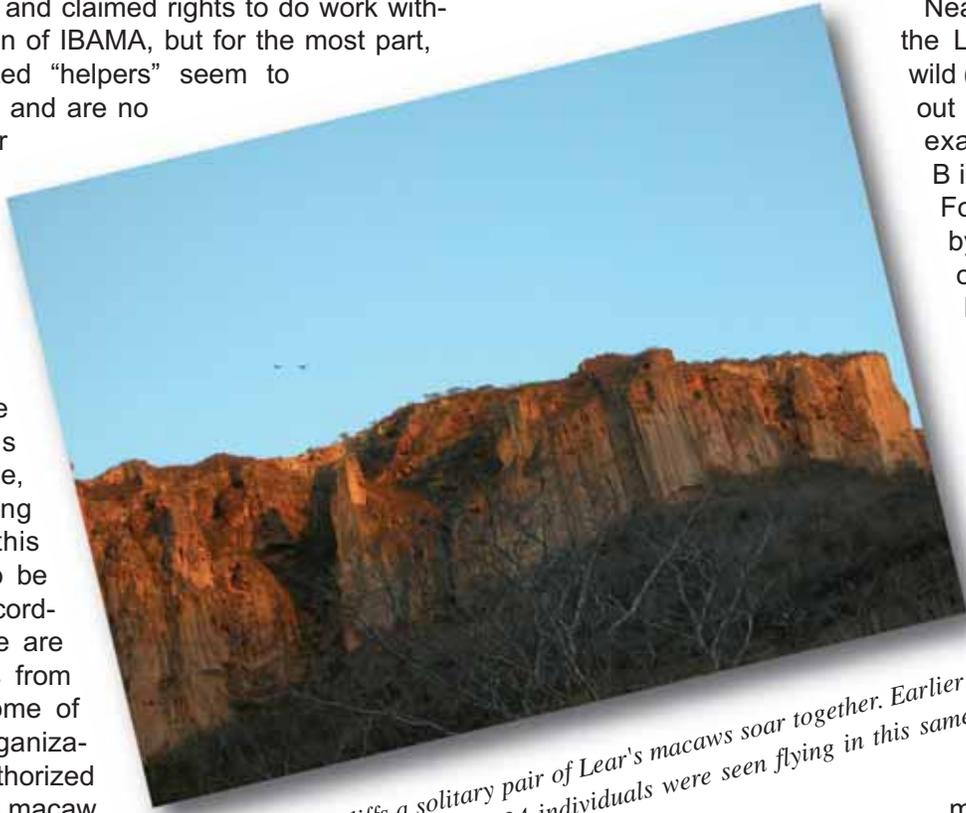
With the exception of CEMAVE/IBAMA, a



The nesting cliffs, shared by several parrot species, are riddled with holes of different sizes. Lear's Macaw is probably one of the most infamous of the known cliff nesting parrots.

governmental organization, conservation work in Brazil has traditionally been accomplished by non-governmental organizations, with the permission of IBAMA to do work in the area. In the past, some have just barged on in and claimed rights to do work without the permission of IBAMA, but for the most part, these unauthorized "helpers" seem to have faded away and are no longer funding or working in the area. This leaves several serious organizations, all members of the official committee doing most of the work. There is much to be done, too; the breeding biology of this species needs to be observed and recorded because there are very few records from captive birds. Some of the Brazilian organizations that are authorized to work on Lear's macaw, and that need your funding so desperately are Pro Aves, UNIDERP, Crax Research Society, Biodiversitas Foundation, and the Garcia D'Avila Foundation. Additionally, the Rio de Janeiro zoo, and the Sao Paulo Zoo in Brazil will be doing some fund raising to construct new facilities to house Lear's and Spix's macaws in the future. One important foundation not located in Brazil, but still doing important work for conservation is the Loro Parque Foundation, Canary Islands, Spain. Contact informa-

tion and methods of money transfer to these organizations will be posted on the Internet at <http://www.savetheparrots.com> in the very near future.

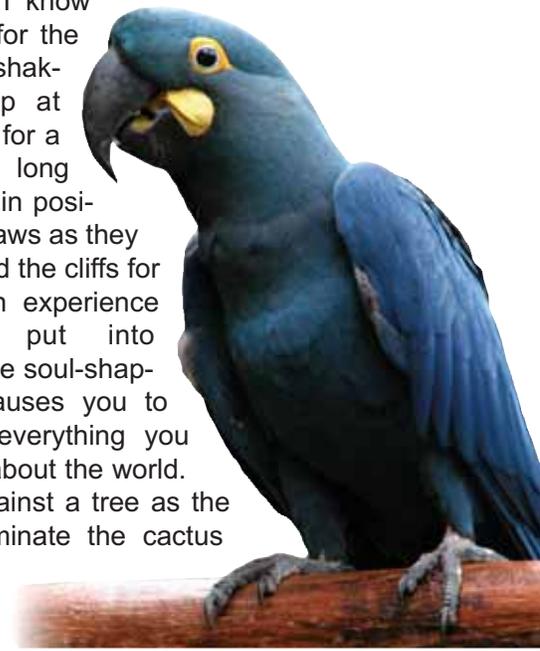


Far above the cliffs a solitary pair of Lear's macaws soar together. Earlier in the day, a group of about 24 individuals were seen flying in this same area.

Near each site where the Lear's lives in the wild (I've purposely left out the names of the exact locations), Biodiversitas Foundation, funded by Ms. Judith Hart of Dallas, Texas, has constructed three very nice field stations that can be used by serious, authorized, biologists. I was impressed to find that these stations even have a stove, a shower, and a toilet - much more than most of

the homes in the same area! I was personally very thankful to Ms. Hart each morning when I awoke in my tent and knew that I would have hot coffee and a shower at some point in the day. Little did I know when I signed up for the trip that I would be shaken from my sleep at 3:30AM to prepare for a short drive and a long hike in order to be in position to see the macaws as they awoke and departed the cliffs for the day. It was an experience that I cannot put into words...one of those soul-shaping events that causes you to stop and rethink everything you thought you knew about the world.

Leaning against a tree as the sun began to illuminate the cactus and other plants around me, I heard the calling



A closer look at the Lear's Macaw. Notice the white ring around the eye, and the large yellow skin area behind the beak. The Lear's is very similar to the Hyacinth macaw, but body weights and lengths are considerably smaller.

Help Support Lear's Macaw Conservation!
 Visit www.houstonbirdclub.org
 to purchase this beautiful pin.



All proceeds go directly to the Lear's Macaw Conservation Committee.

of the Lear's macaws from their 'dens' along the cliffs. At first it seemed to me to be a sad sound, several lonely calls into the darkness. But as the sun lit the cliffs, more and more voices joined the chorus, and soon the cliffs were alive with Lear's macaws calling to each other. Suddenly, and seemingly all at once, pairs of Lear's dove from the cliffs, flew in huge circles around the tall mountains and joined with other couples that had just dove from their roosting sites. The sky was alive with the silhouettes of macaws, lit from behind as the dawn was breaking over the hills. More than twenty birds were circling far above my head, far above the cliffs themselves. Then, just as suddenly as when they first dove off the cliff, they all landed on top of the cliffs where I could no longer see them. They continued to scream to each other until they regrouped, and then in a flurry, they took off into the air, turning away and flying off into the dawning sun. The biologist told me they would not return that day until just before sundown, and so we hiked back to the truck and headed back to the field station to have coffee and get our daily shower. Along our hike, a beautiful pair of Blue-winged parrotlettes (*Forpus xanthopterygius*) buzzed on by, probably on their way to some pasture rich in seed. The blue blaze of the male's rump was easily visible even at 90 miles an hour.

The cliffs might have been empty of macaws at that point, but there were certainly many Blue-fronted amazons (*Amazona aestiva*), Blue-crowned conures (*Aratinga acuticaudata*), and Cactus conures (*Aratinga cactorum*) still hanging out on top of and within the cliff walls. The noise was incredible! Consider that these cliffs are out in the middle of nowhere. There are no road noises or city noises to distract you, and so the parrot calls seem so loud that they actually echo off the cliffs. When the parrots were quiet, the only other sound you could hear was the buzzing of busy bugs; there must have been millions of bees and insects within earshot. The thought of coffee

was too strong by that time, so we started the truck and headed back to the station for coffee and showers.

It was certainly a treat, and a wise idea for the Lear's committee to take an old captive breeder like me to the field. Of course it wasn't my first time with wild parrots, but it was my first time traveling with so many biologists that could offer so much information as we drove along. As a permanent member of the Lear's conservation committee, one of my contributions (or duties, if you prefer) is to provide input on the captive breeding set-ups within Brazil where Lear's and Spix's are being maintained. As a captive breeder with over twenty years experience, my input may shave off a few years of the 'trying' processes, and hopefully the zoos and other breeders in Brazil will be successful in a timely manner. Success in the caged environment may lead to the development of a future release program for these magnificent species.

It is an honor to be a member of Brazil's conservation committee for the Lear's macaw. But I am not the only one who worked so hard to fund the trip to Brazil for this meeting. Many other people helped to raise the necessary funds, and all of them were dedicated to their part of the conservation of this species as well. A special thanks needs to go to a few people that donated money, time, and talent to make this happen. And so a big thanks goes to the Houston Avicultural Association (HAA), Mark Hagen, Nancy Speed, Todd Price, Lyrae Perry, Joy Caron, Gary Foster, Jean Jordan, Mark Moore, Matt Schmit, and Howard Hammack, for providing the labor and the talent. And to so many others that purchased our Lear's lapel pins to help fund this trip, and hopefully to assist in other projects associated with the Lear's and/or Spix's macaw conservation efforts in the near future. For more information on how you can help support the Lear's Macaw Conservation effort, or to purchase Lear's Macaw lapel pins, please visit <http://www.houstonbirdclub.org>, or <http://www.savetheparrots.com>. ■



A more scientific group of people would probably be hard to find. Representatives from both major zoos in Brazil, as well as IBAMA, CEMAVE, and others went along to see the macaws in the wild.



Field biologist, Yara Barros, of IBAMA was the volunteer cook at the field station. The group was thankful to have her!