

By Dr. Janice Boyd, AFA Conservation and Research Committee

CURRENT ISSUES IN PARROT CONSERVATION

For the past six years, parrot lovers in North America have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to hear some of the leading researchers in wild parrot conservation at the yearly symposium sponsored by Parrots International. This year was no exception. The two-and-a-half-day symposium was held at the elegant U.S. Grant Hotel in San Diego, Calif., on May 14 and 15. A “meet and greet” was held the evening of Thursday May 13. An optional VIP San Diego Zoo Day took place on Sunday, with behind the scenes tours of the panda exhibit, the new Natural Encounters bird show, and the Elephant Odyssey Exhibit, as well as a catered meal and presentation on the California Condor Reintroduction Project. As usual, the food was fabulous. Your author gained several pounds the first several weeks in May attending first the “Refining Skills” training workshop at the Natural Encounters Ranch in Florida and then the Parrots International Symposium. Oh, well: a broader perch for my pet parrots!

Ten speakers on Friday and 10 speakers on Saturday filled our time from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day. All were excellent, but space requires I touch on only a few of them. Paul Salaman, director of conservation for the World Land Trust in Washington, D.C., spoke on “Ten Years of Saving Parrots in Colombia.” In 1998 he assisted in the formation in Colombia of Fundación ProAves (www.proaves.org), which, working with local communities and landowners and international organizations, has become one of the most effective conservation NGOs in South America. Their first on-the-ground effort, saving the Yellow-eared Parrot, was recently recognized and publicized as a greatly successful multi-year, multi-stakeholder program that allowed this critically endangered species to recently be downlisted to “merely” endangered. With help from 47 different organizations (including AFA Specialty Organizations Loro Parque Fundación and the International Conure Society), the Yellow-eared Parrot went from 81 individuals in 1998 to more than 1,000 individuals in 2010. Paul described some of the newer projects of ProAves to conserve other Colombian avian species, including the Fuertes’ Parrot, Santa Marta Conure, Painted Conure, Golden-plumed Parakeet, Rusty-faced Parrot, and Military Macaw.

Mike Perrin, director of the Research Centre for African Parrot Conservation at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, presented two talks:



PHOTO BY OLAF WIRMINGHAUS

The studies of the late Olaf Wirminghaus showed the South African endemic *Poicephalus*, the Cape Parrot, was a separate species from the other African *Poicephalus* subspecies, and that it was in danger of becoming extinct from habitat loss, poaching, shooting and, more recently, disease (PDD). Based on his findings, the Cape Parrot Working Group was formed in 2001 to work against the Cape Parrot’s downward trend toward extinction.

“Ecology and Conservation of the Endangered Cape Parrot” and “The Diversity of Parrots of Africa, Madagascar and the Mascarene Islands.” Mike is a founder of the Cape Parrot Working Group, begun in 2001 when the critical situation for the Cape Parrot, *Poicephalus robustus*, was recognized. While two other *Poicephalus* species are also found in Africa, *P. robustus* has a particularly limited distribution in small areas in South Africa. It is Africa’s rarest parrot. Threats include the usual suspects of habitat degradation and fragmentation, poor breeding success due to food and nest site shortages, and poaching, but also—unfortunately—Beak and Feather Disease (Pbfd). Hundreds of volunteers do an annual count in South Africa each May, called the “Cape Parrot Big Birding Day.” Although the population is difficult to count because of habitat fragmentation and because they fly long distances for food, recent counts seem to indicate the population has increased from about 500 individuals in May



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The Buffon's or Great Green Macaw was once common throughout Costa Rica's Atlantic coast. Numbers declined drastically over the past 100 years and the present population is limited to the northern zone of Costa Rica up to the border with Nicaragua. Conservation

measures seem to have successfully stemmed that decline and the population is holding its own. A large macaw, it favors large nuts such as those from the mountain almendro tree and the titor or monkey pot tree.

2000 to more than 1,000 today. They seem to be doing a little bit better than holding their own, but the presence of PBF in the wild population is very worrisome. Several facilities in South Africa are doing captive breeding and aviculture may be an important factor in preserving the species (for example, see www.amazona.co.za and www.endangeredparrotbreedingfacility.com). For more information, look into the programs at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (biology.ukzn.ac.za/cpwg.html) and the Cape Parrot Project at the University of Cape Town (www.africaskyblue.org/Cape_Parrot_Project.html, now also on Facebook).

Nigel Collar, Leventis fellow in Conservation Biology at BirdLife International, spoke on "Loving It to Death? The Plight of the African Grey Parrot." Nigel pointed out that the two subspecies of African Grey Parrot are very familiar and common in captivity and have been so for at least several hundred years, yet very little is known about their ecology in the wild. Not even good wild population estimates exist—they range from 680,000 to 13 million—but clearly populations

are declining in many countries and the current harvest rates are unsustainable, at least locally. Habitat loss is leaving certain populations without nest sites, creating an ageing population of non-breeders. Patterns and pathways of trade in the species are always shifting, but demand (and thus profits to trappers and middlemen) remains high, in spite of, for example, the recent European Union ban. His opinion is that CITES will not ban trade until the Grey Parrot reaches levels considered endangered or critically endangered which, due to the lack of any monitoring of wild populations, will essentially be never. He thus is proposing a multi-year project to study the African Grey Parrot ecology, establish monitoring protocols, develop local wildlife conservation capacity with African wildlife staff and students, and develop appropriate alternative livelihoods where the wild trade is unsustainable. Exactly how this initiative will evolve is unclear, but it does appear that the time of neglect of the plight of wild African Grey Parrots is coming to an end.

Other speakers included Olivier Chassot from University



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The population of the Yellow-eared Parrot has increased from 81 in 1998 to more than 1,000 in 2010 thanks to the efforts of Colombian

NGO Fundación ProAves and its 47 international partners. BirdLife International has recently downlisted the species to endangered.

for International Cooperation in Costa Rica, speaking on the long struggle to preserve the Buffon's or Great Green Macaw in Costa Rica. Fortunately the struggle seems to be bearing fruit and the Buffon's Macaw is holding its own or perhaps even increasing in numbers in that country. (For more information visit www.greatgreenmacaw.org/)

Dr. Jaime Jiménez from the Universidad de los Lagos in Chile described his project with the Slender-billed Conure (recipient of a recent AFA Avian Research Grants award). The species is protected by Chilean law, but poaching for the pet trade still continues. The species is persecuted as a supposed crop pest, and habitat fragmentation is removing nesting and food trees. While not yet in a serious predicament, the population levels are declining and Jaime hopes his research will lead to management techniques for the species that will allow population levels to stabilize.

Darrel Styles, well-known avian veterinarian and aviculturist who needs to eat and so works for USDA rather than studying our birds as a poor university researcher, spoke on "Avian Bornavirus—Its Association with Proventricular Dilatation Disease and the Current State of Research," a talk he will also

give at the August 2010 AFA Convention in St. Petersburg. Don't miss that talk. Many, many questions still exist as to whether only ABV causes PDD, what fraction of birds positive for ABV will eventually come down with the disease, and if the multiple strains of ABV have different outcomes. Dr. Styles has a way of making complicated scientific issues easy for all bird owners to understand.

Ryan Watson from Al Wabra Wildlife Preservation attended by video because of the unfortunate (for us) timing of the successful hatching of three additional Spix's Macaws at AWWP. He was able to show us the chicks via video. AWWP's Spix's macaw population is now 50 individuals: 20 males, 27 females and the three juveniles. (More information on AWWP at awwp.alwabra.com.)

Next year's Parrots International Symposium will be held in May in Miami, with optional tours to visit the Bahama Parrot research project in the Bahamas and the Puerto Rican Amazon Recovery Project in Puerto Rico. In Puerto Rico plans are to visit both the new Iguaca Aviary of the USFWS and the Rio Abajo Aviary of the Puerto Rican Department of Natural Resources and the Environment.