

The Breeding Centre of Loro Parque Foundation

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LORO PARQUE FUNDACIÓN

CONSERVAMOS LOS LOROS Y SUS HÁBITATS
SAVING PARROTS AND THEIR HABITATS
PAPAGEIENSCHUTZ WELTWEIT

From the world's most comprehensive parrot collection (see *Watchbird* Vol. 32 No. 1) has grown a conservation organisation of immense importance worldwide. The Loro Parque Foundation (LPF) was founded in 1994 as a non-profit, non-governmental organisation to assist the conservation of threatened and endangered parrots. At that time 95 species out of the approximate total of 330 were at risk of extinction. Since then LPF has directed the equivalent of about \$2.7 million to save species and their habitats. How this has been achieved will be the subject of my third article. In this article I will describe how the parrots themselves have been responsible for raising much of this funding. Approximately US\$560,000 has already been allocated for conservation projects in 2005.

It all started in 1994 when ownership of all the parrots in Loro Parque, Tenerife, and in the breeding centre were transferred to the Foundation. This was an enormous commitment that has probably benefited parrot conservation more than any other single act. One of its major sources of income is derived from the sale of

the young raised in the Foundation's breeding centre.

It had been the ambition of Wolfgang Kiessling, founder of the park and president of the Foundation, that it should have the finest parrot-breeding facility in the world. Opened in 1998, the new facility is located a few kilometres south of Loro Parque, 200m (650ft) above sea level.

Covering an area of 30,000 sq metres (7.4 acres) it houses approximately 2,600 parrots; the number can vary by 300 either way according to the time of year. At the end of 2004 they represented the unprecedented total of exactly 350 species and sub-species.

The parrot collection here is priceless, not only for the obvious reasons but because the breeding pairs, and

the young birds that are maturing, are like a Noah's Ark of parrots. Virtually all parrots known in aviculture are here, some represented by multi-generations going back at least to the 1980s. Exceptions include four Australian species that are not held legally outside their native country: the three smallest lorikeets and the Glossy Cockatoo.

In the breeding facility two distinct sections house parrots from different environments. One area is covered (high above the aviaries) in black mesh. This blocks out 50% of sunlight and is used to house species from rainforest; they need a darker and more humid environment. The second area has a ceiling of a light blue nylon mesh, suitable for housing parrots from more open areas, such as the Australian out-back.



Wolfgang Kiessling, founder of Loro Parque and president of the Foundation.



Walk-in aviaries with the section holding the feeding trays jutting out so food does not fall into the aviary.

The first priority is that the parrots should be kept in pleasant conditions. I must say that many people would like to live in such agreeable surroundings! The theme of dense planting, palm trees and flowering shrubs, which characterises the park, is repeated here. One walks into a pleasant airy and green atmosphere of rows of aviaries, divided by banana plants, Schefflera trees, flowering lilies and many other plants that provide a visual barrier between breeding pairs, plus shade and shelter. It is like a garden city, with the houses replaced by aviaries. In all there are about 1,200 aviaries and suspended cages, the latter being in the minority.

In a huge collection like this, the key factor is staff who can work well together as a team – under the

right leader. That leader must obviously be experienced and knowledgeable and have the ability to inspire and encourage staff. An additional asset is a sense of humour. This combination of qualities is rare in one person but they are found in Matthias Reinschmidt, Loro Parque's curator. Matthias has the enthusiasm and the charisma to inspire his staff and the practical knowledge of a bird keeper since childhood and that very rare instinct to know what is best for them.



Mitchell's Lorikeets, almost extinct in the wild, are breeding here.

Matthias is fortunate to have a second in command who already has almost full measure of these elusive qualities. Rafael Zamora is a young biologist from Tenerife who has also been a bird keeper from the age of six years. He still breeds finches (including the endangered Red Siskin) at home. Rafael's introduction to Loro Parque came six years ago as a biologist who monitored the precious pair of Spix's Macaws day and night for three years via video. As I talked to Rafael in Matthias' office, I saw the male Spix's enter the nest and affectionately preen the female's back. She was incubating two fertile eggs! One of these hatched, to bring the second Spix's chick of the 2004 season. The two young ones are now housed together in a very long flight. It is indeed fortunate that they can mature with their own species!

Another knowledgeable member of staff is Pedro Martin who, in my time as curator, emerged as an exceptional young keeper. Now, 17 years later, he is invaluable to Matthias for his extraordinary memory concerning individual parrots in the collection – recollections that extend back 20 years. This knowledge is almost equalled by Pepe Medina – another of my

keepers from the 1980s. Currently in charge of the birds in the park is Felix Afonso who, for nearly 20 years, ran the original breeding centre there. His fund of knowledge is equally deep. Continuity of bird-keeping staff is a priceless asset.

On return visits it gives me great satisfaction to see the dedication of men like these – keepers who were a great pleasure to work with. Matthias introduced me to another, José Gregorio Reyes, ten years at Loro Parque, who he praised for increasing the breeding successes on his section; it includes the lorries, fig parrots and parrotlets. The number of young reared in the year before he took over the section was only six. Under the care of José it increased to 66 the following year and to approximately 100 in 2004. This underlines the importance of observant and conscientious keepers in a collection that is so large that the curator cannot have every pair under observation.

However, one remarkable little pair of birds single-handedly raised the total by 22 between April and September! The Spengel's Parrotlets (*Forpus crassirostris spengeli*) reared three clutches (seven, eight and seven) between April and September.

In October last year I went first to see the crowning success of the 2004 season, the Spix's Macaw. She was in a long flight with a young Illiger's Macaw with whom she was reared, and soon flew the length of the aviary to be admired. Unlike most of the other Spix's Macaws in captivity, this young bird and her parents are the property of the Brazilian Government. Most private owners refused to return ownership to the species' native country, where it is extinct in the wild.



The male Buffon's Macaw with his two young.

The Spix's Macaw Recovery Programme is strongly supported by the Foundation which has always been the major benefactor. In 2004 the Foundation pledged about US \$100,000 to the Recovery Programme. Appropriately, this species is used on the Foundation's logo.

On my tour with Matthias he explained the techniques he uses to increase breeding success. These included fostering. A Palm Cockatoo was reared to the age of 41 days by a pair of Blue-eyed Cockatoos (*Cacatua*



Young of the rarely-bred Short-tailed Parrot.

ophthalmica) before being removed for hand-rearing. Two pairs of Major Mitchell's Cockatoos (*Cacatua leadbeateri*) had, between them, reared five Gang Gangs (*Callocephalon fimbriatum*) to independence. Two beautiful youngsters were still in one aviary with their foster parents. Matthias took a calculated risk in his use of foster parents of totally different genera but the choice is obviously limited to the species available at the same stage of the breeding cycle. These risks paid off handsomely.

Another important youngster that owed its life to fostering was an Orange-breasted fig parrot (*Cyclopsitta guillemittii*). This unusually coloured and vivacious gem is a seldom-seen rarity. In October 2003 a captive-bred male was acquired from Switzerland for a female already in the collection. By May of the following year she had produced two nests of two young, all of which died. The third clutch of eggs was transferred to another pair of the same species (but of the

sub-species *amabilis*). The white-breasted female is a beautiful, inquisitive and over-friendly little bird who might be considered in the high-risk category for a foster parent, but she was a perfect mother, as the young one on the perch testified.

Matthias looked with great pride at two pairs of the exquisite Collared Lorries (*Phigys solitarius*). Rare in aviculture, two pairs were acquired in December 2002 and placed in adjoining cages. No breeding occurred in 2003 so Matthias had a screen of black shade cloth erected between the two cages. Immediately both females laid. The first chick was killed so the second egg was transferred to a nest of Goldie's Lorikeets. The chick was reared without problems. The second pair reared their own youngster, resulting in an unrelated pair of these gorgeous birds that can be seen in the park. In the breeding centre it was a joy to observe one pair with a recently fledged chick on the perch.



The little-known Purple-bellied Lory.

In 2004 a lory species was added to the collection for the first time ever – the rare Purple-bellied (*Lorius hypophonius devittatus*). These beautiful large lorries were in immaculate condition.

Some successes under Matthias' guidance can be attributed to special attention to the diet. Fig Parrots are not easy to breed yet four Edwards' and four Desmarest's (the two largest *Psittaculirostris* species, and of exquisite coloration) were reared in 2004. The chicks

survived because no seed is offered. They have a special mixture that includes dried insects such as mealworms with baby cereal, plus chopped fruits.

The large pairing aviaries have resulted in successes with species that had not previously bred well. Several males and females are placed in a planted aviary, measuring about 8m x 7m (24ft x 21ft). When they



The pairing aviary for Red-browed Amazons is heavily planted.

have chosen their partners they are placed in one of the small aviaries attached to the large flight. In this way the first recorded captive breeding of the Mercenary Amazon (*Amazona mercenaria*) took place here in 2002. It was good to see that the pair had been successful again in 2004 with three parent-reared young. This Amazon, from the Andes, is little known.

The same method was used to breed the endangered Red-browed Amazon (*Amazona rhodocorytha*), resulting in as many as ten young in 2003, and five more in 2004. The occupants of these large aviaries, 2.5m (15ft) high, have an extremely pleasant environment. Even the floor is covered with vegetation, such as ferns and flowering shrubs.

Another endangered Brazilian Amazon that bred well in 2004 was the Red-tailed (*Amazona brasiliensis*). Held in few collections and difficult to breed (fertility is low), one pair produced five young. From three eggs in the first clutch, two chicks hatched and were hand-reared. The three eggs of the second clutch were exchanged with those of a Double Yellow-headed Amazon. Both females reared the chicks that hatched,

giving Matthias the confidence to leave the eggs with the Red-tailed Amazons next time. This was an appropriate result for one of the species whose conservation is being strongly supported by the Foundation. Initial successes with parrots that are hard to pair do not necessarily follow. They might need the stimulation of separation. Male and female Mercenary Amazon are separated in November, to be reunited in February. Their excitement is then so great that they nest at once. Many pairs of Amazons lose interest in reproducing and breeders would be advised to have spare aviaries so that they can use this strategy.

Yet another Amazon species that has benefited from the Foundation is the Yellow-shouldered (*A. barbadensis*) from Venezuela and nearby islands. It has been a consistent breeder in the collection for a decade and a good nucleus of the species is held here. Severely threatened in the wild by removal of chicks from the nest, by drought and, on the island of Margarita, by the increase of tourism, the Foundation has been supporting the two parrot species on Margarita, the Amazon and the island sub-species of the Blue-crowned Conure (*Aratinga acuticaudata neoxena*). The construction of a 24-hour guardhouse in the most important nesting area of the Amazon on Margarita resulted in young fledging in 2004. For several years all chicks had been stolen from the nest.



Matthias Reinschmidt with young Spix's Macaw and its companion Illiger's.

The Foundation's grant of 26,530 Euros (£19,000) also paid for a census of both species, with two more censuses later in the year. The project team held an educational session for schools last August and have involved local university students in an educational campaign.

The Red-vented Cockatoo (*Cacatua haematuropygia*) from the Philippines is a critically endangered species. At La Vera there are several pairs in aviaries 11m (36ft) long. Two screens, one on each side of the aviary, at right angles to its side, provide visual barriers between male and female if the latter feels threatened. A number of young have been reared.

Loro Parque supports the conservation programme for this species, along with several other organisations. Work is centred on the island of Rasa where food trees have been planted that should bear fruit by 2006. To date, nest-boxes have been ignored but habitat protection continues with nine wardens on patrol.

A threatened species which is nearly extinct in Ecuador (its only location outside Central America) is the Buffon's or Great Green Macaw (*Ara ambigu*). In the past the Foundation supported the conservation project in Ecuador with more than 5,000 man hours of field time, to research nesting and food resources. In excess of 100,000 trees were planted within the macaw's range.

The three males in Loro Parque's collection had been examined by laparoscope by the park's vet who saw that they were most unlikely to reproduce. Then a 35-year old male was acquired from Basle Zoo in Switzerland. He was paired with a six-year old female. The female's first two eggs were given to a pair of Green-winged Macaws who reared two young Buffon's. From her next clutch the Buffon's reared two wonderful youngsters who were so inquisitive they flew the 11m length of their aviary to inspect me. In other collections this magnificent macaw is seldom kept in aviaries that permit sufficient flight.

The very spacious aviaries for young of the large species, such as macaws and cockatoos, were a joy to observe. One such enclosure was mainly devoted to Blue-throated Macaws (*Ara glaucogularis*) – now the rarest of all macaws in the wild. Their numbers in one of these aviaries, their beauty in flight and the intensity of their shimmering almost turquoise blue and golden plumage is etched on my mind. These fortunate young birds have a huge space in which to perfect their flying skills and to socialise with other members of their species.

The conservation of this macaw was supported by the Foundation with approximately \$40,000 in 2004. Seven researchers visited 21 private ranches in the Beni region of Bolivia (the only locality worldwide where it occurs) and found four new sites where it exists, ap-



Female Blue-backed Parrot and ...

parently increasing the number of birds known in the wild (under 100) by 20 individuals. The researchers published local and national media articles and gave television and radio interviews to highlight the importance of conserving this macaw. They conducted education workshops and gave twenty presentations to small ranches and communities, reaching more than 250 people.

By November, 1,400 young had been reared in the breeding centre, of 184 species and sub-species. In 2003 the total was 1,375 chicks ringed, of 171 species and sub-species. Some of the species reared here are so poorly represented in aviculture that they would virtually have died out in Europe were it not for Loro Parque's goal, formulated nearly two decades ago, to keep at least three pairs of each species. It was good to see young of the Blue-backed Parrot (*Tanyganthus sumatranus*), for example.



*... recently fledged
youngster.*

What happens to these young birds? Some are retained for future breeding purposes. The others go to Germany, either to a dealer who places parrots for aviaries or to one of three pet stores that specialises in hand-reared parrots. As no quarantine operates in Germany, the hand-reared young can quickly find new homes.

The income from these sales, as already mentioned, goes straight into the Foundation for conservation or research projects. Approximately US \$560,000 has already been allocated for conservation projects in 2005. This is one of the very few instances of captive parrots contributing to the survival of those in the wild. The parrots in the park play a role in alerting the public to the plight of parrots; a label on each cage indicates which species are declining. The role of the Foundation in assisting certain species is indicated by a prominent notice in three languages.

No one can visit the breeding centre at La Vera without a feeling of awe at the work being accomplished here and the conservation benefits that result from it. As Wolfgang Kiessling says: "For many decades to come, the Foundation will be an effective instrument in the conservation of natural heritages for future generations".

All those interested in the conservation of parrots can join the Loro Parque Foundation (Avda. Loro Parque, 38400 Puerto de la Cruz, Tenerife).

For further information visit the website:
www.loroparque-fundacion.org ■