

# Regrouping to Save the Spix's Macaw

Rick Jordan and Yara Barros

Of the New Working Group for the Recovery of the Spix's Macaw

All Photos courtesy of AI Wabra Wildlife Preservation

## History in the Wild

The first recorded discovery of *Cyanopsitta spixii* took place in April 1819 by Johann Baptist Ritter von Spix, thus the name Spix's macaw. It was later confirmed and described by Wagler in 1832.

A lot of time passed between those original discoveries, and the so-called "rediscovery" of the species near Curacá in Northern Bahia, Brazil, in the mid 1980's. With that time also comes a huge lack of information about the species, including its original range in the wild and estimated population. Because of this missing information, much speculation and assumption has taken place among scientists and conservationists of today. Was this species widespread and common? Was it always a rare species? By the time of its original discovery, had the population begun to plummet from outside pressures on the habitat? No one "really" knows; the best that can be done is an educated guess.

What we do know for sure is that by the mid 1980's, there were three birds remaining in the wild. And we know that less than five years later, there was one single male living in that exact same place. The species was now functionally (virtually) extinct in the wild.

We do not want to play down the importance of the information obtained by Roth in the early 1990's, where local people provided information leading to an estimate of around 30 pairs at the beginning of the century. But, we all know that "estimates" by local people are virtually unreliable. Information provided by untrained bird watchers and local uninterested residents should be regarded as "information of interest", not as scientific data. For example, if you ask the people of Texas today how many Cardinals they have seen since 1950, it is unlikely that anyone could turn these

interviews into real data that parallels the actual population. But suffice to say that Spix's macaw was never a common bird, at least not for the past 200 years.

The very last male known to exist in the wild paired off with an Illiger's macaw (*Procyrrhura maracana*) as observed by several people studying the species in the area (Juniper and Yamashita 1990). Field biologist Yara Barros, in her continual study of the bird, also confirmed this observation.

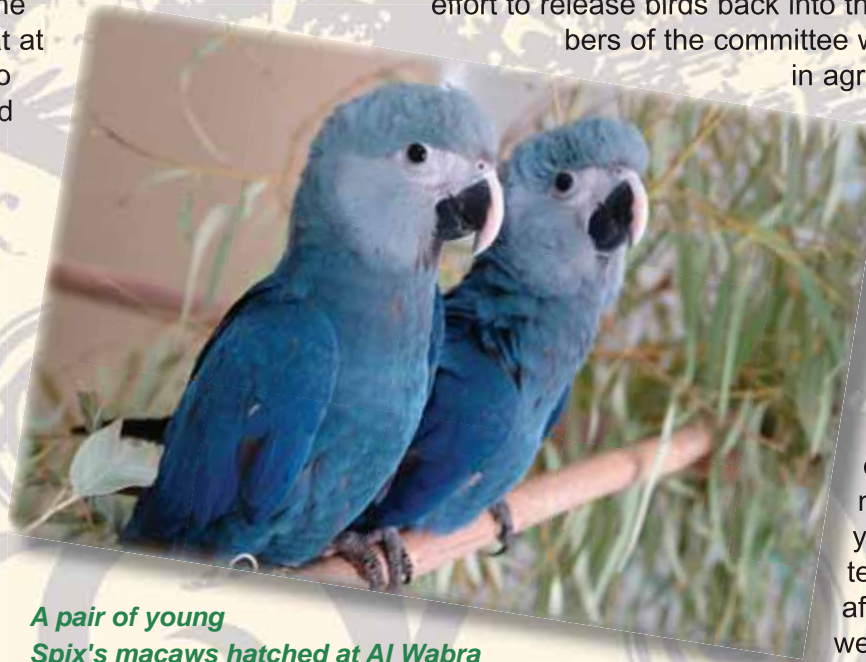
## History in Captivity

There were several importers in the United States and Europe that listed Spix's macaws for sale for what, today, would be considered very little money. Interviews with persons that knew these importers and the bird business has yielded that these advertisements were placed to see if orders could be taken, and to see how many people were willing to buy them if they were available. As far as



Adult Spix's Macaws at  
AI Wabra Wildlife Preservation

any of the larger importers within the United States knows, no Spix's were ever legally imported before or after CITES came into play (later we find that at least one and possibly two were imported illegally and held until 2003). Trappers in Brazil had "promised" birds, but never produced them for U.S. importers. In Denmark, two Spix's Macaws were offered for sale in the late 1970's by a major importer called Avifauna. The cost was less than that asked for most other Macaws at the same time. These two birds later ended up with Dr. Hammerli in Switzerland.



*A pair of young Spix's macaws hatched at Al Wabra Wildlife Preservation in 2006, at about three and a half months of age*

### **Biology of the Last Bird in Nature**

We learned a lot about the Spix's macaw in the wild from Yara's work in the field, as well as from the work of other biologists such as Marcos da Ré, who studied the species for six years before Yara became involved with the project. Yara observed this bird for several years as it attempted nesting with its then "current" mate, an Illiger's macaw. Important information, such as the distance this bird would fly each day to find food, how and where it roosted at night, its calling patterns, its daily habits, food choices, and its tree and roost preferences, were recorded by Yara, and have become the foundation data we have on this species in the wild. We also conducted management experiments, like the release of a female, release of Illiger's Macaws and fostering, and placing an Illiger's nestling into the nest of the heterospecific pair to see if their parenting abilities were adequate.

### **The First Plan to Save the Species**

The "Permanent Committee for the Recovery of the Spix's Macaw" (CPRAA) was formed in 1990 under the authority of the Brazilian government's environmental authority, IBAMA. The committee began its ten-year existence of cooperative efforts to man-

age the remaining captive population, study the species *in situ* and to work toward a coordinated effort to release birds back into the wild. The members of the committee were not always in agreement with each other, but for the most part the first nine years resulted in a substantial increase in the number of captive birds, and information and biological data on the species in nature. After ten years the committee was dissolved after some birds were transferred without the consensus of the committee members, something that was agreed would

not happen in the rules and regulations governing this committee. IBAMA had asked if "ownership" could be returned to Brazil to make sure that all the birds in captivity would be managed as a single population, but only one holder returned the ownership of his birds to the Brazilian Government. Other private holders and past members of the committee "assumed" that Brazil had plans to take the birds away from those who now possessed them if they signed the ownership agreements. So, basically the fear of the loss of ownership and possession made the efforts to save the species more difficult. In the end, Brazil did not ask for the return of the birds, not even from the one institution (Loro Parque) that returned the ownership of the birds to the Brazilian Government. IBAMA admitted it never planned to take birds back to Brazil, as they believed in cooperation with breeding centers outside Brazil.

### **A New Group - A New Hope**

The Spix's macaw is now extinct in the wild. The last minute attempts to save the species in its natural habitat failed, despite the good intentions behind them. Were mistakes made? Who knows? Everyone has an opinion, but for sure no one on the committee had a secret agenda to cause



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failure to the project. In November 2004 IBAMA invited the current "holders" of Spix's macaws, as well as selected zoo officials, specialists, biologists, and consultants to a meeting in Praia do Forte, Brazil to begin another attempt to recover the Spix's macaw. This meeting saw some new participants because the holder in the Philippines transferred all of his Spix's macaws to Sheikh Soud Bin Mohammad Bin Ali Al-Thani of Qatar. The holder in Switzerland did the same with the exception of one pair that remained behind, but was being managed by the Sheik's staff. The pair that was being held by a Brazilian breeder has been moved to the Sao Paulo Zoo, and a single male "Presley" was voluntarily repatriated from the United States and is also now residing at the Lymington Foundation, near



*A young Spix's macaw at the Al Wabra Wildlife Preservation*

Sao Paulo, Brazil. The Brazilian Government has now established a Working Group for the Recovery of the Spix's Macaw, once again, and an Action Plan for the species is being designed. NOTE: Spix's macaws are being bred at Sheik's facility in Qatar and at Loro Parque. All the photos accompanying this article have been donated by Simon Jensen, the photographer, and the Sheik himself.

A second meeting of the working group has yielded even more exciting news. At a meeting held in November 2006, it was announced that seven chicks were reared this year in Qatar, and three at Loro Parque. A new participant in Germany has acquired some of the birds from Switzerland. Furthermore he has agreed to participate with the cooperative effort to save this species and has already sent a bird to Loro Parque to be paired with one of the offspring produced there. The stud-

book has been reconstructed after a slight delay in transferring it from the original manager and things in general look up for the little Spix's macaws in captivity. Two new breeding facilities have been added to the list of Brazilian holders, and mating behavior has been noticed in several pairs of birds.

### Who Put Up the Money?

Incidentally, IBAMA and the Loro Parque Foundation funded Yara's field work, as well as an office, other employees, several vehicles, a large release cage, and incentives and materials to educate the local people and get them involved with the conservation effort. Loro Parque Foundation alone donated over \$600,000.00 US to the project to try to study, manage and protect the Spix's macaw in the wild. The data obtained during the eleven years of the Spix's Macaw Project (1991 to 2002) will now be used to guide us in the recovery strategies. Others made contributions to this cause as well: Richard Porter, Genevieve Wall, Catherine C. Kelly, Wanda Elder, James C. Hawley, and others donated monies used to enrich the lives of the local people and educate them on the importance of this native bird. Sometimes we forget to mention who put up the money to accomplish such things. Richard Porter of the International Aviculturists Society (IAS) donated money that was used to add an annex to the existing schoolhouse in Curaçá and to build a new school in the local area. His donations were used to provide important equipment for this school and the local children. Recently, Parrots International has taken an interest in the Spix's macaw project and the school. They have begun a support and donation program for the little schoolhouse to keep the local children interested in their native wildlife and the potential release of Spix's back into the habitat.

### Is There Still a Chance?


Does the Spix's macaw still have a chance to be returned to the wild, and to live in its natural habitat once again? Certainly it does. With the dedicated efforts of the remaining private holders, and the extreme commitment of the zoos and private breeders within Brazil, the Spix's macaw may someday be flying free in its native land.

The current captive population of Spix's macaws is very important and must be managed

properly to give the species a fighting chance. Saving the Spix's macaw is going to take some money, some *serious* money! Land must be purchased for the release of birds in the future, and law enforcement must be provided on a twenty-four hour basis. Quarantine stations, medical facilities, release cages, vehicles, field biologists, local education, and much more must be addressed and included into the budget. The re-establishment of a species is not cheap and it cannot be done haphazardly. The equation has many variables and all aspects of the program must work together if the end goal is to be attained: Spix's macaws flying free again in Brazil. ♦

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