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Twenty-four More Fly Free! A Visit to the Puerto Rican Parrot Recovery Program

by Janice Boyd, Ph.D. • AFA Conservation & Research Chair

In mid-December 2007, your Conservation and Research Committee Chair had the privilege of visiting first hand the two branches of the Puerto Rican Parrot Recovery Program and observing a release of 24 captive bred Puerto Rican Parrots (*Amazona vittata*) into the Rio Abajo State Forest, where they joined up with eleven other captive raised parrots that had been released the year before, in 2006. The AFA Research Grants Program has been providing modest grants to this recovery program for several years, and when the chance came to see the program in person, I jumped at the opportunity. However, having a first hand view of what our grants had contributed to was not the only objective of this trip.

Another objective for visiting this parrot breeding and release program was education for two parrot conservationists from Guatemala and El Salvador, who were to take back what they learned to Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao*) conservation projects in their respective countries. While the species being bred and released in Puerto Rico is an Amazon, and the species in the two Central American countries is a macaw, we still felt there was much to be learned by talking with such a long-lived and successful program. Gabriela Ponce from Guatemala represented the Wildlife Conservation Society-Guatemala's Scarlet Macaw Recovery Program, and Robin Bjork from El Salvador represented the non-governmental conservation organization, SalvaNatura. Both orga-

nizations have recently begun working to create Scarlet Macaw recovery programs in each country that will include captive breeding and release components. Guatemala still does have some Scarlet Macaws in its northern portion, the Peten, but the species was wiped out several decades ago in El Salvador, so the SalvaNatura program will attempt to actually reestablish the species in that country. AFA members will be hearing more about these two programs in the future.

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All three of us were extremely impressed with the professionalism of the members of the Recovery Program. They were very helpful in sharing what they had learned about psittacine husbandry, release protocols, and field techniques. Also impressive was the extent of their success in reestablishing the Puerto Rican Parrot in two locations, the El Yunque Rainforest (also known as the Caribbean



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National Forest) and the Rio Abajo Forest in the karst region of Puerto Rico. From a low of 13 birds in the 1970's, the Puerto Rican Parrot population has now increased to over 250 in captivity, 25 to 30 in El Yunque and 33 in the Rio Abajo Forest. Once the population in Rio Abajo is well established, additional populations will be established in other suitable locations on the island. This will help ensure the survival of the wild birds should a catastrophe wipe out one localized population and will also approach more closely the original distribution of the bird that was once found throughout Puerto Rico and on adjacent islands. The Puerto Rican Parrot Recovery Program involves both Federal agencies (Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, and Geological Service) and the Puerto Rican Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DRNA). We visited the DRNA breeding aviary and release site in Rio Abajo and spoke on December 11 and 12, 2007 (Tuesday and Wednesday), with Ivan Llerandi, in charge of the DRNA release effort, and Ricardo Valentin, Aviary Manager (see his pictures of life at the Rio Abajo Aviary at his picture sharing site at <http://flickr.com/photos/8700785@N08/>). Mr. Llerandi explained the release procedures, including how they prepare the birds for release and how they monitor them afterwards. Mr. Valentin took us on a tour of the aviary site, explaining his aviculture procedures and record keeping. Then, on Thursday, 13 December, we arrived very early in the morning, before daybreak, to take up a position in a blind near the release flight. At 6:30 a.m. a large gate was opened in the flight. Nothing happened for about 15 minutes, but as it grew lighter the wild flock, established the previous year, began loud vocalizations that were answered from within the flight. Suddenly, six flashes of green flew out through the open gate and off into the nearby trees. The first brave individuals joined the wild

flock. By the time we left the blind at 7:30 a.m., 22 of the 24 had flown free. We were told that the gate would be left open for two weeks so that the birds could go in and out at will, but supplemental food was only placed in feeders outside the flight.

On our last day, Friday the 14th of December, we visited the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office in Rio Grande and went into the field with Dr. Tom White, director of the program, to see one of the artificial nests they monitor each year and one of the monitoring platforms high up in a tree. That afternoon we visited the new Iguaca Aviary, run by frequent AFA Convention speaker, Mr. Jafet Velez.

Throughout our visit we were shown great hospitality by all the team members, who shared both verbally and in the form of documents and publications an incredible amount of information not only on the Puerto Rican Parrot Program but also on aviculture and reintroduction techniques that should contribute to the success of the Scarlet Macaw reintroduction programs being started in Guatemala and El Salvador. AFA members can feel proud of how our grants have contributed to the success of bringing the Puerto Rican Parrot back from the brink of extinction. We are giving the program a grant again for 2007-2008, and this grant will go to the Rio Abajo aviary to provide fresh fruits and vegetables to the birds before and during the breeding season as a supplement to their standard pelleted diet. I hope AFA and its members will continue to provide support to this successful "aviculture as conservation" project, especially to the effort by the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. If any AFA clubs would like to provide additional assistance to either of these efforts, or to the programs in Guatemala or El Salvador, please contact me at jboyd46@charter.net for further information. Donations of \$500 or \$1000 can make a big difference. 🐦

Photos by Janice Boyd, Ph.D.:

1. One of the parrots released in 2006 that came back to visit the aviary birds. Looking closely one can see the antenna for the telemetry collar that is still around the bird's neck.

2. Entrance to the Rio Abajo State Forest, located in the very hilly limestone karst region of Puerto Rico. The area once contained large flocks of Puerto Rican parrots, so it was selected as the second site for establishing another wild flock outside of the Caribbean National Forest. (Photo by Robin Bjork)

3. Ricardo Valentin, the Aviary Manager, explaining some of his avicultural techniques. His approach includes having all cages modular and easily moved from one location to another, because if a pair does not seem to be breeding well in one location, he will move the cage to another that perhaps will suit them better. All cages are located in shady areas in the forest around the administration building and other buildings. The Rio Abajo Aviary has been spectacularly successful breeding the Puerto Rican parrot, producing a total of 188 chicks during its existence, of which 31 were produced in 2007.

4. Gabriela Ponce from Guatemala standing next to an artificial nest made out of PVC. The nest will be painted with camouflage colors and a collar of wood will be placed over the mouth of the nest before it is put out in the field. Then a long perch will be attached to the front.

5. A nest box in one of the breeding cages in the US FWS Iguaca Aviary in the Caribbean National Forest. They use nest boxes similar in design to the artificial nest boxes, while the Rio Abajo Aviary uses more traditional rectangular nest boxes.

6. The actual release flight is very large and is located only a few hundred yards from the breeding aviary. As a result, the released birds remain in the vicinity of the aviary and can often be seen or heard, and the wild and captive birds call to each other. The birds to be released are placed in the release flight for around a year, where they develop a sense of being a flock and interact with the "wild" (released in previous years) Amazons that visit them.

