

The Status and Conservation of the Cuban Parakeet

(*Aratinga euops*) in Cuba

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The Cuban Parakeet, or red-speckled conure, was formerly found throughout Cuba and the Island of Pines. The species was once considered the most common endemic bird in Cuba. Unfortunately, however, their numbers are decreasing, and the species is only found in widely dispersed strongholds throughout Cuba. Population surveys at the beginning of this century found the numbers to be as low as 1300-2000 individuals, with a few of their strongholds only containing 15-20 individuals.

The immediate threat to the species is familiar to us all - habitat loss and poaching for the pet-trade. The issue of habitat loss is most specifically the loss of appropriate nesting sites, coupled with the ectoparasites that infect and kill the juveniles within their nest cavities in the more humid mountain habitats where the birds have been forced to find refuge.

In 1997, Juan Castillo Perez and Raidel Diaz Aguiar, specialists of the Mogotes de Jumagua, a protected ecological reserve, created artificial nesting sites by topping off 24 Royal Palm trees (*Roystonea regia*) and partially excavating 42 cavities. The artificial lateral cavities formed this way were modified and utilized for nesting by the parakeet, as well as other species competing for the limited resource. The major disadvantage of this approach to providing nesting cavities is that the palms rapidly decompose, often rotting and falling within two years, thereby presenting a constant danger to any eggs and chicks that are inside.

Working in the Ecological Reserve "Alturas de Banao", Maikel Cañizares in 1998 approached the problem of limited nest sites by designing and hanging artificial nest boxes. Alturas de Banao ecological reserve is located in the southeastern side of the Guamuha mountain chain, in the Sancti Spiritus province. Its area comprises 5000 hectares including five different vegetation zones, with the evergreen forests being the most important for the parakeet. Park guards constantly patrol this reserve and poaching is at a minimum. Maikel began by locating natural parakeet nests and used the characteristics of these nests to construct eight artificial boxes. This was done by cutting palm trunks into 1.0m

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long sections, cutting them in half, hollowing them out and then gluing them back together. These were then hung on live palm trees within the reserve. To do this, it is necessary for someone to climb up the palm trunk, and with two helpers, pulley the nest box up to the appropriate height of between 10 to 20 meters up the tree. These nest boxes have been utilized by a variety of species of birds, including the Cuban Amazon, and are considered quite a success. Unfortunately, however, these boxes have a life-span of only about 2 years.

During January and February of 2004, twenty-one nest boxes of a different design were constructed with a PVC-like material and placed in a parakeet nesting site in Alturas de Banao. When the reserve was originally established, there were some people living within the park borders -- small families that had self-sustaining farms in the valley of the reserve. These farms were usually located in the flatlands, where palm stands were often found. As most of these families used the land for subsistence, much of it was left intact, and their homes were left behind and turned into biological stations. In these valleys are remnant stands of palm trees where the parakeets have been seen nesting both in rotten palms and in the artificial palm nest boxes. The new



plastic nestboxes were placed in two of these valleys. The Aratingas used these boxes only once, although a variety of other species of birds found them to be quite a pleasant place to breed.

For this reason, in 2005 Maikel Cañizares and his colleagues returned to the palm nest boxes, and had them ready for the 2006 season. They were a great success and all were used by the Aratingas in 2006.

This work has been made possible by a committed team of Cuban biologists at The Institute of Ecology and Systematics, SNAPR (Sistema Nacional de Areas Protegidas), ENPFF (Empresa Nacional para la Proteccion de la Flora y la Fauna) in Cuba and by donations by the Miami Metro Zoo, the Wildlife Conservation Society, St. Catherines Island Foundation, Optics for the Tropics, and the Loro Parque Fundacion Small Scale Grants Program.



However, by 2007 the local woodpeckers had found them, and had begun to prey on the parakeet chicks. The size of the woodpeckers and the parakeets are so similar it is difficult to exclude them from the nest. By the end of the second season, the nest boxes were deteriorating, and coupled with the woodpecker predator issues, a new design was necessary.

This year a new design has been prepared with a more extended nest box entrance. The new design, surprisingly enough, is made of cement. This material is relatively easy to find in Cuba, and can be molded with a form that is believed to keep woodpeckers out. There have been 25 made so far, and 14 are already sitting in the palms, and we now wait to see the reaction of the parakeets. Breeding season has just started - with egg-laying generally beginning in April - and already 6 pairs have found and look to be utilizing the boxes.

While the nestbox program has been frustrating, much has been learned about the biology of these parakeets. Extensive observations throughout the breeding season, measurements of chicks and their development, and basic reproductive behavior have been documented.

Clearly the interest and dedication of Cuban ecologists and conservationists is strong, but the limiting factor generally has been the lack of supplies. While Cuba is not far from the United States, the US embargo on trade with Cuba has made obtaining a good selection of reasonably priced materials difficult. A number of US non-profit organizations have provided equipment, materials and funding. Although, working within the current US restrictions, there are limitations on what can be achieved. European organizations such as Loro Parque Fundacion have also provided financial support, although the limited availability of materials also reduces the intervention options available to the Cuban biologists even with such support. Nevertheless, the dedicated Cuban biologists are making progress towards ensuring the conservation of the Cuban parakeet (as well as the Cuban Amazon, Amazona leucocephala); and small scale assistance by US and European NGOs will help provide the foundation for more aggressive conservation measures when the US embargo is finally lifted.



Photos & Illustrations: (opposite) Known locations of flocks of the Cuban parakeet, a bird once common throughout the island of Cuba and on the Isle of Pines. Nest robbing and destruction of nesting trees have reduced the population largely to the sites illustrated. The authors have worked on their nestbox program at location 3, "Banao." (top) Close up portrait of the Cuban parakeet, *Aratinga euops*. In Cuba the bird is called the "catey." (middle) On left, the first author Maikel Cañizares, along with an assistant, at the site Alturas de Banao. (bottom) Example of a PVC nestbox that was not accepted by the catey but was used by a number of other cavity nesting bird species.

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