

The Large Macaws

by Bob Elgas
Sun Valley, OR



Buffon's Macaws painted by Bob Elgas.



Photos of paintings by Bob Elgas

A beautiful Bob Elgas painting of the Blue-throated Macaw.



In this painting Bob Elgas has depicted the unique colors and shape of the Hyacinth Macaw.

Throughout the world there are more than 350 distinct species of parrots. When compared with the eight species of swans, or the 15 species of cranes, it is obvious that the psittacine family is large. Not only are parrots colorful but many are spectacular. Among the most impressive are the macaws. These large, long tailed, brightly colored birds are truly inspirational. It was once said that a macaw was the Rolls Royce of the parrot world. Few would object to the comparison.

The future of many parrots, including a number of macaws, is in jeopardy. Already many are gone. The Cuban, or Little Red Macaw, was exterminated more than 100 years ago. The Spix's Macaw, *Cyanopsitta spixii* may no longer exist in the wild. The few that have been preserved in captivity are, unfortunately, too frequently maintained as single individuals having no association with others of their own kind, thus with no opportunity to breed and perpetuate the species. Sadly they can

be referred to as "the living dead" for, essentially they have little future other than inevitable extinction. (Since Elgas wrote this, we have learned that there are two Spix's in the wild and 31 in captive breeding situations. Editor's note.)

The Lear's Macaw *Anodorhynchus leari* which is similar to the Hyacinth Macaw, has a total wild population of approximately 60. Not only is their status in the wild precarious but they are very rare in captivity. With a population so small the future of the Lear's, at best, is somber. The Glaucous Macaw *Anodorhynchus glaucus*, a variety very similar to the Lear's, has been unrecorded for years, and indeed may already be extinct.

There is considerable concern for the Hyacinth *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus* which is the largest macaw, and indeed the largest of all parrots. It is considered the most magnificent of the psittacine family. Historically, Hyacinth Macaws existed in vast numbers. More recently, however, populations have

declined dramatically. So much so that there is concern that wild populations could be exterminated within the foreseeable future. As might be imagined contributing factors, among others, have been habitat destruction and illegal capture for the pet trade. As a result of their spectacular appearance and gentle nature (they are frequently referred to as "the gentle giants" of the macaw world), they have always been highly sought after. Hyacinths are rather well established in captivity, and are being bred with reasonable frequency. If breeding programs are properly managed these splendid birds could become well enough established to ensure their survival. As is true with any rare species, captive reared offspring should not be sold as pets, but should be placed in appropriate breeding facilities.

Another species which is not abundant is the Buffon's, or Great Green Macaw *Ara ambigua*. Its natural range is somewhat restricted, being confined to areas of Central America and portions of western South America. Because its plumage is similar to that of the Military Macaw *Ara militaris*, it is frequently misidentified as being a member of that species. Although the plumage is similar, there are important differences. The Buffon's is substantially larger than the Military. Both birds are basically green. However, the Buffon's is more brightly colored, being a handsome yellow green as opposed to the darker tones of the Military. During years past, when importations were allowed, Buffon's Macaws were occasionally entered into the country. They did not generate special interest, and were often sold as Militaries. As recently as a dozen or so years ago importers offered them for as little as \$300, certainly a much different price than that prevailing today. Recently there has been an escalation of interest in them, and a number of breeders are successfully rearing young. Hopefully, it might be possible to eventually estab-

lish self-sustaining populations. It is as yet unclear if the captive population is sufficiently large to maintain a viable gene pool.

The Military Macaw, as described above, is a smaller and less brightly colored cousin of the Buffon's Macaw. Although the two are similar in appearance, each is considered a separate species. The name Military is because of the green coloration which is similar to that of military uniforms. They have been kept in captivity for many years, and have frequently bred. They have never enjoyed the same popularity as other macaws, partially because they are less brightly colored than some and, perhaps, because they have sometimes been described as having a dull personality. I find this inappropriate since the Militaries with which I have been associated have been anything but dull. In my own home, living on a large stand, is "Thumper," a wonderfully exciting Military Macaw who is Mr. Personality Plus. There isn't a youngster in our community who doesn't know Thumper, and who is not familiar with the assortment of entertaining tricks he has perfected. Thumper loves recognition, and after completing his repertoire he hangs by his toenails and claps his wings vigorously, encouraging everyone to applaud. Personality? Thumper is loaded with it. Don't sell Military Macaws short.

Although Militaries are still being reared in captivity, in view of declining populations there needs to be a greater emphasis on captive breeding.

Of particular interest is the Blue-throated or Caninde Macaw *Ara glaucogularis*. Until recently they were not well known. Outwardly they resemble Blue and Gold Macaws, and it is probable they stem from a common ancestor. They are smaller than Blue and Golds, and have significantly different head markings. They are primarily native to Bolivia, which is also the southernmost range of Blue and Gold Macaws. Some taxonomists once the-

orized they were a race of Blue and Golds in which the juvenile plumage was different from the adult. The supposition was that upon gaining maturity they would revert to normal Blue and Gold plumage. This has been disproven and it is now recognized they are a separate species unique unto themselves. In addition to being considerably smaller than Blue and Gold Macaws, the blue color is more greenish in tone. The entire crown is blue, lacking the green fore crown of the Blue and Gold. The feathers lining the face are much thicker and the expanse of bare skin on the lower jaw is much smaller. Whereas the Blue and Gold has a black bib at the throat, the Blue-throated Macaw has a much larger patch extending downward toward the chest. This throat patch is bluish rather than black, giving rise to the name *glaucogularis*; *glauco*, meaning blue, and *gularis*, meaning gular or throat. Because of the dark feathering of the head and throat, which gives the impression of a hood, an appropriate name might well have been hooded macaw. Little is known of their status in the wild. As previously noted, they are native to parts of Bolivia, but populations are small. In a recent publication released by Cornell University, an institution well known for its ornithological program, it was reported that a flock of 17 Blue-throated Macaws had recently been discovered in a remote area of Bolivia. Because of the rarity of the birds, the precise location is being held secret to prevent exploitation. Before importations were discontinued, a few of these little macaws made their way into the United States, some of which were incorporated into breeding programs. They are currently being bred in several facilities, and offspring are being transferred to additional breeders. Hopefully, with careful management, populations will be increased to a level which will allow them to sustain themselves. The status of the Blue-throated Macaw, both in the wild and in captivity, is precarious.



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* Position open: contact regional vice president if interested.

** indicates 2 year term has been fulfilled. If no new interested party comes forward and indicates a desire to serve, incumbent remains in position.

For information about contacting any of these member clubs, please call that club's state coordinator.

The Red-fronted Macaw *Ara rubrogenys* is a species just recently gaining recognition. Exclusive of the Spix's it is the smallest of the large macaws. It also is native to Bolivia, and while it is considered scarce, it is not as rare as the previous species. Its plumage is basically green, with a red crown, giving rise to the name. There is also an expanse of red feathering on the bend of the wing at the shoulder. Before importations were terminated a number of these little macaws came into the country. A number of facilities have successfully bred them, and while they are not reared in quantity, at least they have the potential to be established. As is true with the Military Macaw, they are less colorful than others which could result in less interest. It would be unfortunate if we fail to establish them through lack of interest. They are rare birds needing special attention.

The three remaining species of large macaws, The Scarlet *Ara macao*, Blue and Gold *Ara ararauna*, and Green-winged *Ara chloroptera* have wild populations that are reasonably secure. In addition, they are being captive bred with reasonable frequency. With proper husbandry it should be possible to maintain self-sustaining populations into the foreseeable future.

Historically macaws existed in large numbers. They are successful animals normally having the capability of sustaining themselves. Aside from humans they have few natural enemies. Unfortunately, human interference has resulted in drastic declines in macaw populations. Most macaws are native to neo-tropical rain forests, with the center of abundance being concentrated in the Amazon basin of Brazil. The Amazon is the world's largest rain forest. As such it is home to a huge variety of plants and animals, many of which are as yet unknown. Until recently the rain forests have remained undisturbed. Unfortunately they are now undergoing tremendous transformation. Vast portions are being destroyed through clear cutting to divert the land to agricultural use. Unfortunately those lands are not capable of sustaining agriculture and in a short time will no longer produce. When this happens they are abandoned, and additional forests are destroyed with the same inevitable result. As the cycle continues the rain forests are destroyed, the wildlife disappears, and the land becomes barren. Sadly this condition is

expected to continue and worsen.

In addition to habitat loss, capture for the pet trade has also had a serious impact upon populations. Regulations have been enacted in an effort to control such activity. However, many species command substantial prices and are much sought after. As a result, illegal trafficking still continues.

Will wild macaws survive? It is difficult to imagine they might not. Realistically we must recognize that at least some could be lost. Certainly the Spix's and Lear's Macaws are in a precarious position. Even the Hyacinth is vulnerable, and others, too, are in danger. The thought that even one species could be lost is painful. There is little we as individuals can do to alter circumstances in the wild, but there is much we can accomplish to preserve them in captivity. Properly managed breeding programs can contribute substantially to captive preservation. Should the worst scenario occur, in which wild populations were exterminated, it would be a tremendous contribution for them to be preserved in captivity.

Previously, when importation was legal, there was a continuing supply of potential breeders. That condition no longer exists. We must now rely on birds currently in the country which can no longer be supplemented by importations. We must utilize existing birds wisely, particularly those species low in number. Those of us breeding rare species must not sell them as pets, but must transfer them to other qualified breeders. The ultimate goal must be the establishment of captive self-sustaining populations.

The most successful method for contributing to the preservation of rare forms is to concentrate on breeding one or perhaps two species. It is nice to maintain a large assortment which is visually pleasing. However, the potential for making a meaningful contribution in preserving rare birds is greatly enhanced when the emphasis is on a specific species.

We do have the capability to breed rare birds and to establish sustaining populations. While we have the capability to preserve macaws, we cannot allow ourselves to become complacent. Once a species crosses the threshold of oblivion there is no return. Extinction never ends, not in a hundred, not in a thousand years, not ever. Extinction is absolute . . . it is totally and utterly final. ➤