

The Numenon of the Sierra Madre

by Tom Marshall
Leesburg, VA

Numenon is a philosophical term that refers to the intangible essence of material things. It is the "something" without which a material thing would be dead or lifeless.

In 1949, Aldo Leopold, widely acknowledged as the father of wildlife conservation in America, wrote in the highly acclaimed *A Sand Country Almanac* that he discovered that the numenon of the Sierra Madre was the Thick-billed Parrot. (Well, not the *real* numenon as *it* has to be intangible while the parrots are quite tangible. But I understand his feeling that the parrot personifies the *essence* of the mountains).

Leopold wrote, "*He [the Thick-billed Parrot] is a discovery only because so few have visited his haunts. Once there, only the deaf and blind could fail to perceive his role in the mountain life and landscape. Indeed you have hardly finished breakfast before the chattering flocks leave their roost on the rimrocks and perform a sort of morning drill in the high reaches of the dawn. Like squadrons of cranes they wheel and spiral, loudly debating with each other the question whether this new day which creeps slowly over the canyons is bluer and golden than its predecessors, or less so. The vote being a draw, they repair by separate companies to the high mesas for their breakfast of pine-seed-on-the-half-shell. They have not seen you.*

But a little later as you begin the steep ascent out of the canyon, some sharp-eyed parrot, perhaps a mile away, espies this strange creature puffing up the trail where only a deer, bear or turkey is licensed to travel. Breakfast is forgotten. With a whoop and a shout the whole gang is awing and coming at you. As they circle overhead you wish fervently for a parrot dictionary. Are they demanding what-the-devil business you have in these parts? Or are they, like an avian chamber of commerce, merely making sure you appreciate the glories of their home town, its weather, its citizens, and its glorious future as compared with any and all other times and places whatsoever? It might be either or both. And there flashes through your mind the sad premonition of what will happen when the road is built, and this riotous reception committee first greets the tourist-with-a-gun."

How unfortunately prophetic was Aldo Leopold. The Thick-billed Parrot was driven away from his range, by the felling of pine trees for fuel and the shooting of parrots for food. Unlike the Carolina Parakeet, which was rendered extinct, the Thick-billed was able to retreat to Mexico, waiting for an opportunity to return as continental United States' only living native parrot.

This opportunity presented itself in 1986 when the Arizona Game and Fish Department, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Forest Service embarked on an effort to re-establish the Thick-billed in what was thought to be part of its former range in the Chiricahua Mountains. Most of the birds to be re-introduced were smuggled parrots that had been confiscated by U.S. authorities. Many of these confiscated birds were diseased or injured and could not be used. Some were sent to the Tyson Research Center in Missouri for rehabilitation and for later

use in the release effort. Several captive raised birds, including some handfed, were also destined to be used in the release effort.

By 1989, 49 Thick-billed Parrots had been set free, though six hand-reared birds were recaptured because they could not make the transition to the wild. Basically, they had no flocking instinct and were therefore highly vulnerable to predation.

The wild parrots established a predictable pattern of movement in their Arizona range. They wintered along the Chiricahua's conifer clad crest, above 8000 ft. where the snows are deep and disturbances are few. They took their summer in pine forests in central Arizona's Tonto Basin. They were thought to have nested in this area in 1987 and reportedly did in 1988 and 1989.

In late 1989, the re-establishment effort was interrupted by a severe drought. Then the project was all but

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wiped out by the "Dude," Arizona's worst forest fire on record which in 1990 swept across the parrots principal summer foraging grounds.

There is strong evidence, however, that the Thick-billed can make his home once again in Arizona. Prior to the re-introduction effort, there was no real proof that the Thick-billed ever nested in Arizona—but it is highly probable that they did. The sightings of immature birds in 1988 and 1989, with their telltale pale beaks, was proof that they could and would breed in Arizona.

The project's second phase began in November 1991 when 18 Thick-billeds were released just before Thanksgiving. More releases are planned through 1996, at which time the state and federal agencies involved in the re-introduction will reassess the project and determine whether there is enough hope of long-term success to warrant continuation.

As a parrot aficionado, this project is very special to me. I would be

thrilled to see this native come home to stay. We lost the Carolina Parakeet, let's not lose the Thick-billed too.

Update

Phoenix, Arizona, March 14 1995

The Arizona Game and Fish Department just notified me that they have "discontinued the release of captive born and confiscated Thick-billed Parrots due to the poor assimilation success."

Captive raised birds, even when trained intensively, have had serious behavioral problems in adapting to the wild. Flocking and feeding behaviors were deficient. Additionally, the project has been troubled by dangerous and untreatable diseases in birds coming from confiscations and from open multi-species captive breeding institutions.

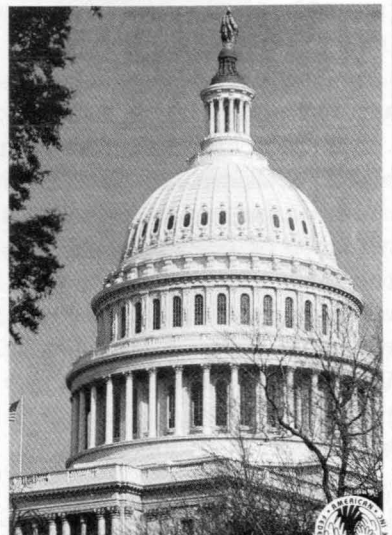
Presently the Game and Fish Department is assisting an international multi-agency effort to survey and monitor wild populations in Mexico. The goal of the study is to "develop conservation studies for the Thick-billed Parrot and the Maroon-fronted subspecies. Depending upon the results of this study, the Department may investigate future translocation of wild Mexico Thick-billed Parrots [to the United States]." One consideration for any future translocation, besides adequate food sources, would be a location in an environment with fewer predators.

The Thick-billed Parrot with its extremely social habits and exposure to heavy predation from raptors, is a species that is most likely dependent on "critical mass" effects in keeping mortality rates at acceptable levels. In other words, "there is safety in numbers." For a re-introduction effort to have a good chance in an area where there are lots of hawks, there would have to be a release of a large number of birds at once or the birds would have to be released in an area where the hawk population is small.

I'm still optimistic about a native parrot species being re-established in the United States despite the problems encountered in this initial and somewhat ill-fated effort. ➔

New Legislative Handbook Now Available

The Birdkeeper's Legislative Handbook



by Kelly Tucker

American Federation of Aviculture
Educational Series, No. 1

At last, American Federation of Aviculture's *Birdkeeper's Legislative Handbook* is available. Introduced at AFA's 1996 convention in Concord, CA, this booklet is the first of its kind to give expert advice to bird keepers. Three years in production, this booklet will prove to be an invaluable resource to the pet owner and bird breeder alike—anyone who has a problem with proposed restrictive laws or who wants to avoid problems with law enforcement agencies and their neighbors.

This 32-page booklet tells you in plain English how to ensure that your interests and rights are protected when new laws are proposed or when existing laws are changed. It gives step-by-step instructions on what to do when there is a knock on your door; what to do when you need a lawyer and how to handle many other situations.

Kelly Tucker, an AFA Regional Vice President, who donated the prepared manuscript to AFA, believes that "while

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