

# The Echo Bouncing Back

by Tom Marshall, Leesburg, Virginia

Until 1662 the tiny island of Mauritius, lying in the vastness of the Indian Ocean about 450 miles east of Madagascar, was the home of the world's most famous dead bird—the Dodo. The Dodo, which has become for many the symbol for extinction, is gone forever, but Mauritius is still home to the desperately rare Echo Parakeet (*Psittacula echo*).

Portuguese sailors first reached the island of Mauritius in 1507. The islands of Reunion and Rodriguez complete the archipelago known as the Mascarenes—some 500 miles east of Madagascar. With the arrival of other Europeans, the Mascarene Islands have lost at least 14 bird species within the past three centuries.

Of the 14 species of birds lost from the Mascarenes, a total of seven were parrot species. Only the Echo Parakeet of Mauritius has survived to the present day.

*Psittacula* fanciers would be particularly interested to know of the Reunion Island Ringneck (*Psittacula eques*), a close ally of the Echo Parakeet, which permanently dropped out of sight around the year 1734. Also of interest is Newton's Parakeet (*Psittacula excu*) formerly on the island of Rodriguez, which presumably existed in a green morph form and a blue morph form until it disappeared in 1875.

Deep-water volcanic archipelagos, such as the Mascarenes, tend to offer the right physical spacing for archipel-

ago speciation. Though clustered, they stand separate, providing a balance between isolation and colonization that allows populations to segregate and diverge. The Echo Parakeet emerged as a distinct member of the *Psittacula* genus.

Joseph Forshaw, the eminent ornithologist and a leading authority on parrots, stated in the third edition of *PARROTS OF THE WORLD* that, "tragically, the Echo Parakeet a.k.a. the Mauritius Parakeet, is the most endangered of all parrots, and imminent extinction seems inevitable. Efforts to save the species through captive breeding have been unsuccessful, and in 1984 the total population was estimated to be less than ten, and probably no more than five birds."

Since that book was published, however, progress has been made on Mauritius on behalf of its endemic parrot and 1996 was a banner year for breeding this chunky cousin of the Indian Ring-necked Parakeet (*P. krameri*). The overall total for 1996 was 24 surviving chicks, bringing the total wild/captive population of Echo Parakeets to an estimated 85 to 90 birds. Conservationists with an avicultural bent on Mauritius are supporting the practice of captive and wild populations that are managed as one, with regular flow of partly wild and partly captive Echo Parakeets helping to support the genetic integrity of the world population. In addition, fostering, a

tried and true avicultural technique, has also been employed by utilizing captive Indian Ringnecks as egg incubators and/or surrogate parents.

This Herculean effort by the World Parrot Trust, the Mauritian Government, and the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust Society under the guidance of Carl Jones has managed to halt the Echo's decline with successes in captive breeding.

It is difficult to describe the difference between the Echo Parakeet and its close relative, the Indian Ring-necked Parakeet. The Echo has been isolated on its island home for a sufficient period of time to evolve its distinct form and feathering; its unique social interaction and breeding behaviors, and the particular manner in which it relates to its environment.

The Mauritius bird, according to Rosemary Low in her landmark book, *ENDANGERED PARROTS*, is much larger in body size—about 25% larger and heavier. The plumage also differs significantly. On the Echo, the shade of green throughout is much darker than the apple green of the Ringneck. Male Echos have pronounced blue margins to the feathers of the crown, extending to the nape and to a lesser degree to the mantle. In addition, the male sports a definite yellow line beneath the black throat. The bill coloration differs in that the female's beak is entirely black. In males the upper mandible is red like that of the Ringneck. Whereas the Echo is a bigger bird, its tail is not as long as that of the Ringneck. Another characteristic which sets the Echo apart from the Ringneck is its louder voice which differs in pitch, cadence and stridence. It is also less vocal than the Ringneck.

The Echo's habitat is different as well. It stays in the forest and upland scrub rather than open country frequented by Ringnecks. Therefore, the two allied species, one native, the other introduced, do not seem to be in direct competition with each other. Refreshingly, the Echo Parakeet, unlike the flighty Ringneck, shows little fear of man and can be approached to within 10-16 feet before it takes flight.

The World Parrot Trust (WPT) has been given the opportunity to offer five adult wild pairs for adoption

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*Two male Echo Parakeets in the wild.*



*A wild Echo Parakeet enjoying life.*



*A wild pair of Echo Parakeets with the male feeding the female.*

(they'll remain in the wild, however). Each pair is already named, and all are closely monitored throughout the breeding season. The cost of each adoption will be \$1500. You will receive a special certificate and WPT will undertake to keep you informed about the progress of your birds. You will have the satisfaction of knowing that you are helping this magnificent conservation achievement by Carl Jones and his dedicated team of conservationists and aviculturists in Mauritius. If interested, please contact:

World Parrot Trust, U.S.A. in care of  
Cynthia Webb, P.O. Box 341141,  
Memphis, TN 381844.

**References**

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