



FROM
THE FIELD...

The Lear's Macaw

by William D. Clark, MD
San Antonio, TX

My worst fears were being realized. A week and a half in northeastern Brazil and we were probably going to miss seeing the Lear's Macaw! But how could I complain? We had seen many beautiful and rare birds and had enjoyed the company and instruction of two of the world's finest field ornithologists. After all, it took renowned Brazilian ornithologist Helmut Sick many years of searching to find the home range of these birds. With a known population of about 60



Photos by William D. Clark

Some areas of the caatinga of northeastern Brazil have patches of forest.

(and rumors of a second population of similar size) this is one of the earth's most threatened species.

I have had a lifetime interest in the natural world in general and birds in particular. I got my first pet birds in 1950—a pair of Budgies. Soon, I was breeding them and learning all I could about the parrot family. I became a serious student of wild parrots in 1981 when I made the first of 22 trips to Mexico, Central and South America to study them. With time, I became deter-

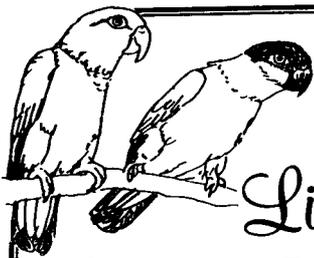
mined to see and photograph every living species of macaw. I knew that this would be a most difficult, if not impossible, task. It took several trips to see my first macaw and several years to see and photograph Blue & Gold, Scarlet, Green-winged, Chestnut-fronted (Severe), Yellow-collared, Red-shouldered (Noble and Hahns), Hyacinth, Red-bellied and Blue-throated (Canindae) Macaws.

I missed seeing the Blue-headed and Military on a tour of Manu Park Peru, due to the demands of my personal schedule which caused me to leave early. I missed seeing the Red-fronted on a tour of eastern Bolivia due to a less than enthusiastic guide. This left those three species plus the Blue-winged (Illiger's), Spix's (one known in the wild) and the Lear's on my most wanted list. When I heard that Field Guides, Inc. was planning a tour of northeastern Brazil I signed up immediately. Unfortunately, military orders prevented my going. The second time such a tour was offered I had another conflict and had to pass.

Finally, Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT) announced that they were going to have a similar tour in January 1997. I was excited to learn that Kevin Zimmer and Andrew Whittaker were going to lead this tour. I knew Kevin well from several past tours. I am convinced that he is among the top five Neotropical ornithologists in the world. Andy was also known to



Comparison of the palm nuts favored by Hyacinth Macaws (left) with the small licuri palm nuts eaten by the Lear's Macaw.



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me by reputation as being a very knowledgeable, enthusiastic and skilled ornithologist. Originally from Great Britain, he has been a full-time resident of Brazil for 11 years. He has a Brazilian wife and has dedicated his life to studying the bird life of his adopted homeland.

Northeastern Brazil is home of a special habitat type called *caatinga* which comes in several subtypes all of which share low, thorny vegetation with interspersed cacti and terrestrial bromeliads. Such terrain does not fit most people's conception of ideal habitat for macaws. In fact, at least two species of macaws inhabit this type of habitat (Lear's and Blue-winged) and several others regularly occur in savannas and/or dry forests (Hyacinth, Red & Green, Blue & Yellow, Scarlet, Yellow-collared, Red-shouldered, Red-bellied, Blue-throated and Red-fronted). So, don't always picture a rain forest when you think about macaws! Lear's Macaws are known only from a type of *caatinga* that features both rocky cliffs and licuri palms, *Syagrus coronata*.

The visit to the Lear's home territory was to be at about the midpoint of the tour and was to occur in the late afternoon on the way to our next stop. It was originally planned that the morning that followed would be a backup time in case the macaws were missed the first time. However, mechanical problems with our bus prevented the option of a second visit to the site. I got more and more concerned as that special day wore on. A series of delays had put us well behind schedule. It was going to be an all-or-nothing attempt and the sun was setting rapidly. Kevin and Andy appeared calm and confident on the outside, but I sensed a hint of concern below the surface. There was less than an hour of daylight when we arrived at the ranch where the macaws were said to frequently take their late afternoon meal. There were no sights or sounds to suggest the presence of the macaws when we scrambled off the bus. The ranch owner met the group with a smile and led us into a pasture near his house.

I had started my study of the Lear's Macaw by reading the reports of Dr. Sick who described in detail his suc-

cessful search for the home territory of this species, which ended in 1968. I have even had the privilege of talking with some of those who have done more recent field research on these birds (principally Dr. Judith Hart). From these sources, I knew that the range of these birds was limited to a small area of northeastern Bahia and that the most studied population roosted and nested in holes in the sides of rocky cliffs in the red rock area called the *Raso de Catarina*. I also knew that they were palm nut specialists, much like the similar but much larger Hyacinth Macaw. In fact their name comes from a British artist named Lear who painted one of the birds in the nineteenth century and mistakenly labeled it as a Hyacinth Macaw. Other physical differences from the more familiar Hyacinth Macaw include a lighter shade of blue feathers, a larger but less deeply colored yellow cheek patch and a call much higher in frequency.

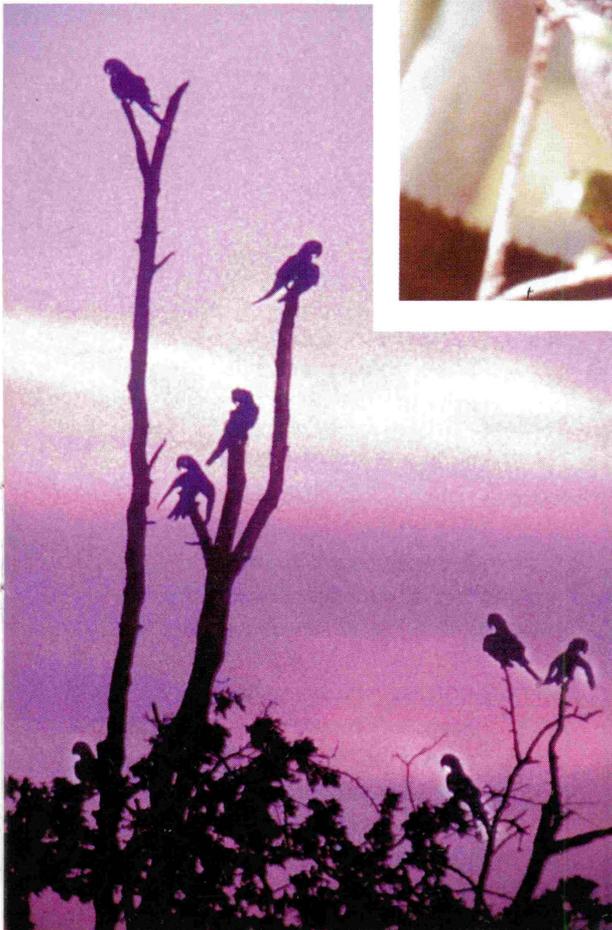
Dr. Hart and her written reports told me that extensive ranching in the home territory of these birds has produced a serious concern for the future of their food source. Most of the palms that bear fruit are older trees that are not being replaced by offspring due to their being eaten by livestock as they emerge from the soil. Locals are being educated to provide protection for the tender young palms and this has produced some cautious optimism for the future of this key element of the birds' diet.

It took about 15 minutes of searching a field with a large stand of palms to locate a pair of these beautiful birds. They were flying from tree to tree feeding on the nuts of the licuri palms. Kevin played his tape of Lear's calls and the pair moved closer. Soon, several pairs were visible, all working their way closer. The sight of these precious animals hanging from the palms as they gathered and consumed the palm nuts was mesmerizing. The behavior of taking the palm nuts only from the trees contrasted with the reports of Dr. Sick who wrote that they gathered them from the ground. By now, the sun was beginning to set and the pairs were calling to one another. Pair by pair, they flew to a large dead tree with each new arrival trying to dis-

A stand of licuri palms, the staple diet of the Lear's Macaw.



A female Slender Antbird, a very rare endemic of northeastern Brazil.



Lear's Macaws in the late afternoon.

place the bird in the highest perch. Finally, 14 of the world's rarest parrots were perched in the old tree, bathed in the glow of the setting sun. Kevin said that the locals told him that this is the common practice for the group of macaws that frequents that ranch. Andy and Kevin also told us that on their scouting trip to the area they spent two days with these macaws but were never able to approach them closely. This was in sharp contrast to the behavior of Hyacinth Macaws on Brazil's Pantanal. Kevin, Andy and I had led one or more tours each to that area and had learned how trusting that species is of humans. Locals told us that they were able to approach the birds rather closely in their daily work routine, but were aware of their reaction to strangers.

I snapped off several photos of the macaws as they landed in the tree and several more during the few minutes they stayed there before departing for their rocky roosting site in the red cliffs we could see in the distance. I wished that our plans allowed for more encounters with these wonderful creatures, but was thankful for the few minutes of company that we were allowed.

A number of birds made my top 10 list during this tour. Who could forget the Great Xenops? Wasn't that cooperative pair of Slender Antbirds a memory for a lifetime? How about the Silvery-cheeked Antshrike, Red-shouldered Spinetail, Scarlet-throated Tanager or the Pectoral Antwren? Was that Cryptic Anthrush a killer or what? Didn't that pair of Blue-winged Macaws allow me to scratch one more species from my macaw hit list? And, that White-browed Antpitta put on a great show! But none of those won top billing.

During the last week of our tour we saw a family group of Pink-legged Graviteiros, a species in the ovenbird clan new to science that our leaders had never seen. Everyone else on the tour rated seeing that species as the highlight of the trip. Not me, I didn't even take a picture. My thoughts were still on those 14 beautiful blue macaws as they flew into the bronzed sky, their raucous calls echoing across the *caatinga* and their memory etching their way into my mind. 