

Costa Rica, the Jewel of Central America

by Toby Hutcheson, Spruce Pine, AL

Costa Rica, a shaky little country, that lies between Panama and Nicaragua in Central America, is a bird lovers paradise. No larger than West Virginia, Costa Rica boasts an avifauna of more than 830 species, more than that of all the United States and Canada combined. However, like most countries of the world, Costa Rica has some bird and animal species that are not faring too well in the modern world. Such brings me to the story of an outstanding aviculturist, doing his part, and then some, to restore some of Costa Rica's native fauna.

Fifteen kilometers from the capital city of San Jose, in the town of Alajuela, is a jewel in avicultural excellence. This facility is dedicated to the breeding and preserving of Costa Rica's native fauna, and the educating of Costa Rican natives as to the importance of preserving its wildlife. This incredible facility is locally known as Zoo Ave.

Former Canadian, Dennis Janik, owns and operates this non-profit facility. He began by establishing a business in Texas. Profits from the business were used to acquire the property and build most of the existing aviaries. After several years Janik sold the business and made the final move to Costa Rica.

Janik insists this is a wildlife conservation, breeding, and education project, not an Eco-Tourism project. He is dedicated to breeding and reestablishing wild populations of Costa Rica's birds and animals, into areas where they formerly existed.

Today Zoo Ave. is funded by gate fees, donations, and money from Janik's own savings. The Costa Rican government has made no effort to acknowledge Janik's facility or his efforts on behalf of Costa Rica. The Costa Rican government may view Zoo Ave. as a competitor to its National Zoo Simon Bolivar, located in



Photos by Toby Hutcheson

These young birds are being kept in large groups where they have their choice of mates. They spend their juvenile period learning to be birds.

the heart of San Jose. In truth, there is no comparison of the two facilities. Zoo Ave., although only seven years old, has an incredible track record of breeding success. Simion Bolivar has no apparent breeding program. Zoo Ave. has 750 more birds and animals than the National Zoo, and is by far cleaner and better kept than the National Zoo. Although the Costa Rican government has not supported Zoo Ave., the Costa Rican media has supported Janik and his efforts.

Dennis Janik first located a private collection of birds in Costa Rica, and acquired this collection before the collectors death. This collection included a large group of Scarlet Macaws *Ara Macao*. Zoo Ave. now has over 60 Scarlet Macaws in their breeding program.

A recent wildlife study by the wildlife department of Universidad Nacional, in Heredia, shows that each wild Scarlet Macaw was worth \$500,000.00 U.S. in terms of how much tourism revenue the birds would generate over the course of their lifetimes. Janik tries to educate native Costa Ricans as to the benefits of macaws and other wildlife to the Costa Rican people. Zoo Ave. estimates that in the next 10 years the zoo will produce between 150-200 Scarlet Macaws for release into the wild. Ten to 15 of their progeny are kept for future breeding purposes. All other birds produced will be released, and an attempt made to reestablish them (in significant numbers) in a part of the country where they have vanished as long as 100 years ago.

Many of the birds and primates held at Zoo Ave., were formerly kept as pets, many in deplorable conditions by Costa Rican nationals. These animals are now kept in large enclosures with

grass, trees, and others of their own species. Zoo Ave. has worked successfully with numerous types of injured and orphaned animals. Zoo Ave. has successfully rescued, rehabilitated, and released many different types of birds and animals including porcupines, Coati Mundi, turtles, caiman, foxes, iguanas, Raccoons, anteaters, sloths, falcons, and many other types of birds. Some injured and orphaned animals, due to their particular injury, cannot be released back into the wild. However, these animals remain in the zoo. They are set up in breeding situations where they have the opportunity to produce healthy young that may be released in the future.

Zoo Ave. cares for over 80 species and has already successfully bred over half of these. They have already successfully released Finsch's Conures, Crested Guans, chachalacas, Ruddy Ground Doves, and others into the wild. It is interesting to note that Zoo Ave. houses some blue mutation Finsch's Conures *Aratinga finschi* that were donated to the zoo by some local residents. However, the zoo shows no interest in breeding these for release



The Montezuma Oropendola, rare in aviculture, has a beautiful song.

into the wild.

Zoo Ave. keeps and breeds many species of tanagers, seed eaters, honey creepers, euphonias, grassquits, jays, mot mots, and my favorite, the Long-tailed Mannikin. Along with Scarlet Macaws, Zoo Ave. houses eight pairs of Buffon's Macaws *Ara ambigua*, dozens of various Amazons, Pionus, and native parakeets, aracarís, Emerald Toucanets, Keel-billed Toucans *Ramphastos sulfuratus*, Chestnut-mandibled Toucans *Ramphastos swainsonii*, and various hawks, owls, kites, and the King Vulture *Sarcoramphos papa* all of

which are in Janik's breeding programs. There are also game birds including various doves, rails, gallinules, curassows, guans, chachalacas, tinamous, and quails. Spotted Wood Quail, *Odontophorus guttatus*, and Buffy-crowned Wood Partridge, *Dendrortyx leucophrys*, are also found at Zoo Ave.

Gate fees at Zoo Ave. vary with national status. Tourists are charged a \$15.00 U.S. entrance fee to help fund the project. However, Costa Rican natives are charged a minimal \$1.20 U.S. gate fee. Janik believes it is necessary to persuade the natives to appreciate their native fauna. A high gate fee for Costa Ricans might deter visitors from the center and defeat Zoo Ave's goal of educating the local people to the importance of Costa Rica's wildlife. Educating the people is far more important than gate fees. Tourists, on the other hand, are not deterred by gate fees and the money is much needed to further the entire project.

The future goals of Zoo Ave. are just as impressive as the accomplishments already attained. Zoo Ave's goal is to breed all of the species which it exhibits in the zoo. It is the intent of the zoo to breed, establish sufficient genetic diversity, and release genetically viable populations of all the birds on their focus list. Also, to establish a new and genetically diverse, wild population of Scarlet Macaws in an area of the

country in which they are currently extinct. The zoo intends to construct a formalized rehabilitation facility with state-of-the-art equipment in order to better rehabilitate and release injured, orphaned, and "former pet" animals. Zoo Ave. wants to increase their sponsorship of scientific investigations into the behavior, breeding, and food sources of all Costa Rican Fauna. Finally, to construct a fully equipped, high tech, on site, classroom to enable them to offer more intensive environmental studies to visiting teachers and school groups.

Dennis Janik has proven that aviculture is not a bad thing. We are not the bad guys that we are often made out to be. He seeks not fame nor fortune, but only to preserve God's own beautiful creatures with the tools that aviculture provides him with. His is a noble cause, practiced by aviculturists the world over. We should hold our heads high, for the love of breeding birds is a badge of honor to those who practice it. Those who seek to stop us or destroy us for monetary gain or through ignorance, are an obstacle that must be dealt with. Our work now is a legacy that we must pass on to future generations that they may enjoy the diverse fauna that this planet has to offer, and seek to preserve it. Praises be upon the Dennis Janiks of the world, shining stars in a shrinking planet.

Donations, inquires, comments, etc. may be forwarded to:

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Please send all donations to the Miami address. Mail sent directly to Costa Rica may take months to get there and may never get there, especially those containing contributions.

Suggested Reading

A Guide to the birds of Costa Rica, authored by: Stiles, Skutch, and Gardner published by Comstock/Cornell



Chestnut-mandibled Toucan



Photos by Toby Hutcheson

These Scarlet Macaws are in a real tropical setting. This is a birdwatcher's paradise.