

Update to the American Federation of Aviculture (AFA) on the Status of the Last Wild Male Spix's Macaw

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The last wild Spix's Macaw *Cyanopsitta spixii* was reported "missing" by the Brazilian wildlife authorities of IBAMA on December 1, 2000. There are many possibilities, including the bird had died, either through natural cause or predation, or, that it could have moved from its current range to either its previous range or a new area. The field biologists believe that there is a real possibility that he might have moved to another area as he had done so before. (In the last event, he was found relatively quickly due to sightings from local "cowboys.") At that time, the field biologist in charge of the program, Marcos Da Ré, believed that the male had changed Illiger's Macaw "partners."

We have no concrete evidence that this occurred (except Da Ré's firm belief that it was a different Illiger's Macaw), as the birds were not tagged. There are a number of theories of what could have contributed to its disappearance, such as increased human activities in the area in the months prior to his disappearance (road clearing and ecotourism), but those will have to be closely evaluated and compared with field data before any conclusions can be made. At this time, the

only clear fact that we have is that the single Spix's male has not been observed in the area that he has utilized for the last few years.

Since the disappearance of the last Spix's Macaw, the Field Team, coordinated by Yara de Melo Barros, has conducted an extensive survey of the possible areas, following up leads from the communities of the area and getting the information out regarding the Spix's macaw.

Field Searches

According to the last report from the field by Yara Barros (December 9, 2000), the team involved in the search efforts followed up all the leads and information from the local population, but without success. The strategy was to look in the areas closest to the information points and included numerous private ranches which are believed to be part of the traditional range of the last Spix's Macaw.

The researchers felt that there was a real possibility that he might be returning to his former range. However, confirming this was a daunting task as it involved finding a single bird in a very large region of the country (approximately 5,000 sq. miles).

The search area size was not the only complicating factor, as on December 11, the first rains of the season (and therefore breeding season) began, making the search quite difficult as the dirt roads become almost impassable. The search group was comprised of three teams, each including a field biologist and local "vaqueiros" who know the bird well and have been involved in the monitoring of this species in the wild. Although many parrot species were sighted, the Spix's Macaw was not found. Species included *Aratinga acuticaudata*, *Aratinga cactorum*, *Amazona aestiva* and *Ara maracana*. The teams experienced some problems in crossing creeks because of flash flooding (which is very common and quite dramatic in this desert habitat). One group was isolated and had to stay at a farm helping with the round up of cattle, goats, and sheep to pre-

vent their loss due to the flooding.

As the Spix's Macaw is known to occupy the areas around the streambeds, the searchers were in some jeopardy due to the flash flooding concerns. Some of the "vaqueiros" who were on the search teams had to return to their own farms to help secure livestock and families.

According to Barros, the rain was a major disruption in the searches as it rained every day until the 17th of December – causing flooding and loss of livestock. Due to the difficulty in getting the vehicles through the area, many of the "vaqueiros" chose to ride their horses (although it took a longer time to get to the area, it was a more reliable method of getting through the flooded "caatinga"). For the third week of search, the teams returned to the first search area closer to the town of Juazeiro, where the macaw had been sighted the last time by local inhabitants (if information was credible).

On December 22, the search operation was halted, although continuing on a lower scale by the field team. If the male was still alive, he would have been extremely difficult to find and quite secretive as it is right in the middle of the breeding season. A decision was made to wait for the reproductive period to end, while continuing to provide the local communities in the region with information on this species, the project, and what to do (who to contact) if the Spix's is sighted.

The Future

Simply because the single bird has disappeared (either died or moved) does not mean that the Spix's Macaw Field Program will be terminated. The reintroduction enclosure and the research base are located on a farm that has been the site of almost 10 years of field research, habitat conservation, and community programs. The integration of the field effort with community-based conservation (schoolhouse program, theater restoration, etc) has been groundbreaking in that it addressed the primary problems that faced the Spix's macaw.

Unlike other reintroduction programs that have failed because the primary reasons for the species extinctions were not addressed (habitat loss, poaching, no community support, etc.), this program has focused its efforts on ensuring a safe habitat for the eventual re-establishment of this species. The rural schoolhouse program is continuing and will be expanded to other regions. The reintroduction program is still on-line for implementation although some strategies will have to be changed due to the loss of the male.

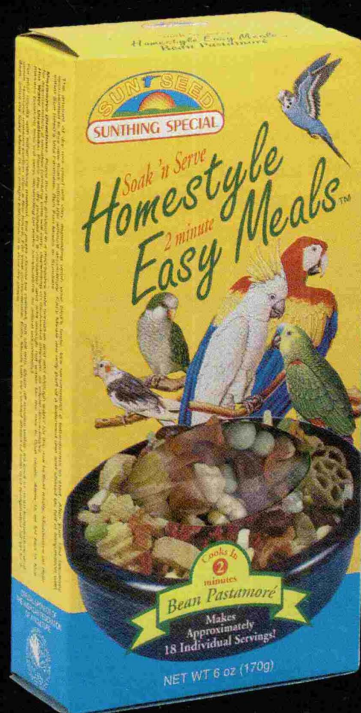
There is a potential for establishing an in-country, breeding facility in the region that will address the captive management of the Spix's and possibly Lear's Macaw. The infrastructure of the nearby town of Curaça has improved considerably in the last 10 years, making this a good location to operate as a base of operation for future conservation of psittacines of the region. The Spix's "model" program of community-based conservation is now being considered for the Lear's Macaw area and it is likely that a joint (more cost-effective) effort will be implemented, as the regions of occurrence for both these species are relatively close to one another.

There is still much to be done and the support for this program is now critically needed. The reintroduction of the Spix's Macaw to the wild now depends on the captive-breeding program and the avicultural community more than ever. It is our hope that we will be able to show that in fact it is possible to re-establish a psittacine species to the wild. ➤

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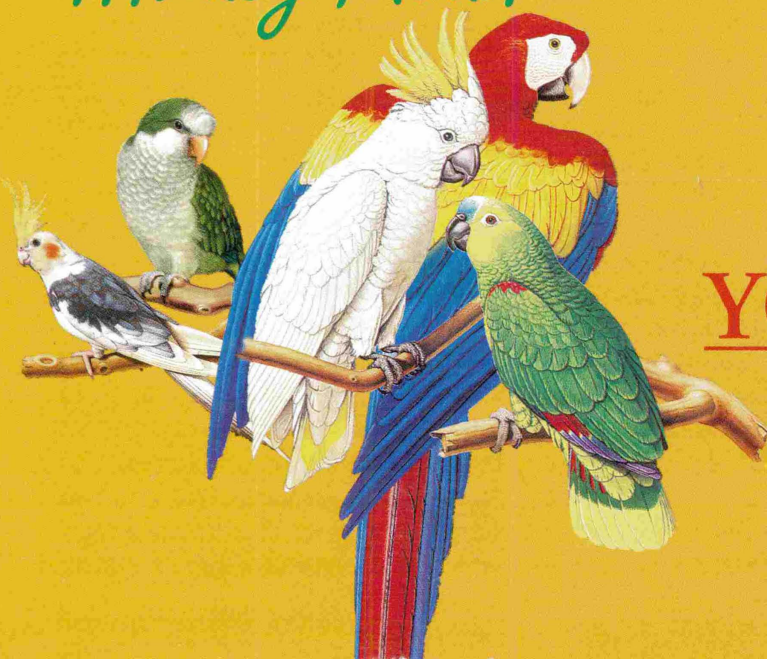
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