

The Wild Macaws of South America

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My wife is a parrot nut in general and a macaw nut in particular. Through watching too much television this led to the idea that it would be nice to see macaws in the wild. It is possible to go on expensive eco-tours. However, for us poor people, my previous experience had shown that one can travel anywhere in the world for half the price independently. This is especially true of third world countries where macaws are to be found. What's missing is the detailed information about where to go. Our own "thing" was macaws and South America, however what follows applies to whatever birds or countries that catch your interest.

Basic information about the range of macaws can be found in such tomes as Forshaw's *Parrots of the World*, however, this is pretty general and can be out of date.

So how is it possible to arrange one's own personal trip? Having established the range of the particular macaw in question the next thing is to view the internet for further and more up to date detail. Also to be found on the internet these days are the websites of local tour operators who can fix it for you to see exactly what you want. Usually they can be cross-questioned by Email. The local tour operators almost invariably speak English – the actual guide's English is more debatable. Few speak no English, all are anxious to improve their English by talking to you. Often you may end up with a team of guides all with different

tasks (I have had up to four, ranging from cooks to mechanics, drivers, pilots, woodcraft experts, bird experts, etc.)

I use the *Lonely Planet* travel guides, which list eco-tour operators and give some idea of their performance. A recommendation in the *LP* guide counts for a lot. The tour operators are anxious to please, I have yet to be let down by one recommended in this guide. The *Lonely Planet* readership is very active in sending in amendments to the editors. The expensive eco-tour operators invariably use these same local operators so, in effect, you get the same thing for a lot less money. I'm a great believer in cutting out the middle man!

Quite often these operators run a standard trip which takes in what you want to see. Typically a standard trip will cost between \$30 and \$100 per day, depending on the technologies involved and the number of participants, (which have to be rounded up, you may have to help in this). This is fine so long as the participants have similar interests. If they haven't this can lead to problems.

However it's easily possible to arrange your own personal and specialized trip for not much money, typically \$100 to \$150 per day (inclusive of everything). For this you can go where you want and stay as long as you like. Time costs virtually nothing, only fuel and maintenance count. These days you can make arrangements by fax or Email to operators in the most unlikely and remote places. It's as well to find out from your proposed operator exactly what experience they have in your particular interest. In some places I've just hired a taxi for a day (it's not expensive).

It's possible to just turn up at your destination and arrange things on the spot, however you may have to hang around for a few days, time means very little in the third world. There's usually something of interest to do in the meantime. One has to adapt to these things!

It's important to research the following categories beforehand:

- The range and habitat of the species you are interested in (although you may have some surprises when you get there). Also have pictures of it/them, these are invaluable to not-very-well-educated guides.
- Any political/security problems in the area you propose to visit. Ignore press and TV reports, consult your own foreign office.
- The cost of the international airfare, your biggest expense.
- Guide Books, plenty about, *Lonely Planet* is just one of them.
- Magazines.
- Internet search.
- Expensive tour brochures, sometimes useful nuggets of information can be gleaned.
- Television documentaries, (usually wildly exaggerate the difficulties/remoteness of the site).
- Tourist information centers and offices, (a poor last in this case).
- Have good travel insurance. I've never needed it but you never know.

If you've never been before, where to start? Well Peru is a good place. There is a wide range of habitats, a well developed tourist infrastructure, and lots of other things for the family to do and see. Costa Rica is also pretty good. However with a little Spanish, your guide book and the necessary information there's no limit to where you can travel.

I don't believe that there's any place on the surface of the planet where you can't go these days with little trouble and inconvenience. I've never been to a place where there was no one willing to take me to see what I wanted to see. I've never failed to have an exciting and enjoyable time. I've usually seen what I came to see and often other things I never expected to see.

For more information and accounts of our travels see my webpage:

<http://freespace.virgin.net/susan.armitage/macaws.htm> 