

The Scarlet Macaw

in Captivity and in the Wild

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When someone mentions the tropical rainforest one of the several birds and animals that comes to mind is the Scarlet Macaw, *Ara macao*. Its recent increase in wholesale price can undoubtedly be attributed to its scarcity in the wild areas of Central America. Most scarlets now imported come from South America where the species is still abundant and export permits are still being granted.

Although generally quite scarce throughout its range in Central America the scarlet can still rather easily be seen along the Usumacinta River which borders the countries of Guatemala and Mexico. My encounter with the scarlet was made along the Guacamayo (Macaw) River in the interior of Belize (formerly British Honduras). I was interested in this population of macaws because nothing has been recorded about their numbers since the research done by Stephen Russell of the University of Arizona in the late 1950's.

I was in the mountain pine ridge area of Belize as a member of the Vulture Study Group of South Africa. Finishing up the formalities needed to establish a feeding station in Belize, along the Guacamayo, for observing the little known King Vulture, *Sarcoramphus papa*, I had hope to get a glimpse of the scarlet. With only three days remaining I was a bit concerned that the opportunity would not arise to travel along the Guacamayo and associated area of hardwoods known as the chiquibul to check for scarlets. Finally I had two mornings free to photograph the life in this wild area. Several individuals had recently travelled into this area with the same hopes but were not successful and returned several times without seeing even one macaw. With only two mornings my chances were not good but the area had plenty to offer besides macaws

so my hopes were high. I set out in my Landrover at 5:30am and reached the river at 6:00. Over an hour had passed and the objective of looking for scarlets had slipped my mind as I was busy photographing the various other faunal types that lived along the river. Suddenly I remembered my objective and drove south of the river along a dirt road that lead deeper into the hardwood forest known as the chiquibul.

My first scarlets in Belize would soon be history. I stopped my vehicle to try and locate a calling Keelbilled Toucan, *Ramphastos sulfuratus*. The toucans and aracarís were nesting so the normal large groups of toucans were replaced with the occasional calling male. This time I was more able to locate the toucan. I found its nesting hole with the female's body half sticking out of the hole. It was a perfect picture so I unloaded my camera equipment (it would require a telephoto lens and a tripod) and set it up as close to the tree as I could get. Just as I had the camera ready and was focussing the lens I heard a loud "squack". Having heard several macaws before I identified the call instinctly as a macaw's and swung my camera around. Just over the treetops was flying two pairs of scarlet macaws. Without the tripod picture taking would have been difficult, as I had on a very long telephoto lens which made the camera very heavy and hard to keep steady.

Returning the next day I saw another pair of scarlets flying but they were some distance away. When one considers the amount of area that the macaws have to forage in it is no wonder that few see them when they drive down the only road that enters the area.

After discussing the matter with several residents I have concluded that the scarlet is quite rare in Belize. It appears that the species is now only

found in this area known as the chiquibul. This is quite a reduction from the statements made on its range by Russell. What caused the population to diminish? It's not an easy question to answer. The species was shot for food and feather by the Mayan Indians for many years. It is a popular choice on the pet trade both locally and abroad. The recent pathway of hurricanes through Belize has taken its toll. The habitat also has been cleared for agriculture. Additionally, the effect natural predators and disease has had is not known. Nevertheless, the species is still found in the forest of Belize. Whether or not it will remain there for future generations to observe and enjoy is hard to tell.

As a pet the scarlet is very popular. Along with the yellow-crowned Amazon, *Amazona ochrocephala*, scarlets are frequently discovered in cages both in the city and in the country. Upon inquiring as to the origin of these scarlets I was told that most come from the large population in western Peten, Guatemala. The only problem with the scarlets as pets is that they require a large cage and a varied diet to stay healthy and attractive. Most people have neither to offer. Many parrots are fed on only bread and water. The scarlet in the photo was such a bird. It was obtained from a couple that fed it on such a restricted diet that it nearly starved and lost most of its feathers. Once put on a varied diet its feathers quickly grew back with only its tailfeathers still missing at the time of this photo.

As aviculturalists we need to increase our efforts to breed this attractive psittacine. We need more information on its life history and need to take an active interest in the policies of the countries, in which it is found, in regards to its export and conservation. Without such information and interest future aviculturist may be without the scarlet macaw in their aviaries.

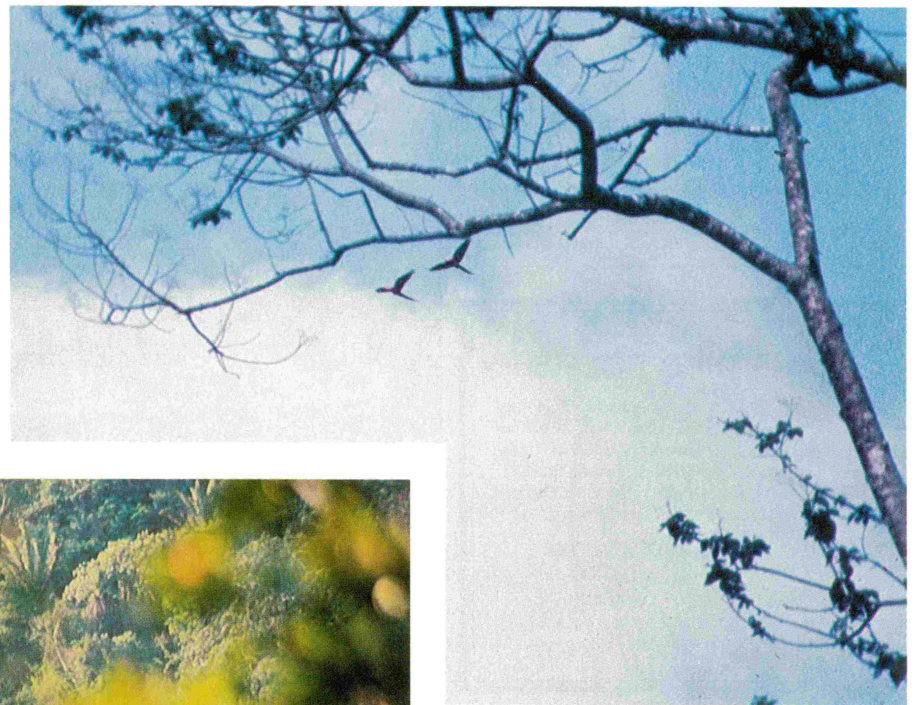


A scarlet macaw kept in a small cage on a diet of bread and water.



Scarlet macaws are frequently kept as pets but they require a large cage to remain attractive.

Photos by Jack Clinton Eirniear, Texas



A pair of scarlet macaws as they flew across the hardwood forest.



The Guacamayo River, the home of the scarlet macaw in Belize.