



THE
GUACAMAYA
REVISITED

from
the field . . .

by Jack Clinton Eitniew
McAllen, Texas

EDITOR'S NOTE: Readers will recall in a previous issue of Watchbird (Oct./Nov. 1980) I visited the haunts of the Military Macaw in the article "People and Parrots of Mexico". I was unable to observe the macaws as it was too late in the year.

I had miscalculated again! Flatlanders often do when it comes to the amount of time required to travel through the mountains. I was fortunate today, however, as a heavy fog had set in giving my field party a little extra time to traverse the distance from our motel to the study sight in the Sierra Madre Range of Mexico.

Arriving at the sight, after a hasty 30 miles through treacherous curvy fog-engulfed mountain roads, it took a couple of minutes for me to regain my senses. Shortly thereafter, we left the Jeep for a short hike along a rocky creek into a nearby oak covered hillside. Of all the countless valleys this one was the most renowned for its wintering population of Guacamayas or military macaws. Exotic Chinaberry trees, transplants gone wild from Tangiers, abound providing a once yearly feast of marble sized fruit.

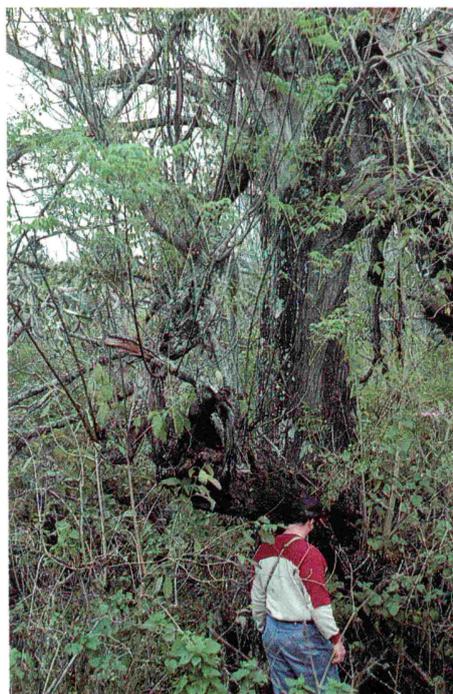
As we left the oaks into an open field used to graze the villages' population of pigs, sheep and cattle I was beginning to ponder over the thought that perhaps we were too late in the year once again to view the magnificent macaws. Upon examination of a nearby Chinaberry tree I convinced myself that we may have been too late today but the abundance of fruit on the trees guaranteed that the birds would arrive sometime in the next day or two.

The first exotic sounds heard were those from a flock of red-lored parrots (*Amazona autumnalis*). Most of our effort was, up until now, being spent observing the numerous North American migrants, such as the blue grosbeaks, as they fed in the small fruiting scrubs that dotted the landscape. As we finally decided to return to the vehicle an all familiar cry was heard through the distant fog. As we stood in the field, moving our heads in a circular

motion trying to catch a glimpse of the birds from whatever direction they might appear, a pair finally rose above the treetops and flew directly overhead. During the next thirty minutes several pairs (groups of two) passed overhead, each with its earthshaking cry telling the world of its presence.

After the parade seemed to have stopped we began to proceed down the valley toward the road but from a different direction than we had taken earlier. As we topped a short hill my companion, Will, heard what appeared to be several macaws either at a great distance or being very silent and quite close. After a five minute period of walking and listening, then walking a bit more, we discovered the flock. As expected they were feeding in a large Chinaberry tree, gleaning it of its fruit like human fruit pickers. We were very fortunate to be able to approach quite close, filling our binoculars with a single bird! My attention went to a single bird as it attempted to, with limited success, climb up a vertical limbless stalk, bite off a single berry, only to slide down a foot or more to the nearest branch.

Of course, as most photographers would know, when you are in the best position to take photographs you don't have your camera! This was the case in this instance as I had thought previously that the fog would not allow enough light for photographs. If I had only known that the fog would give away to



Will Waddell inspects the ground below a Chinaberry tree (*Melia azedarach*) that was previously foraged upon by macaws.



A flock of military macaws as they travel from their roosting to feeding areas in the morning fog.

a cloudless blue sky and a tree full of vibrant green and red macaws!

Forshaw (*Parrots of the World*) mentions the military macaws nest in both pine and sycamore trees during June and July. He also suggests that they might nest in limestone cavities but no actual documentation of this has been made. Two additional nesting records in the files of the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology were in fig tree cavities discovered in June. Despite the lack of direct evidence, residents in the areas where we observed the macaw believed that they nested in the limestone cliffs. This would explain why the nest of a macaw in eastern Mexico has yet to be discovered and would make good sense as there are few trees large enough for a macaw nest in the area.

The military macaw population in eastern Mexico has been monitored for a number of years as it falls within the Audubon Christmas Count for the El Naranjo Region. Although the numbers have varied from year to year a typical number to be counted within the 12 mile diameter circle is 300. This number has varied little over the past ten years which is encouraging in terms of the future survival of the species. After talking to a number of residents about the bird I believe that its major threat is that of habitat destruction. Unlike the other parrots that are valued as pets I know of only one situation where an adult bird was shot in the wing with an attempt being made to tame it down for a pet. In terms of crop destruction it was mentioned that they are easily scared away unlike the parakeets that keep eating until you knock them off the corn stalk! Unlike its close relative the scarlet macaw, its future appears bright. The recent successes of several aviculturists in breeding the species only assures us even more that the species will survive until the millennium. ●

Photos by Jack Clinton-Eitniew, McAllen, TX

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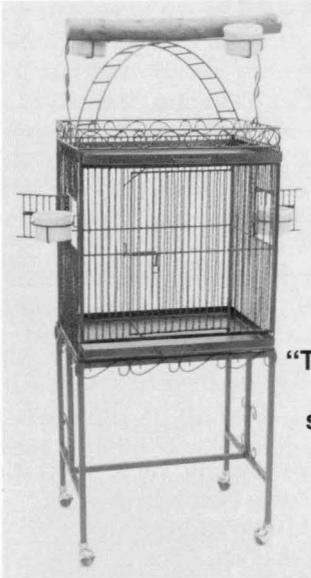
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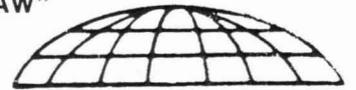
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