

# Valley of the Macaws

by Sheri Williamson  
Fort Worth, Texas

We've all heard that "every picture tells a story" and "one picture is worth a thousand words." But the story a picture tells and the one behind it may be very different, and that hidden story may be one only words can tell. Take, for example, these photographs of military macaws taken in eastern Mexico by my naturalist-husband Tom Wood. They tell much about the appearance and behavior of these birds. The color and details of the plumage, the separation of pairs within the flying flock, and their way of dealing with the clusters of soapberries on which they are feeding can be easily seen. One can also infer that we are lucky to get so close to one of the New World's most spectacular psittacines. What the viewer can't see or infer is the clash of cultures which made these photos possible and perhaps saved a macaw's life.

Our first trip to Mexico was planned like a scientific expedition which, in a way, it was. Our guide was Tom's friend, John Karges, a biology graduate student at a local university; the two met during Tom's early days at the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge. John's undergraduate program at a university in southern Texas included numerous field



*Military macaws in flight. Pairs fly together, a behavior also seen in Amazons.*



*The birds would break off a cluster of fruit with their beaks, then hold it in one foot while picking off the individual berries.*



*The flock landed in a grove of soapberry trees to feed. Despite their weight, the birds perched on the smallest, uppermost branches.*

Photos by Tom Wood, Fort Worth, Texas



trips into northern Mexico. He knew roads to travel, places to camp, hotspots for wildlife — and he was well versed in the language and customs. Tom spoke no Spanish, but he was an excellent wildlife spotter and photographer and the owner of a Volkswagen camper bus.

I had gotten to know many tropical birds during my years as a zookeeper and longed to meet some of them on their own turf. To prepare for such trips I had included Spanish among my first classes when I left the zoo to complete a degree in biology. Together we planned a killer trip. From December 20, 1980 to January 5, 1981, to take in as many habitats as possible: rain forest, cloud forest, high pine forest, desert, coastal marsh, and mangrove swamp. Also on the itinerary were participation in the Audubon Society's annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC) at Catemaco, Veracruz and a visit to the site of the El Naranjo, San Luis Potosi CBC. El Naranjo is special; though only about 300 miles from the Texas border, it has the only CBC that regularly records military macaws, usually over a hundred. One macaw is spectacular, but a hundred . . .

The trip was wonderful. By Christmas day, after four days of travel through the most amazing tropical countryside, we had seen almost three dozen "new" birds, including red-crowned and red-lored amazons and green conures. I'll never forget our first psittacines, a flock of green conures that paid an early-morning visit to our second camp; recognizing their screams, I leaped out of the bus half-dressed and barefooted, stubbing all five toes on one foot. At Catemaco, our southernmost stop, we were treated to the sight of brown jays and keel-billed toucans mobbing a black hawk eagle. Other birders we met told us of wonderful places farther south, but with our time running short we reluctantly headed north.

On the way we ran into a birding tour group that had just come from El Naranjo; they gave us detailed directions to the valley where the macaws live. On the afternoon of January 2, we turned down a dirt road which led past a tiny thatched farmhouse nestled among the scrubby trees of the valley floor. There was little sign of life until the low sun glinted off something against the hills to the east. We leaped out of the bus, and our binoculars resolved the specks of color into macaws, thirty-four of them. They were just as the late ornithologist George Miksch Sutton had described them in his book *At a Bend in a Mexican River*; "a shimmering vision in

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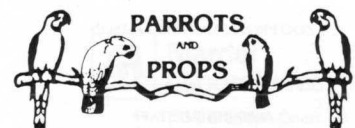
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malachite, turquoise, and gold.' We jumped around and whooped with delight at even such a distant view, but, amazingly, they turned toward us and landed in some trees near the road on the other side of the farmhouse. In our excitement we abandoned the camper and walked back down the road toward the macaws. Tom paused occasionally to take more pictures, not knowing how close we could get before they would spook.

We were nearing the farmhouse and could see the birds well when a boy of about ten appeared in the road in front of the house. He raised a small-caliber rifle to his shoulder and aimed it at the macaws. A scream rose in my throat, and before Tom or John could stop me I was running full-tilt toward the boy shrieking "Don't kill them!" in broken Spanish. Perhaps he understood me, perhaps not, but he lowered the gun and stared in panic at this wild-eyed *gringa*. Mission accomplished, I slowed to a shaky walk and let Tom and John catch up. As we passed the boy, who still stared open-mouthed, I clasped my hands before me and pleaded in Spanish, "Please, don't kill the macaws."

We walked on toward the busily-feeding birds but soon decided that we could get closer using the bus as a blind. We got as close as Tom could focus with his 400 mm telephoto lens, less than thirty feet. The flock was too absorbed in munching on the translucent yellow flesh of the soapberries to pay us any mind, even when we risked getting out for an even closer look. Standing there under the trees, listening to the scraping of beaks, the patter of falling debris, the occasional squawk of indignation, I was moved to tears. At the zoo, militaries were poor relations of the scarlets and blue-and-golds, second-class citizens hidden away in the shadows of a concrete and chain-link cage. Here, free from comparisons and confinement, they were glorious. After eating their fill and allowing us the best look at wild macaws that anyone could hope for, they took to the air and quickly disappeared up the valley.

Back at the bus, I gathered all the loose *pesos* I could find (a few dollars' worth) and walked over to a small corral where the boy was busy with chores. I called him over and in tearful, broken Spanish, explained that I had waited a long time and come a long way to see the macaws. Many other Americans felt the same, I said, and I hoped that the macaws would be here for them and for me when I returned. "Comprende?"

Understand? The boy nodded, and I pressed the money into his hand.

I returned to the bus, and we headed up the valley, hoping for one more glimpse of the macaws. We finally gave up and, on the way out, saw the boy and his parents sitting at a rickety table in front of the house, the money laid out before them. They seemed to be trying to sort out why these crazy people would travel so far and make such a fuss over those big, green, corn-eating pests. Would those few dollars make up for the damage even one macaw could do in their cornfield? Probably not. What right did "rich" Americans have to keep them from protecting their limited resources? None. What did we accomplish besides winning one or two birds a stay of execution? Maybe nothing. But our reason for being there, emphasized by a handful of *pesos* and multiplied by the number of other pilgrims who have made the same journey, may be one reason that there are still macaws at El Naranjo.

Over a decade of CBCs indicate a fairly stable population, and the annual parade of birders and the money they bring may have helped. If the macaws are tolerated as a tourist attraction, the boy may have only intended to frighten, not kill them. I hope this is true, because it means that as a tourist in the tropics I can contribute to the welfare in the wild of creatures which have given me so much pleasure in captivity. It's a debt I am only too happy to repay.

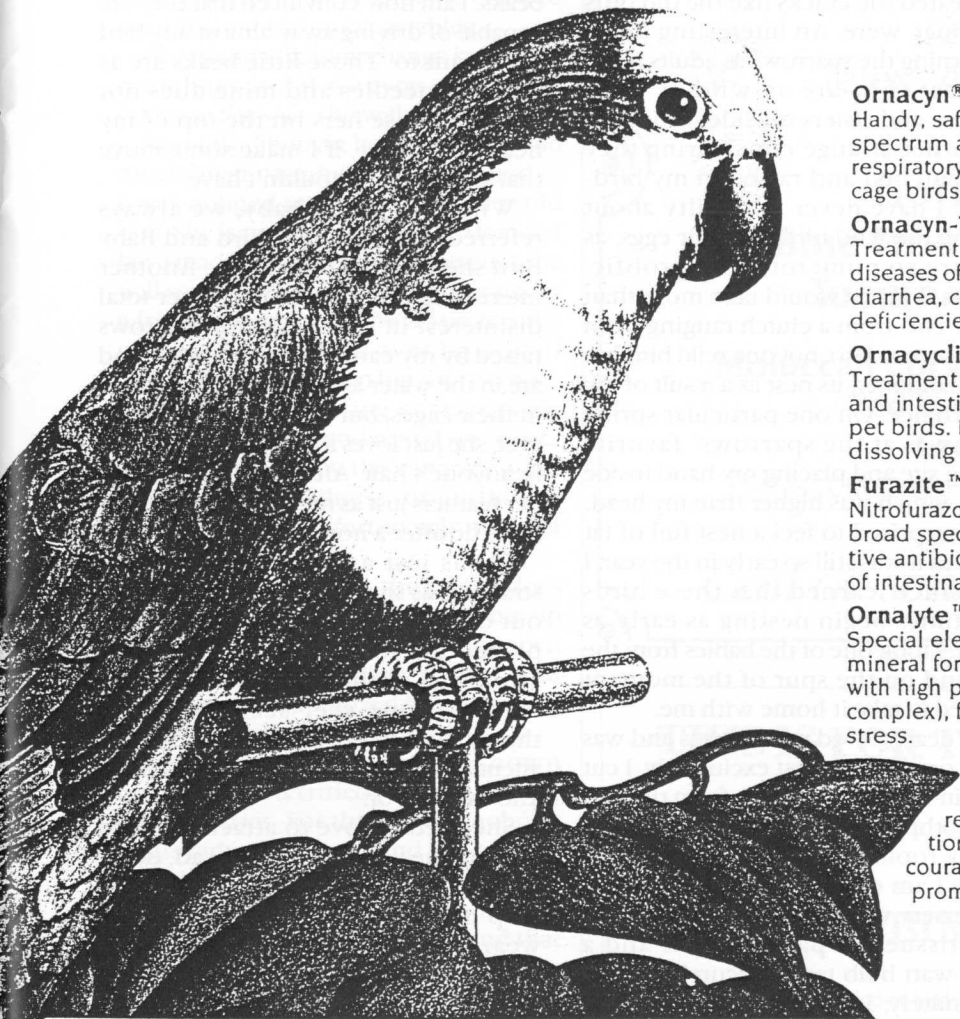
Tom and I will always find excuses to return to the tropics: conservation, scientific research, escape from winter, the devalued peso, etc. But the real reasons lie in the stories behind these pictures and in our need to relieve that afternoon in the valley of the macaws.

### Suggested Reading

Some books which we have found useful in planning our tropical field trips as well as entertaining for armchair travel are:

- American Birds*, any Christmas Bird Count (July/August) issue.  
 Franz, Carl, 1972. *The People's Guide to Mexico*.  
 Franz, Carl, 1981. *The People's Guide to Camping in Mexico*.  
 Peterson, R.T. & E.L. Chalif, 1973. *A Field Guide to the Birds of Mexico*.  
 Skutch, Alexander F., 1983. *Birds of Tropical America*.  
 Sutton, George M., 1951. *Mexican Birds: First Impressions*.  
 Sutton, George M., 1972. *At a Bend in a Mexican River*.  
 Sutton, George M., 1975. *Portraits of Mexican Birds*. ●

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