

# People and Macaws in Costa Rica

by Joanne Abramson  
Raintree Macaws  
Fort Bragg, California

In February, 1989 we had the opportunity to visit Costa Rica. Our visit was cut short by the illness and death of my mother-in-law; and tucked between the weaning of hyacinths and the start of handfeeding season. After being an armchair traveler for 14 years, I was finally on my way to see macaws in the wild. I came away having even more respect for the researchers and photographers who study the tropics.

We found the Costa Rican people friendly, clean, hardworking and helpful. The native language is Spanish. Though English is spoken in the major cities, it is helpful to have some knowledge of Spanish.

Paved roads are common, but outside the larger cities they may not be lighted at night. There are frequently no center lines marking roadways. Rural travel at night due to the lack of light, occasional pot holes, gravel and intervals of dirt roads is slow. Most Costa Ricans do not have cars, but use the roads on foot, bicycle or horse. Cattle, pigs, iguanas and an assortment of other critters often sleep in the road. Four wheel drive is usually unnecessary unless you have been specifically advised ahead of time. Ask for road conditions before you go from the locals. *Do not* trust maps. Often they are old (labeling asphalt roads as gravel) or, even worse, new (showing planned roads that do not yet exist). Tours can be very helpful to first time visitors. They are often bilingual and can take you right to the parks. There are many national parks which operate like those in the U.S. However, should you wish to go into a biological reserve, special permission is required ahead of time. Poachers are a problem throughout the country and you may have to sign in and out with the rangers so they know you did come out.

**Le Selva Biological Reserve:** Men who once were hunters are now the park rangers, protectors of wildlife. An ingenious concept. These people know where the animals are and how the animals act. They may have been poachers after wild cats or macaws, who now are used to hunt the animals for radio tracking instead of kil-

ling them. We went to Costa Rica in February during the non-rainy season. Unfortunately, the country didn't know that. In the lowland tropical rainforest on the Atlantic side of the country we encountered the heaviest rainstorms I have ever seen. We also came in contact with the most amazing variety of wildlife. Bugs of every description found their way on to our paths. Beautiful butterflies, Leaf Cutter Ants carrying their huge leaf pieces "Hansel and Gretel style" into the woods, other poisonous ants and bugs that could ruin your next few days or worse. We were warned about snakes continuously, but saw lizards more commonly. Photographers are a particular delight to these creatures, as they are foolish enough to stay in one place for a long time playing with their lenses. We live in the forests of the Pacific Northwest, but the area we inhabit is so benign. I never think twice about reaching out to hold onto a branch to help me down an embankment, or walk through dense undergrowth. To do this in the lowland tropical rainforest would be to demand retribution. The lush, tropical growth in conjunction with the vast variety of wildlife has created a necessity of nature to combat total destruction. Amazing palm trees with huge nuts, that would be the envy of macaws as well as monkeys, were surrounded with two to three inch long spikes. These spikes were as sharp as a sewing needle.

This was the area we had come to in search of the Buffon's Macaw, known locally as "Guara verde." We were told by the locals that "Guara Roja", "red" macaws (Scarlets) used to live in the area. Some told us that as recent as 1968 Scarlets were seen there. Scattered nuts on the ground signal previous feeding feasts of birds and other animals. We did see Sulfur-breasted Toucans, White Crowned and Mealy Parrots. We also saw Monkey Pod trees which have coconut shaped nuts that many animals including a variety of birds enjoy. Buffon's are a nomadic type of bird, usually seen in small groups. However, heavy rain storms kept the Buffon's under cover as we trekked through the underbrush.

Deforestation of the lowland tropical rainforest occurred for the following reasons: cattle ranching, pineapples, coffee, cocoa, strawberries, ornamentals such as cut ferns for the floral industry, and lumber. The many hardwoods are used in making furniture.

There are many visitors to Poas (an inactive volcano) as well as the other reserves and parks in Costa Rica that are conservation minded. They come from many nationalities; English, French and German as well as the native Spanish was spoken. School children take field trips to Poas. Educating them early is key toward that country's ecology. Because of the different languages present, multilingual pamphlets would be extremely helpful. There is a national campaign to get people more interested in their environment and Costa Rica could be a model to show other countries, including our own, how to do it.

**Carara Biological Reserve:** It was in Carara that we saw our first wild macaws. This is what they called a dry rainforest with mangroves and a climate similar to the chaparral of southern California. Dry, but right on the ocean. I was surprised to see the macaws so close to the ocean. Up till then we had seen many more in the hands of aviculturists in Costa Rica. The Scarlet pair we first saw was nesting in a dead tree about 75 feet tall. They nested in the large trunk, the base of which was 2 1/2 feet in diameter, and remained almost that big in the area the nest was. The male was standing guard as we approached in the late afternoon. He was off on one of the branches overlooking the nest, perhaps ten feet away from the opening. The female came out to check out the intruders (us), looked around rather quickly and descended back into the nest. We saw other Scarlets as well. Two that stopped along the road to watch the cars roll by and were unimpressed with our picture taking as they looked down on us from their 100 foot perch (they must have known my lens was incapable of getting a good shot from that distance). The macaws here feed on Coroso Palms, which tastes like coconut and Wiscoyol Palm, which has date-like clusters. Gary Stiles, a well known researcher in Costa Rica, estimates there are fewer than 300 Scarlets flying free in Costa Rica. Most of these are in Carara Biological Reserve where approximately 75 percent of the total population

exists. Although their range was once much larger, they are now extirpated in all but the national parks and wildlife reserves. More Scarlets probably exist in cages than in the wild in Costa Rica. Birds outside protected areas are vigorously persecuted. In Carara, the non-nesting Scarlets and adolescents roost in the estuary along with the pelicans. Trappers are known to travel up the river by small boat, from the Pacific Ocean which is about a mile away from the reserve, and capture the macaws. They are taken out by boats into international waters by bigger and bigger vessels. Nesting macaws are saved from this fate. But future breeding stock (juveniles) is diminished.

Much misinformation is given out by the local tour groups that we saw, some of which was "macaws take 15 years to breed," "hybrids (which was the *only* type aviculturists produce) are not fertile;" and "macaws do not breed in captivity"! Ignoring the fact that the last two statements made no sense said right after each other, this one was the last straw. We had come upon this group of birders by accident while hiking. The tourists were conservation minded, well educated people who were led astray on this subject. This last statement caused my husband to take the tour guide away from the group and explain to him that he was misinformed. I am unsure if he believed either my hus-

band or me. I shudder at the thought of what else he and others like him say to other groups when there are not aviculturists around to defend ourselves.

Deforestation on the Pacific side was caused by cattle ranching (predominantly Brahma), Palm oil trees, houseplants (mostly Ti plants, sold by the foot), beans, coconut, Macadamia nuts, sugar cane. This is also a big fishing area as well as a harvest spot for oysters and shrimp (these have no effect on the bird life).

Tourism, especially from conservation minded individuals such as bird watchers and scuba divers, is beneficial as the country sees that tourists are interested in seeing Costa Rica's natural land rainforests will be preserved. Many former hunters of animals are employed as rangers and tour guides. They are a wealth of information having lived there all their lives and being aware of many animals.

The area is ripe for tourists. It is a stable political country, with pristine beaches, good food, friendly (they even like Americans) people and just enough diversity of flora and fauna to keep everyone entertained. Many people we saw were bird watchers, trekking around with binoculars. There are many tour groups which drive people around to the parks. Although we did not go on a tour, we did see them everywhere. We were

enthralled with the countryside and did not venture into San Jose once.

**Helpful Items:** Passport is required. Light clothing (long sleeves, long pants), comfortable walking shoes especially boots, tennis shoes are okay in some areas, plastic rain poncho with hood, binoculars, camera with telephoto, *lots* of film (expensive in C.R.), insecticide (Off or Cutters), suntan lotion, backpack, English/Spanish dictionary, calculator (for changing U.S. currencies). Book "Costa Rican Traveler" by Ellen Searby.

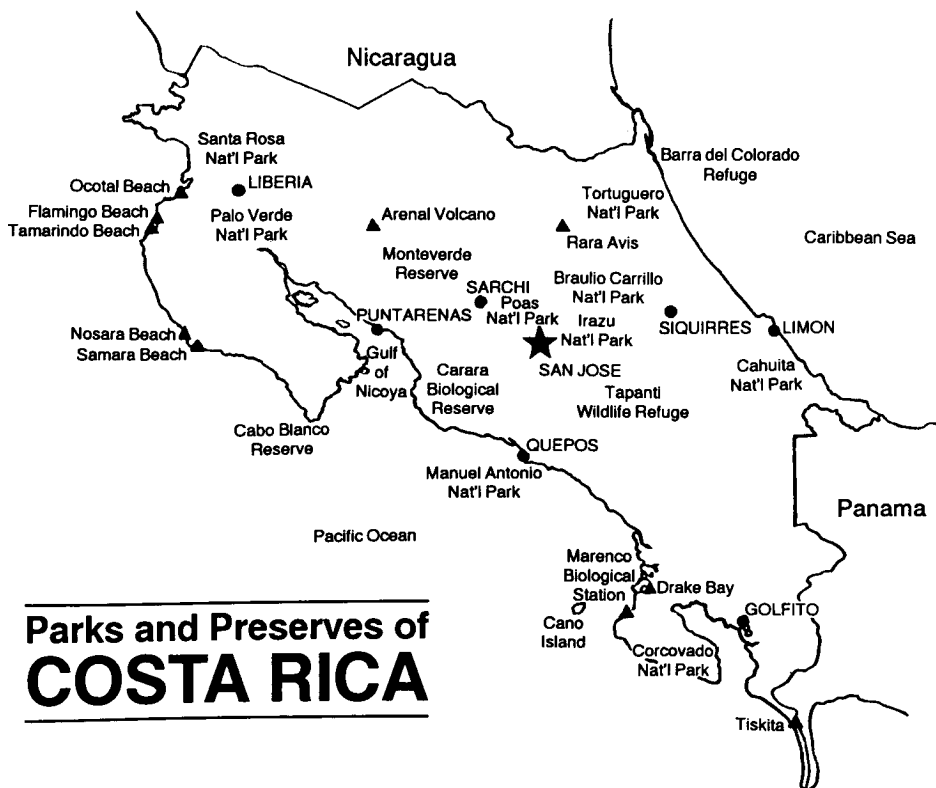
**Aviculture:** The first Costa Rican macaws hatched in captivity were Blue and Golds in 1985 by Richard and Margot Frisius. Aviculture is at the stage we were in the early '70s. Limited breeding stock exists and few captive bred birds due to a lack of knowledge. Much of the knowledge is hampered by a language barrier. Most of the recent reports are in English. Veterinarian services are extremely limited with little knowledge of avian medicine, surgical sexing techniques are not in use, and feather sexing is not allowed due to a law that forbids live tissue to travel across international borders. Prepared food that we consider to be common in our bird diets (pellets, Zupreem, baby food, etc.) is unavailable, so substitute formulas must be made. Although I am confident that if the zoos and other aviculturists were given information and some supplies, significant, viable populations of baby macaws would soon follow. Soon there needs to be communication within the country between zoos and aviculturists so that trading of information, breeding stock and baby birds can occur.

Aviculturists are viewed by the biologists studying wildlife as part of the pet trade, users and abusers of wildlife and diminishers of the wild populations. They view us as the people who support the smugglers. A group, such as A.F.A. could help by putting a fact sheet together showing the benefits of aviculture. This would need to be well researched to counteract these beliefs.

**Conservation:** Those aviculturists who are breeding Scarlets and Buffon's can help by not hybridizing. Attempts should be made to keep the geographically different Central American Scarlet pure. Although it is easy for us to think that by boycotting fast food restaurants we are helping the rainforests, it is not that easy.

(continued on next page)

afa WATCHBIRD 59



## Parks and Preserves of COSTA RICA



*Tropical palm with huge nuts protected by sharp thorns.*

People in Costa Rica, as in our own country, need to eat, have homes and work. The cost of everything imported is extremely high. Taxes are levied heavily on all imported items. The country is predominantly Catholic and population growth is a problem. Saving the virgin rainforest must be our main goal, reforestation a second choice. It is unlikely with the variety of flora in an acre to be able to replant all the varieties origin-



*Waterfowl pond near Jaco. The ocean is in the extreme background.*

ally present. Captive birds are being encouraged to be rereleased, but the associated problems of recapture for the pet trade is dampening this concept. Rerelease will be effective only in areas isolated from humans. Supporting conservation organizations that try to save the natural habitat is important. The three organizations

are World Wildlife Fund, R.A.R.E., and Nature Conservancy. It would be helpful for them to know that you are an aviculturist so we are not continually lumped in with poachers and smugglers. Costa Rica is a spectacular, beautiful country with a rich diversity of climates and wildlife worth your seeing now. ●

*One of several impressive aviaries at the Frisius's.*



*AFA members Richard and Margo Frisius were the first to breed macaws in captivity in Costa Rica. This is Richard with a pair of Buffon's Macaws.*