Roaming Through Florida

by Rick Rundell

Although I had never been to Florida, my mind was full of expectations of disappointment as my plane flew east. I envisioned Florida as a land of tourism, endless beachfront skyscrapers and its natural ecology totally disrupted by drought.

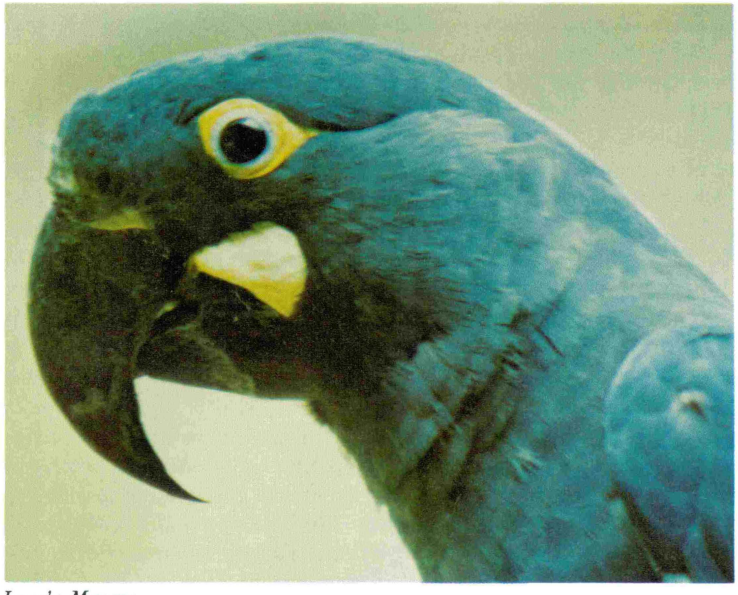
Miami was my first stop. It was a city that reminded me of Los Angeles, sprawling for miles in every direction without any rhyme or reason to it. A drive would take you through expensive houses, then an industrial area followed by a shopping center, and then back again. Being in a land of tourists I had been warned that seemingly every corner would have an attraction to see and this proved to be true, especially with alligator farms and aquariums.

My first stop was at Parrot Jungle, a bird park in south Miami. It is located in a residential area of large homes on acre lots - a similar feel to the area surrounding Huntington Gardens and the Arboretum in Los Angeles. Without billboards, neon lights, and traffic lights the drive was pleasant and relaxing. The park itself was located in a hammock - an island of dense, mature hardwood trees with vines hanging everywhere - similar to a setting for a Tarzan movie. Bromeliads and orchids were carefully stuck in every crevice of every tree. Plants played an important role in the surrounding atmosphere and special sections were set aside for cactus gardens, oddball trees such as banyon trees and sausage trees, and flower gardens. Amidst this tropic environment were 150 free-flying macaws. The park was begun in 1938. In 1942, 22 macaws were acquired which served at the breeding nucleus for the approximately 200 birds presently at the park. Each night the free-flying birds were called down out of the trees and put into night quarters, one pair to each pen. The formation of the pair bond was considered a key to the established routine. If the following morning the pair was found to have an egg, then they would be left inside for the duration of the nesting cycle. Over 30 macaws had been raised in the past 2 years in pens that were 6' deep and 30'' wide. A single perch was placed near the front and an area in the rear of the pen was covered with bark. No nesting cavities were provided.

The young they raised interested me because they all looked so unique. Adults were allowed to pick their mates from a large nucleus of birds. Commonly they would pick a mate from a different species that would produce a different colored bird. A scarlet macaw bred to a blue and gold macaw will produce an orange-colored bird, called a Catalina macaw. The real exciting colors begin when you breed 2 Catalina macaws together. The color patterns do not remain constant. Two birds from the same clutch were on a perch side by side near the entrance of the park. One was deep burgundy in color except for green wings and the nest mate was shades of gold and yellow except for its green wings. Having a zoo background I've always been a purist and against hybrids, but these were so spectacular, I'd gladly make an exception here.

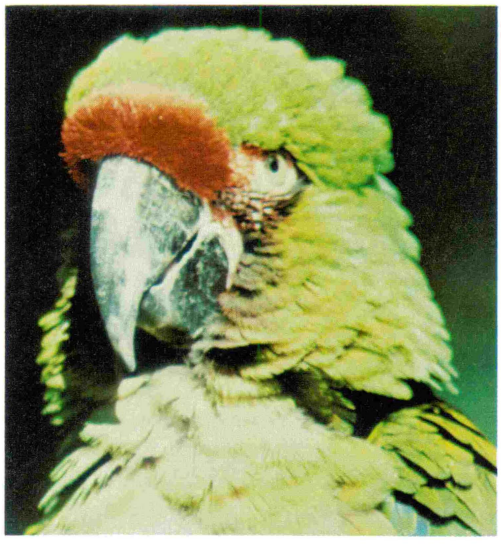
The care for the birds seemed to be of a personal nature. There was no mention in any of my conversations of the rarity of a

photo by Nancy Vigran



Lear's Macaw, Los Angeles Zoo

photo courtesy of Los Angeles Zoo



Military Macaw, Los Angeles Zoo

Green-winged Macaw, Parrot Jungle, Fl.

photo by Ted Grochowski, Jr.

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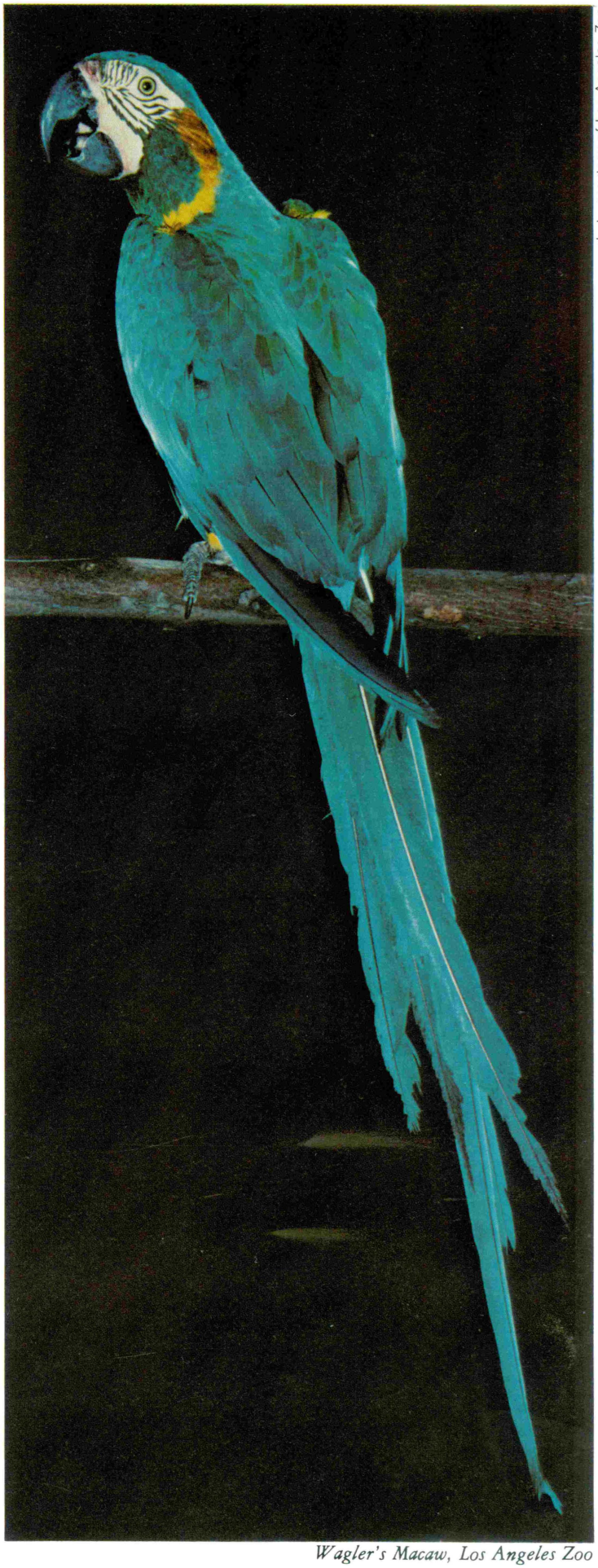

Wagler's Macaw, Los Angeles Zoo

particular type or species of bird, much less its value. They had a few rare birds, black cockatoos for example, but these had been in the collection for years. A fellow zoologist, Bob McMorris, inquired about the possibility of exchanging a few with his zoo, to establish a breeding program. Although the idea was fine there was this reluctance to let Sam or Charlie or Susie or any other bird leave as though it was like trading children.

My next noteworthy stop was Disney World in Orlando, Florida. When Disney established its second park, it decided not to make the same mistake it had made in California in purchasing land. In Florida it purchased 25,000 acres — an enormous tract. It is an entire world to itself. The people who work there commonly live and play within the park. They have their own university — Disney University, of course — for management training and education in their method of operation.

As you enter the park you first must ride on a ferry boat one-half mile across a lake to the amusement area which is very similar to the park in Los Angeles. Space Mountain, Pirates of the Carribean, Haunted House have all been duplicated. However, if one chooses there is a second ferry one can take to another part of the lake — to Discovery Island. It is not well-publicized and unless you ask you will probably miss it or not miss it if you enjoy the main park — but then that is OK because it is a different kind of place. It is quiet, with room to get lost from the maddening crowd. Except for a very low key parrot demonstration — simple tricks and picture taking — it is a tropical garden for exploring without imposing buildings or loud music. If you want a real treat, ask for a personal tour by Charlie Cook, the island's manager. Although a capable administrator, his heart is truly with his birds.

The aviaries are spread out along a circular path — each to be enjoyed separately. As we'd approach an aviary, a big smile would come on Charlie's face, followed by an incredible imitation of the bird's call. It was so accurate that commonly the bird would repeat the call and soon we had dueling kookaburros. The birds were very alert and healthy. I've been on many tours, at times even in the bigger collections, but rarely have they brought as much pleasure. Large parrots, macaws and cockatoos were followed by several species of hornbills, vultures and ravens, more hornbills, kookaburros, and swans until you enter the flight cage. It is an enormous structure that is surprisingly invisible. Constructed with 2'' chicken wire stretched on cables over telephone poles if covers an irregular area 300 feet long and approximately 100 feet wide. In 1973 it cost less than $10,000 to build. Inside is a large meandering pool. The most prominent birds are the scarlet ibis — over 100 in number that breed with extreme regularity. In two years fifty birds raised 42 young. At a value of $500 each, the monetary return is considerable. This success was again seen at Busch Gardens in Tampa, Florida, which would lead me to think that private aviculturists may be missing out on a profitable breeding project.

On the ground were two unique species. One, the common Australian brush turkey, is quiet but has a unique habit of building large mounds of leaves, sticks and whatnot. As these mounds decompose, they generate heat which is used to incubate their eggs. The female lays her eggs in a shallow depression and then the male takes over — constantly burying the eggs, digging them up to check the temperature, turning them and burying them again. The incubation is long due to its low temperature — about 91 degrees — and by hatching time the mound is enormous — 30 feet across and 10 feet high — all built by a single male.

The other unique ground bird was the argus pheasant. A distant relative of the peacock, its call is equal in volume but more melodic. The secondary feathers of the wing are greatly elongated with the eyes of a peacock's train in brown and white hues. Its breeding habits are similar to the peacock pheasants — slow — and its nature is gentle towards other birds.

If I seem to wander away from physical descriptions of the island itself, it is because of the simple atmosphere. I spent two hours under a tree watching the two birds described above. The surroundings just allowed life to slow down. It is a nature photographer's dream.

A final experience at Discovery Island must be related. While waiting for the ferry to take you back to the mainland, one can relax on the grass. A visitor must be careful because once you doze off three young rheas will steal anything they can swallow — and like mischievious kids they will run off immediately if caught. One unsuspecting lady took off her diamond ring and it promptly disappeared. They are still waiting for it to reappear. At a time when millions are commonly spent on new exhibits, it is fascinating to see a wealthy and most innovative company cleverly create an outstanding display at little cost. As many of the A.F.A. convention visitors will testify, the Disney exhibit is extremely rewarding for those who love nature and birds•

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