

# Thick-billed Parrot Project

by Janet Tashjian Hanson Los Angeles, CA

In September, 1986, the U.S.' only remaining native parrot, the thick-billed (*Rhynchopsitta pachyrhyncha*), was reintroduced in the Chiricahua Mountains of southeastern Arizona. A full background of the project and the species' history was presented in an excellent article by Dr. James Koschmann in the February/March 1987 issue of the *AFA Watchbird*. In his exciting report, he described the first release of 13 birds on September 20, 1986, the second of 16 birds on October 19 and the subsequent meeting of the two groups, high in the pine trees on that same day, "a raucous, rowdy affair"!

Since then, Dr. Noel Snyder, the project's team leader, along with his colleague, Dr. Michael Wallace, now Curator of Birds at the Los Angeles Zoo, presented continuing news and a spectacular slide program of the project at the February, 1987 Delacour Symposium of the International Foundation for the Conservation of Birds. This report presents news from that meeting along with personal communications from Drs. Snyder and Wallace.

The large flock formed when the two release groups consolidated and stayed together into November. This combined group lost three members before it split into two groups in early November. The smaller group of 8 birds, two with radio-collars, stayed in the Cave Creek release area, but the second group of 15 birds, with six or seven radios among them, disappeared completely. Dr. Snyder and the team could not find them, even from the airplane with the telemetry equipment. One week later, the smaller flock did the same thing and for five days there were no parrots to be found. Then the larger group returned, now numbering 14, and stayed in the Chiricahua until December 3, when they left again. But this time the team found them, 110 km to the northeast, in the Graham Mountains. They returned to the release area around New Year's and have remained there. Only one more bird has been lost since then. Dr. Snyder believes the smaller group of eight probably flew 80 km south over the border, back into the unprotected and highly dangerous habitat of the Sierra Madres of Mexico.

In March, 1987, two new thick-bills were added to the flock, and several more were released in the middle of May. The radio-collars in the wild flock were beginning to fade; the new birds carry transmitters that not only have a

longer life of a year but also a larger range. The first new birds were "manually launched" into the flock as it fed high in the pines; the second set joined the flock in flight. The calls of the new birds excited the interest of the older members and they quickly settled into the trees to check them out. In both cases, the new releases integrated easily with the flock, which now numbers 17. The only problem with these additional releases is that the new birds lack the muscle mass and, consequently, the flying strength of the veterans and may fall behind on long foraging flights.

Dr. Snyder feels that several questions now have at least been partially answered. The mortality rate was definitely highest during the raptor migration in the fall, decreasing to nearly zero over the winter. However, birds of prey, like the goshawk and peregrine, breed in the mountains in the spring, so effects of that on survival of thick-bills remain to be seen. Now it is also clear the parrots have no trouble overwintering in the snowy Chiricahuas. Food supplies (cones of various pines) were abundant when the birds were released last fall; they are still utilizing last year's crop along with taking new spring cones. The flock showed no signs of breeding in early April, but several pairs were apparent at the end of May. Comparisons in the timing of breeding activities are made between the Mexican populations and the released group and the American birds are on schedule. The released group has, of course, the added advantages of plentiful food and nest sites and no environmental (man-made) stress.

Currently seven captive-reared thick-bills are being held for future release, mostly from the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust in the Channel Islands and at least one from an anonymous donor. They are learning to handle the pine cones, with wild-caughts as instructors. Dr. Snyder does not plan to release them until he has a group of 12 and only when they are fully competent with native foods. The release would be well away from the wild flock, who could still, conceivably, follow some old instinct and head south. Flock movements are probably traditional and learned from older birds. By controlling the food sources and learning experiences of the young, captive-reared flock, Dr. Snyder hopes to educate them into a more sedentary lifestyle in the Chiricahuas.

Support for a project such as this one greatly enhances the image of aviculture and bestows more credibility on those of us who love birds, both in our homes and in the wild. Please remember, this is our only remaining native parrot, plus it is a unique opportunity to support the reintroduction of an endangered species into its original habitat, now made safe. Donations of birds, anonymous or otherwise, are gladly accepted by either the Los Angeles or San Diego Zoo. Your *tax-deductible* donations can be sent to: Non-game Donations Fund/Thick-billed Parrot Project, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Attn: Terry Johnson, 2222 West Greenway Road, Phoenix, Arizona 85023-4399. ●

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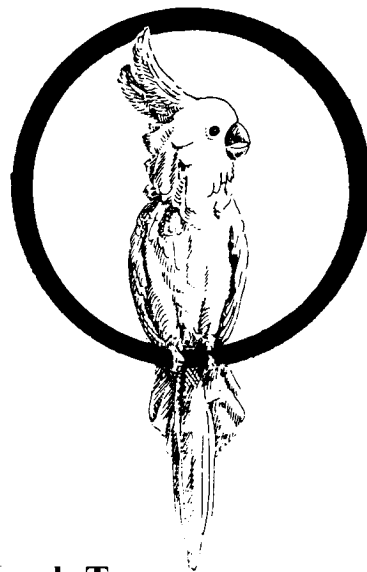
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