

by Dr. Janice Boyd, AFA Conservation and Research Committee

CONSERVATION OF THE NEW WORLD MACAWS

There are many small efforts underway to help preserve macaws throughout their homeland in the Americas. But the problem is that the programs are mostly small and poorly funded. If we could just train the macaws to fly around and return to a base where they tell us about the drug runners, illegal loggers, and guerrilla fighters they have seen, perhaps grants for macaw conservation and research would pick up! But these programs must make do with ecotourism funds, grants from non-governmental organizations and environmentally conscious businesses, and donations from caring people all over the world.

The longest running macaw research and conservation project is the Tambopata Macaw Project in Peru. Started in 1989 by Eduardo Nycander and others, its director is now Dr. Donald Brightsmith of Texas A&M University in the United States, who is expanding the studies into the Tambopata Research Project. Significant support comes from the ecotourism company Rainforest Expeditions that has built facilities and lodges used by researchers and tourists alike.

We then move east into Bolivia where BirdLife International's Bolivian partner Armonía is leading conservation programs for the red-fronted macaw and the blue-throated macaw. Major support comes from Loro Parque Fundación in Spain and various grants from NGOs. Ecotourism projects are being developed to bring in additional funds for the projects and for the people living in the areas to give them a stake in preserving the birds. The World Parrot Trust also works with the blue-throated macaw in the same region of Bolivia.

Heading further east into Brazil we come to the land of the blue macaws: the hyacinth, Lear's, and Spix's macaws. One major population of the stunningly beautiful hyacinth macaw lives in the seasonally flooded Pantanal of Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay. Neiva Guedes of Projeto Arara Azul has been studying and successfully conserving the hyacinth and also green wing macaws of the Pantanal for nearly 20 years. The population of the Brazilian endemic Lear's macaw was severely threatened by trapping and chick poaching for the pet trade, as well as by farmers shooting the birds as they raided cornfields. Trapping and poaching have been stopped and the decline in numbers of Lear's macaws has been reversed. A corn subsidy program that pays farmers in sacks of corn for any damage caused by the birds and a reforestation program for their major food the licuri palm are helping

secure their food sources. The Lear's was recently down-listed on the IUCN's Red List from Critically Endangered to Endangered. Unfortunately, the smaller and lovely blue Spix's macaw that lived in the dry cerrado of Brazil went extinct in the wild in 2000. A very restricted range and poaching of chicks for the pet trade led to an irreversible decline in numbers. But a Brazilian government coordinated captive breeding program is taking place at the Sao Paulo Zoo, Brazil; the Lymington Foundation, Brazil; Loro Parque Fundación, Spain; Al Wabra Wildlife Preservation (AWWP) Center, Qatar; and the Association for the Conservation of Threatened Parrots (ACTP) in Germany with hopes the species may be preserved and reintroduced back into the wild.

Reintroduction is a common theme for a number of other macaw conservation projects. Near scenic Iguazu Falls along the Brazilian-Argentinean border is the Foz do Iguazu Bird Park. A new program by the Bird Park plans to reintroduce the now extinct green wing and blue and gold macaws back into this region. Moving northward across the equator we come to the island of Trinidad. Blue and gold macaws formerly lived in the Nariva Swamp in Trinidad but were wiped out some 40 years ago by poaching. In 1993, Bernadette Plair, a native Trinidadian working for the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden, began a program to translocate blue and gold macaws from Guyana back into the swamp. The result was very successful and on-site studies of the effort have become part of the curriculum by the Zoo and Miami University in their field courses on community-based models of conservation and environmental education.

Westward into the narrow isthmus of Central America is Costa Rica where at least 5 different scarlet macaw reintroduction programs run by local zoos, ecotourism businesses, and private individuals can be found. Here also is the Great Green Macaw Project that has been studying the natural history and conservation requirements of the great green or Buffon's macaw for nearly 20 years. As a direct result of this long-term study, Costa Rica has recently established Maquenque National Park near the Nicaraguan border to help preserve the great green macaw and the spectacular Dipteryx tree on which it depends.

The news is not as good as one moves further north into the land of the cyanoptera subspecies of scarlet macaw. Probably less than 1000 of this large and beautiful subspecies of the more common South American scarlet macaw are left in the wild. The existing conservation programs in Nicaragua and Honduras are local and poorly funded. Macaws are extinct in El Salvador but

recently an ecotourism lodge has funded Salvadoran NGO Salvatura to investigate the feasibility of reintroducing the scarlet macaw back into the country. Guatemala still has a few hundred cyanoptera scarlets in the northern Petén region, but the population is under great stress and the Wildlife Conservation Society's Guatemala Program is working hard to stabilize the environmental conditions there against constant invasions of narco-traffickers and illegal colonists, not only for the conservation of the scarlet macaw but also for other wildlife such as jaguars, white-lipped peccaries, tapirs and Central American river turtles.

An unknown number of scarlet macaws continue to exist in Belize, where human population densities are still fairly low and are concentrated along the Caribbean coast. Unfortunately, a recent highly controversial series of dams built in the interior in the Macal and Raspaculo River valleys have flooded known nesting areas, and poachers and hunters entering illegally from Guatemala are negatively impacting the macaws. Belize still has the potential to become an important conservation region for the cyanoptera scarlets because a significant fraction of the remaining good macaw habitat in northern Central America is found in that country.

Mexico once had large populations of 22 different species of psittacines, including scarlet macaws and military macaws, but

decades of habitat destruction and legally sanctioned harvest and illegal poaching for the internal pet trade and for export to the United States and elsewhere have decimated its parrots. The corner may have been turned in 2007 with the publication by the Mexican branch of the NGO Defenders of Wildlife of the thoroughly researched report "The Illegal Parrot Trade in Mexico: A Comprehensive Assessment." In 2008 legal trapping and export of parrots from Mexico was banned and now the country is working to enforce the ban and to stop illegal trapping and trade. Recently the Mexican government convened a workshop to look into developing a recovery program for scarlet macaws in the country.

The struggle is on between two groups. On the one side are concerned people and officials who now realize conservation and protection efforts are needed to save macaws and other parrots and wildlife from extinction. On the other side are those who continue the long-established human exploitation of these charismatic species and their environment with no thought for tomorrow. Which side will win?

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