

# CONSERVING HYACINTH MACAWS IN BRAZIL

By Kashmir Csaky

Have you ever wondered what it might be like to travel to a distant world? Perhaps it would be an exotic place with beautiful animals, strange plants and a night sky full of glittering stars that outline unfamiliar constellations. You would experience an adventure that tested the very core of your identity. This is the voyage that I took. I did not step onto a space shuttle or look up at the sky and say, "Beam me up, Scotty!" I stepped onboard a 747 headed to Brazil.

For many years I had longed to go to Brazil and see hyacinth macaws in the wild. In May of 2005 I was able to realize this dream along with three other members of the Hyacinth Macaw Preservation Society, Ginny August, Chuck Datz and Laura Lopez. Like most people traveling to a foreign country, we were excited and apprehensive. We were worried about our safety, the food, the local attitudes towards Americans and we wondered if we would really see many birds.

What we discovered was a magnificent country rich in natural beauty and the beauty in the souls of the people who call Brazil home. We were treated like family everywhere we went. Although the accommodations in some places were humble, they were always clean and the food was some of the best I have enjoyed anywhere in the world.

In the northern state of Piaui we went to Bio Brasil's Hyacinth Valley and Greenwing Valley, which is in the 1.8 million acre Parnaiba Headwaters National Park. We entered Hyacinth Camp after nightfall traveling on a long and narrow dirt road riddled with deep ruts. As we stepped out of our Jeep we were a few yards from a tall, leggy, creature that looked very much like a large red fox. The maned wolf was nervous, although he showed no real fear of us; we would see him or two other wolves every day we spent in Piaui.

Each morning we awakened to the roar of a generator and the flickering of lights in our small huts. A hearty breakfast was served at 5:00 a.m. and then we made our way to the blinds, and the reason for our journey, to see hyacinth macaws. We crouched down in the concrete blind staring out small openings. In the soft grey morning light we readied our cameras, questioning if we would really be fortunate enough to see a hyacinth macaw. We saw puma tracks in the dry river bed at the entrance of the blind. Being the city folk that we are, we did not know if the tracks were fresh. As we contemplated about the puma and life around us, the first hyacinths began landing in the tops of nearby trees. Two birds, three birds, and three more birds, four more birds circled and landed in the tree tops edging their way closer and closer to

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us. Soon the first brave individual dropped to the ground and picked up a baseball-size piassava nut. Then a few more birds arrived, and before long the ground was covered with hyacinth macaws. There were many young birds that looked like they were barely fledged. They were playful, hopping, running, jumping, rolling over on the ground and wrestling with each other. Their landing skills were unrefined. Graceful in the air, their big shining blue wings spread out full and regal, yet they would collapse onto their faces with little dignity as they attempted to land. During this time we were nearly hyperventilating with excitement as we attempted to capture as much as possible onto film. We would easily see 50 hyacinths in a single day.

In addition to the hyacinths we saw blue and golds, greenwings, raptors, cuckoos, flycatchers, woodpeckers, rheas and more species than I can name. I was particularly impressed with the potoo, a large bird that strongly resembled a dead branch and the beautiful blond crested woodpecker. In Greenwing valley, brown capuchin monkeys entertained us as they opened nuts. There were sandstone slabs on the ground that had smooth depressions in them. The monkeys placed piassava nuts on the large slabs. They would locate appropriate rocks that they heaved over their heads and slammed down onto the nuts, cracking them open. It would take three or four poundings before a nut would crack. When we first arrived at Greenwing Valley we watched as the monkeys cautiously crept into the area. They were aware of our presence, yet they were not afraid of us. A young monkey came into the blind and followed me around all morning. He would sweetly coo at me hoping that I would offer him a morsel of food.

We left Piaui feeling like we had left family behind. As we walked to our airplane we all felt a bit lonely and actually thought we were missing someone. The hospitality, warmth and friendship will never be forgotten.

Next we traveled to the Pantanal, the largest wetland in the world. It is also known as the Serengeti of South America, because of the diversity and abundance of wildlife found there. We were in Brazil during the

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*Hyacinth Macaws eating piassava nuts in Piaui.  
Photograph by Kashmir Csaky*

dry season and their winter, so the weather was warm and comfortable. We stayed at the Caiman Lodge which is near Miranda and about a four-hour drive from Campo Grande. The Lodge was very comfortable and beautifully decorated. Hot showers were available at any time. There was a swimming pool and two pool cabanas; it was very luxurious compared to Piaui.


In the Pantanal we were greeted by members of The Blue Macaw Project. Our interpreter was a lovely

young Brazilian woman named Andrea. Her English was flawless and her calm demeanor was surprising, considering all the questions we shot at her. The head of the team during our visit was a stocky muscular man named Cesar. Cesar drove us to the nest sites, told us the names of all the birds we saw and explained the complex behaviors of the many different animals. His knowledge was impressive. He seemed to be a Jack-of-all-trades, making nest-boxes, doing repairs and running the office. Although he did not speak English, he had a wonderful sense of humor and frequently made us laugh. He explained that hyacinths often destroyed the trees they hollowed out for their nests. In order to save the trees, the

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project members attach a nest-box to the tree where hyacinths try to carve out a nest. This would prevent or limit further mutilation of the tree.

While we were there they repaired and installed several nests. The women on the team did as much work as the men. Gracie, a lean young woman with thick wavy brown hair and refreshingly clean beauty, would climb the trees with the speed and agility of a jaguar. She checked the nests and made needed repairs with the same efficiency as any of the men. Gracie devised a method for repairing a badly damaged nest using screen, which proved very successful.

In the Pantanal we saw an array of different species at any given time; however, we would see individuals or small groups of birds and mammals. The hyacinths were normally in groups of two or three, although we saw groups as large as 12 birds. The hyacinths prefer to nest in manduvi trees. This cathedral-like tree has shallow roots, smooth light-colored bark and very few leaves most of the year. It also produces a mango size fruit that greenwing macaws love to feast on. During one of our trips into the forest we encountered

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Part of the Blue Macaw field team on May 19, 2005 after replacing a Hyacinth nest-box in the Pantanal. From left to right Andréa C. Macieira, Laura Lopez, César Corrêa, Charles Datz, Ginny August, Kashmir Csaky. Photograph by Jolison Medeiros Barros

10 hyacinths trying to chase two greenwings away from a manduvi tree and losing the battle. Our presence interrupted their feud for a short period of time and the greenwings flew away. We went deeper in the forest and soon we could tell by the excited vocalizations that the greenwings had come back to resume the turf battle. On our return, the greenwings did not spook so easily. All the macaws showed a great deal of curiosity as they quietly observed us. Once we were out of the forest we saw two more hyacinths fly into the woods to join in the fight, obviously recruited by their friends, and soon the greenwings departed; outnumbered six to one, they lost the battle.

We also saw various raptors, gigantic jabirus, herons, spoonbills, parrotlets, nanday conures, blue-fronted Amazons, chaco chachalacas, woodpeckers, rheas, orioles, crab-eating foxes, giant anteaters, forest tortoises, armadillos, wild pigs and of course caiman. The caiman were everywhere there was water; not just one or two, but thirty or forty. They would crawl very close to you. While walking near ponds, you could easily have several caiman within a few feet of you. They were terrifying to be near. A primordial creature with ice and fire in their hungry eyes, they seemed like ancient eating machines covered in alligator skins. Yet they were only interested in us because they thought we would feed them. They were so accustomed to eating leftovers from the lodge that we even saw a capybara mixed in with them one night that easily escaped their steel trap jaws lined in large ivory teeth.

The Caiman Lodge offered many activities including horseback riding, canoeing, bicycling, river boat rides, parties and more, certainly enough to entertain and please all the tourists. Yet, at dinner the other guests seemed almost envious of our involvement with the Blue Macaw Project. Perhaps it was due to our exuberance. I know that several



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of the guests became more interested in hyacinths and the Blue Macaw Project's activities.

Our last day in Brazil was spent at the Lymington Foundation in Sao Paulo. It was the only place we visited that was actually rain forest. The edges of the roads were thickly lined with colorful impatiens. Their pink, orange and lavender blossom smiled cheerfully on a rain soaked day. The land was lush and green; the dense stands of forest were filled with orchids and sprinkled with bamboo. Even though we were in a very big city there were red-breasted toucans playing in the tree tops. The Lymington Foundation, which is on a 100 acre farm, is run by two Americans, Bill and Linda Wittkoff. The Wittkoffs keep and breed many species of birds at the Lymington Foundation with the blessing of IBAMA. Some of the birds were rescued from poachers, while others have come from the zoos in Brazil. They have had excellent results with blue and gold macaws, golden conures and hyacinth macaws. Had we arrived two weeks later we would have had the privilege of seeing the first of the Lear's macaws entrusted to the foundation. At this time the Wittkoffs have also been entrusted with the care of a couple of Spix's macaws. The birds are flourishing under their care and dedication. However, Linda is now 67 and Bill is 71. They are currently struggling to acquire the funds needed to train their successors.



*Yellow-headed Caracara in the Pantanal. Photograph by Kashmir Csaky*

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*Brown Capuchin monkey trying to crack open a piassava nut at Greenwing Valley in Piaui. Photograph by Kashmir Csaky*

Everywhere we went, we met wonderful people doing their best to preserve birds in one way or another. They all needed money and equipment to continue doing their work. We made private donations hoping that every little bit would help. Some of it was in the form of cash, yet we also gave gifts of binoculars, walkie-talkies, books, colored pencils and toys for the children. However, the greatest support we were able to give to these causes was in going to Brazil

and seeing the birds ourselves. This was especially true in Piaui where the people depend on tourism for their livelihood. So, if you would like to support the continuation of parrot life in the wild, why not take a trip to Brazil? It is something you'll never forget. ■