

The Socorro Dove

Its Destiny

by Jan Parrott-Holden
Vancouver, Washington

Extinction. We read about it. We hear about it. But we seldom think about it. That sometimes gradual, sometimes rapid demise of a species. To bird people it is mystifying, intriguing, sad.

It arouses anger, pity, even greed. Yet sometimes it leads to serious, intelligent efforts for reclamation. The Socorro dove (*Zenaida macroura graysoni*), it appears, may just be one such story.

Socorro Dove Reintroduction Project

by John Pire
Texas City, Texas

The time has come for everyone, whether breeder or hobbyist, to show their support for the re-introduction of the Socorro dove (*Zenaida macroura graysoni*), [Grayson's dove], back into its native habitat on Socorro Island, one of a cluster of islands 240 miles off the southern tip of Baja California.

This endeavor, to re-introduce this species, has been in the works for a long, long time. The persons responsible, living or deceased, have spent countless hours, weeks, months, years and dollars to reach the current plateau. These people have discussed, obtained data, drawn up proposals, listened to others and their ideas and have stated conclusions more than once during their work on this project. All of these persons need to be commended for their efforts on every aspect of this worthwhile project.

The best way, as breeders or hobbyists, to show our support is to be of assistance in any way possible which will help towards the ultimate goal: *Actual release of the Socorro dove in its native habitat.*

I am urging all International Dove Society (IDS) members and non-members to show your support of this endeavor. IDS has asked the governing body of this project if it would be possible to erect a plaque at the release site listing all persons contributing to this project. The IDS feels that this is a much needed venture to *secure* this species, in its native habitat, for our future generations. To obtain the ultimate goal all of

us need to help — without our help this project cannot reach its destination.

To regress for a minute, in the July 1987 IDS newsletter an article concerning this project states: "It will take a few more years before the birds can be set up in the release aviary on Socorro Island. In the meantime there is a great need to obtain funding for every aspect of this endeavor. Funding is required to cover the costs of building the release aviary, transportation, maintenance, feed, permits and countless unforeseen costs which come up. Then comes the task of acquiring the Socorro doves for addition to the release population."

This task, of securing the release population, is where we can show our best support. IDS would like to ask all members and non-members having the Socorro dove in their collection to donate one male and one female offspring from your breeding Socorro doves to this project.

If you do not have this species in your collection, you can still become a part of this endeavor. You can make a cash donation towards the funding of this project. Upon notification by the governing body, the location receiving contributions will be printed in the upcoming IDS newsletter and the AFA *Watchbird*.

The Socorro Dove Donation Form is a vital link in this project. Please request it and any other information concerning this project from: International Dove Society, c/o John Pire, 3013 Tarpey Avenue, Texas City, TX 77590. ●

The story has its beginning on Socorro Island. Now if the name doesn't sound familiar you aren't necessarily ill-informed. Few high school geography courses dwell on the Revilagigedos, a cluster of islands situated 240 miles south of the tip of Baja California. Socorro, the largest in the grouping, was once the homeland of a unique dove variety, whose discovery has been attributed to Edward Grayson, son of Andrew Jackson Grayson, naturalist and artist. In fact, the bird is also known as the Grayson dove but in this article I'll continue to use the island name.

This monumental find of an endemic species (one that is known to exist in no other habitat) occurred in the spring of 1867. According to the writings of Dr. Luis Baptista of the California Academy of Sciences, the Graysons, while shipwrecked on the island, made impressive collections and records of Socorro's flora and fauna. Among these collections were a great many discoveries as yet unheard of to science. And most significantly to our story was their first encounter with the Socorro dove.

Grayson, a meticulous observer, kept fastidious notes on these birds. He also made detailed studies of avian numbers, behaviors and distribution. It was a grand beginning, which not many years later led to further explorations of the island.

Dr. Baptista mentions that scientists from the California Academy of Sciences made at least three pilgrimages to Socorro between 1903 and 1932. Each time a party visited the island the Socorro dove was noted. Though distribution seemed to vary with the seasons, it appeared that the doves were especially drawn to high elevations where broadleaf tropical plants, including wild figs and wild currants grew in abundance.

What did the Socorro dove look like? And how did these men know for a fact that this was a distinct species and not merely a subspecies of its closest living relative, the mourning dove?

First notes taken by early island expeditions pointed out the beautiful coloration of this bird. Unlike the mourning dove which tends toward pale gray-



The female tends the nest while the male looks on.



A female Socorro dove on her nest in an avicultural environment. There are none left in their natural environment to nest. Socorro doves are rather easy to keep in captivity responding well to the normal care afforded pigeons and other seed-eating wild doves.

brown hues, the Socorro dove's coloration was a rich, ruddy brown. In addition, according to observations, the latter was at least forty percent heavier than its relative. Its legs were longer, presumably to enable it easier passage through scrub vegetation. Later findings

evolved from a trip taken by Dr. Baptista's colleagues, Dr. Joseph Jehl of Hubbs/Sea World in San Diego and Dr. Kenneth Parkes of Carnegie Museum.

But the interesting thing about this particular venture to Socorro is that there were no longer any of the doves to

be found in their native habitat. They had vanished somewhere between the years 1958 and 1978. The reason? Actually there are two main reasons. The first being that these birds were exceedingly tame, actually unfearful of predators. Grayson's own diaries reveal that the birds were seemingly "unconscious of danger." Not perhaps altogether surprising, since Socorro was uninhabited until 1957 when the Mexican government erected a military outpost and a weather station.

With the arrival of man came the arrival of his animals. Among these were cats. And herein lay the downfall of the Socorro dove. Those who have diligently studied, explored and followed the lifeline of the species, have concluded without a doubt that feral cats obliterated the wild population of the Socorro dove.

Had it not been for several concerned aviculturists, who saw the inevitable and set up captive breeding programs, there would be nothing left of this beautiful avian specimen but the pictures painted by artist and discoverer, Andrew Jackson Grayson. How many of the doves are alive today? It has been estimated that the number is in the hundreds, perhaps as many as 1,000. I must confess that I do not know.

According to Dr. Baptista, chairman and associate curator of ornithology and mammalogy at the academy, there is great hope that one day the Socorro dove will live again on the island of its origin. A program is already in the works to eliminate the feral cats and funds are being sought to maintain a breeding program at the California Academy of Sciences. It is Baptista's goal to one day be able to return young birds to their ancestral land where they will be provisioned for until they can fully fend for themselves.

Will it happen? Since captive-release programs have met with success in the past, and since the Socorro dove has been termed a relatively easy breeder, the chances look good. And, when it means the difference between survival and extinction, chances are always worth the risk.

If you are interested in additional information or are desirous of donating to the academy's captive breeding program, write: Dr. Luis Baptista, California Academy of Sciences, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, CA 94118.

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