

Little-known Parrots of the Colombian Andes

by Rosemary Low

When I was asked by Loro Parque Fundación (LPF) to help publicise their conservation work, I was enthusiastic. I had followed for several years, and with increasing interest, the reports of the projects concerning the endangered parrots of the Colombian Andes. Two of the species there were of particular interest to me. One made headlines around the world when it was re-discovered in 2002 after not being reliably reported since 1911. This was Fuertes' Parrot (*Hapalopsittaca fuertesi*). The other was the Yellow-eared Parrot (formerly called conure) (*Ognorhynchus icterotis*).

At the fourth International Parrot Convention held at Loro Parque, Tenerife, in 1998, film was shown of the last few survivors of this species, reduced to about 60 birds and declining so fast that it seemed inevitable that this would be the next parrot species to become extinct. But that is another story...

I wanted to focus on the Colombian projects as they have achieved so much in such a short time. To do this I contacted Paul Salaman, an English ornithologist now based in Bogotá, who oversees the LPF parrot projects in Colombia. "When he was next in England, could we meet?" I asked. Back came an e-mail: "I am unlikely to be in the UK in the foreseeable future. Why don't you come out to Colombia and I will take you to some of the project sites?"

The prospect was so exciting that I lost no time in booking a flight for eight weeks ahead. I had been to Colombia once before, about 25 years previously. I knew of course that Colombia has one of the highest, if not the highest, number of bird species within its shores of any country worldwide — currently believed to be 1,875 (Compare that with just over 300 species found in the UK!). This high number is attributable to its unique location and to its topography. It is the only country in South America that has an Atlantic and a Pacific coast and it is also unique in stretching from Central America to the Amazon River. Three mountain ranges of the magnificent Andes occupy the western part of the country; in the east the habitats vary from lush rainforest and flat grasslands to sandy desert.

Given this variety of habitats, it is not surprising that Colombia has the second or third highest number of parrot species worldwide, a total of 52. This is

The Yellow-fronted Amazon who craved "cacao"!
by Rosemary Low



exceeded by Brazil with about 72 species and possibly by Australia with 52 or 53 species. (These numbers could be revised at any time as DNA research often indicates that a particular species is, in fact, two species). There is a sad statistic connected with Colombia's 50 plus parrot species: at least 12 are in imminent danger of extinction.

Eighty per cent of the human population of Colombia (approximately 34 million people) live in towns and pueblos in the Andes because much of the rest of the country is uninhabitable. In extent, Colombia covers 440,00 square miles (about four and a half times bigger than the UK with a little over half the human population). After more than a century of cutting down forest, even on gravity-defying slopes where coffee and other crops are cultivated, most of the natural vegetation of the Andes has been destroyed. No wonder, then, that the endangered parrots are mountain species, living either in the Andes or in the Santa Marta mountains to the north. A poster depicts the parrots in danger of extinction and I was surprised to see that it included the Hyacinthine Macaw. Reputedly this macaw lives in Colombia just over the border from Brazil.

I was due to arrive in Bogotá, Colombia's capital, at 8pm on January 27 but as the result of two delays at Miami airport it was nearer 3am on the following morning when I landed. Paul was there, waiting. After two and a half hours sleep I was up and ready for the visit to the first site to see one of Colombia's four parrots that are found in no other country (endemic). It is interesting that two of these species are Pyrrhura conures. The Santa Marta Conure (*P. viridicata*) is confined to the mountains of that name while the Flame-winged or Brown-breasted Conure (*Pyrrhura calliptera*) has survived in a few fragmented populations in the Eastern Andes between 1,700m (5,600ft) and

3,400m (11,000ft). Both these species are unknown in captivity and were little known in the wild.

The situation has changed recently for calliptera as it is being studied by Ana Maria Gonzales for her PhD thesis. She was to be my guide that morning as we drove 70km north of Bogotá into the department of Cundinamarca. This conure occurs at altitudes between 2,300m (7,500ft) and 3,700 (12,000ft). At 2,400m we left the car and climbed a hillside covered in sphagnum moss and familiar-looking wild plants such as the Yellow-flowering Hawkweed (*Hieracium*), until we came to a small patch of forest.

Without Ana Maria's knowledge, one could search for months with little hope of finding this conure. We had only to wait a few minutes to hear the calls of a *Pyrrhura*. (This was easy-birding — a gentle introduction to be followed by much harder work where the other species were concerned!) It was not long before several Flame-winged Conures flew towards us and landed in a tree about 18m (60ft) away. Gradually, we crept nearer. Four-on-a-branch, they sat together preening in the sun, the yellow patches in their wings shining like little beacons when they stretched.

They were beautiful with their reddish ear-coverts and whitish nape feathers. They differ from other members of the genus in having the scalloped feathers of the upper breast soft brown and the edge of the wing yellow. The scalloped feathers of the nape are much more prominent than the few artists' illustrations would have one believe. At last we moved too close and they took off. Then I discovered, to my surprise, that there were ten! We waited on a rock and they briefly re-appeared in the distance but we knew the show was over. Perhaps this conure had not been photographed until the Foundation's ornithologists started to study it. Ana Maria has studied the feeding and nesting habits of the Flame-winged Conure and showed me photographs of chicks in the nest. Nests were inspected once or twice every month and extensive notes were made

regarding the individuals attending them. Mating was observed most often between August and October.



First-day cover postage stamps celebrating the rediscovery of Fuertes' Parrot. by Rosemary Low

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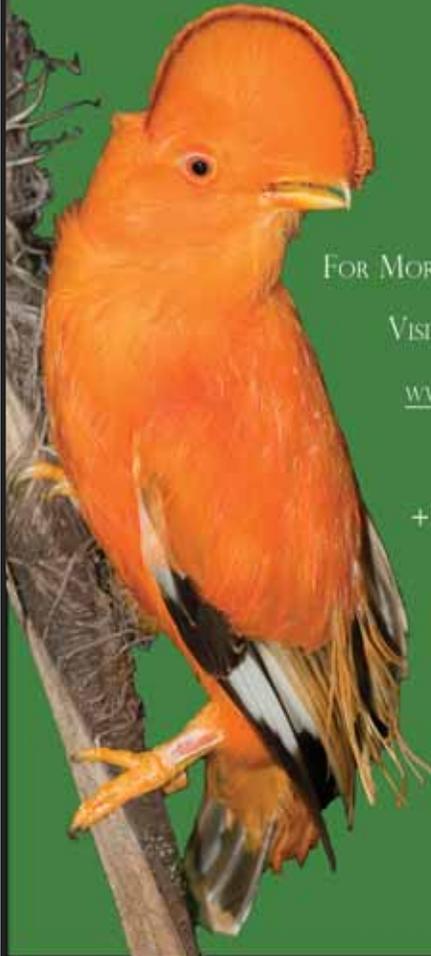
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Observations were also made at roosting sites. These are often holes in trees made by woodpeckers with a maximum depth of 1.7m (nearly 6ft). The entrances are well disguised by bromeliads. Between three and 15 individuals use a roost site. The conures leave their roosts between 5.25am and 5.50am, as soon as the first light enters the hole. In addition to studying their biology, an education programme was carried out, in the field and at a local college, to teach people about the threats facing this endemic parakeet.

Ana Maria showed me a tree covered in small reddish fruits on which they fed. I noticed flowering clover and asked her if they ever fed on the ground? Yes, sometimes, they did feed on the clover but when feeding there they always posted a sentinel to sound the alarm. The trees at this altitude are lavishly bedecked with bromeliads – and it is here that they drink. Even in the dry season the early morning mist brings enough moisture to secure their drinking supply.

This conure is being studied at three sites – the one I visited where 50 is the maximum number observed and at two sites in the Chingaza National Park where the maximum numbers seen are 38 and 33.

In the past little was known about the breeding biology of *Pyrrhura* conures. Now it is known that in some species, including calliptera, it is a group of between three and nine birds that attends the nest. The helpers are likely to be the young from the previous nest. This work is part of Loro Parque Fundación's Project *Pyrrhura*, to which it allocated more than 15,000 Euros (about \$18,500) in 2005.

Next morning I left Bogotá (situated at 2,630m – 8,600ft) with Paul Salaman at 6.30am on the first leg of an eight-day trip that was to take us to remote Andean locations where some of South America's rarest parrots live. First we spent an hour crawling through the traffic leaving the city, dominated by the brightly painted buses belching acrid grey smoke. As we drove to Ibagué Paul told me how, from the initial Loro Parque project that commenced in 1999 to save the Yellow-eared Parrot, the Colombian bird conservation organisation ProAves formed a partnership with LPF. ProAves is young in years – and so are its researchers. In the next few days I was to meet some of the enthusiastic young people who are working on various projects and I was deeply impressed by their dedication and knowledge. They spend countless hours in the field in difficult conditions. I soon gained the impression

One of the two Bronze-wing chicks hatched in the nest-box.
by Rosemary Low



that Colombian bird conservation will make more gigantic strides in the next few years.

Fundación ProAves has offices in various locations, including Ibagué. We stopped there to pick up Alonso Quevedo and his colleague. Roberto's job is to document altitudes and habitat use in the project areas, so that detailed maps can be produced of the habitats of the various endangered parrots. These maps will be crucial to their survival. This work is part of LPF's project "Parrots of the Central Cordillera" which, in conjunction with Fundación ProAves, focuses on the most endangered parrots of the Central Andes. LPF allocated 38,000 Euros for this project in 2005, more than doubling its 2004 allocation of 18,000 Euros. These sums go a long way in Colombia where the cost of living in the Andes is cheap by our standards.

While at the office I heard the familiar calls of a Yellow-fronted Amazon (*Amazona o. ochrocephala*) – and I went to investigate. I found a wing-clipped Amazon in the garden on a long perch under shade, with a perch at right angles without cover where she could rain-bathe during a shower. I learned that she was a confiscated bird who was being cared for by ProAves staff. I spent some time talking to her. She soon became chatty, telling me over and over again "Quiero cacao! Quiero-cacao!" her voice rising crazily on the second "a" of the second cacao. Fortunately, there was no sign that anyone was answering her plea of "I want chocolate!"

We drove for several hours through the mountains to reach Roncevalles in the Central Andes, the first site where we observed the Yellow-eared Parrot. To see their chicks in the nest was something I will

never forget. On the following morning we set off on horseback at 6am, riding through the small town and up into the mountains. I passed a flock of Bronze-winged Parrots (*Pionus chalcopterus*) who were out early to raid a crop of peas. Needless to say, they are not popular birds especially when they descend on a field of maize, and some are shot. As they took off, as dark as rooks before the sun was up, I realised there were between 30 and 40 of them.

It took 1½ hours to reach the high oak forest where a little-known species lives. About three minutes before we reached the top, a flock of 26 small parrots flew above us. Even although there was no sun, they made an unforgettable kaleidoscope of soft and varying colours such as I have never seen before in a flying parrot. This was the Rusty-faced Parrot (*Hapalopsittaca amazonina velezi*).

The genus *Hapalopsittaca* consists of four species of small (23cm) short-tailed parrots, confined to the Andes. It is one of the least known genera of parrots in the world; one is critically endangered (Fuertes') and two, including the Rusty-faced, are endangered, due to deforestation. Because of the importance of the two endemic members of the genus, *fuertesii* and *velezi*, Adriana Mayorquin was appointed Co-ordinator *Hapalopsittaca* ProAves. Probably no photographs of live birds existed until Project *Hapalopsittaca* commenced in 2001.

The sub-species here, *velezi*, was described for the first time as recently as 1989. It would be easy to overlook this quiet little parrot. It occurs only on the western flank of the Central Cordillera, between 2,200m (7,200ft) and 3,000m (9,800ft) in the departments of Caldas and Tolima. It differs from the other two sub-species (the nominate race in the eastern Andes and *theresae* in Venezuela) by its golden-olive hindneck and nape. With its scarlet shoulder patch it is indeed a pretty bird, locally called Loro multicolor.

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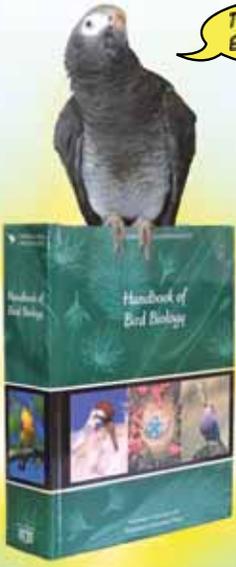
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Critically Endangered:

A species that faces a 50% risk of extinction in the immediate future (in ten years or three generations).

Endangered:

A species that faces a 20% risk of extinction in 20 years or five generations.

These species are characterised by rapid population reduction and small and fragmented populations and/or a small range.

The area where they live in a remnant of forest, surrounded by cattle pasture, is cold and cloudy; when the clouds parted for a while we could see Roncesvalles, a small patch of human habitation far below us. The oak trees are covered in lichens and mosses and fallen branches disappear under their cover of these complex fungi and algae growing so prettily in symbiosis. The oak branches are heavy with epiphytes, the seeds of which are eaten by the parrots.

Nest-boxes have been erected here but not used, so it appears that there is no shortage of natural nesting sites. Acorn Woodpeckers were quite conspicuous and perhaps made some holes suitable for parrot nesting cavities. However, felling of trees for fencing in the nesting area, where we were, occurred last year, causing about three pairs to desert their nests

In conversation with Adriana I realised how lucky I am to know so many different species of parrots. She had read about them all, from Kakapo to Pygmy Parrot, but had no opportunity to see any exotic forms. When I told the team how many species there were at Loro Parque, they were incredulous.

The following morning we drove back to Ibagué on dirt tracks, crossing little fords and somehow missing the dogs and chickens that wander the streets. A white duck was sitting in a puddle in the middle of the road! We stopped in the town while Paul's vehicle was repaired. By chance, in the back of a tiny café, I came across a Short-tailed Parrot (*Graydidascalus brachyurus*) – a long way from its Amazonian habitat. This species, which looks like a miniature Amazon parrot, is rarely kept as a pet but the café owner told me that it was 15 years old. Many of its green feathers were striped with black, almost certainly a sign of a dietary deficiency. I looked into its food dish; it contained only the soft white maize that is so different from the boiled yellow maize that we know. It was quite tame and very vocal.

The vehicle again roadworthy, we set off for Genova, a small town in the Central Andes, in the department of Caldas. Here we stayed at the home of Claudia, the



A nest-box in the habitat of the Rusty-faced Parrot (*H.a.velezi*) has yet to be used.
by Rosemary Low

education officer of the regional ProAves group. That evening the local children put on a wonderful show, using song and dance to tell the story of one of the most endangered parrots in the world. It lives close to their town: Fuertes' Parrot, formerly known as the Indigo-winged Parrot.

The rich soils and lush vegetation of this region long ago attracted colonists who used its natural resources and denuded its steep hillsides. What little forest remained was plundered for firewood and cleared for crops and pasture. It seemed impossible that Fuertes' Parrot could have survived here. In April 2002 Paul Salaman had said, "Our hope for this parrot is dwindling and we're all gravely concerned that it has been lost forever". International conservation and ornithological authorities had listed the species as Critically Endangered. This situation had long alarmed the conservation community but the harsh environment and difficult access had been a deterrent to searching for the parrot's possible range.

Then Jorge Velasquez and his determined team from Fundación ProAves decided on some real action. In 2000, Jorge, then 20, was a student at Colombia's National University in Bogotá. With the assistance of Paul Salaman, they made a determined effort to rediscover Fuertes' Parrot. A series of searches were launched throughout the Colombian Andes for this and for the Rusty-faced Parrot (*velezi*).

Remarkably, Jorge (who I met several days later) rapidly located several new populations of the Rusty-

eyes. The date was July 28 2002; it would forever live in their memories.

Jorge and Alonso spent several days studying the flock, taking detailed notes, sound-recordings, photos and video to document the discovery and to provide vital information on the species' ecology. It seemed incredible that the 14 birds, which included three juveniles, had survived in just a few dozen hectares of forest.

In 2003 the ProAves/LPF team was elated to discover a nest containing young with the entrance 8ft (2.4m) from the ground. At an altitude of 10,500ft (3,200m), it was in a cut tree, in an area where felling had occurred. The team discovered that the incubation period is 25-27 days and that young fledge after about 53 days. They spend one week in the nest area before going off with their parents. Now three tiny populations of Fuertes' Parrot are known with a total population perhaps in the region of one hundred birds. They occur only high in the Central Cordillera, between 8,500ft (2,600m) and 12,500ft (3,800m), where most of its habitat has been destroyed.

The team identified an area of 700 hectares of good habitat for this parrot and, furthermore, ensured its protection under written contract with the local mayor. Now 1,500 hectares of montane forest are being managed as the El Mirador Nature Reserve specifically for Fuertes' Parrot and for the Golden-plumed Parakeet (*Leptosittaca branickii*).

By forming a "friends of the parrots group" and giving talks to the local community, the team has taken important steps to secure the parrot's future. Protection of Fuertes's Parrot will only be successful with the full support and commitment of the local people who unwittingly had been the parrot's greatest threat. The critical requirements of the species appear to be tall mature trees, where they feed on berries amongst the epiphyte-laden canopy branches, and search for nesting cavities. The latter were almost non-existent.

The ProAves team therefore erected more than 200 natural wood nest-boxes, covered with bark. In April 2004 came wonderful news! Five boxes were occupied by breeding pairs, which were then incubating eggs. The parrots had been desperate for somewhere to nest – so desperate that one box was occupied 15 minutes after it was erected!



Bronze-winged Parrot.
by Rosemary Low

faced Parrot and collected vital ecological data useful for its conservation, but Fuertes' Parrot eluded him. Was it already extinct? One day Jorge and Alonso Quevedo ascended over 10,000ft (3,000m) through a mosaic of pastures to a small patch of cloud forest, shrouded in a dense mist that swirled around the forest canopy. Suddenly, a sharp cry pierced the gloom and a parrot's calls were immediately joined by a chorus of others. "The ghostly silhouettes of fourteen parrots tumbled from the cloud, drawing nearer, as if released from the heavens" said Jorge. They spiralled downwards in tight vortexes to alight in nearby trees. In those few seconds Jorge and Alonso though they were witnessing a miracle, as one of the world's rarest birds – Fuertes' Parrot – materialised before their

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Male Fuertes' Parrot flies in to feed the female.
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I was very moved when I first read the story of the rediscovery, two years ago. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that one day I would be standing in cloud forest with Alonso Quevedo watching a breeding pair of Fuertes' Parrots!

We had left Genova in the dark, at 5.40am. For an hour we drove up a narrow, stony track, where clouds hung low over the mountains. At the start of the El Mirador Reserve, protected as the result of negotiations between ProAves and the local authority, the kindly Don Gustavo met us with five horses. He is the forest ranger employed by ProAves/LPF. For two hours we rode up a steep track, so muddy, slippery and stony that the horses were stumbling. My heart was in my mouth! Finally we reached the house (derelict only a year ago) that the group has rented and renovated. We were welcomed by Don Gustavo's wife with hot soup and bread and cheese. The house was of the usual rough construction of wood with a brick wood-burning oven on which the cooking was carried out. After an hour or more, the horses were saddled again, this time for a short ride over even steeper ground.

We ascended into the cold páramo zone and dismounted not far from a nest-box. A female Fuertes' Parrot looked out, totally unconcerned. She was incubating – and after a minute or so she went back down to her eggs. This species must have had so little contact with man in its remote habitat that it has no fear.

The team based at the house document every sighting; they are in the field for 20 days each month. They knew that the male usually flew in to feed the female four or five times daily, and usually at about 11am.

Half an hour later the male was heard and we hid in the undergrowth. He flitted in soundlessly, through the epiphyte-laden and lichen-encrusted trees. Not as brightly coloured as the Rusty-faced Parrot, he is mainly green with the crown blue, forehead and cheeks dull yellow and a red patch on the shoulder. This patch is duller and smaller in the female.

It was unreal, almost dream-like: we emerged and the male ignored us. We departed the scene quickly, however, when he was still present. I could hardly believe what I had just seen! Here was one of the most critically endangered parrots in the world, glimpsed by only a privileged few, behaving with as little concern as a pair of lovebirds in an aviary! Another nest of this trusting little parrot is located not far away and, on a nearby finca, there are five more active nests! These are located quite near to the house.

During the afternoon we returned to the same patch of forest to see another parrot species at an artificial nest. The contrast could not have been greater. The Bronze-winged Pionus is, understandably, so nervous of man that it leaves its nest at the first hint of his presence. We reached a tree where a wooden nest-box hung from a bare branch; the female left the nest when she heard us approaching. One of the team ran up the tree as though it were a flight of stairs and brought down a chick for us to see. About ten days old (my estimation), it was very noisy and had a crop full of seeds. A younger chick was also in the nest.

The Bronze-wings had apparently been as desperate for nest sites as were the Fuertes' Parrots. I was shown a former nest in a thick, decayed stump broken off at about 1.8m (6ft) high. It had proved to be unsuitable. The two chicks hatched there in the previous year had died at the age of about three weeks, I was told, due to flea infestation. A wooden door had been made at nest level so that inspection could take place but the cavity was not used again.

Two other parrots that occur in the reserve are included in the project: the Golden-plumed Parakeet and the little Rufous-fronted Parakeet (*Bolborhynchus ferrugineifrons*) (closely related to the Lineolated Parakeet). Neither was present at the time of my visit.

I climbed back down to the house and sat on a rock contemplating the extraordinary sightings of the morning. The sun emerged briefly then the clouds swirled in, obliterating the steep, rocky, tussocky mountainside, and the patches of oak trees with plumes of cloud flowing through them. I sat talking to one of the ProAves team, Field Co-ordinator Nicolai Doran, about the Mercenary Amazon (*Amazona mercenaria*). I had glimpsed it briefly,

Rosemary Low with Jorge Velasquez (kneeling, centre) and other Pro-Aves personnel in Genova.
by Rosemary Low



high above, on a number of occasions. He had never seen this Amazon perched. Nicolai showed me the skin of a Fuertes' Parrot that was illegally taken from the nest. This caused an uproar and the police were involved. Sadly, the parrot died before it could be rehabilitated. Taking of young is a rare event, thanks to the educational work carried out by ProAves.

The local people now celebrate the existence of their local parrot. On National Parrot Day they parade in the street with banners, posters and children in parrot costumes. One banner bearing a colourful depiction of Fuertes' Parrot read: "Prohibido meterlo en una jaula". (It is prohibited to cage it.)

A lot more remains to be learned about Fuertes' Parrot. But now that LPF/ProAves are working with the local people, as well as with governmental bodies, locally and nationally, the vital steps towards securing this little parrot's future have been taken.

Environmental awareness is a very important part of the work. Various posters have been produced and widely distributed, also four excellent short professionally-made videos showing five endangered parrots and their habitats. In 2003, fifty-five Colombian students were trained in bird conservation and this training work is ongoing. These actions have changed the attitude of the local people who now realise how unique and special are the parrots of their region.

The work of the dedicated people I met paid rapid dividends. Only one month after I left, 21 pairs of Fuertes' Parrots had occupied nest-boxes!

If you would like to support this important conservation project, please contact Loro Parque Fundación, Puerto de la Cruz 38400, Tenerife, Spain
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