

Conserving Slender-billed Conures in Chile

A report by Tony Pittman

I HAD KEPT SLENDER-BILLED CONURES (*Enicognathus leptorhynchus*) for 16 years before I made my first trip to Chile at the end of 2003. This small species of parakeet originates in southern Chile where it lives in thickly wooded rolling country studded with lakes between the Pacific Ocean and the Andes. It is unfortunately rapidly disappearing from aviculture although it is a delightful engaging and playful species of parrot. There appeared to be little information on its status in the wild other than a report published in 1967 (A.W. Johnson) that it had been much reduced by an outbreak of Newcastle's disease as well as "excessive shooting" and loss of habitat because of logging activities.

Called "choroy" locally, the Slender-billed Conure is 40 cm–43 cm (16"–17") long. It is dull green with the tips darker giving it a scaly look, dark red forehead band and the characteristic long slender upper mandible. It lives year-round in large noisy gregarious flocks—which incidentally allows colony keeping and breeding in aviculture—and according to Johnson fed mainly on the tiny seeds

of wild and cultivated plants, including weeds (yuyo).

It is partial to the seeds contained in the cones of the Araucaria pines, which it can open without difficulty with its long curved bill. However these pines have suffered fungal disease at low altitudes in recent years and no longer grow in much of the distribution area of the Slender-billed Conure. The loss of this food source may have resulted in increased damage to cultivated crops. While the flock feeds sentinels take up position in nearby trees and give the alarm as soon danger is perceived.

There are incidentally four native species of parrot in Chile and one introduced species. The three other native species are a sub-species (formerly *byroni*, but now re-named *bloxami*) of the Patagonian Conure or Burrowing Parrot (*Cyanoliseus patagonus*) locally called "trichahué," which lives in a small area some 125 km (75 miles) south of Santiago; the Mountain Parakeet (*Psilopsiagon*, formerly *Bolborhynchus aurifrons*) called locally "perico cordillerano" and the Austral Conure (*Enicognathus ferrugineus*) called locally "cachaña." The introduced



Slender-billed Conure perched high in the trees.

species through escapees is the Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*) or “cotorra” which lives in and around the capital Santiago.

The Austral Conure has a much larger distribution area in southern Chile than the Slender-billed Conure, but where they occur in the same area they associate. It is smaller than the Slender-billed Conure and lacks the characteristic bill of the latter, but I found them difficult to tell apart when in flight or perched at the top of a tree. In flight the Slender-billed Conure tucks in its bill against its neck, presumably for aerodynamic reasons.

I went to Chile in 2003 because of the apparent lack of reliable up-to-date information on the Slender-billed

Conure. I was helped in arranging this by Alvaro Jaramillo, a then California-based Chilean biologist/ornithologist, who was just about to publish a new book on “Birds of Chile.” He recommended a biologist friend of his—Jorge Ruiz—who worked as a tour guide at a eco-tourist lodge near the city of Valdivia in southern Chile. I contacted the lodge—the Santa Maria lodge—through its Web site and arranged to be picked up at the local airport by its owner, Christian Dünner.

CHILE IS A SOUTH AMERICAN COUNTRY squeezed between the Pacific Ocean and the Andes. It is just over 4,300 km (2,700 miles long), but only 180 km (110 miles) at its widest. When

I flew from Santiago to Valdivia I could see the beach on one side and the peaks of the Andes on the other. Within its borders it has the world’s driest desert, vast expanses of forest and a spectacular array of glaciers and fiords. It has more than 2,000 volcanoes, 55 of which are active. There were two major eruptions earlier this year (2008). As I looked out of the aircraft window I could see the enormous cone of Villarrica. Chile also suffers from earthquakes although the last major one in the Slender-billed Conure area measuring an incredible 9.5 on the Richter scale was in 1960.

The scenery at the lodge was breathtaking with lush forest, mountains and the cone of Villarrica in the distance.

I discovered that originally the family owned some 1,250 acres of land around the house, which then overlooked a small river some 350 feet wide. The earthquake, which devastated Valdivia and the surrounding area resulted in most of this land sinking by 6 feet and flooding.

Now the house overlooks an immense lagoon nearly a mile wide. The family was left with some 215 acres in two small areas linked by a narrow strip of land alongside a neighbour’s property. The smaller area of some 90 acres around the house was dedicated to a tree and shrub nursery supplying the distant market of Santiago operated by the owner and his business partner and the larger area of 125 acres was



Nestbox number 18—One of the several sites provided.

left as a nature reserve with original woodland. The land is part of the Rio Cruces nature reserve covering just under 12,500 acres of habitat.

Jorge and I went for a walk around the reserve area soon after my arrival and I had my first sighting of Slender-billed and Austral Conures in the wild. I must admit to hearing them first for the forest was full of their to me very familiar cries.

I had had e-mail contact with Jorge before my arrival so he was well aware of my interest and was able to provide useful information from the outset. The first and perhaps most important piece of information was that the outbreak of Newcastle's disease in the middle of the 20th century reported by A.W. Johnson in



Slender-billed Conure chick.

his 1967 book did not actually affect the two parrot species very much, although it had initially devastated the population of the Chilean Pigeon (*Patagioenas araucana*), a large, very attractive bird much in evidence throughout my stay

at Santa Maria lodge.

Johnson had reported that the Slender-billed Conure fed off the seeds of wild and cultivated plants such as thistles, wheat and weeds. Jorge was able to extend this small list to include the seeds within the

fruits of various tree species such as *Pordocarpus saligna* called "mañio" locally, *Aextoxicon punctatum* called "olivillo" or "teque" locally and the new leaves of *Nothofagus obliqua* called "roble" locally. He has since observed Austral Conures feeding on the flowers of *Embothrium coccineum*, called "notro" locally.

The high rainfall in the area has produced lush broad-leaf evergreen forest—according to Jaramillo (2003) the only temperate rainforest in South America. Several species of *Nothofagus* dominate, but there also several broad-leaf trees of various families. We found both Slender-billed Conures and Australs nesting in the "roble" (*Nothofagus obliqua*) and also the "ulmo"



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Native flowering tree.

Flower bud

(*Eucryphia cordifolia*).

IT WAS IN AN “ULMO” TREE that we discovered a nesting pair of Slender-billed Conures. The tree had been fitted with wooden horizontal slats to form a makeshift ladder some 15 to 20 years ago. This had been done to remove young from the nest for

sale locally as pets. There were a few narrow slats still hanging off on the lowest part of the tree and the faint outlines of long missing slats were visible higher up. The trunk inclined slightly in the other direction, which would have made climbing the tree much easier.

At the end of this visit I

flew back to the UK happy in the knowledge that although the Slender-billed Conure was suffering from habitat loss like species all over the globe, it did not appear to be especially endangered as I had originally feared.

Since this first visit I have kept in touch with Jorge and

last year (2007) provided funding for constructing and installing 20 nest boxes. I visited Chile at the end of 2007 to see whether any progress had been made with the nest-boxes. We had hoped to be able to study the conures’ reproductive behaviour more closely. However none of the nest-



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boxes had been taken up by either the Slender-billed or Austral Conures. I had suspected this might be the case as they remain very wary in captivity even when bred in the aviary. We do know, however, that the breeding season is from October to March—the austral summer—with the eggs being laid in December and January. The egg measures 31.4 mm x 25.2 mm. Incubation is 25–26 days and the young fledge at about 8 weeks. The young appear to be fed by the parents for some time after fledging.

We have not been able to establish whether they migrate long distances in the winter. I have studied specimens in several museums, but could find no indication of migrating behaviour.



Slender-billed Conure silhouetted against the Chilean sky while perched high in the tree tops.

We also wondered what they would feed on in the four winter months from May to September. A study of Austral Conures by Diaz and Kitzberger in the nothofagus forest of southern Argentina published in December 2006 in *Austral Ecology* magazine discovered that in the winter months the conures there fed off parasitic vegetation, especially mistletoes (*Misodendrum sp.*), and knot-forming fungus (*Cyttaria sp.*) in the trees. There seemed to be no reason why both Slender-billed and Austral Conures in the nothofagus forests of southern Chile should not have a similar diet in the harsh winter months and indeed they have been

observed rooting around in the epiphyte laden trees.

The two researchers also established that the Austral Conures fed on the flowers of the nothofagus trees and their epiphytes in late spring and early summer, thus nectar and pollen form an important part of their diet during the breeding season and may I suggest could perhaps trigger it. We know from our own observations how important flowers are to the Slender-billed and Austral Conures at Valdivia.

More study needs to be done of these fascinating parakeets and I am pleased that AFA has decided to support a project by

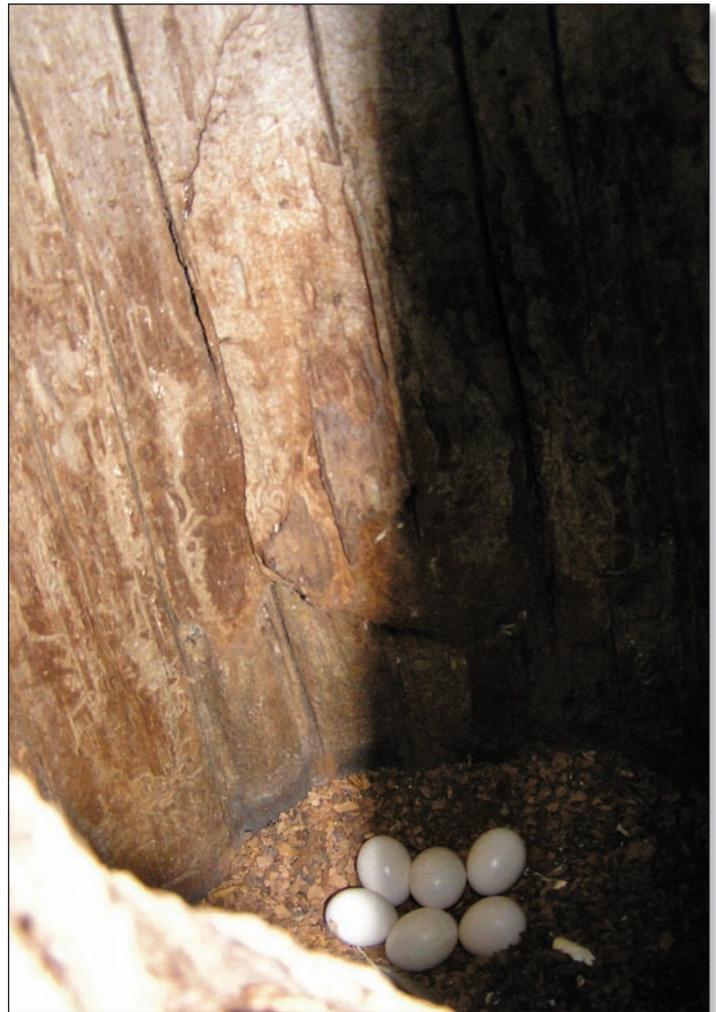
Ana Bertoldi and Jaime Jimenez of the University of Los Lagos at Osorno in southern Chile. An important part of the project, which would run from October 2008 to December 2009, would be to fit radio transmitters to some wild birds to establish their movements, document nest site selection and landscape variables. They will also record foraging habitats and activities as well as collect specific data on reproductive chronology and productivity.

Postscriptum (December 2008)

I have just returned from several days in the field with Jaime Jimenez. The landscape there was entirely different to the Nothofagus rain forest in the reserve near Valdivia. It was an agricultural area with pasture for cattle and isolated large trees, many in advanced stage of decay, in the meadows. There were larger numbers of trees along the margins, but very few small trees. The conures could be observed as well as heard, but it was difficult to ascertain where they were nesting.

On the second day we decided to engage the services of two farm-hands—brothers—who knew the area well and where active nesting cavities could be found. Most of the likely nest hollows were very high in the trees and as the brothers were expert climbers they worked together to ascend the trees and investigate. We thus discovered a number of active nesting cavities, some with females in them, some with eggs and others with young chicks. These sites will be closely monitored in the coming weeks with a view to seeing whether the radio transmitters can be affixed to chicks just before they fledge.

Tom White was there in November and attempted to catch adult birds to attach the radio collars to, but they proved very



Active nesting cavity high in the trees.

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Mature pair of Slender-billed Conures.

difficult to catch. Eventually two birds were caught in a mist-net and collars affixed. These two birds are also being monitored. Information about this has been placed recently on the U.S. Embassy Web site and can be viewed at the following link: <http://santiago.usembassy.gov/OpenNews/asp/pagDefault.asp?arginstanciald=2&argNoticiald=4293>

It was clear that any project there will have to include the replanting and protection of new trees as well as an education programme to involve local people in the conservation of the conures, which many at present regard as pests. The support of AFA and ICA will be much appreciated in achieving these objectives.

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Information with bird list on Santa Maria Lodge at available at www.hualamo.com

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