



The Thick-billed Parrots: BRING'EM HOME

By Tom Marshall

One Thursday early in September, 2013, I travelled 94 miles from my home in Leesburg, Virginia to Hershey, Pennsylvania to visit zookeeper/naturalist Katie Govern of ZooAmerica. Katie had provided an invitation to witness the banning of this year's first (parent-raised) Thick-billed parrot chick at three weeks and two days. Head up with big bright eyes — what a healthy-looking baby at 291 grams! That day, I shared in their collective pride over this major accomplishment. The staff had waited two days in order to accommodate my desire to witness this momentous occasion, for which I am very appreciative.

At ZooAmerica there are six adult birds in the flight along with the newly hatched baby in the nest box. One of the adult parrots is the two year old daughter of the breeding pair, who seems to be pairing up with one of the single males. Last year the parents did not breed, apparently due to constantly having to attend to the expressed needs of their female chick, far longer than they may have wished, or would have had to in the wild. All the parrots get along in the flock and appear to act as protectors of the nest box, although the parents do not want other flock members to land on the box or come too close to the sanctity of their home. There are also two feeding stations and another nest box designed to ease any tension that may arise during the breeding season. These particular parrots have been selected among 40+ member institutions in connection with the Species Survival Plan (SSP) of the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) to ensure genetically diverse offspring. This birth announcement will be reported and recorded to the participating SSP zoos.

The approximate 30' x 20' x 9' aviary is not high-tech and is simply made of wood and wire, but certainly adequate. Zoo visitors must view the enclosure from below the hillside upon which it is situated. The structure is encompassed by pine trees, adding a sense of security and privacy. The nesting material consists of aspen pine shavings and pine needles, to absorb moisture and prevent spores and mold. The Thick-billed parrots are fed twice a day during the time there are young in the nest and they get fruits and vegetables, commercial feed by Mazuri, and many nut varieties, especially pine nuts and walnuts still in shell. The parrots have all been vaccinated for the West Nile Virus that, unfortunately, took the life of an earlier chick several years ago.

The Sacramento Zoo staff coordinates the Survival Plan Studbook for this species which assists with the management of captive Thick-billed populations. The Wildlife Conservation Society's Queens Zoo (NY) announced last November six new

Pair of Thick-bills at nest site.

Thick-billed chicks, bringing their collection up to 23 birds, the largest number of any other facility accredited by the AZA. The Great San Diego Zoo, the Sedgwick Zoo (KS), the Akron Zoo (OH) and other are adding their expertise to the breeding of these endangered parrots.

The Thick-billed parrot used to have a large range, which included the southwestern United States. They are considered rare and rapidly decreasing in numbers in Mexico. Loss of habitat due to deforestation is the foremost reason for this beautiful bird's decline, but mining activities in some areas further stress the population. With the most northerly distribution of any neo-tropical parrot the Thick-billed parrot (*Rhynchopsitta pachyrhyncha*) had occurred in Arizona and New Mexico, but their loud calls and noisy habits attracted far too many hunters and

they were, unfortunately, extirpated by 1935 from the United States — this our only native parrot remaining, after a similar fate may years earlier that decimated the Carolina parakeet.

The Thick-billed parrot appears as though it could be on the way of transitioning into a small emerald green macaw with long wings and long wedge-shaped tail, scarlet forehead and stipe over eye, heavy black bill and bright yellow under the wing coverts, which is very obvious in flight. (The yellow under the wing is absent in the closely related Maroon-fronted parrot (*P. terrisi*)). Compared to their overlapping neighbor, the Military macaw, which is more olive green and is much larger with proportionately much longer wings and tail, Thick-bills only weigh about one pound and are about 16 inches long.



Thick-billed chicks.

The remaining habitat, less than 10% of the original old-growth forest in the Sierra Madre Occidental in Northern Mexico, is endangered by a number of threats: fire, insect damage, logging and agriculture.

However, on July 1, 2013 the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced the Thick-billed Parrot Final Recovery Plan Addendum, which was collaboratively written by the Arizona Game and Fish Department and the Services' Tucson office with participation by experts in Mexico, which in essence focuses on restoring populations and habitat in the parrot's current range in Mexico and establishing criteria for measuring recovery progress.

The potential for the parrot's expansion into remaining suitable habitat within the U.S. was discussed, but the emphasis at this time is only on recovering the Thick-billed parrot where it lives in Mexico.



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Rosemary Low, in her comprehensive history of aviculture, *A Century of Parrots* states that the species for which captive breeding programs might be most useful are those which

- are members of a genus which is known to breed readily in captivity;
- are seriously threatened by loss of habitat;
- have a small range in the wild.

Thanks to the efforts of the Species Survival Plan and the participating zoos, we know that Thick-bills do breed well in captivity. It is also true that Thick-bill parrots' remaining habitat in Mexico is less than 10% of the original old growth forest and that their range was never extensive, although it was somewhat larger when it included parts of the U.S.

In 1986 the Thick-billed parrot was the subject of a reintroduction attempt in Arizona. Sadly it was not successful due to several avoidable factors. Releasing parrots during a hawk migration, as was rumored, should definitely be avoided in the future. Using captive-raised birds who did not know how to forage for food and who did not develop the complex flocking patterns necessary for eluding raptors could be addressed by establishing on-site training infrastructures for potential releases in the Chiricahua Mountains in Southern



Thick-billed parrot fledgling.

Arizona, their former migratory location, and/or other suitable areas in New Mexico. Currently their range in Mexico is only 50 miles south of the U.S. border.

I feel that it is highly important for the USFWS, the approximately forty zoos participating in the Species Survival Plan for Thick-billed parrots, conservation organizations and AFA to enthusiastically support efforts to re-establish Thick-bill populations in Arizona and possibly New Mexico, sooner than later. The former ranges in the U.S. would provide an extension of the parrots' range into suitable habitat of high altitude and large tracts of pine forests that is not threatened by logging.

An Arizona population may be vital to the species' survival. Thick-bills need the protection afforded to them by being located in multiple places in numbers large enough to protect against natural and man-made disasters and close enough to connect disparate populations to provide for dispersal and gene flow between populations. The captive breeding programs at the SSP zoos are designed, in part, to supplement efforts to establish a critical mass of viable Thick-bill populations in Mexico as well as in the United State to fend off their endangerment.

In the wild Thick-billed parrots are among the fastest parrot species, and are nomadic in nature, as they often fly 12 to 24



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miles a day in search of food. It is reported that flight is swift and direct with shallow wing beats and impressive agility, due to their falcon-like form. They will streak through the sky, wingtip to wingtip, holding a tight V-shaped formation. That would be something to see!

Thick-bills can and will survive with an enhanced range of habitat and larger numbers supplemented through organized captive breeding. Reintroducing a fading species to the wild, even in its native and former habitats, is never easy, especially when they involve birds born in captivity. However, wildlife researchers will tell you that such efforts tend to be more popular than other conservation techniques, like those that rely on legislation and public education.

There is considerable national pride appeal to AFA being involved through our Conservation Committee in returning the brightly plumaged Thick-billed parrot to Arizona as well as bolstering the efforts to protect their habitat in Mexico. This effort should be a cause celebre that American bird owners and breeders would support with their donations, as the Thick-billed parrot is our parrot, and the use of aviculture techniques, such as artificial nest boxes, supplemental feeding and captive breeding is what may very well save this parrot from extinction.

David Waugh of Spain's Loro Parque, and one of our 2013 convention speakers, once said, "Man through an exorable process of urbanization is becoming less connected to the natural world, and that which he does not know, he will not understand and he will not care for..." We have an exceptionable opportunity to make aware, educate and provide help to our last native parrot, the Thick-billed parrot. Do we have the will to meet this challenge? I think we can!

References:

- Low, Rosemary. *A Century of Parrots*, Insignis Publications, UK, 2006.
- Milpacher, Steve and Desi. "Rays of Hope", *PsittaScene*, 4-7, November, 2008.
- Juniper, Tony and Parr, Mike. *Parrots: Guide to Parrots of the World*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London.



Banding a Thick-billed chick.

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