

caatinga looks like a professionally landscaped desert garden, with brilliant yellow flowering plants among giant cacti and the few remaining Caraibeira trees (*Tabebuia caraiba*). Goat herd boys, with their annoying bells (and smells) roam the roads with the lizards and millipedes. Strange-looking frogs called furiously all morning as they fertilized the millions of eggs the females were laying. When we drove out at the end of the day, there were mounds of white foaming egg masses in almost every pool.

In a diversion from the printed itinerary, the following morning we rode our bus to a meeting place at 6:00. No one was there to meet us. At 6:45, one of our guides, Bret Whitney, found a neighbor who knew the missing driver, and went to his house to find him. The driver was asleep and complained that we were an hour early, but he finally brought some release forms for us to sign and explained that we would still have to wait because his truck was broken. He finally secured another vehicle, and we began a drive on muddy roads. By this time, we knew that our destination was the Spix's Macaw research site and everyone was shocked, but ecstatic at the prospect. We learned that Bret had begun making phone calls two days earlier, frantically trying to maneuver the chain of command in an effort to get permission for our visit. After hours of frustrating failure, he finally succeeded; and achieving this feat will always be remembered as a miracle.

The Spix's macaw, discovered and collected in 1819 by Johannes von Spix, a German naturalist, had never been seen in large numbers. The extermination of the bird was due to illegal trade; and by the 1980's they were critically endangered in the wild. After conflicting stories of sightings over the years, a Brazilian farmer finally produced a reliable photograph of the bird in 1990, and a research base camp was set up immediately. In addition, The Spix's Macaw Project enlisted the villagers of Curaçá to aid in the bird's survival. The project built local one-room school houses, made building renovations, and even collected food for them, all in an effort to convince them of the

importance of keeping this species alive. To support the project, we stopped at houses along the way and bought carvings for souvenirs. As we got closer, the road became so muddy, the vehicle got stuck and we had to walk the rest of the way. At this point, we would have gladly slithered through the mud on our bellies to get there.

When we arrived at the research site, we were briefed by one of the researchers on a small hill above the observation blind. For ten years, this macaw was surely the most closely observed and guarded animal on earth. A team of four scientists had been recording every movement at two-minute intervals during all daylight hours. Their primary goal was to have this male reproduce. With only a single bird in the wild, the recovery of its kind depended on the success or failure of a captive breeding program. As it was nearing the time the bird usually returned to the tree, we were given our instructions.

The rules were simple and unimpeachable. A guide would accompany three people down to the blind. We were told that if the bird did not fly in, and the rest of us had remained quiet and unobtrusive, three more people would get a chance to go down. Our nervous anticipation was palpable. To decide who would go first, we all drew twigs from a leader's hand and compared the lengths. A sober-looking group of birdwatchers watched the lucky lottery winners descend the hill. The rest of us remained where we stood, binoculars and two spotting scopes trained on the Caraibeira tree the Spix's had nested in.

When we heard the macaw's call, we were galvanized, but silent. The Spix's flew in and perched in the tree. From the gasping sounds, it was easy to tell when each person got the bird in focus. We somehow stayed quiet, but everyone was jumping up and down, and hugging. Many tears were in evidence as we took turns looking through the scopes. I don't think it is possible to convey the drama, excitement, and sentiment of those minutes. When the bird flew off, we cheered out loud!

Moments later the leader and trio appeared, heading back up the hill. We were still euphoric, and anxious to assure them we had all seen the bird, too. Since we had had such fantastic views, we couldn't imagine what it had been like to see the bird from inside the blind. From their downcast heads, we guessed that they must be feeling guilty that the rest of us had missed the bird. As they got closer, we could clearly see the sad expressions on their faces, and were further impressed with their empathy. We couldn't wait to celebrate all together. How quickly our goofy grins disappeared when we learned the truth about their sad demeanor. Because of their positions in the blind, two of the three had not been able to see the macaw.

We rode in a truck back out to our driver, who was still stuck in the mud. We pushed him out, and rode to our bus. Everyone

Right: Map of Caatinga, Northeastern Brazil.

Below: Caatinga Scrubland



was subdued the rest of the day; and some faces were missing at dinner that night. Our delirious happiness had come crashing down with the realization that two of our group not only couldn't celebrate with us, but would also have to live with the disappointment. We all admired the grace with which they absorbed their loss.

The next day we watched about 30 spectacular Indigo macaws (Lear's) moving about in small groups as they fed on licuri palm nuts. Occasionally they passed closely by to investigate us, or watched us from the tops of the trees. That day it was a happy experience for everyone in the group! We ended the trip with 433 species of birds, 8 mammals, and memories to last a lifetime.

2001 - 2014

The macaw disappeared in October of that year. Disheartening reports and speculation abounded while the Curaçá villagers searched for the Spix's, a fellow survivor of their drought-ridden land, and the savior of their quality of life. The unanswered Spix's imitations made by the goat herders rang through the land daily, a poignant reminder of what these villagers and the world were losing.

The Spix's macaw was declared extinct in the wild on February 07, 2001. I have carefully followed the Spix's macaw recovery programs. They form a long, confusing chronicle of thwarted attempts, innumerable political obstacles, and dissension about ownership and the cooperative release of captive-bred offspring. The success Loro Parque Fundación experienced when 850 delegates voted to transfer ownership of the 60 Spix's macaws held in breeding programs worldwide to the Brazilian government was a most-welcome development in 2002, and their success continues. A system to manage the available genetics for the Spix's macaw is now in place; and hopefully a Central Management System for birds in captivity worldwide will follow.

On an emotional scale, my feelings have not diminished. Seeing that last wild Spix's macaw so close to its extinction made a lasting impression. It is still the highlight of all the species I've seen and all the experiences I've had working with birds. I can't imagine anything will ever come close to matching it. The photo of the Spix's macaw in Chapter I of the FOA Level II class gave me chills; but further on, the picture of the Spix's

nest tree literally took my breath away. My mind began to wander. I was back in that magical day in the *Caatinga*, admiring that last wild macaw, surely the symbol of the international conservation movement forever.

Spix's macaw folk art.



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