



The Parrot Rescue Center of Costa Rica:

LIFE WITH THE PARROTS OF COSTA RICA

By Valentina Belknap

Owner and Operator of the Parrot Rescue Center of Costa Rica

My Costa Rican adventure began in 2009. My dad was moving from United States to Costa Rica to build his dream home in the jungle, and I decided to tag along to see what it was like. I didn't originally plan to stay, but after assimilating into life here I was hooked. We eventually ended up building our home where the rescue center is now located, just outside of San Ramon, in the province of Alajuela.

I was nineteen at the time and didn't really have plans for my life. I had worked at a pet store in the States and purchased an African grey parrot there. That was the beginning of my love for birds. I stumbled upon a breeding facility here in Costa Rica and purchased a Scarlet macaw from them (see "Rango" in Fig. 1). Seeing the poor conditions at this facility and what I would consider the neglect of the birds, it made me consider what I could do to make a difference. I wanted to see more and learn more about the care of birds, so I volunteered at a rescue center for a while and visited several others here in Costa Rica. I had found the direction my life and career would take.

After a lot of research, meetings with various government officials, biologists, and other rescue center experts and obtaining the proper licensing for the project, the work began. I knew that I had a lot to learn, and with the knowledge gained, I realized that there was a great need for the protection of the endangered parrots of Costa Rica.

I soon discovered that there were a number of rescue centers for the endangered macaws of Costa Rica, but none for the rescue of Yellow-naped Amazons, also an endangered species. These birds became endangered primarily due to the destruction of their natural habitat and the illegal removal of chicks for the pet trade. It did not take long to see that there was a need for a program concentrating on the rescue and rehabilitation of Yellow-napes. This was the beginning of the Parrot Rescue Center of Costa Rica, or Parrot Rescue CR. I officially received my Plan de Manejo, the license to legally operate as a rescue center in Costa Rica, on April 18, 2013.

One of the reasons there is an increased need now for wildlife rescue centers in Costa Rica is because of a change in the law. In October 2013, a new wildlife law was approved in Costa Rica.



Figure 1. The author and her Scarlet macaw “daughter” Rango. She bought her from a breeder in Costa Rica and hand-reared Rango from 1 month of age.



Figure 2. Hanging out and giving treats to 2 of the Amazons, a Yellow-naped and a Red-lored, in the Amazon habitat.

People caught buying or selling native wildlife species without permits could face sanctions that include imprisonment of one to three years, fines and confiscation of the animals. The law sets fines for sport hunters of up to ₡1.5 million (\$3,000) and up to ₡900,000 (\$1,800) for people caught trafficking wildlife species. Those who kill animals or destroy nests or natural habitat also will face the same consequences. So now many Ticos (what Costa Ricans call themselves) who kept native parrots as pets are either just turning them loose or are turning them in to rescue centers such as the Parrot Rescue Center. However, you can legally own a pet parrot as long as you have a permit for it. A breeder can apply for a permit from MINAET (Costa Rican Fish and Wildlife Service) to breed and sell parrots. They then provide you a permit when you purchase a baby bird. A parrot that is legally purchased will come with a permit and a band on its leg, which shows that the bird was bred in captivity and not poached from the wild.

The main focus of my project is to rescue, rehabilitate and release the native parrots of Costa Rica, with an emphasis on Amazons, especially Yellow-napes (Figs. 2 and 3). Almost all of the birds that we receive come in traumatized by neglect, both physical and mental abuse and history of an extremely poor diet. After a short quarantine, the birds are introduced into habitats with other birds of their species. Often it is the first time since they were hatched or were young chicks that they have been around other parrots. In all cases to date, they adjust to “bird life” within a few months. It has been amazing to see and experience their transformations.

If they seem to be rehabilitated after some period of time, we will do a “soft” release out into the surrounding forest while still providing them some food at a feeding station. We have just done this with an Orange-chinned parakeet that was in captivity for a long time. He has been staying around our property, and in a covered area he receives daily foods—seeds, nuts, bird pellets, fruits and veggies (see Fig.4).



Figure 3. A pair of Red-lored Amazons. When they came in they were in a neglected condition, but they have healed well and now are bonded.



Figure 4. “Freedom,” the first Orange-chinned parakeet I released. She chooses to stay close by, and we put out food for her.



Figure 5. The Scarlet macaw habitat. It is quite large: 3m x 5m x 4m.



Figure 6. The Amazon habitat. Another larger enclosure will be built behind this one exclusively for Yellow-napes.

Although our focus is the rehabilitation and breeding and releasing of Yellow-naped Amazons and other types of native parrots, we continue to take care of those birds that are not releasable due to permanent injury or long term captivity. All birds receive a daily diet of bird pellets, nuts, seeds and many varieties of fruit. We also strive to enhance their daily lives with forging toys. Their enclosures are not just perches, but rather are filled with toys, living trees, bushes and branches with leaves and fruit that are normally in their wild diet (Figs. 5 and 6).

The plan for the Yellow-naped parrots is to breed only those that come in that cannot be released after rehabilitation. All of the Yellow-napes will be sexed by sending feathers to the United States for DNA testing. Once confirmed that the pair are male/female and begin showing signs of wanting to breed, they will be transferred into individual breeding cages. These are smaller habitats that will be built on a part of the property that is a little ways away from the other parrots so that they have seclusion and less noise. The babies will be left with the parents as long as they take care of them. If not, they will have to be hand fed. I do have experience in this area, having hand-fed my Scarlet

macaw from the age of 1 month. Once the chicks have fledged and are at a releasable age, they will be given local branches with seeds and leaves that they would normally eat, and after a while will be released into the surrounding forest. We later will put up nest boxes in which for them to breed.

My macaw is not caged most of the time and flies free where she has learned to eat about half of her diet from the wild (Fig. 7). Any other macaws that I receive will also be released into this area as a soft release. Food will be provided as needed. My Dad and I have planted about 50 or more native trees on our property and surrounding properties from which the birds would normally feed. We removed the coffee plants and planted trees on another part of the property as well. Fig. 8 shows the entrance to our land. When we first built the road 3 years ago it was just grass. You can see from the picture how fast vegetation has grown up around the entrance, so it will not be many years before the trees we have planted will be large enough to produce food for the released parrots and any babies they produce.

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Figure 7. Rango, my Scarlet macaw who is free to come and go as she pleases. Other Scarlets will be released here on the property in the near future.



Figure 8. The road and driveway to our place and the rescue center. When we first developed the property 3 years ago, these hills were covered in grass only. You can see how fast trees and bushes grow here in Costa Rica.

The Parrot Rescue Center is a non-profit organization and does not receive funds from the government. We rely solely on the generous donations we receive from people and various organizations, as well as our own funds. One hundred percent of all donations go directly into the project. There are no paid positions. See our website to learn how to visit us, to volunteer, or to make a donation.

We get Tico volunteers once in a while who live close by. We also get help from Wendy Thomas, a retired expat from United States, who lives a couple of hours away and volunteers every few months.

Our short-term need is for additional habitats. With each one that has been built to date, it has been filled with birds within a month or two. We have the land to expand, but lack the funds to build. Each enclosure costs approximately \$2,500 - \$10,000, depending on the size. At this time we are constructing kitchen facilities and a nursery. Once that is completed we will move on to the next habitat—another 3 m x 6 m x 3 m. The height is kept

to 3m because many of the birds we receive are not capable of flight, and higher cages would be detrimental.

Long-term we hope to acquire funds to purchase additional land that surrounds our property. It would be designated as a permanent conservation reserve through the government and then replanted for the wild life and bird habitat. This cost would be approximately \$80,000 to \$250,000, depending on the amount of land purchased.

My wonderful life: I happily awoke this morning in my jungle paradise to the sound of many noisy, happy Amazons screaming their morning songs. When I went out to feed them. I realized that in the tropical trees surrounding me, I had an audience of Capuchin monkeys overseeing my work. Then overhead a wild flock of Orange-fronted or Orange-chinned parakeets flew over. Yep, it's a hard life I live.

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Breeding the Twelve-wired Bird-of-Paradise in Weltvogelpark Walsrode

AGE IS NOT AN OBSTACLE!

Author: Dipl.-Biol. Anne Hoppmann

Hand-rearing Team: Veterinarian Andreas Frei, Biologist Jan Dams,

Animal Keepers Wolfgang Magnus, Janina Gerbatsch, Sina Eggers and Kim-Jana Lang



Birds of paradise are among the world's most known and famous bird species due to the often colourful and very exceptional plumage of the males. The small, up to middle-sized passerine birds, mostly live in the dense rain forests of New Guinea, but some species can also be found on the Maluku islands and in the northern part of east Australia. Due to its famous inhabitants New Guinea is also called the "Island of Birds-of-Paradise". The national emblem, as well as the flag of the independent state of Papua New Guinea, even shows a bird-of-paradise!

In total, 42 species are recognized in the family *Paradisaeidae* and the majority of the males have iridescent and brightly coloured plumage on their back, breast and tail feathers. During courtship the shining colours and feathers are presented to a female at special 'leks', or within the territory of a certain female. Therefore, the males of many species clear the ground or branches from foliage to be able to better draw attention to themselves. Most species are polygynous, meaning that a male mates with multiple females, which are rather dully coloured with their brown-yellow plumage to blend in with their habitat. They alone care for the incubation of the eggs and the rearing of the young without the help of the male.

From trading expeditions in the early sixteenth century, only the footless and wingless skins were known in Europe. Therefore, the representatives of this bird group were soon called 'divine birds' or 'paradise birds', as they were thought not to need wings at all. The skins led to the belief that the birds never landed on earth before their death, but were kept permanently aloft by the plumes. Until the 18th century these stories were still believed to be true due to the lack of information about birds of paradise from the wild.

Weltvogelpark Walsrode keeps some species of these famous birds-of-paradise. One of the larger ones is the Twelve-wired bird-of-paradise (*Seleucidis melanoleuca*) which inhabits rain and swampy forests in lowlands of New Guinea and the western Papuan Islands. It feeds on fruits, especially the fruits of the pandanus or sago palm, but nectar, insects, frogs or lizards are also eaten. Twelve-wired birds-of-paradise can be very acrobatic while feeding—they can even hang upside down from branches to investigate holes in the wood for insects. The males of this species are known for their conspicuous black-olive coloured head and wing plumes as well as their brightly yellow plumes on their breast and flanks. The tail feathers, twelve blackish wire-like filaments, emerge at the rear of the plumage and can be moved

independently during courtship. This species is polygynous, and in the wild a single male mates with several females. To impress a female, males display on traditional, mostly dead vertical branches freed from leaves which tower above the treetops. These typical branches are even defended from other males. Upon arrival of a female, the male moves his wings, the yellow plumes on his flanks, and his twelve elongated tail feathers while jumping up and down on his branch and singing to impress the female.

This species can be seen in a zoological institution in Europe only in Weltvogelpark Walsrode. In the year 2008 Walsrode received a male Twelve-wired bird-of-paradise, called 'Van Dyke', from Bronx Zoo in New York—which now is already over 30 years of age! It was believed that this bird could be shown in the exhibition to the visitors but was not for breeding purposes anymore—but all were wrong! Despite the high age of the male, our female laid the first fertilized eggs in 2012, after being relocated to another enclosure in the rainforest hall! Since September 2012, a total of 7 chicks were already successfully hand-reared.

In the wild, a female builds a shallow egg-cup shaped nest of small branches and leaves inside the bulky deep structure of pandanus bark and vines, which is padded with rootlets and plant fibers. It is mostly placed in palm trees up to 14 m above the ground. Normally, one egg, rarely two eggs, is laid. After the incubation period of approximately 20 days, the chick hatches. Three weeks later the nestling already leaves the nest.

Our female made a nest by herself out of coconut fibers, twigs and leaves in her enclosure in our rainforest hall. The pair is housed in a large aviary, but the male was always very interested in the nest and the female, and he destroyed the first eggs that were laid by the female. To make sure that no more eggs of this rarely kept bird species would get lost, all eggs laid by the female were now transferred into an artificial incubator. This way we could secure the eggs and rear 7 young birds successfully! Due to the fact that this species is so rare in zoological institutions, it was very important for us to secure offspring, and (unfortunately) artificial incubation was the best way to do this.

The next egg that our female laid was thus transferred to an artificial incubator. The egg was exchanged with a dummy egg, so the female could continue incubation. Meanwhile the real egg was artificially incubated at 37,4 °C and a humidity of 55 % until it hatched. Candling the egg after approximately one week can quickly reveal whether the egg is fertilized or not. This procedure was used on all eggs that were laid afterwards. After hatching all nestlings are transferred into the care of the hand-rearing keepers, the vet and the biologist of Weltvogelpark. They are placed into a steel bowl padded with paper towels, an anti-slide mat, coconut fibers or wood wool and housed in a closed and heated rearing machine.



Twelve-wired bird-of-paradise, directly after hatching with egg shell.



Twelve-wired bird-of-paradise, 3 days of age.



Twelve-wired bird-of-paradise, 8 days of age.

On the first day, when the yolk in the belly is still being digested, a chick is only provided with a mixture of water and a ringer-lactate solution. After approximately 35 hours the feeding starts, beginning at half past 5 in the morning until 11 o'clock in the evening. In total the chick is fed 9–10 times per day—every two hours, which keeps the keepers very busy! In the beginning in Weltvogelpark the food consisted of the innards of one day-old mice enriched with lactobacilli to support and stimulate the digestion. On the 5th day of age the food is already further enriched with more vitamins and small portions of low-iron pellets, which are especially designed for fruit eaters and contain a high amount of proteins. From day 9 onwards, peeled



Twelve-wired bird-of-paradise, 13 days of age.



Twelve-wired bird-of-paradise, 19 days of age being fed.



Male Twelve-wired
bird-of-paradise at
Weltvogelpark.

blueberries are fed as well. The one-day-old mice are now fed as a mash. Around the 15th day of age the food is expanded with T20 NutriBird Pellets for fruit eaters from Versele Laga which are rich in proteins, vitamins and minerals as well. At this moment the eyes of the nestling are already open, and the young is very attentive. Shortly afterwards the feathers break open, and soon the nestling is entirely fledged. In the whole growth period, the temperature in the rearing machine has to match the needs and the growth of the chick. Beginning with 37.2 °C, the temperature is slowly regulated downwards and always adjusted to the growth of the young. On day 14 the temperature has been lowered to 35 °C. In contrast to the temperature, the weight of the nestling is of course rising—tiny in the beginning, the chick is already weighing 21.5 g on day 6, 51 g on day 11, and on the 13th day of age it is already weighing 63 g. Shortly before fledging the weight has risen up to 108 g.

On the 25th day of age, young Twelve-wired birds-of-paradise leave the nest, now approximately weighing 119 g. The artificial nest is placed in a rearing box a few days earlier so that the young can become accustomed to the surrounding. The box is only heated by an infrared lamp and is furnished with natural branches and twigs. During the night, it is still placed back into the heated incubator until it fledges. Soon after fledging the chick is already very active and vivid. It is preening itself and closely observing the surrounding. At this stage the young bird needs much more energy than before and thus the amount of food has to be increased and fed to the young with a tweezers every hour. Additionally, a plate with a mixture of different fruits and T20 pellets from Versele laga is placed into the box so the fledged young gets to know the food. Approximately from day 30 onwards the young can be seen more and more often at the food plate until it feeds actively by itself. In this phase the keepers still provide additional feedings for the young bird with the familiar tweezers. The food is further enriched with small pieces of ripe mango and papaya. The amount of fruit and fruit pellets are increased, and at the same time the amount of meat is reduced. From day 40 onwards, the now nearly fully grown juvenile bird is transferred into a large aviary, furnished with a variety of natural branches and twigs. It is now feeding by itself from the food plate, is very interested in the water bowl,



Twelve-wired bird-of-paradise, 25 days of age after fledging.



Twelve-wired bird-of-paradise, 45 days of age in aviary.

and takes a daily bath. The new surrounding is being explored very actively. The room temperature is around 23 °C, and the juvenile doesn't need an additional heating lamp anymore. All juveniles are coloured like females in the beginning, so they mostly have brownish plumage. Even if the young bird is actually a male, the typical colouration of the plumes of a male is not totally reached before the age of 5 years.

Weltvogelpark Walsrode is very proud to have successfully reared Twelve-wired birds-of-paradise. Of course we didn't want to wait as long as five years (!) until the young birds actually show their sex by revealing their adult plumage. Therefore, we tested all juveniles via DNA analysis of a feather sample. As it turns out, we have been very lucky with our chicks—4 males and 3 females! We are now looking forward to seeing the young birds grow up and caring for them until they are sexually mature at the age of 4–6 years.

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Twelve-wired bird-of-paradise, 2 months of age in aviary.

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If anyone can verify any previous breeding of this species, please contact the AFA Avy Award Chairperson Julie Corwin at blconnection@hotmail.com

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