

Adult Yellow-eared Parrot.
Credit: Fundación ProAve.



The Meteoric Recovery of Colombia's Yellow-eared Parrot:

A PROJECT WITHOUT EQUAL BACKED
BY LORO PARQUE FUNDACIÓN

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Rare indeed is a conservation project about which the news is so relentlessly positive, but without doubt one of them is the project to save the Yellow-eared Parrot (*Ognorhynchus icterotis*) from extinction in Colombia. A product of the partnership between the Loro Parque Fundación (LPF) of Tenerife, Spain and Fundación ProAves of Colombia, this project is arguably the most successful in South America. It is a project where the extraordinary increase in numbers speaks for itself.

In the mid 1990s, the LPF was supporting the protection in Ecuador of the last known Yellow-eared Parrots, 20 individuals in total. By 1998 they had disappeared, and it was feared that the species was completely extinct. However, in the same year, and based on hearsay of its continued existence in Colombia,

ProAves, with the support of the LPF, the Zoological Society for the Conservation of Species and Populations (ZGAP) and American Bird Conservancy, began the Yellow-eared Parrot project with the main objective of ensuring the survival of the species and habitat protection in the Colombian Andes. In 1999, after a year of searching, a population of 81 individuals was found in the central Andes, in the community of Roncesvalles, Department of Tolima. In January 2001, a second population with 63 individuals was found in foothills of the western Andes, in Jardín, Department of Antioquia.

During the intervening years the LPF has been the principal supporter of this outstanding project. With all the results from 2015 now available, the headline news is that due to the project



Above: Wax palms in cattle pasture. Credit: LaPatria. **Right: A pair of Yellow-eared parrots at their natural nest.** **Below Right: Climbing a palm to check a nest-box.** Credit: Fundación ProAves.



the wild population of Yellow-eared Parrots has again reached record numbers. At the two previously mentioned locations population censuses have been conducted each month. At the main roost site in Jardín, a maximum of 4,251 individuals were counted in April and 1,096 individuals at another roost site in May, while in Roncesvalles a total of 949 were recorded. Even allowing for some possible movements of the parrots between the sites, there is no doubt that the population is bigger than ever and increasing rapidly. Such has been the rate of recovery, that in 2010 the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) reduced the category of threat of the Yellow-eared Parrot from 'Critically Endangered' to 'Endangered'.

This remarkable situation has its roots in the original detailed investigation by the Yellow-eared Parrot project which revealed that the parrot is extremely dependent on the wax palm, Colombia's national tree, but also an endangered species. For this reason, it was alarming that the wax palm is found in only small fragments, and that recruitment of the palm was virtually non-existent, due to cattle grazing of the seedlings and also its indiscriminate use on Palm Sunday. The years of research, for example on habitat use, diet, distribution and breeding behaviour, have provided a solid foundation of knowledge of the threats facing the parrot and palm wax, thus allowing the project to produce a comprehensive plan of action for conservation.

Subsequent conservation actions for the two breeding populations, and more generally at regional and national levels, have achieved great success, again reflected by some remarkable numbers. For example, the habitat restoration and reforestation has exceeded 360,000 trees and wax palms planted across 920 hectares. The project has attained the official designation of 5,000 hectares of forest on 25 private farms as nature reserves,





Left: A pair of Yellow-eared parrots at their artificial nest.
Top: The ProAves team at the Yellow-eared Parrot reserve.
Above: Observation of Yellow-eared parrots near wax palms.
 Credit: Fundación ProAves.

and continues to maintain the 16 km of fences it has erected to protect forest fragments and young wax palms from cattle grazing. The 4,585 hectares of buffer zone to Las Hermosas National Park are now protected through their management by the project. In addition the project created the Yellow-eared Parrot Natural Bird Reserve of 188 hectares, in which just in 2015 have been planted with 1,045 more seedlings of five species of plants important for the parrots. As an economic incentive for landowners to maintain forest on their land, the project has been able to establish environmental service agreements with municipalities, whereby payments from users of water in the lower part of a watershed support the protection of forests in the upper part.

On average each year the project reaches 40+ rural schools with environmental education workshops, and can now boast of 3,000 school age students involved in the “Friends of the Birds” groups, as well as 26 “bird-friendly”. In addition, the project has trained more than 215 university students, and 14

Next Page: 1. Teaching children about plants in the nursery. 2. Ready for reforestation! 3. A school class with their Yellow-eared Parrot models. 4. A brood of three Yellow-eared Parrot chicks. 5. Yellow-eared parrot festival. Credit: Fundación ProAves.

Parrot Guardians have been trained and employed. Weekly local radio broadcasts are held in three rural towns and farming communities, and there have been national radio and television broadcasts using the parrot and palm as flagship species. Also at national level are the annual campaigns of Palm Sunday, National Parrot Day and “Reconcile Yourself with Nature”, with the free distribution of awareness materials, which have reached 20,000 posters, 3000 t-shirts and countless wax palm seedlings for people to plant. At a relatively early stage, the project obtained the cooperation of the Catholic Church to remind its parishioners not to use wax palms on Palm Sunday, with the amazing effect that nowadays everybody uses alternatives.

Due to the positive effects of the project, there are no longer any reports of Yellow-eared Parrots being killed or taken from the wild, and this emblematic species continues its meteoric rise.

