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The American Bird Breeder's Role in Conservation

by Rosemary Low, Curator of Birds
Loro Parque, Tenerife, Spain

American avian breeders can aid in the conservation of threatened species, particularly birds from tropical areas of the world. Breeders need not be confined *only* to those who keep and breed rare or endangered species. All breeders can be helpful, if they will but try.

Criticisms From Conservationists

Birdkeepers, at times, come under fire from conservationists, some of whom are adamantly opposed to the keeping of birds under aviary or almost any other conditions. Others believe captive breeding can play no part in the conservation of endangered species. These people are strongly critical of private breeders who claim their motive for breeding birds is, in fact, conservation.

Christoph Imboden, director of the International Council for Bird Preservation, wrote, ". . . there is an increasingly popular notion among proponents of aviculture that captive breeding will have to play a key role in our species-conservation strategies. Many argue that we should initiate captive breeding programs not only for threatened species but also (as a precaution) for those which have not yet declined to critical status."

I believe there are hundreds of species of birds for which captive breeding is either impractical or impossible. Birds established in aviculture represent but a small portion of the 8,700 species which exist today. A few groups, such as waterfowl, pheasants and parrots, are particularly well established in aviculture. It is perfectly realistic to believe many of the species within these groups could be saved from extinction by captive breeding. Birds identified as "softbills," for example, are much more difficult subjects where multi-generational breeding is concerned. It is my view, a sustained effort over a short term can be used to increase dwindling stocks of

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certain birds. I believe significant results can be obtained in short order with such species.

Difficult Species

Some of the endangered or potentially endangered birds have proved or would prove to be no more difficult to breed in captivity than are closely related species, already well established. For example, among the Australian parakeets, such as the golden-shouldered (*Psephotus chrysopterygus*), these birds are already more numerous in captivity than they are in the wild.

Australia is an affluent country; even so, destruction of habitat continues to endanger the existence of many native avian species. Indonesia and most South American countries are examples of less affluent areas. Conservation in such countries is given a much lower priority. Brazil is a classic example. In that vast country the endemic fauna of many areas are declining very rapidly. Many avian species will become extinct in the next couple of decades.

Some species, such as the blue-throated (*Pyrrhura cruentata*) and the golden-capped (*Aratinga auricapillus*) conures may not survive in their natural habitat for more than two or three more decades. Reason: their habitat will have been completely destroyed. If enough breeders concentrate on birds from areas where habitat destruction is especially serious, it is likely that in a few years there will be larger captive stocks of many more species than there are birds surviving in their natural habitat.

Christoph Imboden wrote, "... captive breeding of a threatened species must be part of a comprehensive species recovery program encompassing (as appropriate) habitat protection and restoration measures, plans for re-introduction, scientific monitoring, awareness campaigns, and legislative action; and it should command the full



Yellow-shouldered subspecies of the blue-fronted Amazon (*Amazona aestiva xanthopteryx*)



NeNe or Hawaiian goose



Cuban conure

support of the government of the country of origin.’

I might have modified the statement and said, “*Ideally*, captive breeding of a threatened species *should* be part of a comprehensive species recovery program . . .”.

As matters now stand, there are far more threatened bird species than there are “species recovery programs.” As Dr. Imboden pointed out, recovery programs are expensive and time consuming. There is never enough money or personnel to assist all of them with formal programs. Obtaining formal support from the appropriate government is hard to do. We think the support *should* be forthcoming because birds are “our” priority. The hard fact is governments of most tropical countries have little interest in conservation.

Governments are usually not at all concerned that another species is on the verge of extinction because more rainforest has been destroyed. Governments *are* interested in the short-term financial gain forest destruction brings. In many countries, the people are literally starving. Neither the govern-



Cuban Amazon

ments nor the people understand the apparent luxury of conserving forests when land could be used to produce food.

Worldwide Forest Destruction

The annual rate of deforestation, worldwide, is too vast for the mind to comprehend. Already half a *billion* hectares (a hectare is 2.471 acres), have been destroyed, leaving 1.1 billion hectares of standing forest. Costa Rica, for example, has 16,000 sq. km of forest cover left. Those forest areas are being destroyed at the rate of 4% per year. Nigeria's 60,000 remaining square km of forest is going at 5% and Thailand's 83,000 sq. km of forest is going at the rate of 2.9% per year.

Enormous sections of rainforest have already been destroyed. In 1978, an area of over 30,000 square miles (half the size of the state of Florida) was deforested in Brazil, to make way for cattle ranches. The meat derived was used to supply hamburger to fast food outlets in the United States. The full extent of deforestation in Brazil wasn't even known until 1987 when satellite images were obtained.

Impacts on Man and Birds

Deforestation on such scales will have catastrophic effects on the human race because of alteration of climate that will occur (the "greenhouse" effect). Ultimately, such deforestation will cause extinction of most species of parrots in the wild, because few species can survive without forests.

I believe Dr. Imboden has overlooked two very important points. One: the expertise and two: the experience of aviculturists — most notably private individuals — has provided a fund of knowledge which would have and, in some cases, has been invaluable to government-funded "researchers" involved in the captive breeding of endangered species. Too often such government workers have been totally without knowledge of aviculture. Even worse, they have lacked the wit or wisdom to consult with those who have been successful in breeding closely related species. Fortunately, some government-sponsored programs are now consulting with or actually employing aviculturists, or zoo personnel. How Dr. Imboden can dismiss the work of aviculturists in breeding endangered species, "unless it is part of an integrated program," is not understandable. Surely, it is better to have a good reserve in aviculture, whether or not it is part of such a program, than to

have no reserves at all.

For example: the Cuban Amazon (*Amazona leucocephala leucocephala*), a bird, native to and found only in Cuba. This bird was once widespread over the island. Deforestation has reduced its habitat to a few locations. In 1980, the Department of Zoology of Havana Zoology Institute contacted Ramon Noegel in Florida. Noegel has been the most successful captive breeder of the Cuban Amazon. He has now raised the species to the fourth generation. Advice was sought to assist in a government breeding program for the Cuban Amazon, as well as for the endangered Cuban conure (*Aratinga euops*).

As of this writing, there has been no success in the governmental program in breeding either species. Fortunately, there are a few Cuban conures in aviaries in eastern Europe. It should be possible to draw on these aviary-maintained birds to ensure success of the governmental breeding program, should the Cuban conure become extinct in the wild. Based on present knowledge, the Cuban conure now has a viable population in but one province of Cuba. Clearly, there is a possibility that the species will become extinct in the wild.

Due to the interest and skill of some aviculturists, good captive breeding stocks of certain endangered species now exist. These stocks could be drawn on in the unlikely event suitable habitat becomes available so birds can be re-introduced to the wild. Importantly, such breeding stocks have been produced at no cost to any government.

Dr. Imboden has stated, "The purpose of establishing a captive breeding program is to use the progeny as a source for eventual re-introduction into the wild when factors threatening the species' survival have either been removed or brought under control."

Such thoughts appear to be sheer fantasy! In eight out of ten cases, the significant factor in a species' decline has been loss of habitat. It is unrealistic to believe adequate habitat will be restored, except in very exceptional circumstances.

I can concur with Dr. Imboden's comment, "most advocates of captive breeding of endangered species readily agree today with the aim of the eventual release of captive-bred birds. In fact, it is rather worrying how indiscriminately this argument is now used by many institutions and individuals to justify their captive breeding



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programs, when they obviously have no conception of the enormous difficulties involved in a successful reintroduction.'

Reintroduction

Reintroduction of species to the wild may be possible in a few very special cases, such as the California condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*). Other situations could involve uninhabited islands which can be made safe and suitable for release within the range of the species.

Some tropical countries are creating reserves of certain species. Theoretically, it should be possible to reintroduce selected species to the wild. It has proved to be no easier to protect birds from hunting and trapping in such reserves than was the case in the original habitat.

Another factor has to be born in mind. Even if suitable environments for re-introduction were re-created, birds which have been bred in captivity for several generations may have been altered in subtle ways. These changes may make them unfit for survival in the wild. The NeNe (Hawaiian goose), (*Granta sandwicensis*), is a case in point.

Genetic weakness, due to inbreeding, may occur in species with a reduced gene pool. On the other hand, some waterfowl species, such as the Laysan teal (*Anas platyrhynchos*) have been saved from extinction by captive breeding, stemming from a very small number of individuals. It is believed the entire surviving population of this species stems from a single pair.

How can all of these points apply to American aviculturists? Many aviculturists have some potentially endangered species in their aviaries, even though as individuals you may believe you are maintaining *only* common birds. Take the blue-fronted Amazon (*Amazona aestiva*). This is a familiar species. It has been imported from Brazil (more recently from Bolivia and Argentina), to the United States in great numbers. There was a time when large scale trade in a certain species could continue indefinitely. This is no longer the case. There are now few tropical birds whose habitat has not been touched by man. Today, a large volume of trade in common species or even a small volume of trade in species with restricted distribution areas, when combined with habitat destruction, is a recipe for extinction of the involved species.

A recent report on the status of the

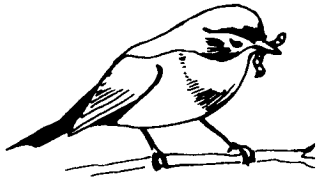
blue-fronted Amazon in the western Chaco of Argentina shows the species is considered to be a pest in six of the ten provinces in which it is known to occur. This status is ascribed despite the fact there has been no extensive or reliable estimates of damage to crops caused by this Amazon. There are no restrictions on the number of the species that can be hunted or traded. For example, in the provinces of Salta and Formosa (in the extreme north) in Argentina, exploitation of the forests has expanded so much in this century that only a few large tracts remain. In eastern Salta the population of the blue-front is believed to have been declining for 50 years. Decreases have resulted from the building of railroads, intensive timber extraction and cattle ranching. Traders suggest that in a forested area (90,000 hectares) in the eastern part of Salta, 3,000 young blue-fronts have been removed every year. Most of these birds have been shipped out of the country. Comparable declines must be occurring in other areas outside Brazil, although proof is difficult to come by, since similar studies have not been conducted. Commercial trade is a major factor in the rapid decline of the species. With habitat destruction and trade must come a decline in the species. For example, as the forests are exploited, trappers will be plundering all wild nests that can be located. This means few young birds will survive to breed, so the overall number of the species will decline. This sad state of affairs is repeated for many other species.

What can *we* do about all this? First: we must build up self-sustaining stocks of more and more species so plundering of the remaining wild populations is unnecessary. Some of you may not realize what a fortunate position you are in compared with aviculturists in most other countries. Enormous numbers of a very large range of tropical species enter the United States every year. There are more breeders here than in any other country worldwide. There are more avicultural magazines, advertising domestically-bred stock of many species, and there are more sources to contact, including specialist groups, such as the Amazona Society. An American aviculturist can, if he or she tries hard enough, find any species which exists within aviculture, except some of the *most* highly endangered.

Contrast this situation with the northern European countries such as Norway, or with Australia whose legislation severely restricts species avail-

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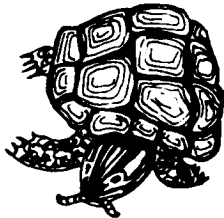
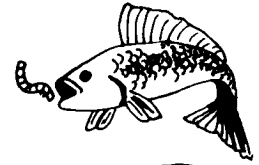
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able. Australian breeders visiting the United States are overwhelmed by numbers and species of parrots. In Australia, a blue-and-yellow macaw is virtually the equivalent of a Lear's macaw which, in the United States, is a great rarity valued at thousands of dollars. American aviculturists have had it too easy for too long and tend to take for granted the diversity of species, especially those that are low-priced.

The American breeder is in a far better position to play a role in conservation than would be the breeders in any other country. This will be true *only* if he or she thinks carefully about the species being produced, makes long term plans and ceases to act as though wild-caught birds will continue to pour into quarantine stations for evermore.

Some American breeders may have grown tired of warnings issued over the past decade. The warnings have been to the effect that large-scale import trade cannot continue for very much longer, yet you see no evidence that the trade is, in fact, diminishing. You may be assured, the blue-fronted Amazon is no isolated example. How many blue-fronts are currently being raised in the United States?

The 1985 census of the Amazona Society indicated the number is very low, even allowing for the fact that not all Amazon breeders are members. The Argentine sub-species discussed earlier on is *xanthopteryx*. The census showed members held 152 birds. 118 Were known to have been wild-caught. These 152 birds produced seven young in 1986. This is less than 5% and that would represent the annual mortality rate of the species in a good year.

All American aviculturists *must* contribute towards increasing the percentage of domestically-raised young — whatever species you keep. The most efficient way to do this is to

specialize. Specialists are the backbone of aviculture. The breeding success rates of specialists, adjusted as a percentage of the birds kept, is far higher than that of the keeper of one or two pairs. If the specialist concentrates on one species, rather than one group such as, for example, lorries, phenomenal successes can be obtained.

Just one example: Tom Ireland almost certainly produces more black-headed caiques (*Pioites melanocephala*) than all of the other breeders in the United States put together. Listen with care to Ireland's advice. Listen to the other specialists. Follow the advice such experts give you. Such knowledge and experience can help all of us in reaching a goal of producing dozens, maybe hundreds of young birds. If we achieve this goal, no educated person would even consider buying wild-caught birds.

A question asked, "But if we are so successful, when the trade in wild-caught birds ceases, there can be no guarantee that wild nests will not be plundered."

This, unfortunately, is absolutely true. It is also another issue. Some of the larger species which are traded now, such as Amazons and macaws, are also traditional food items. Bird keepers cannot be held responsible for losses in the wild attributable to such situations. Aviculturists are responsible for decisions made as between buying a wild-caught bird versus a domestically-raised bird. Given such choices, it is little wonder that some conservationists classify aviculturists as consumers of the world's avifauna when buyers choose wild-caught birds because they are cheaper. We *must* try to educate others to the importance of buying birds from breeders.

Pets Versus Breeders

Many breeders here in the United States are doing a magnificent job of supplying endangered and/or potentially endangered species, such as macaws and cockatoos, as pet birds. We need *more* breeders, especially those prepared to specialize in one species or group. Macaws, as a group, are diminishing in numbers in the wild due to habitat losses. Charles Munn has been studying the breeding biology of these birds in the Manu National Park in Peru. There is no similar work being carried out in any other region. This may be considered as surprising until one realizes the difficulties involved. Macaws nest very high above the ground. Munn had to use climbing

harnesses and ropes, supplemented by shooting lead weights. Another hazard encountered at 115 to 150 feet (35 to 45 meters) above the ground — Munn found himself surrounded by thousands of bees and wasps.

The low breeding rates of the macaws, developed by Munn during the course of his study, were dismaying. Of 20 blue-and-yellow macaws (*Ara ararauna*) observed, only two pair were nesting. The study was undertaken during the height of the breeding season. It has to be noted that the apparently non-reproducing birds were not accompanied by immatures. Three nests of the blue-and-yellow macaw, three of the green-winged (*Ara chloroptera*) and two of the scarlet macaw (*Ara macao*) were studied, i.e., eight in all. Young were fledged from only three nests — a total of five young from eight pairs. Obviously, no firm conclusions can be drawn from such a small sample. It is Munn's belief that reproduction rates of macaws in captivity may be 10 to 30 times faster than in the wild.

Don't Hybridize Your Macaws

All the large macaws except the blue-and-yellow and the green-winged are already on Appendix 1 of CITES, i.e. classified as endangered. It may not be too long before the remaining two species follow. Aviculture cannot afford to produce hybrids from birds which will almost certainly be totally extinct in the wild in the 21st century. Aviculturists *must* use the birds in our care in a more responsible manner. Otherwise we are as guilty of their destruction as the man who fells a macaw nesting tree or the native who removes a youngster from a nest for the cooking pot.

Funds

Last, but by no means least, there is yet another way in which aviculturists, breeders and non-breeders alike, can play a part in the conservation of endangered species. That way is to participate in the raising of funds for study. Without funds nothing much can be achieved. Conservation activities cost money.

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NOTICE

As of January 1, 1989, all correspondence intended for the editor of the *Watchbird* should be mailed directly to the AFA business office. Send to the Editor, c/o AFA, P.O. Box 56218, Phoenix, Arizona 85079-6218.