

# Guyana

## land of green mansions

by Kathy McGregor, Littleton, Colorado

Several months ago, I had the opportunity to visit Guyana. I fell in love with this very primitive and magical country with its vast rain forest, abundant bird and animal life, and the shy, proud Amerindian people.

Guyana is located on the northeastern shoulder of the South American continent. It is bounded by Suriname on the east, Venezuela on the west, and Brazil on the south and southwest. There are over 790,000 people in Guyana, but approximately one half of them live in the capital of Georgetown, so the interior of the country, which is largely rain forest, is sparsely populated. English is the official language so you might think there should be no trouble understanding the Guyanese, but they talk very fast, with a heavy Caribbean accent, so you have to become attuned to the speech

patterns.

My husband, Jock, had been working on a project in a remote part of the country located about four hours from Georgetown by road. He kept telling me about the raucous calls he heard from the macaws flying overhead as he worked in the jungle. Each time he came home from a trip, he would describe the different Amazons and macaws he had seen and how magnificent the jungle was. Even though I knew that jaguars, anacondas and caiman were just a few of the other inhabitants of the jungle, we decided we would try and arrange a vacation trip into the jungle so I could see the birds in the wild for myself.

The kind of trip we had in mind could not be arranged through a travel agent, so an English lady who had lived in Guyana for 27 years arranged the adventure for us. She not only knew the workings of the country but also had lived 10 years in a remote area of the jungle with her anthropologist husband, raising their seven children in an open hut. She is one of the most fascinating people I have ever met and we quickly became friends. I learned to have the utmost respect for this lady who knew so many of the Amerindian people and so much about the jungle and the country that she loved and that was now her home.

We were very excited about the adventure that had been planned for us, but we were not exactly sure what to expect because all we had requested was to see some of the remote areas of the country with particular emphasis on the bird life. The trip that our friend had planned for us was beyond our wildest dreams and included visiting remote villages, witnessing the nightly gathering of thousands of Scarlet Ibis and visiting the magnificent Kaieteur Falls.

Since there are very few roads and little infrastructure once you leave the main cities, arrangements had been made for a private plane to take us to the interior and then we would travel by foot, boats, and canoes. Our friend

asked if we were good swimmers because if one of the boats should capsize in the river, we would have to swim as fast as possible to shore. Her explanation went something like this.

"You need to swim fast because the caiman (a type of alligator) rush into the water when they see you and once they get hold of you, they take you to the bottom of the river and drown you. However, if an anaconda should attack you, be certain that you hold its jaws open with both hands because as long as it does not get a grip on you, you will be fine."

She closed by saying that she had already contacted the local police to check out her gun to take on the journey!

Needless to say, after this, Jock and I wondered if we were really prepared for the trip.

It was with some trepidation that the next day Jock and I, the English lady, and two of her grown children who had been born in the jungle, a friend of theirs from England, our Guyanese "host," and an Amerindian guide boarded the eight seater twin-engine plane bound for the northwest part of the country. It was so awe-inspiring to see the miles and miles of lush "green mansions" which are home to the four main native Amerindian tribes — the Arawaks, the Warraus, the Caribs and the Wapisianas — and the more than 728 different species of birds, 198 mammal species, and 137 reptile species. From above, the jungle looked like an endless bright green carpet interspersed with taller dark green treetops closely resembling heads of broccoli.

Our first stop was at an Amerindian village in the Moruka region. Being Saturday, it was market day and people had gathered from all over the area. As there are very few roads, the many rivers and marshes in the area act as waterways connecting the villages and small settlements, so most of the people get around by canoe or motorboat.

The market was colorful, noisy, and lively with active trading of food, cas-



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sava bread, clothing, and miscellaneous other items including live birds. I had come to Guyana to see the birds in the wild, and it was heartbreaking that the first birds I saw were stuffed in small wire cages. On one boat there were two small cages of birds. One was crammed with Orange-winged, Mealy or White-eyed and Yellow-crowned Amazons. The other small wire cage held a single Blue and Gold Macaw. We brought our video camera with us and when Jock began filming the birds, the owner jumped in the boat and sped away. One of our guides told us that it was illegal to trap the birds during the breeding season, which it was at the time. While the law obviously wasn't and couldn't be enforced in these remote locations, the boat owner with the birds wasn't keen on being filmed with the birds in his possession.

At the same market we saw a 12" by 8" wire cage with four adult Green-winged Macaws in it. The birds were lying on their backs or crouched down on their feet squawking and fighting because the cage was not high enough for them to stand up in. I asked a group of Amerindians who

owned the birds, and a small boy of about eight years old claimed them. When I asked him where he got them, he would not answer; and when I asked how much the birds cost, he still did not answer. He did, however, tell me that he caught the birds by lassoing them out of the trees. We spent some time touring the market and surrounding area and returned to find the boat with the other birds back with the cages covered with palm leaves. We could not believe that so many birds were waiting to be sold in a small rural market in the middle of nowhere. I can only speculate as to how long the birds had already been in captivity, or worse yet, how many more days they would be kept in the small cages. There was no possible way for them to eat or drink in such cramped conditions. Later we found out that most of these birds are taken by traders downriver to the coast.

For the next part of our journey, we transferred to dugout canoes and wound our way through increasingly smaller and smaller rivers and streams as the jungle canopy closed over our heads to visit several remote Amerindian settlements. Many times during

the course of the day we saw and heard a variety of Amazon parrots, toucans and Green-winged Macaws.

One of the most unforgettable memories I have is seeing the majestic Green-winged Macaws flying overhead. You always knew they were coming because of their raucous calls echoing across the sky — first one, always followed by its mate. That evening when we had stopped at a small camp beside the Barama River, we spotted two Green-wings in a huge cashew pear tree. We had been talking in the area for about 20 minutes before Jock looked up and saw them. They were probably 15 feet above us hidden in the large, green leaves and invisible except for their bright red heads which resembled the red blossoms of the tree. We must have filmed them and walked all around and under the tree for 30 minutes but the birds never flew away. However, they kept a watchful eye on us between their feeding and preening. Occasionally we would hear the ever-so-familiar sound of a friendly squabble, but the birds were settled in for the evening. It amazed me that these brilliant red, green, and blue

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"monsters" were camouflaged and hidden from view except for their heads which could have been mistaken for one of the red flowers that so many of the trees in the jungle grow. It also made me aware of how incredibly trusting the gentle giants were and how easy it would have been to throw a rope up around one of them and then later lure the mate down.

That night we stayed at a remote camp on the banks of the Waini River. To our delight, we were befriended by one of the camp's mascots — a long-haired black monkey named Jacko. What a mischievous character! The Amerindians watched Jacko when we arrived to see who he approached and who he allowed to touch him, because they said he had a "sense" about people which they trusted. Luckily we were all accepted by Jacko.

We were also accepted by the local "residents" of the river — the Piranha. We were assured that as long as we had no open wounds, the carnivorous fish would not attack. The day was hot and the river very inviting, so we swam without incident in this stretch of the river as our hosts had for the last 20 years. Nonetheless, we were strongly warned not to swim at daybreak or dusk when the fish were feeding.

Thankfully, we missed out on one of the other camp "visitors" by just a few days. A 15 foot anaconda had wandered in for a little company. When the local wildlife experts were called in to capture and relocate the snake, they were somewhat puzzled by the large swelling on it. They later reported that the "swelling" turned out to be 70 baby anacondas!

Early the next morning, coming from one of the houses we heard the sounds of a macaw screaming. We went up to investigate, but of course, "No one had any macaws there and had not seen any"! A short time later, we were preparing to leave that camp and travel down the river with our guides. As I got into the boat, I noticed a bag up under the front of the boat. In the bag was a Green-winged Macaw — the same one we had been hearing for the last two mornings. After seeing them flying free and thinking of all of the poor, pathetic creatures I have seen in the States that could not cope with living in captivity, I broke down and began to cry. Our

guide asked the man who had captured the bird to take it off the boat. Suddenly an additional bag appeared from the back of the boat with another Green-wing which was probably the mate. Apparently, the birds had been captured in the area a few days earlier and were being transported on our boat first and then taken by another boat to the coast. This meant that these birds were to be entrapped in these bags for probably two more days with no food or water.

Although we had ample evidence in a very short period of time of the thriving trade in birds despite the fact that it was breeding season and, therefore, technically illegal, it also became apparent during the rest of our stay that not all of the macaws and Amazons that were caught by the Amerindians were kept in small cages ready for sale. In fact, as we continued on our journey through Guyana, we came upon family after family that had the parrots as pets. One family not only had a vicious, small terrier-type dog that charged at our legs with his fangs bared, but also a Green-winged Macaw that came running out of the open hut, strutting around the perimeter of his domain ruffling his head feathers in warning! His fellow flock mates — Orange-wing and Mealy Amazons — kept their distance, preferring to play with the small children they were accustomed to. After the dog settled down in the tall grass with a watchful eye on us, the macaw went back into the hut to wander amongst the babies and Amazons.

While on the river, it was not unusual to see canoes with entire families in them, including the family dog and pet macaws or Amazons sitting on the edge enjoying the scenery. It was one of the most beautiful images I have seen. These people have lived with the antics of the Amazons and the beauty of the macaws for years and years; and they too, like us, keep the parrots as pets. Not all of them catch the birds to sell. The ones who do cannot be blamed because the Amerindians are a very poor people and trading in parrots is one way they can provide additional income for their families. When I told one of them that hopefully they will stop catching the birds, he was amazed because he said there were thousands still in the jungles. The next day we had the opportunity to witness the truth of this

statement when we visited "Parrot Island."

"Parrot Island," located near Bartica at the confluence of the Mazaruni and Essequibo Rivers, is a place where Amazons flock to roost. The parrots return every evening at dusk to this island where we literally saw and heard thousands of them. It was very difficult to identify them in the air and in the trees, but I suspect they were Orange-winged, Mealy, and Yellow-crowned Amazons. The locals say that when they are nesting, they stay in the jungle with their babies and do not flock with the others to the island. Anyone who has an Amazon as a pet can imagine the noise when 10,000 Amazons get together!

While we were visiting "Parrot Island," some of the local boatmen told us of another English woman who had many macaws and animals living at her wildlife preserve. Eventually we were able to talk them into taking us to visit her. It was all arranged — they would pick us up at our camp at 5:00 a.m. the next morning. So the next morning we sat by the river in the dark, in the rain, waiting. By 6:30 a.m., we were still sitting there waiting. Eventually someone made contact with them by radio, and they relayed they would be on their way immediately. Because this was the "way of the land," we could not get too upset. They did arrive with the boat and had had to locate a man with a special license to take the boat up one of the most dangerous rivers in the country — the Mazaruni. This was the first and only time we had life jackets to wear and were advised to put them on and to take our shoes off. Only a few minutes into the journey, I realized why! Not only were there large boulders barely covered by the water which the driver knew the location of like the back of his hand, but also rapids. My white knuckles reminded me of the many white-water rafting trips we had taken back in Colorado, but this time we were in a wooden boat with a 250 horsepower motor opened full throttle . . . going upstream!

Eventually we made it to our destination. The lady and her teenage son were the only ones left at the park. She had not been able to draw enough interest to her wildlife preserve to continue paying the people who had initially helped her run it,





*This is the home of an English lady who has lived in a remote area of the jungle with her anthropologist husband for ten years, rearing their seven children. Her knowledge of the jungle and the Amerindian people was exceptional.*



*These four Green-winged Macaws are destined for the busy Saturday market at an Amerindian village. These cramped quarters are horrible for these macaws caught for the bird trade.*



*Many captured birds arrive at the market place brought in from the interior by small boat. Among the species seen on this newly arrived motorized boat is a cage full of Orange-winged Amazons.*

*Many of the local villagers have pets taken from the wild. This family has a tame Orange-winged Amazon that travels with them along the river.*

Photos by Kathy McGregor





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and then someone had stolen her generator. She only had a pair of Blue and Gold Macaws, a Hawk-headed Parrot, and several Amazons left. All of the other birds and animals had left to forage with their own species because she was no longer able to provide enough food for them. She was successful, though, in handraising some of the tiny neonates that the locals had found and brought to her to care for. She told of three tiny baby toucans that had apparently been abandoned or fell from the nest. After successfully handfeeding them, the babies eventually started flying off in the direction of the wild toucans' calls because she did not have much food left to feed them. Initially, they would be gone for an hour or two at a time and then return. Each time they stayed away longer and longer until they no longer came back. The wild toucans had taught the babies how to obtain food and live in the jungle. So, quite by accident, she was actually able to reintroduce handfed babies back into the wild!

She remembered seeing flocks of the Blue and Gold Macaws flying more than 20 years ago, but now it was very rare to see a Blue and Gold Macaw in the area. She surmised that many had been captured for the pet trade and others moved out of the area because of the danger of being caught. Her plan to set up a wildlife preserve area for the wild birds and animals was a wonderful thought; and with the increasing interest in "ecotourism," I hope she will succeed.

We ended our magnificent journey at Kaieteur Falls, one of the world's most impressive waterfalls with a vertical drop of some 741 feet, making it five times higher than Niagara Falls. In 1989, President Hoyte of Guyana, on behalf of his nation, set aside almost one million acres of Guyana's rain forest to expand Kaieteur National Park. This is one of the largest conservation efforts in Latin America, and the area still remains virtually untouched by man and is surrounded by nature. The lush ferns and vines and delicate orchids and wild pineapples share the primitive jungle with the howler monkeys, giant lizards, birds, jaguars and snakes — just to name a few. When we visited the area, we were the only people there at the time, and to say it was a breathtaking sight is truly an understatement.

Since my trip, people have asked me what my opinion is now as a bird owner and breeder. Was I going to continue to breed birds and keep them in cages after seeing the birds in the wild? Seeing those macaws flying free and also the ones captured in the small cages made me realize how much more important it is for captive breeding to continue. There are countless numbers of wild birds that have already been caught, brought out of the jungle, and are now sitting in cages in people's houses — forgotten. These are the birds that we must find mates for and set up in captive breeding programs so that sufficient domestically raised babies are available. Then, hopefully, there will no longer be a market for wild-caught birds.

People have enjoyed the companionship and antics of exotic birds as pets for hundreds and perhaps thousands of years and will continue to do so. Banning or severely restricting the importation of wild-caught birds is only one part of the equation. Without the simultaneous promotion and encouragement of domestic breeding programs, demand will outstrip supply and prices will rise bringing increased smuggling as well as the associated disease and mistreatment.

Not only should captive breeding be encouraged, but breeders should also try to be responsible about who they sell their babies to and educate potential owners about their feeding, care, and emotional needs. We must strive to try and make these birds' lives in captivity good ones, and that is where the human education regarding birds' emotional and physical needs comes in.

Hopefully, we will be able to visit Guyana soon. I came away from the jungle with a very warm feeling for the country and the Amerindian people and the wonderful friends we made there. It is truly a magnificent and magical country and a place I will never forget.

Since our trip, the tourism board of Guyana has published an excellent brochure which contains several addresses of local companies who are now promoting trips to remote areas of Guyana as part of their development program for ecotourism. For more information you can write to: Tourism Association of Guyana Limited, P.O. Box 101147, Georgetown, Guyana. ●