American Federation of Aviculture Inc.

Conservation News

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The American Federation of Aviculture, Inc. (AFA) is a not for profit organization dedicated to all aspects of aviculture.

The AFA has provided funds through our small grants programs to benefit wild-bird conservation and the study of their biology since the mid 1970's.

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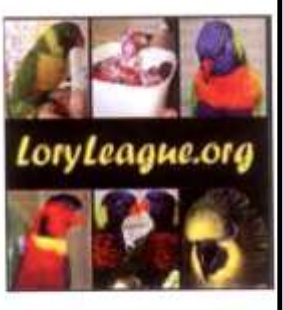

Nature & Wildlife Art
By Lyrae Perry

"Art is a spiritual practice with the power to connect each of us with all of creation."

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Guardian of the yellow-eared parrot murdered in Colombia

Pictures from ProAves

For more information on ProAves, see https://proaves.org/en/

Near the end of the 20th century, the yellow-eared parrot (*Ognorhynchis icterotis*) was thought to be extinct, as a result of habitat loss. Ninety percent of the cloud forest where the Yellow-eared Parrot lives, had been cleared for ranching, farming, and settlement.

In most areas where it is found, the Yellow-eared Parrot relies on the wax palm (*Ceroxylon quindiuense)* for its fruit, and to provide nest and roosting sites, and local tradition had people cutting down wax palms every year to obtain palm fronds to use in Roman Catholic Palm Sunday celebrations and processions. Additionally, the slow-growing palms were logged for wax and wood at unsustainable rates, and cattle ate young saplings and palm fruit. As the wax palm became increasingly scarce, so did the Yellow-eared Parrot.

Then in April 1999, a group of researchers sponsored by the American Bird Conservancy and Fundación Loro Parque discovered a group of 81 in one location in the Colombian Andes. After the bird's rediscovery, Fundación ProAves (which was formed around the same time to protect this species) began an intensive campaign to ban the use of wax palm leaves in religious ceremonies, encouraging celebrants to substitute the foliage of a commonly introduced palm instead. This campaign was also supported by the Vatican. Reduced demand for wax palm fronds and work by ProAves to plant palm saplings allowed these majestic trees to recover.

One of the ProAves employees engaged to work on the recovery of the Yellow-eared Parrot was a local young man, Gonzalo Cardona Molina. For over 20 years he worked for ProAves protecting the wax palms, helping provide community environmental education, helping conduct censuses and surveys of the natural history of the species, and establishing a nest box program to provide artificial nests to assist in the successful reproduction of this species. Loro Parque Fundacion was the main supporter of this work. By 2010, the Yellow-eared Parrot population had climbed to more than 1,000 individuals, and the species was downlisted from Critically Endangered to Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. ProAves reported the population count in December last year was up to 2,800.

By 2021, Gonzalo Cardona was coordinator of the ProAves Andean Parrot (Loros Andinos) Reserve, located in the La Yerbabuena village in Roncesvalles, Tolima. He was proud to say that he was "one of the people who knows the most of this species in Colombia." Furthermore, he had become an expert in the regeneration of the wax palm.

Sadly, on January 8, 2021, he was reported missing by ProAves. Shortly thereafter it was reported that he had been murdered. As of this writing, no further information has been released, but ProAves has said that his murder was because of his environmental activities. Fortunately, ProAves provides insurance, so funeral costs and his family's immediate expenses are covered. In addition, ProAves hopes to be able to employ Gonzalo Cardona's spouse. For more up to date information, go to ProAves Facebook page https://www.facebook.com/ProAvesCol.

The Big Red is Back!

The Iberá Project and the return of the Green-winged macaw to Argentina

Written in Spanish by Marianela Masat
Translated by Gabriela Vigo-Trauco, PhD
Edited by Donald J. Brightsmith, PhD.
Photo credits: Matías Rebak - Rewilding Argentina Foundation

The Green winged Macaw or *guaa pytá* as it was called by the Guarani peoples in northern Argentina, flies free again over Argentinean skies. It was originally distributed in the northern part of Argentina and disappeared due to habitat loss and trapping either to be used as food or as a colorful charismatic companion bird. We, the **Rewilding Argentina Foundation**, have taken on the task of bringing the species back after 150 years of extinction. The Foundation is dedicated to the restoration of key species and the environments they inhabit, with the main objective of recovering ecological functions lost through species extinctions. We work in various parts of the country where parts of the fauna have disappeared or their populations have notably declined. Such is the case of the Green-winged Macaw, which is considered a keystone species because by eating fruits and seeds it also disperses them and helps to "restore the forest".

The task of reintroducing the macaws began in 2014 in the Province of Corrientes and it has not been easy at all. In essence because there was not a pre-existing wild population so we had to start from scratch. We acquired the initial release cohort, a group of birds that will be the founders of the new population. They came from zoos, rescue centers, confiscations, and pet owners. After going through quarantine, the corresponding health checks, and time inside an acclimatization area at the field station, a total of seven individuals were released. A good start, but six of them disappeared or were depredated in the following weeks.

That first release was a huge disappointment and the team immediately understood that they had to learn from their mistakes. The released macaws had spent all or part of their lives in captivity, often in very small enclosures.

They had lost the ability to fly, feed on native fruits, flee from predators, and even recognize other macaws as their peers. From then on, the project was marked by a strong adaptive management process, that is, to fail, learn from mistakes, modified course of action, and act again. In that way, we started improving flying training techniques, incorporating food items from the wild, and also refining socialization, releases, and monitoring. We also became more meticulous in the bird recruiting process. Birds coming from private homes, who have been pets for most of their lives, were not accepted due to their high-level of tolerance and even affection to humans.

The Big Red is Back…(Con't)

However, we have the case of a male macaw that came from a family home from Buenos Aires that today, after a long and difficult training process, flies free and displays the best wild behaviors from all our reintroduced individuals. He stays away from people, eats 100% native fruits, has been paired with a female for four months and they are already showing reproductive behaviors.

Few macaws meet our requirements to be part of our release cohort. That is why each individual accepted receives maximum attention in each stage until becoming free and independent.

After passing the required quarantine and health checks, they are moved to our common areas where social behaviors are evaluated and perhaps some initial pair bonds are formed that will allow to release individuals as pairs. We also start adding wild food items to their daily diet. Then, the flying training process begins. It is a long and complicated set of training procedures followed by several trainers. We use flight tunnels to help the birds learn or regain flying abilities and also to eat from feeding stations. We work on predator recognition and escape techniques. Also, radio collars are placed on each individual before being transferred to the release site in the field.

Once in the field, they spend a week in pre-release enclosures, installed at 9 meters high at different points within the Iberá Park. So, the long process of soft-release begins. It consists on calling the macaws to movable feeding stations using whistles and back into the pre-release enclosure. Distance between feeding stations and pre-release enclosures is progressively longer to encourage them to fly longer distances and explore the mountains and soundings. When macaws begin to find native fruits and feed on them, the independence stage begins. It mainly consists of decreasing food rations in their pre-release enclosures to encourage them to search for their own food.

This stage can last from a few weeks for some individuals to several months for others. Throughout this phase, monitoring and tracking is very intense. When released macaws no longer depend on us to survive, they are considered independent and monitoring intensity decreases.

While we were monitoring reintroduced macaws that were already independent, we discovered that they were able to move up to 70 km from morning to afternoon and that little by little they started to visit neighboring villages where fruit trees and plants were available in families' houses. For this very reason we decided to go out immediately to talk with neighbors about those giant red birds that came to their houses screaming and ate from their shade trees or stopped to take a nap. Luckily, people had a very good response and started sending us photos and videos and even the geographic coordinates of their sightings. Some families were also beginning to recognize individuals by their marks and to learn their names which was extremely important because it helped us to expand our tracking and monitoring to places where our telemetry tracking systems didn't reach. The project became so popular that recently, one of the local settlements declared the "Great Red" as a natural monument and some people even come to the Iberá Park exclusively to see them.

The Big Red is Back…(Con't)

One of our most challenging times came in 2019 when one of the macaw pairs laid eggs inside a nest box that we had hung. We had started hanging different types of nest boxes and dealing with obstacles along the way such as swarms of bees colonizing boxes in a matter of seconds, other bird species like owls nesting in them, or very strong storms destroying the nest boxes. Finally, after trying many models and hanging techniques a macaw pair laid eggs in a box. It was the male who was the only survivor from our very first release cohort that was paired with a female that came from a zoo. Later in the season, a second pair also laid eggs in another box. Neither of these clutches were successful. In both cases, the eggs were crushed by their parents in a few days. We didn't know about macaw reproductive behavior then, so we were disappointed and understood there was still a lot to learn.

This is why we traveled to visit the Tambopata National Reserve in Peru, where The Macaw Society, run by Dr. Donald Brightsmith and Dr. Gabriela Vigo-Trauco had been working with macaws for more than 20 years and generating important information for projects that, like ours, were beginning to discover the complexity of macaw reproductive processes. I had the chance to go to Tambopata twice. Although the first time I stayed for just two days, it was the opportunity to see the magnitude of their research and I decided that we had to go back. Thus, in January 2020 we returned in the middle of the reproductive season. Together with the field leader Roshan Tailor, the veterinarian Sophie Herbert and the climbing technical support manager Carlos Huamani, we were able to learn to manipulate eggs and chicks while hanging in the trees, take biometric data from the chicks, deal with territorial parents, and many details that would later be key to face the next reproductive season in Iberá.

The Big Red is Back…(Con't)

In October 2020, one of the previous macaw pairs laid eggs again. This time, it seems they had learned from their mistakes the year before because they managed to hatch the eggs. This event marked a milestone that had repercussions at the local, national, and global level: the first red macaws had hatched in Argentina after 150 years of extinction. The joy and excitement of the whole team were at maximum. However, in the field, it was a bit tense for us, the three women who were in charge of the daily monitoring of the new hatchlings. From 5am to 8 pm, every day, we had somebody watching the nest from an observation point. We knew that those first hours were critical for the newly hatched macaws. Minute by minute, we were in contact with Dr. Gabriela Vigo Trauco, co-director of The Macaw Society, who was guiding us through those key hours. Our first task was to get the weight of the hatchlings so we would be able to make educated management decisions.

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In the following days, a mix of tragedy and hope were in the air. The second egg hatched but we found it dead in the nest on its first day of life. We performed a necropsy and found its crop full of sunflower seeds. Although we could not determine for sure that this was the cause of death, we knew that a diet based on sunflower seeds was not good for macaws and especially so for a new hatchling. So, we started to investigate and discovered that a local tourist operator had placed a small platform feeder on his lands. The nesting male was seen eating there and even was photographed there. We immediately contacted the owners and encouraged them to remove the feeder.

The Big Red is Back…(Con't)

This was just the first obstacle we needed to face during the chick period. Four days later, the third egg hatched so we had a brood of two chicks hatched five days apart. According to Dr. Vigo's findings from Tambopata, this meant very low, almost zero, chances of survival for the youngest chick. That is why we decided to intervene by providing supplemental food to both chicks as needed to increase their chances of survival. Our goal was to increase fledgling success with the ultimate goal to have new independent macaws added to our local population.

Marianela Masat (28) is from Guadalupe Norte, a small town located in the north of Argentina. She has a degree in Natural Resources and works in animal reintroduction projects since 2014. She has work with the giant anteater (*Myrmecophaga tridactyla*) , the pampas deer (*Ozotoceros bezoarticus*) and since 2018 with the Green-winged macaw (*Ara chloropterus*) as part of the Macaw Project from Iberá. She started as a part of the monitoring team and now she is the coordinator of the project.

Another big challenge was definitely to deal with first time parents and the fact that they did not display good parental behaviors. When chicks were around 25 days old, the nesting female (mom) started spending the night outside the nest. In Tambopata, our principal reference for macaw breeding behavior, females always stayed in the nest overnight; even with older chicks. We started to suspect that she may have lost interest in the brood.

A few days later, she stopped visiting the nest at all and just the male (dad) was feeding the chicks. Desperate, we installed a feeding station for him, called him with the training whistle and offered him food so he would have enough to supply his chicks. At the same time we went to look for mom. After an intense search we managed to find her. She was doing fine, interacting with the male, preening and vocalizing but staying far from the nest and not coming back to the nest to check on the chicks. Until one day, about a month later, she went straight inside the nest and attacked the chicks. We had an observer watching the nest all the time and had climbing equipment ready as well. So, we climbed the nest and rescue the chicks that luckily were not badly injured. After this, we realized that the female was putting at risk all the hard work we and the male had done. As a result we made the hard decision and trapped the female and placed her back in one of our pre-release enclosures. She is still there now and is doing just fine. We were shocked. Chicks had less than a month left in the nest and weighed almost as much as an adult, we were so close to have our very first wild chicks fledge! But it seems this pair had more to teach us.

We are monitoring the male, who still gets a large part of his daily intake from our feeding station, and is taking care of both chicks by himself. We are in constant communication with our colleagues from The Macaw Society and thanks to their advice and contributions we have overcome uncertain times and made educated decisions to help this brood succeed. Although, we don't know what other obstacles we will need to sort out along the way, we know that if those two chicks fledge they will have the chance to live with their parent as wild macaws.

The total reintroduced population in the Iberá area now has 15 macaws, so these two chicks signify a 15% increase and that makes all the sleepless months, long hours of nest monitoring, the hard field conditions, worries and uncertainty totally worth it. Our work is just another of the many aspects of the macaw project of Iberá. Meanwhile, the rest of the team will continue working on other project phases, from getting new individuals ready for release to tracking the ones already released. Our ultimate goal is to create a new self-sustaining macaw population so they will be able to fulfill their ecological function and help regenerate the woods in the great Iberá park.

For more information on the Iberá Project, go to http://www.proyectoibera.org/en/english

Aviculture Is Conservation Too…

Late Winter for Parrots at Loro Parque Fundación

By: Rafael Zamora Padrón
Scientific Director, Loro Parque Fundación

This is a very important time for our parrots. The beginning of the year is generally when our parrots prepare for a change, even though our temperatures are still cool. It will not be long before the daylight hours in European latitudes begin to increase. And longer days begin to cause a reproductive stir in most species.

Spring can still be cold at times at Loro Parque, and this is stressful for tropical species; we need to make sure they are comfortable. In most species of parrots, cold is not a major problem, but sudden changes in temperature are stressful, and protection against the elements is important. A roof and some covered sides on the aviaries are important to moderate sudden environmental changes.

Smaller species may need protected areas with ceramic or infrared lamps that allow them to choose their comfort zone by moving closer or further from the heat source as needed. Nest boxes, even in the off breeding season, offer shelter from the wind or on stormy days.

Crimson-bellied Conure (P. perlata)

Some species like the *Brotogeris* live in colonies and like to gather in groups to take advantage of the warmth of the group. We supply nestboxes or wide wooden huts for them.

Blue-crowned parakeet (*Thectocercus* (formerly *Aratinga) acuticaudata*)

And although many breeders may think that cold seasons are undesirable, there are a number of advantages for the parrots. They are resting and their hormonal activity is lower. Those that are a bit chubby can reduce the excess fat in their bodies thanks to the cold.

Now and in the next few months, thanks to the rains, a large variety of annual greens become available to us. Thus, annual herbs such as dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), chickweed (*Stellaria media*), alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*), watercress (*Nasturtium officinale*) or shepherd's purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*), and many others grow in abundance and they are exactly what our parrots need to begin to prepare for their upcoming breeding season. These herbs, flowers, and fruits also provide part of the environmental enrichment we offer our birds.

One must be careful in collecting these green foods if they grow outside of controlled gardens. They must be free of pesticides and any toxic elements. You also have to be sure of the type of plant you are collecting. Misidentification can cause digestive problems or worse. In Loro Parque Fundación we have gardens for our own crops that we grow without pesticides, so we can always supply quality, safe foods to our animals.

This is the time we try to form new pairs. The attitude of the males is generally less aggressive and winter favors mutual grooming and contact between parrots. During this time the pairs begin to prepare themselves for the longer and sunnier days that lead to a new generation of parrots at Loro Parque Fundación.

Red-masked Parrots, returned and released in Ecuador

Rafael Zamora Padrón
Scientific Director
Loro Parque Fundación

Nineteen red-masked parakeets have been able to return to the wild in Ecuador during 2020. Previous year, was possible to release twenty specimens of this highly sought after species in local markets into the wild, as a result of the collaboration between local authorities and our ally the Fundación Jocotoco. On account of its attractive coloring, this species of parrot is normally captured locally for exploitation on the illegal pet market. After they were seized by police officers, it was possible to recover them to avoid their death. Unfortunately, there is a high rate of mortality among these birds due to the unhealthy conditions in which they are kept, usually under very inhumane care. Arenillas Zoo housed thy confiscated birds in quarantine to ensure their full recovery. They were subsequently marked and identified with corresponding microchips and rings that will enable their tracking in the future to avoid them falling into poachers hands again.

Reintroduction processes like these are very complex matters. They require recovery phases, isolation, advanced handling, behavioral knowledge, appropriate facilities, veterinary checks, adaptation prior to release and complicated red tape to ensure licenses and project viability. Many months of collaborative work involving a multidisciplinary team based on a previously successful project the year before were required this time round.

Thirty-nine specimens have now been returned to the wild in a joint project undertaken by Loro Parque Fundación and Fundación Jocotoco, courtesy of the collaboration of zoos that have both the facilities and specialist staff to successfully complete actions of this type.

Two Hurricanes bring flooding disaster to Chajul Station in Mexico

By Rick Jordan

If you have read one or both of our previous AFA Conservation News bulletins, you are familiar with the biologist station located in Chajul, Mexico. This is the primary station where biologists study and assist in the conservation of the last remaining Mexican scarlet macaws.

In less than a month, two major hurricanes hit the coast of Guatemala, circling north and bringing torrential rains to the area where the river flows through Chajul, Mexico. The station sits high upon a hillside along the river, and has only been affected by the flooding river once in thirty years. Last year, 2020, the river made its record-breaking crest and flooded the entire biologists station at Chajul. The water level during crest was just below the eves of the rooflines.

This is devastating to a conservation station that relies heavily on donation money and grant money to operate. All electronic kitchen appliances such as refrigerators and freezers were destroyed. There is no power company electrical service to the station; it relies on solar panels and batteries to collect electricity for daily use. This system has to be completely redone and new storage batteries will need to be replaced. This combined with all the mattresses, bedding, towels, climbing equipment, and everyday furniture will have to be evaluated as the sun dries the things that could be salvaged.

Biologists covered in mud evaluate the damages at the Chajul Station, 2020

Flooding (Con't)

Biologist Rodrigo Leon manages to save the Inca egg incubators and brooders from rising waters.

After the water receded, the kitchen of the Chajul Station was devastated. Most of the electrical appliances have to be removed, and the propane stove has to be completely restored. Mud and debris left behind was over a foot deep. It may take months to get back to normal again.

Flooding (Con't)

Volunteers and biologists had to row boats from town, across the river, and into the rain forest to get to the flooded station. Many biologists from the numerous universities in Mexico, and a few in Europe, study here in Chajul. The station provides housing and food for students to study a vast number of Mexican species including, scarlet macaws, tapirs, jaguars, peccary, butterflies, hummingbirds, tropical trees and plants, toucans, crocodiles, and more. The station is important to the people of Mexico and to the understanding of a fast-disappearing habitat along the southern-most border with Guatemala.

Flooding (Con't)

It is times like these when we need to call upon our humanity and try to assist those that are most in need. The people that are fighting to keep wild scarlet macaws flying free in southern Mexico are heros. They fight off poachers. They save nestlings that would normally die. They fledge new generations into the remaining forest of southern Mexico. They collect data to assist anyone coming to the fight behind them. But today, they are fighting to keep the faith as a river challenges them to a different type of battle.

During the floods, the biologists could not do much about the river, but they had a flock of their "fans" cheering them on as the water began to recede. The birds previously raised and released at the station come back regularly, often bringing another generation of scarlet macaws, raised in the wild, with them. Any aviculturist looking for the connection between what you do, and what biologists do for wild birds, need only look to the rooftop in this photo to see that aviculture IS conservation too.

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Visit us on the web at: WWW.AFABIRDS. org

Belize Bird Rescue

https://www.belizebirdrescue.com

Phone: (+501) 610-0400

Belize Bird Rescue (BBR) is Belize's only multi-species avian rescue and rehabilitation facility. It is a licensed, non-governmental, non-profit organization that enables the Belize Government's Forest Department to enforce the Belize Wildlife Protection Act by providing an appropriate, mandated facility for the sanctuary and/or rehabilitation and release of confiscated, injured, orphaned, abandoned, or problem birds. It also provides resources and knowledge support to local conservation organizations and facilitates overseas and in-house training for Forest Department members, for Belizean veterinarians, and for Belize Bird Rescue staff and interns.

A main focus of the organization is the rehabilitation for release of wild-caught psittacines confiscated from the illegal local pet trade. Additionally, the organization rescues and rehabilitates injured and orphaned resident and migratory birds of all species, and provides sanctuary or long-term care for non-releasable birds. Along with the Belize Forest Department, BBR helped develop a program for captive parrots to provide a mechanism for parrots already in captivity to remain legally with their owners, provided that minimum standards of husbandry and care were followed.

Education is an important part of outreach to local Belizeans. The organization works to raise awareness of the need to protect Belize's birds through educational presentations, community outreach programs, publications, exhibitions and advertising.

BBR works in close cooperation with the Government of Belize Forest Department and with other NGOs and non-profit organizations in Belize including the Toledo Institute for Environment and Development, Programme for Belize, Belize Bird Conservancy and the Belize Audubon Society. Along with several other Belizean organizations and NGO's and the Belize Forest Dept, BBR is part of the Belize Yellow-headed Parrot Working Group (https://belizebirdconservancy.org/yellowheaded-parrot-project). They hand-rear chicks collected by other members of the project from at-risk nests. After fledging and developing independence, the young birds are soft-released back into monitored and protected release sites

Releasing rescued grown-up chicks in an area with many wild Yellow Heads eagerly awaiting new friends.

Belize (Con't)

BBR was founded in 2004 and is located in the capital city of Belmopan. It was initially funded by its founders. Following the award of NGO status in 2015, BBR now receives funding through private donations, crowd-funding, and grants. The annual operating budget is approximately US$85,000. Another source of funding is the Rock Farm Guest House (https://www.rockfarmbelize.com/) located only 3 miles from the capital of Belmopan. Unfortunately, it is temporarily closed for international visitors for the duration of the time of the covid-19 pandemic. Another important source of funding (and assistance in running the program), the intern program, where international interns pay to work at the facility, has also been put on hold until the pandemic has been suppressed and travel to Belize is again allowed.

The pandemic has resulted in very difficult situations for many people, businesses, and organizations, both in the USA and in other countries. Those of us who can should pitch in and help, even if just a little. Belize Bird Rescue is one of the worthy conservation organizations that is suffering. The author of this piece has donated to BBR and asks other readers to help the birds of Belize by making a (US tax deductible) donation using one of the methods available at https://www.belizebirdrescue.com/donate . There are a lot of Belizean parrots and other birds in sad situations that will thank you.

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