

The Golden Conures at the End of the Rainbow

By Tara Tuatai

My devotion to Golden Conures began several years ago. I was on a trip to the USA (from Australia) and visited a specialist bird store in Florida, Golden Cockatoo, which is near Miami. For the first time, I was able to see them up close and hold them. I was smitten, not just because they were beautiful but they were also gentle, intelligent and affectionate. At this time, I was spending a lot of time in bird groups online and had recently joined the Parrot Society of Australia and was attending meetings. My pampered companion birds were the catalyst that kept driving me to learn more and more about parrots which eventually led me to the World Parrot Trust. I had purchased several of their magazines at a PSOA “Parrots” conference and joined soon afterwards. To my utter shock and horror, I learned how many wild parrots were being cruelly stolen out of their natural homes to be sold as pets, including my dream bird, the Golden Conure. My captive bred parrots had given me the greatest joy of my life; now I was determined to give something back to help their wild cousins who were fighting for survival in a world that seemed determined to rob them of their homes either by poaching or deforestation.

What could I – a simple accounts clerk at the time possibly do? I was not a research scientist or biologist, no letters after my name, no political power and very little money. My main skill is “thinking outside the box”, a skill that allowed me to manipulate frequent flier programs to gain free airline tickets all over the world. Having seen



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most of the world over the past 20 years (literally every country except Libya and East Timor), I was well prepared to venture into the rainforests, savannahs and other habitats of wild parrots. Avian eco-tourism became my passion. I spent hours online researching the best places to see wild parrots and how I could get there using airline miles and hotel points for gateway cities so the bulk of my tourist dollars would go to the local communities. The eco-lodges, restaurants, tour operators, private guides (some of whom were converted poachers), handicraft artisans, boat drivers—all these people were benefitting from eco-tourism. They knew their jobs depended on getting more and more people to visit and see their precious native wildlife, especially the parrots.

In 2008, I launched my website www.featheredandfree.com, which was devoted exclusively to promoting conservation of wild parrots (and other birds who shared their habitats) through avian eco-tourism. It included a forum that later evolved into a popular Facebook group with members from all over the world. Sharing knowledge, inspiring people to visit parrots in the wild and support the local communities so they would realize their parrots are more valuable being left alone in the wild is the main focus of Feathered and Free. My own travels led me (with patient husband in tow) to exotic places such as the Pantanal, the Macaw clay licks of Peru, the Amazon, the Magoebaskloof of South Africa, Palawan in the Philippines, India, Nepal, Central America and several islands in the

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South Pacific and Caribbean. I am not a check-list type of birder who sees a bird, ticks it off a list and moves on. Once I find wild parrots, I like to spend time just watching them-enjoying their antics, admiring their beauty and observing their behaviour. I also love to photograph them. I have been privileged to see many different parrot species in the wild over the years such as Hyacinth and other large Macaws, Rimatarua Lorikeets, Alexandrines, Philippine “Katala” Cockatoos, lots of Conures and Amazons and of course my own Aussie neighbors-Galahs, Cockatoos, Lorikeets and Rosellas to name a very few.

The one species that I longed to see but had eluded me until now was of course the Golden Conure. Not for lack of trying, it was just that there was so little information on how an eco-tourist can visit them. I was able to find articles in back issues of PsittaScene by research scientists and biologists such as Toa Kyle, Thiago Orsi and Carlos Yamashita and an article by Glenn Reynolds who founded the Golden Conure Survival Fund in 1999. Google, usually an easy source of information for me, found very little about people who had seen Golden Conures as eco-tourists/birders. I found a trip report from a UK Birdtours group going back to 2003 and a blog by a knowledgeable Brazilian guide-Gil Serique, who is based in Alter do Chao near Santarem and who wrote about seeing the Golden Conures in the forests of the remote Cupari River.

All made for fascinating reading but none were practical for me to replicate in my own quest to see this beautiful bird. I wasn't able to spend months doing research like the biologists, I didn't have the money to hire a private boat and guide down the Cupari and didn't have the connections

to get into the other places reputed to have populations of Golden Conures-the Ferreira Penna Scientific Station at Caxiuanã National Forest and the Paragominas area south of Belem. Roelant Jonker of City Parrots sent me links of some other research articles and a survey by Sociedade Brasileira de Ornitologia and a link to a blog by a birding group in Joinville who claimed to have seen Golden Conures way outside their range in Joinville. If they were there, they were most likely escaped pets.

I finally got a break during an email conversation with Bradley Davis, owner of Birding Mato Grosso and a highly respected birding guide who specializes in birding tours to the Panatanal,

Chapada dos Guimaraes and Cristalino. Since I was planning to go there as well, I had been seeking his advice and started reading his website and discovered a trip report he wrote about a trip to Amazonia National Park near Itaituba in Sept 2010.

Finally! Recent practical information about how to

get to an area known to be a habitat of Golden Conures! He gave me the email of Maria Lucia Carvalho, director of the Amazonia National Park (later moved to Piauı́ -Parque Nacional Serra da Capivara). I had used Google Translate to communicate with her in Portuguese but luckily she spoke English and was happy to issue me and my husband, Ina with permits to visit the park and arrange for Gilberto Nascimento Silva, a park ranger, photographer and guide to be our guide. She even gave me detailed information about how to get to the park from Itaituba (car hire) and travel onwards to Santarem by boat. The pieces were falling into place, all that remained was to figure out how to get from Alta Floresta/Cristalino to Itaituba. The tour agency who managed



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Cristalino gave me the names of the bus companies and I quickly found their websites and schedules and was able to complete the itinerary.

My husband and I set off for Brazil on 10 Sept, 2012 with a plan to use rental cars to get to Linhares/Vale do Rio Doce (home of Blue-throated Conures), the Panatanal, Chapada dos Guimaraes and then a bus from Cuiaba to Alta Floresta to visit Cristalino Jungle Lodge, one of the world's greatest birding destinations. We were very successful in all these places and saw many parrots and other birds. Cristalino is in a spectacular setting surrounded by pristine Amazonian rainforest. The accommodation is in attractive, sustainable bungalows, there is a library, buffet meals and a bar with the best caipirinhas I had in Brazil. They have several well-qualified guides, which are assigned to people who arrive independently without a group and several boats to take us to trailheads on the river and best of all, two

Canopy Towers, which let you be either face level or above the forest canopy and get closer to the birds. Most tourists fly into Alta Floresta via Cuiaba but there are also several buses a day. My observations of this extremely well-run eco-lodge would be an inspiration later in the trip.

Three days later, we left Alta Floresta on a gruelling 20-hour bus ride that was mostly on unsealed roads to get to Itaituba. The website had said we would arrive around 2:30pm-ish. We didn't get in until after 4pm. I immediately tried to phone Gilberto but there was no answer. I thought it was his cell phone, it was actually his home phone but he was at his guard post in Urua and I waited an hour for his wife to get home, answer the phone and tell us via a translator that

he was waiting for us in Urua. We took a taxi to the car hire place but it was a Saturday evening and it was closed until Monday. Our only options to get to Urua were a bus at 11am or taxi. It was too late to go that evening, so we got a room at the Juliana Park Hotel and set an early alarm for the next morning. Despite having printed Google maps, it was really hard to communicate with the taxi driver who insisted on going to Ibama first as he was afraid to drive the 65 kilometers to Urua. The guard on duty at Ibama inspected our permits and assured the taxi driver it was OK to drive us there and gave him directions. The road went past the small airport, then turned into a rough dirt road. I was afraid the taxi driver would chicken out and turn back but he persevered and we got to Urua around 9am and were greeted by Gilberto who had heard us drive in.

Gilberto led us to the small bunkhouse that visitors stay in. It has 2 bedrooms, each with a single bed and two bunk beds, a central dining area, a kitchen with a gas cooker and a laundry tub outside. We dropped our stuff in one of the bedrooms, then Gilberto led all of us, taxi driver included to the Mirante, a lookout pavilion with a stunning view over the Tapajos River. Much to my delight, we saw our first parrot sighting of the



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day-White-eyed Parakeets as they swooped over the river and disappeared into the trees. The taxi driver seemed as enchanted as I was but reluctantly had to get back to work so we paid him and he took off. Gilberto doesn't speak English, but I had a few words of Portuguese and managed to communicate with him using lots of mime to fill in the gaps. He brought out a Portuguese-English dictionary that a former visitor had left behind which helped a lot. There was no fridge in the hut but Gilberto took our water

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bottles to put in the guards' fridge. The generator only operated for 3 hours around midday and 3 hours at dinnertime.

Maria had already told Gilberto that I really wanted to see Ararajubas (Portuguese for Golden Conure) but since we had arrived late, it wasn't likely we would see them that first day. He used a bird field guide-Avifauna Brasileira by Tomas Sigrist to point out what species we were seeing throughout our visit. I took photos of the parrot pages so I would later remember them all. I had been hoping to find the book in Sao Paulo later on but failed to do so. Gilberto took us on a very challenging (for us) hike on the Açaizal trail. I was excited and hopeful because I knew Bradley Davis had seen Vulturine Parrots here a couple of years ago but unfortunately we weren't so lucky. It's a 4.5 kilometre hike in primary rainforest, Gilberto had to hack away some branches that had fallen over the path and fashion impromptu walking sticks to get us past a slippery steep portion. We did see some small birds and a trogon but no parrots. We arrived back at Urua a couple hours later, dirty, exhausted and ready for lunch. There

are no restaurants or shops anywhere near Urua so you have to bring food from Itaituba. We brought tinned corned beef, cocktail sausages, rice, noodles and biscuits-nothing perishable. Let's face it, you don't come to Amazonia National Park for the cuisine!

After lunch we had siesta time as per usual for birders. Later we went back to the lookout because in the afternoon, lots of birds fly over the river and it's relatively easy to get photos of them against the river while in flight. I should point out that throughout this trip, most of the parrots we saw were in flight, very few were perched...and if

they were perched, they tended to take off as we approached. I'm actually glad they have this habit since there is a danger of poaching. They can't know which humans want to capture them, shove them into tiny cages and ship them all over the world and which humans just want a photo of them.

After our "gourmet" dinner, I took out my netbook and showed Gilberto some of the photos I had taken of other parrots we had seen on the trip. He brought over a portable HDD and showed me some of his photos taken in the area-some of Golden Conures. He also had videos of a Brazilian TV show that featured Amazonia National Park and had footage of Golden Conures. I borrowed his copy of Avifauna Brasileira so I could note down what species we saw. There were White-eyed Conures (*Aratinga leucophthalma*), Pearly

Conures, (*Pyrrhura lepida*), Santarem Conures (*Pyrrhura amazonum*), Tui Parakeet (*Brotogeris sanctithomae*), Blue-headed Parrot (*Pionus menstruus*), Short-tailed Parrot (*Graydidascalus brachyurus*), Festive Amazon (*Amazona festiva*); he also showed me various



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hummingbirds, toucans, kingfishers, tanagers and a trogon but I didn't get them all written down. I do have the feeling that some of them would be on many birders' life-lists though! My policy has always been "shoot first, ask questions later" with my camera of course! Power went out at 8pm so we crashed out, anticipating an early rise and hopefully Golden Conures in the morning.

The next day, we were up bright and early. We waited at the lookout until Gilberto came over and told us that we would have a better chance for Ararajubas if we moved closer to the road. Ina brought a couple of chairs and we sat there all

morning, me with the camera and 400mm lens, Ina with the binoculars. We did see quite a few parrot species and other birds. Gilberto would point at them in the book and I would try to get a good shot. By lunchtime, no Golden Conures had shown up and it was pretty clear they weren't going to; they would have been there in the morning if they were so inclined. The day proceeded much the same as the previous day—lunch-siesta-back to the “mirante” to look out over the Tapajos for birds.

I reflected on the basic similarities between Cristalino and Amazonia/Urua. Both had similar infrastructure—small airports with only a few domestic connections. Cristalino has Alta Floresta which foreign tourists access by a flight to Sao Paulo from their home country, then flight to Cuiaba and connection to Alta Floresta. Itaituba has service to Santarem and Manaus, which can be reached domestically via Belem, Brasilia and Sao Paulo. There are even direct flights to Manaus from the USA.

Once you get to the airport, the similarities continue. You reach Cristalino via a dirt road and boat trip that takes about 90 minutes all up. You reach Urua via a 65 kilometer dirt road, about 90 minutes all up. Both are surrounded by pristine rainforests with a wide variety of bird species, many of which are endemics and/or endangered—major attractions to birders worldwide. Cristalino has its Canopy Towers, Urua has the Mirante-lookout. Both have trails in the rainforest. Both are located on rivers. But that's where the similarities end.

Cristalino has a world-famous eco-lodge, charming bungalows, the buffet restaurant, bar and library and is marketed world-wide by specialist eco-tourism travel agencies. Prices

range from \$400-600 a night for a double room including meals and guided birding hikes. Urua's bunks are free at time of writing, it costs around \$25 for a guided hike and you have to bring your own food and cook it. I couldn't help thinking what a waste it was to not develop Urua along the lines of Cristalino. It was disheartening to see a guestbook going back to the late 90's and only halfway full. Most recent entries seemed to be day visitors, perhaps school groups?

The benefits of establishing an Ararajuba Eco-Lodge at Urua or elsewhere in the Amazonia National Park are obvious—jobs for locals, money to protect the Golden Conures' breeding grounds with full time guards, and tourist activity, which scares off poachers. There is easily enough space

for several cabins on the premises. Many Brazilians already have a fondness for Ararajubas as they sport the official colours of the Brazilian flag and sports team—gold and green. They already flock to eco-lodges in the Pantanal, Chapada and Amazon-Manaus area, they would most certainly come here. Foreign

birders would want to see the Golden Conures and other endemics. All we need is someone with the money to invest in this worthy project.

The sky clouded over and my thoughts drifted back to the task at hand. A slight drizzle was enough to discourage most birds but fortunately it didn't last long and as dusk approached, the flocks of smaller parakeets returned. I snapped away as much as possible knowing that Gilberto would identify them for me later on, and then I saw it. Faintly visible through the darkening sky was a rainbow! Legend has it that there is a pot of gold at the end of every rainbow, but the only gold I wanted should be flying through the Amazon sky. I made my wish as the rainbow



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faded away. It grew dark and I dejectedly went back to the hut where Ina had been heating up some rice and sausages. Two years of planning, scrimping and saving and no Golden Conures to show for it. I knew nothing is guaranteed in nature but it still hurt.

The next morning, it was time to start heading back to Itaituba to catch the boat to Santarem. Transport is irregular in this area; buses can be delayed so you never know when one may pass by. We dragged a couple of chairs up to the road and Gilberto stayed with us to help us find a ride. There was nothing around except a bulldozer doing roadwork so we sat there looking for birds and watching the road for any vehicle headed to Itaituba. A family of Toucans were in a tree nearby and some Santarem Conures flew overhead, then some more White-eyed Parakeets. I was devastated to have come all this way and didn't get to see my beloved Golden Conures but I tried to make the best of it and took photos of what birds were there.

I got up to follow the Santarem Conures into the forest when all of a sudden Gilberto made a "Hush" gesture, cocked his ear, smiled broadly

and pointed to the left. "OMG, Ararajubas?" I exclaimed! He nodded and kept pointing to where they would appear out of the distant trees. I grabbed my camera, pointed it and started snapping away in burst mode, peering anxiously over the camera. Then there they were in all their glory! They flew past in small groups, glowing in the bright sunlight and disappeared into the trees on the right. I could hear their gentle calls as opposed to the raucous *Aratinga* calls. It was



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over just as quickly as it began. I stood there in stunned silence, did I just dream this or did I really see a flock of wild Golden Conures? The camera told the story. By some miracle I had snapped 6 photos that had the proof they were real! Zooming in, I could see the gold and green of several birds as they

flew over the trees! Gilberto said there had been about 27 or 28 in the entire flock; some had been obscured by trees but he could tell by the calls they made. My dream had come true! Overcome with emotion, I collapsed back onto the chair, tears of joy streaming down my face, and then it dawned on me. The flock of Golden Conures had flown from the area where yesterday evening, I had seen the rainbow.

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