

# Part II: The Trek to El Condominio and El Taray to see the Maroon-fronted Parrots

By Steve Milpacher

## Day 5

It was now the 5th day of my trip to Mexico and I was on my way to see Maroon-fronted Parrots (*Rhynchopsitta terrisi*), a nearly identical species to the Thick-billed, apart from the prominent maroon wash on their foreheads.

I would be meeting with Rene Valdes, a young wildlife biologist studying Maroon-fronts at El Condominio and El Taray, as well as 20 other nesting cliffs. These parrot nesting areas are found in two extremely mountainous areas in the Sierra Madre Oriental in the Mexican states of Coahuila and Nuevo Leon, slightly east of where I first started. I would be hiking once again in terrain that would leave me breathless and exhilarated, for the trails would take me 2,100m up into an area high in canyons, with impossibly steep valleys.

Rene, who has been in the area studying the birds for several years, has documented their lives and decline in the wild along with Gabriela Ortiz, one of recent my traveling companions when viewing the Thick-bills and a fellow researcher of Rene's at Monterrey Tech. Both have watched the Maroon-fronted parrot habitat undergo extensive conversion due to logging, fires and agriculture; it is now restricted to a north-to-south 300km section of the Sierra Madre Oriental, breeding in only about 100km of that area.

Recently fire has swept through the area, destroying large areas of suitable habitat with little chance of natural regeneration, as returning brush is likely to be chaparral, similar to the undergrowth found in the fire-prone state of California in the U.S. Their Vulnerable status in the wild is well earned – it is thought that they now number no more than 2,500-3,500 individuals.

Following a short drive from my hotel, and after traversing the meandering goat paths/roads, which are sharp, narrow and steep, we reached the first parrot area, the Cumbres de Monterrey National Park.

We stopped at the first roosting cliff and waited for the parrots to arrive. Rene's skilled ears heard the calls of the parrots several minutes before they could be seen.



Steep canyon walls extend upwards for hundreds of metres on each side



Narrow path on the way to Cumbres de Monterrey National Park



Calling from across a far ridge they eventually arrived, travelling in our direction and flying low on the horizon. I was impressed by their dexterity as they dodged and parried, their flight being swift and skilled. Our visit with them was short and we ended the day in a small parrot-themed tourist cabin, talking until the wee small hours of the morning about the Maroon-fronted Parrots and their plight.

## Day 6

The next day we set out for El Condominio, a large nesting area for the birds. I had dressed in several layers, not knowing what to expect after my surprise at the relative cold and temperate climate with their Thick-billed Parrot cousins to the North. This turned out to be a mistake as we were much further south, and the day grew quite warm. The hike to the base of El Condominio was one or two kilometres up what looked like a small hill that at first glance looked easy, and would have been, if not for the altitude. I generally walk or hike every day, but was surprised by having to stop every few minutes to rest due to the effects of the thin air.



Early morning sunshine at the nesting site, El Condominio

Once we reached the main observation point, it proved to be an astonishing experience. The medium green birds fluidly made their way through the area, with the straight-up-and-down limestone cliffs of El Condominio as a backdrop. Gracefully they knifed through the air, effortlessly going about their business, not paying us much heed. The cliffs themselves are massive, so large that the soaring birds looked like mere specks against them. Their main nesting holes, representing about 40 pairs, are located in largely inaccessible rock faces, which guarded against them being burgled by predators, animal and human alike.



Parrot nesting holes located in limestone cliffs

What is left of their coniferous forest they utilize as a food source: with various pine seeds making up the majority of their diet. To get to these and other foods such as agave flowers and fruits, they need to travel large distances to and from their feeding areas. That is why protection of their habitat

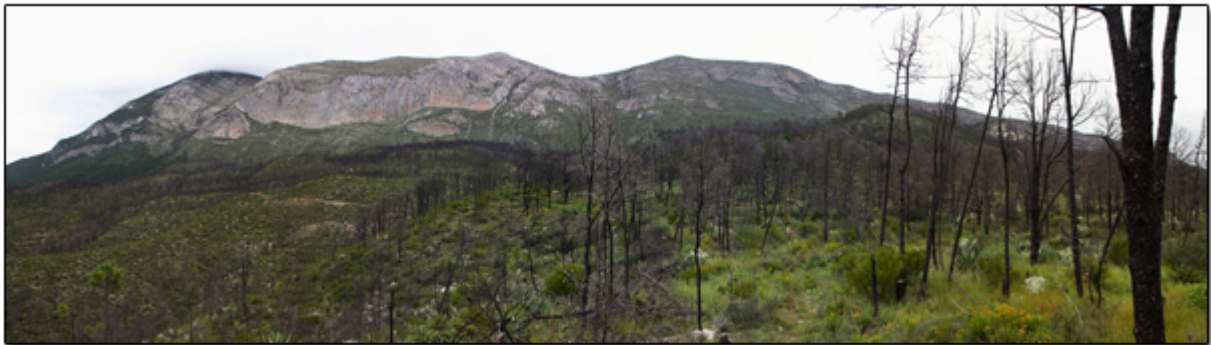
is so critical – they have lost far too much of their foraging areas already to logging, fires and agriculture. The opportunity here is positive, however; Rene and I discussed tentative ideas for ecotourism and a Maroon-fronted Parrot interpretive and education centre, which would, hopefully, help local people appreciate and preserve their natural heritage and utilize it sustainably.

I was exhausted after an exhilarating day of climbing, observing and talking with Rene until late into the evening again. I needed some sleep, because another exciting day of parrot watching awaited me at the recently created parrot sanctuary of El Taray.

## Day 7

### On the Road to El Taray Sanctuary

Bright and early we rose again, this time at 4 AM and then drove more than 40km before stopping at a small clay lick that the parrots use, on the way to the sanctuary. With the permission of a local land owner, we parked ourselves under an apple tree and waited for the cautious birds to appear. Three or four minutes before their arrival, Rene once again heard them. Then, like clockwork the small group showed up around ten AM and began to consume the clay. We watched as two of them would feed; one would stand guard, and then they'd switch. They appeared extremely wary in this area, cautious for any movement or sound. We observed them for about 20 minutes until a small group of people came along on their all terrain vehicles and scared them away.



Near vertical nesting cliffs and a fire-altered landscape at El Taray

Onwards we drove several more kilometres until we reached the base of El Taray, a sanctuary located adjacent to Cumbres de Monterrey National Park. El Taray was the main nesting area of the Maroon-fronted Parrot and is accessible by permission only. Historically, over 100 pairs nested here before two large fires obliterated most of the trees in the area in the last few years. Due to the destruction the parrots disappeared and are only now beginning to return. At the time of our visit, about 40 birds were in the area, which is an increase from 2007, albeit a small one. The parrots' foothold here is tenuous, but not hopeless. Efforts at reforestation are currently underway but more work needs to be done.

Ahead of us was an hour-and-a-half climb, across a mostly burnt out landscape, navigating through two of the most wicked plants I have ever encountered: agave; giant room-sized behemoths with wicked, sharp, spiny leaves, and Uña de Gato, which roughly translated means "the claws of the cat." After having been overheated the previous day I had wisely, or so I thought, chosen to wear shorts, a decision I would painfully regret.



Car-sized agave plant with piercing spikes extending from the tip of each leaf

Upon reaching the top, we were able to observe the Maroon-fronts much more closely. For three hours we watched as the birds travelled around in small groups, resting atop the 6m high spires of the massive agave plants. Given our close proximity (usually no more than 4-5m), we were able to observe these emerald green beauties at close range, and they us with their watchful curiosity. For most of the day the weather had been overcast and dark but now the clouds parted, the sun shone and made the viewing spectacular. As an amateur wildlife photographer, and long-time parrot enthusiast, I was in heaven. Nearing the end of our visit, the clouds started rolling in, the thunder clapped and the rains began. Because of our high altitude the ethereal white mist soon consumed us, and the rains were so heavy that we needed to seek cover under a large rock ledge.



Curious Maroon-fronted Parrot keeping watch

After what seemed like an hour and with the day growing late we decided to make our way down the slope. Thankfully the rain had subsided, if just a little. Carefully we inched our way down the slope using the burned-out trees as leverage. As we slipped our way down the loose rocks and now slippery, wet vegetation, Rene cheerfully called out “el gato!” to warn me of impending spiny plants. Despite being cold, drenched and shivering (not to mention the blood loss from my multiple cuts and abrasions) I couldn’t stop grinning at this inspiring experience.

Despite the fires we could see the beginnings of new growth, the greenness returning. This has been greatly helped by the researchers and volunteers who are beginning to plant over 30,000 pine seedlings brought from Saltillo City to a staging area situated at the base of El Taray. With this effort, the ongoing research, the possibilities of an educational centre and possible ecotourism at the other locations, the Maroon-fronted Parrot may have a chance.

## Day 8

It was with mixed feelings that I headed back to Canada. During this trip I had seen many parrots, covered a lot of territory, learned about many complex issues, and enjoyed discussing some interesting possibilities with our partners in Mexico. What I took away most from this trip was a sense of urgency at these parrots’ collective predicaments, and of awe at the uniqueness of these two species. There is a lot of work that has been done to save these birds, and a lot more to come. With a bit of ingenuity and a lot of help, we can save the Thick-billed and Maroon-fronted Parrots.



Mutual preening between an affectionate pair

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