

Monty Python in Zambia

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I was interested to read about the upcoming WPT Parrot Week, and wish you all every success. I was particularly amused to read that John Cleese is lending his support (I'm a big fan), and thought you'd be interested to know that Monty Python's infamous dead parrot does indeed have a role in parrot conservation.

As part of my research project on the Status, Ecology and Conservation of the Black-cheeked Lovebird (*Agapornis nigrigenis*) in Zambia I am attempting to map the distribution and seasonal movements of the lovebirds through direct observation and by conducting interviews in the local villages.

Two other parrot species occur within the Black-cheeks range: Brown-necked Parrot (*Poicephalus robustus suahelicus*) and Meyer's Parrot (*Poicephalus meyeri transvaalensis*). The locals call all three parrots by the same name: 'Sichikwele', usually associating the birds with their noisy calls and as crop pests.

To help confirm the species identity during the interviews I

have borrowed three specimen skins from the Livingstone Museum. After the initial greetings, Monty Python always comes to mind as I take a pew on a battered wooden stool outside the interviewees mud hut. Most of the conversation is conducted through my Zambian assistant in the local languages of Tonga or Lozi. The field guide and box of parrots is produced – usually causing much



The Monty Python parrots: Brown-necked, Meyer's, Black-cheeked Lovebird.

amusement – and are carefully examined.

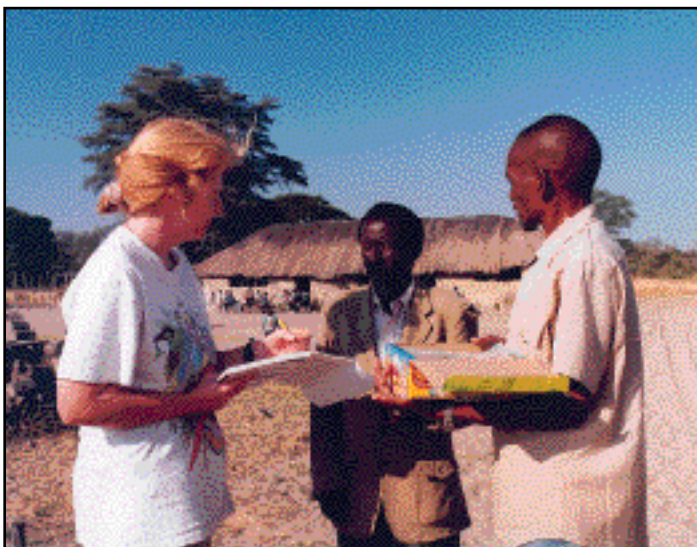
Useful Specimens

The specimens are also useful when talking to school children, asking them if they know these birds, whether they catch them, and when trying to explain that the Black-cheeked Lovebird is a very special bird in Zambia. Conservation awareness is non-existent, and it is a delicate balance to promote the conservation of a species that feeds on the millet and sorghum subsistence crops.

Survival Dependent on Villagers

The long-term survival of

Black-cheeks is without doubt dependent on the local villagers. Humans, like the Lovebirds, depend on the limited water resources. Birds are trapped for food, including Lovebirds (and Brown-necks and Meyer's); usually by young boys who make snares around waterpools, or near the seed heads in ripening crops. Also by lining trees near pools where birds perch prior to drinking, or with a catapult. Educating children in Lovebird Conservation is clearly a priority – following in the crazy tradition of Monty Python is the first step on the long dusty road.



Louise Warburton and her assistant explain their mission.



The village children are asked about the lovebird.