

# news from the field...



## Swan Song in Blue-throat Land

an excerpt from a parrot blog for parrots.org  
By Toa Kyle

September 10, 2007

The 2007 Blue-throated Macaw (BTM) field season is well underway. I've just finished orientating our new project coordinator. After four field seasons here in Bolivia I am moving on to other projects. My replacement is an Argentine, Igor Berkunsky (of Ukrainian descent if you're wondering about his name). He did his PhD studying Blue-fronted Amazons (*Amazona aestiva*) in the Argentine Chaco for five years and is ideally suited to take the reins of the BTM project. He's worked with over 130 nests and the field conditions of the Chaco should make working in the Llanos de Moxos (where Blue-throats are found) a cake walk. Temperatures in the Chaco can get up to 45 °C (125 °F) at midday and water is so scarce, field workers have to use second hand bath water to wash dishes.

The past month has been a whirlwind tour of showing Igor as many Blue-throats (*Ara glaucogularis*) and nest trees as possible in the field while introducing him to important contacts and dealing with the bureaucratic side of things in town. August is usually one of the driest months of the year in terms of field conditions though 2007 has proved to be an exception. This year will go down as an El Niño year which in this part of Bolivia means rainfall was heavier than normal. The main river in our study area, the Mamoré, flooded extensively in March causing humanitarian crises in many populated areas and killing thousands of livestock, the main economic activity in the region. Even in August some areas were still flooded, necessitating the use of horses to get around, something we don't normally do until November.

It's hard to say how the flooding will effect this breeding season. On the one hand, increased rainfall should translate into more fruit production and thus more food resources available to Blue-throat breeding pairs. On the other, things appear to be more out of whack

compared to previous years. For example, in August it's not unusual to find large Barn Owl chicks (*Tyto alba*) in nest cavities also occupied by macaws later on in the year. This past month we found two Blue-throat nests occupied by **Barn Owls** but the females had only recently begun incubating.

Also, a larger proportion of nest cavities had been taken over by Africanized bees compared to past nesting seasons. This complicates our work as one of the goals of our project is to provide as many nest cavities as possible to prospective Blue-throat nesting pairs. It's difficult to say if the increase in bees and delay in Barn Owl breeding are a result of the increased rainfall or due to other factors but they may result in fewer nesting attempts by Blue-throats this year (unless we "clean out" the bees like we did with one successful nest last year). On the bright side of all of these concerns for the effects of El Niño is that we already have an active nest. This nest began incubating the first week of August, the earliest active nest I've seen in five field seasons.

It was always interesting to inspect the numerous nest boxes we put up last season. Many of them were occupied by bees (the bane of my existence last month!) but a few were full of Black-bellied Whistling Duck chicks (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*). One of them plummeted to the ground the first time I opened the side door to the box to see who was inside. Was it hurt in the fall? Not a chance. These ducklings are anatomically designed to weather such a fall as they are still incapable of flight by the time they exit the nest. Hence the origin of the term "rubber duckies."

The highlight from the field last month was in the 7 Islas areas. This was our most successful area from last season with three chicks fledging in late December. Of course I was interested to see how many of those chicks had survived thus far. Early one morning Carmen Silva (a volunteer



For this and other parrot blogs please visit:

from last year who is now a paid field assistant this season) and I were walking down to the end of a forest island when we were stopped dead in our tracks by the sight of several **Blue-throats in a tree** ahead of us. It was comical how we both started counting out loud to ourselves, "Four. No! Six! No! Seven! There's seven here!!". We'd already seen four other Blue-throats in other areas that morning so there were at least 11 birds around. A small miracle given how rare Blue-throats are. Examining facial feather line patterns, which are unique for each Blue-throated Macaw, I recognized two birds as the pair which had fledged two chicks last season. Sure enough there were two chicks perched above them. I was so happy. They'd both made it this far.

It's a bit hard to put into words how I felt when I saw those chicks. In essence they represent what our project is all about, hope for the future for this species in the wild. At the same time because I've spent four field seasons working with Blue-throats, many memories, good and bad, drifted over me as I watched them that morning **play and clown around** with one another.

Since I'm leaving the project it is perhaps expected that I reflect on whether or not I've made a difference with my time here in Bolivia. Having a morning like that one in 7 Islas is reassuring on many levels. In my opinion we are a long way from having Blue-throats fully recovered but during my time with this project I feel we've identified many aspects of their breeding ecology we can manage more successfully to help get more chicks into the wild each season. I've communicated as much of this knowledge as possible to Igor during our month together and now where our project succeeds or fails lies with him. From what I've seen from our time together, the future of Blue-throats is in good hands.

That's Igor checking out a potential BTM nest.

So what's next for me? I'll be heading over to Peru to look for **Blue-headed Macaws** (*Primolius couloni*). I did my thesis work in the Peruvian rainforest in 1999 and 2000 and truth be told, I have never seen jungle as rich in wildlife as there since. It's going to be a welcome home coming of sorts.

Blue-headed Macaws are the least studied macaw, and incidentally the only species of macaw I've yet to see in the wild. There's a pressing need to get a better sense of where the species is distributed as well as basic elements of their natural history; what they feed on, their nesting habits, etc. I read recently that due to their rarity, they fetch almost US\$3,500 each on the black market in Peru, so I'm also curious to learn about trapping pressures, if at all possible. I don't expect to answer all of these questions with the relatively short time I'll have to study them but given how little is known about these birds, any information I can collect for them will help. The photo, to the right, of Blue-headed Macaws was taken at a clay lick in Peru by a colleague of mine, Luis Claudio Marigo. God willing I could take pictures like his!

## Off to a great start from Igor in Bolivia

October 17, 2007

Just a month into the Blue-throated Macaw nesting season Igor Berkunsky wrote with good news: the Blue-throats are off to an early and promising start this season with chicks in 4 of 6 active nests (the other 2 with eggs) and all **hatched chicks surviving**. We are cautiously optimistic as we've seen conditions change dramatically in short order but we hope to have even more good news to report in the next the next few months.

