

PsittaScene



Twenty Years

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Saving Parrots

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Only Único

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In a *flash* of iridescent *turquoise* and gold,
a young *macaw* launched into *flight*.

There are few things more exciting and spectacular than seeing a macaw fly for the first time. Everything had been going well for this fledgling Blue-throated Macaw (*Ara glaucogularis*) – his parents selected a great nest site, his mother incubated his egg just so, and both parents fed him all the right seeds and fruits. But “Único,” as he came to be known, had one big problem. His right wing developed with a deformity and he couldn’t extend it properly to fly. For most wild parrots, the loss of one chick would not be a grave concern, but for Único (“oo-nee-koh” meaning “unique”), the situation was truly unique. He wasn’t just the only chick to make it out of his own nest this year, he was the only Blue-throated Macaw chick to “fledge” in all of 2008. None of the other known nesting pairs in the wild produced chicks, and most never even laid eggs! How could this be?

As we've reported many times over the past seven years, the World Parrot Trust has been working in Bolivia with this spectacular bird – the rarest wild macaw – to locate, protect, and help each nesting pair produce as many chicks as possible. We do this by deploying a number of

conservation tools, many developed specifically for this project, such as upgrading existing nest sites, installing new nest boxes, protecting the nests and chicks from predators, and providing chicks with medical and nutritional support as needed. Just last season (2007), our years of work paid off with the strongest breeding performance on record, and ten chicks fledging. And, for the first time ever, we saw cases of three Blue-throat chicks fledging successfully from a single nest.

On the heels of 3-chick nests, the dismal breeding in 2008 came as a shock. We had only seen a similar situation once before in the past, also when the species’ primary food source, the motacú palm simply failed to produce fruit. As it turns out, 2008 was one of the driest years on record, so it was not terribly surprising the palms made no attempt to flower and fruit. In fact, nearly all the other parakeets, amazons and macaws living in this region held off on breeding as well, presumably in hopes that more food would be available next year.

Unfortunately, the Blue-throats have no time to waste. As a critically endangered species, every chick and every breeding season is an important part of their hoped-for recovery. The remaining 15-20 wild pairs which attempt to breed in the good years are scattered over a vast seasonally-flooded region, roughly the size of the country of Wales, or twice the size of the state of Connecticut. For the population to grow and recover, these remaining adult pairs not only have to breed successfully year after year, but their youngsters must make it to adulthood, find other available Blue-throats of the right sex and age, and form a functional pair bond. In an area so vast with so few young birds produced each year, finding any Blue-throat is a considerable challenge. Finding just the right bird is an especially tall order. Even then, the difficulties aren’t over, as the new pair must find a suitable and available nest site, and get all the other details right before they can produce chicks of their own and help the population grow.

While we see the protection and support of the wild birds as our first conservation priority, it may be that a full recovery under current



Extremely dry conditions in Bolivia this season caused most parrots, including the critically endangered Blue-throated Macaw, to forego breeding. Record breeding in 2007 was followed by a single nestling in 2008. Sadly, a wing deformity made this otherwise picture-perfect chick unable to fly. Fortunately, "Único" will serve as an ambassador for wild macaws in his own country.

conditions just isn't in the cards. They may have just too many challenges to face. More intensive nest work to reduce predation risk further still may be a viable solution. But in the end, it may be necessary for captive birds to assist their wild counterparts, filling some of the extensive areas now unoccupied in Bolivia, and eventually making it easier for these birds to find ideal mates, breed successfully and for the species to return once again to safe levels.

For Único, the story has just begun. He's now being cared for in captivity and will hopefully become an education ambassador for his wild kin. Few Bolivians have ever heard of, much less seen, a Blue-throated Macaw. We're hopeful Único will change all that, helping locals and international tourists alike understand how precious these birds are and how precarious their situation is today. We're also working to find him a mate in hopes that he may one day raise chicks of his own to fly free over the savannahs and forests of Bolivia.

Our work to prevent the extinction of the Blue-throated Macaw has only been possible through the contributions of parrot enthusiasts around the world. With your generosity, we can put the researchers in the field to find and protect nests, install nest boxes, feed chicks and ensure they fledge successfully.

