

Psitta Scene

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Cover Picture By © BILL KING 2002

Adult Blue-throats often perch at the nest site like this for long periods before entering the cavity. Clear photos like this one enable individual recognition of the facial feather lines. By analyzing these photos over time, researchers can potentially determine how long pairs stay together, how often they use the same cavity, whether non-pair birds visit the nest site, etc. without the need to trap, handle or band the birds.

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Bolivia's "Bluebeards"

the road to recovery for the world's rarest wild macaw

Text and Photos By JAMIE GILARDI, except where noted.

Far too many parrot species hover on the verge of extinction. With the last wild Spix's Macaw gone, the Blue-throated Macaw now holds the dubious distinction of being the world's rarest wild macaw. What's really unique about this bird is its history over the past 50 years. For decades, western researchers could not find it in the wild despite many serious searches by scientists, parrot enthusiasts, and others. Only in the 1990's was the Blue-throat "re-discovered" when Dr. Charles Munn posed as a filmmaker and hired a trapper to take him to a nest in northern Bolivia. With most of the wild birds already captured for the international and domestic pet trade, it was very nearly too late to save the wild birds from near certain extinction.

Today we find ourselves in the odd situation of having many hundreds, possibly thousands, of these stunning birds in captivity, and only a few dozen left in the wilds of northern Bolivia. As we've just completed our third major season of field work with the Blue-throats - or 'bluebeards' as they're called locally - we thought it timely to provide news of the current situation for the birds in the wild, for those in captivity, and the prospects for ensuring the bird's safe recovery back from the brink of extinction.

As we reported in Feb 2002, No. 50 PsittaScene, our immediate goals remain to locate, protect, and encourage the survival and successful breeding of the wild birds. Clearly, each surviving wild pair is incredibly important for the species because they have generations of acquired knowledge of breeding sites, feeding sites, predators, competitors and the like. And as many studies have now shown, to be a successful wild parrot, each bird must develop a number of essential survival skills through years of

experience and social learning. Every successful nesting attempt puts more birds where they are most able to contribute to the recovery of the Blue-throated Macaw (*Ara glaucogularis*) - that is, in the wild. So our highest priority could therefore be classified as a "search and rescue" mission, that is, to find all remaining pairs, determine what their nesting options are, work with the local residents to help them protect the birds and their nest sites, and finally, to do everything in our power to help them produce healthy surviving chicks each year.

Although one normally envisions Macaws living in tropical rainforest, these birds inhabit something more akin to an enormous swampy cattle pasture about the size of Wales or twice the size of Connecticut, depending on your frame of reference. It is a spectacular area in the state of Beni in northern Bolivia, which absolutely teems with wildlife despite the longstanding practice of intensive cattle ranching. With enormous crocodile-like caiman, capybara, Jabiru storks, and



A classic "isla" habitat in Bolivia's Beni department. Although most of these "islands" were formed naturally and are surrounded by water only in the wet season, some of the most perfectly circular ones are thought to have been created by early Native Americans called the Moxos. The understory is often open with very little vegetation.



As the smallest known cavity entrance, this nest has provided a model for nest entrance dimensions which will allow Blue-throats to enter, but exclude the other larger macaws - namely the Blue and Gold and Greenwinged Macaws.

ostrich-like Rhea, large and impressive wildlife are everywhere. Because a good deal of the Beni is flooded for many months of the year, we have focused our field efforts from June through December, the driest months. Although travel by dirt road is sometimes feasible, we have found that off-road motorcycles and travel by horseback are the most effective means of transport for field workers. That said, hitching the occasional ride in landowner's

small plane has proven extraordinarily helpful as well.

So, starting in earnest in 2002, we purchased two second-hand motorcycles and our Bolivian field team set off to check on all known sites where the Blue-throats were known to occur as well as chasing down as many rumored sites as possible. This team then consisted primarily of Felman Cuellar (aka "Pocho") who first lead Dr. Munn to the birds in 1992, a local who has decades of experience working with parrots in the Beni, and a second Bolivian named Andres Szabo who has worked both in Bolivia and Peru on parrot conservation projects. With Pocho's local experience and knowledge of the Blue-throats and Andres' broader experience with Macaw conservation work, the team was able to visit most of the historic breeding sites and effectively document the conditions on the ground in terms of habitat, human activity, threats from predators, and other issues which might prove crucial to successful breeding. As expected, the challenges are many in number and vary both from place to place and from year to year.

Both the better know Blue and Gold Macaw (*Ara ararauna*) and the smaller Blue-throated Macaws naturally occur in the Beni, and both eat similar foods and nest in similar types of trees. An interesting fact about large palm trees is that when the crown dies, the trunk is quickly hollowed out by enormous grubs about the size of a long human finger, and the hollow trunk soon becomes an ideal Macaw nest site. (The grubs, incidentally,

are considered a delicacy by locals who hold them by the head and eat the remainder of the writhing beast in a single bite.) It's not yet known whether Macaws also eat the grubs, although they do eat similar larvae like those of the soldier fly, so it's quite possible they indulge in these as well - food and lodging in one fell swoop, if you will. More intriguingly, both these Macaws eat the palm fronds to such a degree that in some cases they can kill the entire tree, which then inevitably goes through the grub-hollowing process and becomes a potential nest site. Whether they do this intentionally as some have suggested, or one of their foraging habits just happens to create future nest sites remains to be determined.

As anyone who's attempted to breed a parrot knows well, many of these birds show quirky and inexplicable behaviours around the nest. In the Beni, the two Macaw species require very similar nesting sites, and as Dr. Katherine Renton observed just over the border in Peru, the larger Blue and Gold Macaws are known to aggressively challenge nesting pairs of their own kind, in some cases pulling chicks from their nests and temporarily taking over nest sites. And as we've reported previously, pairs of the Blue and Gold sometimes show far too much interest in active Blue-throat nests, although we've recently seen evidence of the smaller Blue-throats rising to the challenge and successfully driving off the bigger birds.

Although competition for nest sites is often discussed with any cavity nesting birds, when researchers have looked for

Photo: Bill King



A family of Blue and Gold Macaws devouring the new fronds on a palm. If they consume the central cluster rising behind them, they will kill the tree and perhaps make a future hollowed cavity for future breeding. You may recognize this same family from a scene in PollyVision!

factual evidence of nest sites being limited for parrots, they tend to come up empty handed. That is, they find that there are lots of available cavities out there, which go unused. The issue may be slightly more complex than just physical dimensions however. Anyone watching young children playing in small groups has observed that the most interesting toys are those that are being played with by others, and I suspect there is a parallel here in parrots' views about what makes a cavity attractive. Sure there may be lots of cavities around, but the most interesting ones are those that are being explored or actively used by other parrots.

Regardless of what motivates the birds, the fact remains that we see relatively frequent interactions at nest sites which are likely to cause frequent nest failure for these threatened Blue-throats. Consequently, with help from Mark and Marie Stafford of Parrots International and their captive birds, we've explored the possibility of exploiting the difference in body size between these species and providing cavities with openings too small for Blue and Gold, but just barely large enough for the smaller Blue-throats. In 2004, one of the Blue-throat's natural cavities was even smaller than predicted from these experiments, allowing us to take this approach a step further and make cavities even more exclusive. We've also deployed a series of artificial cavities in areas where the Blue-throats breed in hopes that making ideal cavities super abundant will facilitate the breeding output of the remaining wild Blue-throats. In one instance, a pair was seen exploring and excavating an artificial cavity this year, and another of these cavities was used by a pair of Macaws in 2003, but alas, it was a Severe Macaw (*Ara severa*) which took up residence in the cavity.

In addition to locating, protecting, and monitoring nest sites, our field team in 2003 initiated detailed studies of the Blue-throats foraging patterns as well as researching seasonal availability of the palm fruit on which they depend. With generous and growing support from donors in the USA and UK, Pocho and Andres were joined by a parrot researcher from Canada named Toa Kyle, who has worked on a number of other endangered parrots such as Golden Conures (*Guaruba guarouba*), Lear's (*Anodorhynchus leari*) and Great Green Macaws (*Ara ambigua*). With Toa joining the team, we've now been able to add these additional habitat analysis components to our team's goals, as well as contributing years of parrot field experience to the project. Not surprisingly, the team is now discovering that the diets of these birds are more complex than was once thought, and in 2003 anyway, learned that the availability of palm fruit can be unpredictable and may cause major



One of two successful nests in the 2004 season. The metal flashing protects the eggs and nestlings from reptile and mammal predators in this (very low) nesting cavity of Blue-throated Macaws. The climber at the top Jairo Moreno places the chick in the bucket and lowers it to the ground for measurement and health inspection by Toa on the ground. (Inset): chick awaits health check.

disruptions in breeding.

As with every conservation effort, the success of the species recovery will depend heavily on the cooperation and collaboration of a large number of players. In the fall of 2003, then director of the state department of natural resources, Dr. Alex Ferrier, suggested that the two teams working on Blue-throats in the wild - ours and a team from a local NGO called Armonia and supported by the Loro Parque Fundacion - should host a joint workshop to help organise and publicise the efforts to save the species. By inviting all landowners, researchers, tour operators,

and other interested parties to gather, discuss, and decide on what needs to be done and which groups would be involved with each task, the workshop proved a very educational and inspiring experience for those involved and was the first gathering of its kind for this species.

Since that time, a number of additional meetings have been held to help foster cooperation between the interested individuals, NGO's, and government agencies. For a multi-faceted conservation effort such as this one which naturally includes law enforcement at the local, national, and international level, education

of locals, landowners, and ranching associations, biological work from the nest level to regional population surveys, cooperation and communication is an essential ingredient for success.

Nearing the end of the 2004 breeding season, I had the pleasure to visit the Blue-throat project at a point when the chicks were about two weeks from flying. This was my second trip to the Beni and my first during the wet season with waist-deep water covering most of the study area. Travelling first by small plane from Trinidad, then hours on horseback, we finally arrived at the most amazingly Macaw-infested island of palms and hardwood trees one could imagine. The place was simply teeming with all sorts of Macaws, in addition to the Blue-throats, there were loads of Severe Macaws, Green-winged (*Ara chloroptera*), Yellow-collared (*Propyrrhura auricollis*), and of course several pairs of the ubiquitous Blue and Gold. Predictably, there was an ever-present growling banter between pairs, but in the end they all appeared to have accepted their neighbours with dignity and relative harmony. It was an inspiration to experience such a thriving population of parrots, giving us the unmistakable sense that, at least in some years and in some places, the urge to thrive and breed remains strong and healthy in these majestic Macaws.

Passing through Trinidad on our way to Santa Cruz, Toa and I met with Dr. Luis Soria, a professor at the local University. We discussed potential collaborative work with Blue-throats and explored opportunities to involve students in future field seasons. We also had a chance to meet briefly with the biologist from the Beni department of natural resources Abraham Rojas. Both meetings were a welcome opportunity to share experiences and ideas and they underscored the fact that close communications and collaboration will be surely be the most effective way to facilitate all aspects of fieldwork, education, and law enforcement required for the full recovery of these Macaws. This point was driven home once again



On the road - the team in late 2002 using off-road motorcycles. From left, Andres, Pocho, and Toa.

the following evening in Santa Cruz when Toa and I sat down for an in-depth meeting with Armonia's director, Bennett Hennessey and their chief scientist, Dr. Sebastian Herzog. Having a few hours face-to-face provided a positive forum to review what the respective projects had learned in the 2004 and previous seasons, some of the new discoveries and challenges in working with this critically threatened bird, and how best to move forward for the 2005 season and beyond. Additional meetings with collaborators and partners such as Museo de Historia Natural Noel Kempff Mercado and a well established Bolivian NGO named Fundación Amigos de la Naturaleza helped clarify for us how international and domestic conservation efforts are working together to save these birds.

You'll note from Toa's first hand account in this issue that the 2004 season was a great success. More broadly, we're delighted by the progress of the field team in the past three seasons; they've come a long way toward learning what does and does not work well, and they're constantly coming up with new and creative strategies

to aid the recovery of these spectacular birds. We're looking forward to hitting the ground at a run in 2005 and hope to have additional positive news as the Blue-throated Macaw continues on the road to a full recovery.

The Trust has been pleased to support this project with the generous and recurring contributions of the Broillet Family, Gerard Johnson, Natural Encounters Inc., the Keith Ewart Charitable Trust, the International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators (IAATE), Alain Breyer, the Connecticut Association for Aviculture (CAFA), Parrots International, and donations from many other individuals who share our keen interest in this species and our concern for their survival in the wild. As we head into a more ambitious season in the field in 2005/2006 as well as the development of holding and breeding facilities both in the USA and Bolivia, we are eager to broaden this support, enabling more individuals, foundations, and corporations to help save these spectacular birds.



Although most of Bolivia's Beni is covered by open grassland, large stands of forested areas like this one remain intact, with a combination of abundant hardwoods and palms, both of which are essential to the Blue-throats and other parrots.