

# A Welcomed Visitor - By Dave Cruz, Minnesota Zoo



Photo: © Dave Cruz

The Blue-throated Macaw has intrigued me for much of my bird training career. In November of 2007, I had the opportunity to visit the World Parrot Trust Blue-throated Macaw Project. I was fully prepared to be received as an "outsider" or a privileged guest to be kept at arms length and diverted from the real action. I wanted to hit the ground running but I knew I needed to temper my enthusiasm. I had to "chillax" as my daughter Kendra would say (that's a combination of "chill" and "relax" for those of you who do not have an ultra-hip ten year old to keep you current).



Photo: © Federico Kaoliris

When the rains come, getting to nest sites and chicks gets much more complicated. Boats (and boots) and horses become invaluable in getting daily tasks accomplished.

To state that my trepidations were one hundred percent incorrect would be an understatement. I was welcomed into the well oiled machine of good natured professionals and was immediately in the thick of this project. From the moment our small four passenger plane landed in the muddy field that passed for a landing strip, I was just another member of an extended, hard working family. And I do mean hard working. I was informed that our bush pilot would not return to pick us up unless we made some repairs to the "runway". We set to work with machetes, home made shovels and hoes. Now that's my kind of initiation.

There is a lot of ground to cover on this project. The terrain is less than accommodating and the hiking required to gain access to these nesting sites is tough going. I was warned about dehydration in the scorching afternoon sun but did not take heed until I had to be assisted back to camp by one of my new teammates. I learned that lesson quickly and my body adapted to the conditions in short order. I enjoyed the challenges of the hiking and climbing. The thrill of exploring places that most humans will never see is one of the ultimate joys of my life. But one of the hardest things for me to master was the waiting game.

I was not prepared for the long periods of time when the seasonal rains are so severe that everything is put on hold. I didn't know it was

possible for it to rain so hard, for so long. The waiting and the worrying about the safety of the nesting macaws and their eggs and chicks in various stages of development was more than I thought I could bear. The rest of the team had already been through this time and time again. They waited out the storm in hammocks while planning and preparing for the flurry of activity that would follow. These rains, though a passing nuisance to me, are a harsh reality that have claimed many a valuable Blue-throat nestling. This is serious business and a lot of care has gone in to making these nests flood-proof.

My time on this project was short but intensely rewarding. This first hand experience was also

invaluable to me and my crew back at the Minnesota Zoo. It gives us a whole new perspective in teaching zoo visitors about these birds and what it takes to save any species once it is so critically endangered. The Blue-throated Macaw Recovery Project is nothing short of imperative. I could and should slap every accolade available upon the field team, the donors and facilitators but that is not the whole story. This small population of wild Blue-throated Macaws, although increasing, is extremely fragile. It looks like human intervention may be the only way to stave off the extinction of this spectacular macaw species. In the end my hope is that this is a story of survival.



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