

To Fly or To Fall - By Sarah Faegre, project volunteer

19 December 2007

It is 6 am when I arrive at the blind. I have been watching this blue-throat nest every day for a month now.

For the past week Goliath, the larger of the two chicks has been poking his head

cavity entrance. Shortly after sunrise I watch as he climbs to the entrance and looks around. Now and then, a yawn escapes his big, black beak.

At 8 a.m., as his parents perch in a nearby tree, Goliath takes his first cautious steps out of the nest cavity. He wobbles above the cavity entrance on the steeply angled trunk and begins to flap his wings. In the following hours I watch as his parents lavish attention upon him. His parents fly to the branch above him and he immediately becomes braver, climbing up the trunk to the first fork. He bows his head until his beak touches the bark, his eyes half closed, feathers raised to facilitate the gentle nibbles of his parents. They preen his wingpits and nibble the tiny feathers and bare skin around his face, then proceed down his crop to his belly. Watching the three of them together is one of the most beautiful scenes I have ever observed in nature.

Meanwhile, little Manu (the younger sibling) seems to feel terribly left out, perching at the

cavity entrance and squawking loudly. Mom climbs down the trunk and enters the cavity to attend to Manu as Goliath traipses higher. He is about to reach the next fork, with dad right behind him when he slips... He flaps madly, but it's too late. He crashes into a patch of bromeliads at the base of the nest tree. The father simply stares down as his chick screeches from the ground. Mom pops her head out of the cavity and the babysitter (me) jumps out of the blind and goes to help the fallen chick.

As I approach, the parents screech with distress and circle the nest tree several times before leaving the area. Goliath screeches and tries to fly away but his wings barely help to increase his groundspeed as he waddles away from me. I pick him up easily and he calms down. Lucky Goliath has a fan club of people all around the world, so he will be one of the few wild parrots to get a second chance at fledging. I return him to the nest tree and walk back to the blind. There is no sight or sound from the chicks for the next two hours and I hope that they will stay put.



Photo: © Sarah Faegre

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I arrive at the blind at 7:00 a.m and see one chick poking its head out of the cavity entrance. Is this Goliath or did he already fledge? Is he high in a tree with his parents? Could he have fledged yesterday and been eaten by a predator? At 7:15 the chick retracts his head and I am left staring at the empty cavity entrance wondering... At 7:38 I hear the familiar, whiny call of the adults along with chick sounds nearby. My curiosity is overwhelming and I sneak out of the blind to take a look. Goliath is with them clinging to a precariously hanging branch in a small, scraggly Motacu Palm. He looks at me, seeming much less concerned by my presence than by his problematic situation. He tries to climb higher, loses his balance and flaps his wings madly, clambering back onto the branch. "What do I do?" I wonder. I don't want to disturb the family at this extremely sensitive time, but I can't leave a Blue-throated Macaw chick in this vulnerable position. My solution? The portable Blue-throated Macaw babysitting unit (a.k.a. the portable blind).

I spend 15 minutes silently moving the blind. I wonder how long he has been in this tree? It looks like he climbed from the ground. If he's fallen twice, what's to say that he won't fall again? I think surely this scrawny, stub-tailed chick can't fly, yet he's posturing in preparation for take off. I click my camera into video mode wondering "Do I really want a video of a Blue-throated Macaw chick crashing to the ground?" And then, with all the force in his body, Goliath pushes off from the branch and flies, straight through the trees and out of sight, his parents close behind him. And so, at 8:45 a.m., the parents and their newly fledged chick disappeared as silhouettes over the golden savannah.



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