

Study of the Cuban Parakeet

by Rosemarie Gnam

The Cuban Parakeet was once abundant and widespread in Cuba and the Isla de la Juventud (formerly Isle of Pines) (Barbour 1943). In the nineteenth century, Gundlach (1893) reported the species from the Ciénaga de Zapata, Trinidad Mountains, hills of Bayamo, and mountains of Guantánamo. It disappeared from the Isla de la Juventud soon after the beginning of the twentieth century (Bangs and Zappey 1905). In 1951 it was believed that the parakeet population in the Ciénaga de Zapata was the only one west of Camagüey (Barbour 1943). It was then still common in the forests of the Guantánamo Basin and in the mountains near Trinidad and south of Camanayagua (Barbour 1943). Davis (1941) noted parakeet populations around Cienfuegos, Trinidad Mountains, and the southern Sancti Spiritus province (Guasimal). Currently, small isolated populations of the parakeet persist in several locations, with population centres in the Ciénaga de Zapata, Camagüey, Guantánamo, and Oriente province (Garrido and García Montaña 1975, García Montaña 1980, Wiley 1991). It is considered rare throughout its range (Garrido and García Montaña 1975) and has undergone an alarming decline in numbers (Wiley 1991).

Barbour (1943) stated the parakeet requires virgin forest. It inhabits the wilder, heavily forested mountains, but it also occurs in palm savannas (Bond 1965). Little is known of the species biology. Unlike the parrot, the parakeet seems to be a more social species, nesting and roosting in flocks in appropriate habitats. Also unlike the Cuban Parrot, the parakeet uses termitaria and holes in cave and cliff faces in addition to tree cavities as nest sites (Gálvez and Wiley, unpubl. data).

The Cuban Parakeet has been a popular cage bird, which has contributed to its decline (Todd 1916, Barbour 1943, García Montaña 1980). Gundlach (1893) had predicted that, at its rate of harvest for cage birds, the formerly abundant parakeet would soon disappear from the Isla de la Juventud. Apparently that prediction was soon fulfilled (Bangs and Zappey 1905). Nevertheless, the main cause of its decline has been large-scale destruction of forests (Barbour 1943, de las Pozas and González 1984, Wiley 1991).

Cuba has undergone extensive conversion of natural forests to cultivation and pastures. In 1812, 90% of Cuba was covered with natural forests (Instituto Cubano de Geodesia y Cartografía 1978). Less than 100 years later, 54% was still in natural forest. Habitat destruction has since been even more extensive, and only small remnants of the original forests now survive. By 1975, just 18% of the island was covered by forests (Instituto Cubano de Geodesia y Cartografía 1978).

CUBAN PARAKEET PROPOSAL

Without a conservation programme based on sound biological data, this species will likely undergo further



The Cuban Parakeet or Conure is rare in the wild and in aviculture. Photo: R. Low

population declines, local extirpations of populations, and perhaps will become extinct within the next century. We propose to determine the present status and distribution of the Cuban Parakeet, and compare that information with what is known of populations within the historical period. This data, when analysed in view of data we will have collected on the species' ecology and effects of interaction with humans and their activities, will provide background for the development of biologically sound conservation recommendations. Such effective recommendations are the overall goal of this project.

OBJECTIVES

1. To determine the Cuban Parakeet's status and distribution in Cuba, particularly where the healthiest populations have been reported.

2. To characterise habitat of the parakeet, including breeding,

feeding and roosting habitats.

3. To determine the diet and foraging ecology of the parakeet.

4. To investigate the species' breeding biology.

5. To examine the ecology of the parakeet, with emphasis on competitive and predatory interactions.

6. To determine causes of the parakeet's decline, from which a strategy for its conservation can be developed.

PROCEDURES

Objective No. 1. Known former and current habitats of parakeets will be visited and population surveys conducted. Extensive population surveys will be

formed through natural decay or are usurped from primary cavity nesters in trees, life of cavities, competition.

Objective No. 3: Intensive studies of parakeet diet will be undertaken, using techniques of examining feeding birds, sampling crop contents of chicks, and relating these to phenological studies of the major food species in the area.

Objective No. 4: Breeding behaviour of the parakeet will be investigated using blinds located near active nests (Snyder et al. 1987). Full day observations at selected nests will be made to study parakeet activities.

Objective No. 5: Ecological studies of parakeets will emphasise inter- and intra-specific interactions around active parakeet nests, with particular interest in competition among parakeet pairs nesting in colonial situations, possible nest site competitors, and identification and effects of predators on parakeet populations.

Objective No. 6: Data gathered as in Objectives 1-5 will be used along with information gathered during interviews with local biologists and residents to determine causes of the parakeet's decline, from which a plan for its conservation will be developed.

PROPOSED SCHEDULE

First Year: Studies will be concentrated in palm savanna habitat of east-central Cuba, where good populations of parakeets occur with populations of Cuban Parrots. There, efforts to survey population size and distribution, as well as study aspects of the biology of both species, can be more economically performed with the limited personnel, vehicular support, and time available for the investigations. If opportunity arises, and the effort will not compromise on-going work, we will survey other populations for parakeets. Blinds and tree-top lookouts will be established in the major study area for investigations of parakeet behaviour and ecology.

Second and third years: Work on the status, distribution, and biology (emphasising breeding biology) will continue at the main study area in east-central Cuba. More effort will be made to locate and characterise additional populations of parakeets in central and eastern Cuba.