

# RECENT WORK ON THE ECHO PARAKEET

by Carl G. Jones

During the last year the conservation work on the Echo or Mauritius Parakeet has developed dramatically. Our tented camp in the forest has been expanded and a team of biologists now works out of here studying the parakeet, Pink Pigeons, and the native passerines.

The camp is set on a ridge above the Black River Gorges in a natural clearing called Plaine Lievre. Up to five biologists are based here more or less throughout the year. Conditions are basic but quite comfortable: the team lives in three tents and there is also a large storage tent and a lean-to kitchen area. Plaine Lievre was chosen as a release site for captive-bred Pink Pigeons several years ago but has proved to be a good camp-site for those working on other species. Echo Parakeets fly over the area almost daily and some forage very close to camp, sometimes even feeding on the trees around the clearing.

The biologists usually live in the tents for up to ten days or a fortnight at a time before returning to our main centre in Black River for a rest and to discuss the work. Black River is a four hour walk away or a rough hour's drive along forest tracks and country roads.

Life in camp is pleasant enough during the dry season (September to mid-December) and work progresses well, but during the rainy winter months (May to August) the work is often cold, wet and miserable. The worst time of the year for living in the field is from mid-December to April. This is the cyclone season, when torrential rain storms can disrupt work for weeks on end; every year we have to break camp during the worst weather. Last

season camp was flooded with everyone still living in it. Everyone had to sleep in flooded tents with the camp beds just inches above the water. One member of the team felt safer sleeping in a covered hammock strung between two trees at the edge of the forest. Luckily such discomforts are usually short-lived, but the disruption to work of having to break camp and commute into the forest during breaks in the weather may last more than a month. This year life should be a lot easier, since the Government has built us a two-roomed concrete building just outside the forest for our use during the worst weather.

The gift of a four wheel drive double cab pick-up truck is going to be the biggest help the project has had to date. This will make commuting and the provisioning of camp much easier. The parakeets live in about 50 square kms of forest and a four wheel drive is essential to get to many areas of their habitat. The truck is due to arrive any day. Up until now we have had only one trail bike and have had to share vehicles with our other conservation projects.

The work on the parakeets has progressed well, and we have continued to carefully monitor the birds during the winter. We were fortunate to have the help of a group of four students from the City of London Polytechnic who worked with us for two months. They positioned themselves at strategic lookout points throughout the parakeets' range for four or five hour watches at all hours between dawn and dusk. From their observations we were able to work out the movements and habitat preferences of the parakeets and add more details to our knowledge of their behaviour and ecology.

Jacky Mills, who did an excellent job last season, left us in May and has been replaced by Kevin Duffy and Sian Waters, formerly of Edinburgh Zoo. They have worked with captive parrots and are experienced in tropical fieldwork.

Kevin and Sian work with Steven Rault, a Mauritian fieldworker, and together they have kept a careful eye on the population. The wild population is thought to be about 12-15 birds with only three known females all of which are paired up. Fortunately there has been some reproduction in recent years and several of these birds are thought to be young.

At the time of writing, all three pairs of birds are showing signs of breeding and two pairs may be on eggs.

During the dry months we suspect the parakeets are short of food and it is then that they feed largely on leaves, since most of the fruit in the forest has been taken by introduced rats, monkeys, mynahs and bulbuls.

To give the parakeets a helping hand during this time of shortage we have been placing food out in the forest for them. Food is hung up on branches so that it looks natural. We have tried virtually every type of fruit and vegetable that we can obtain and, although the parakeets have sampled grapes, chillies and apples, we have not yet been able to encourage them to take our food on a daily basis. The problem is simply that there are so many trees and so few parakeets, one has to put out large amounts of food before they chance upon it. Added to this, the food is rapidly eaten by the other fruit eating species in the forest. We have been experimenting to get around some of these problems by poisoning rats and monkey proofing trees. Fortunately the chillies which the Echo Parakeets most favour, have not been taken by any other species in the forest.

For several years we have been preparing for the day when we would have captive Echo Parakeets and have established a colony of Ring-necked Parakeet to use as

foster parents. Five breeding pairs are kept and they are very good parents. The nest boxes are fixed to the outside of the flights and are inspected daily. The nesting parakeets have been taught to be very tolerant of any intrusion and during the breeding season they will readily accept and rear foster babies of any age. Last season we harvested two fertile eggs from one nest and a baby from another. Three young were successfully reared.

The young Echos are quite different from Ring-necked Parakeets, far less excitable, but much more active. Echo Parakeets have shorter broader wings than Ring-necked Parakeets and are far more manoeuvrable in an aviary.

One of the captive reared Echos apparently had a metabolic problem and became obese despite careful dieting. Unfortunately this bird, although active and looking healthy, died suddenly. Post-mortem results have so far been inconclusive. The other two parakeets are doing very well, they are fed on fruits and vegetables and, since in the wild they are fruit, flower and leaf eaters, they are not fed many seeds.

The parakeets are kept at the Government Captive Breeding Centre in Black River. They are housed in two interconnecting aviaries, each unit is 8 feet high, 6 feet wide and 16 feet long. These units are raised off the ground so their droppings fall through the wire floor. It is hoped to harvest more eggs and/or young this year for captive rearing. Julie Dixon from Jersey Zoo, who used to rear the parrots there, now works for us and will be responsible for the rearing of any young Echos.

The future of the Echo Parakeet still looks critical, but it is now looking better than it has for over a decade, thanks to the help of the Government of Mauritius, the World Parrot Trust, Wildlife Preservation Trusts, Mauritius Wildlife Fund, Parrot Society and other organisations.

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Collecting eggs of the Echo Parakeet



Echo Parakeet at 7 days



Echo Parakeet at 48 days