

SUMMARY OF ECHO PARAKEET CONSERVATION 1994-95 SEASON

By Tim Lovegrove



Pair of adult Echos in Mauritius aviary.
Photo Andrew Greenwood.

This year we are pleased to report the most productive season for the Echo Parakeets since the mid 1970's. We began the season with four pairs in the wild and one in captivity. All started breeding early, perhaps in the wild birds in response to abundant food supply following a flush of growth after last February's big cyclone.

This season the plan was to harvest as many eggs as possible from wild nests and allow the birds to recycle and lay second clutches, which would be left to fledge naturally. This procedure has the potential to increase normal productivity, and simultaneously boost the numbers in both captive and wild populations.

Nine eggs were removed from three wild nests and brought to the captive breeding centre at Black River. In the meantime the single captive pair, which bred for the

first time last (1993-94) season, had also laid, producing two fertile eggs. All of the eggs from the wild and captive pairs were fostered to the Indian Ring-neck Parakeets, which are specially kept at the aviaries for this purpose. Five of the nine wild eggs, and two captive pair eggs hatched. Unfortunately three of the wild pair young died at various stages, leaving two wild pair and two captive pair young, all of which have now fledged and are doing well. They will shortly become independent, and will be moved to another aviary where they can socialise together away from their ring-neck foster parents. With the successful rearing of these young the captive population will total eight.

Two of the three wild pairs from which eggs were harvested recycled, and both produced two clutches. Unfortunately both eggs in one clutch were infertile. However this gave us the opportunity for the first time in the management of Echos, to carry out an egg transfer between nests, because these two were closely synchronised. This went smoothly, both eggs hatched, and both chicks are now close to fledging. (These have now both fledged successfully).

Sadly the nest of the fourth wild pair failed just as the eggs hatched. The evidence (chicks mutilated, but not eaten) suggested that a second male which has been associating with the pair, may have sabotaged the nest. Extra males (males outnumber females in the Echo population by about two to one), have been known to disrupt



Tim Lovegrove setting a rat trap in the forest.

Photo: Paula Harris.

breeding in the past, but this was the first suspected case of infanticide. However extra males are not always disruptive. The nest to which we transferred the fertile egg also had two males in attendance, but since both regularly provisioned the female we assumed they would do likewise for a chick. Indeed that is what happened, although just lately one male seems to be visiting more frequently than the other one.

Recently we discovered two new Echo pairs, bringing the total of known wild pairs to six. One of them already had two fledged young from an unknown nest site. The other pair had a large nestling when we found them in mid-December. All three young are now nearly independent, so a total of 5 young fledged in the wild this year! It is reassuring to know that in some good years Echos can rear young without our help. This season has been remarkable for the abundance of natural foods and unusually low numbers of ship rats. Despite low rat numbers we have taken the usual precautions trapping and poisoning around nests to ensure maximum protection. We have also been protecting the nestlings from nest parasites by changing the nest material at frequent intervals and replacing it with fresh nest material treated with 5% carbaryl insecticide. Using these management techniques as well as daily monitoring of progress, we are confident of a high success rate in future breeding seasons for the wild Echo parakeets.

With the successful breeding of

the captive pair in two successive seasons, we now know that Echos will breed in captivity. The staff at the aviaries have this season also been refining hand rearing techniques (should these be necessary for Echos), by hand-rearing young Ring-neck Parakeets. Ten were reared successfully.

The only major problem to solve now at the aviaries is the extent of Psittacine Polyoma virus which was found recently in the Ring-necks used as Echo foster parents. Polyoma is still rather a little-known disease, and it is not known if it is already endemic on Mauritius. It can be fatal to young birds, and it is possible that the three young Echos which died at the aviaries this season contracted Polyoma. Samples are being sent to Germany for analysis, and our veterinary advisor Andrew Greenwood will be visiting shortly to take a further batch of blood samples for analysis. We will also be collecting blood from some of the wild birds to determine the spread of the disease in the wild. Until the extent of Polyoma is determined (we hope to have results in a few months), we will not bring any more eggs in from the wild. It might even be necessary to start afresh at the aviaries and replace the stock of Ring-neck Parakeets. This would delay part of the captive breeding programme for several years. Although this is a frustrating setback, at least we know that the wild pairs are breeding successfully, and intensive management will enhance this success rate.

22 January 1995



13 day old Echo.