

# Echo Parakeet season 1996 - Progress!

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The 1996 breeding season has seen spectacular progress with the Echo parakeet on Mauritius particularly due to the funding of additional field and aviary staff. The number of known wild pairs has increased considerably allowing even better monitoring, and the number of captive chicks is now sufficient, all being well, for the establishment of a captive breeding population and a trial release this spring. Unfortunately, the high productivity of nestlings by the wild birds was not matched by their ability to rear them.

## INTENSIVE RESCUE EFFORTS

Intensive rescue efforts allowed most of these chicks to be saved, but only at the cost of taking them into captivity. The total Echo population, therefore, has to be seen as two jointly-managed groups, partly wild and partly captive, with flow established between them.

There are now 13 known wild pairs (or breeding groups as most have extra males associated with them). This is an increase from 7 in 1995/6 and between 3 and 5 of these are probably newly recruited pairs which were not previously present. One pair is non-laying so far and one nest cavity has now seen continuously recorded use for 6 years, although perhaps not by the same individual birds. So 12 pairs

laid this year, from five of which the first clutch was harvested (14 eggs in total). Some of these were from nests where second clutches could be expected, and others from nests likely to fail. Two of the harvested pairs recycled successfully. 100% fertility was recorded throughout and 34 eggs were produced in total.

## POOR PARENTAL CARE

From the 20 eggs left in the wild, 18 chicks hatched, of which 4 died. 10 were rescued and 4 were left to fledge naturally in two nests. Chicks were rescued when daily monitoring showed that they were failing to gain weight, or when the nest was attacked by predators. The reasons for poor parental care this year are unclear, as weights recorded for wild adult females were the highest ever seen. It is possible that the unusually dry weather led to a failure of food supply at the last minute, or that there was substantial social disturbance from the extra male birds.

Of the 14 eggs taken into captivity, 13 hatched and then 10 additional chicks were rescued, giving aviary staff 23 wild origin chicks, plus two reared from the captive breeding pair. Five of these chicks failed, two dying whilst very small and one from injuries inflicted by mynahs in



Andrew Greenwood and Rachel Shorten examine Echo Parakeets in the forest.

Photo: Sam Williams

the nest. Of the 3 captive pairs already established, two are laying so far, but only one has produced chicks (now for the second year). The second pair successfully reared a ringneck chick fostered to them, having previously reared but plucked an Echo chick.

## 24 CHICKS SURVIVE

The overall total for 1996, so far, is now 24 chicks surviving; by far the most successful year ever seen. The total joint wild/captive population is estimated at about 85 to 90 birds.

New funding this year, over and above that provided by the *World Parrot Trust UK*, included \$6000 from the *World Parrot Trust USA*, which funded a vital additional field worker, Vicky Jones and \$4000 from the *International Aviculturists' Society* which helped support Janet Webb working in the aviaries. This brought the field team up to 5 for the first time, which certainly allowed the location of new nests, and the aviary team to 4. Late failure of a number of nests released some of the field team to help in the aviaries, particularly when finishing off the new aviary complex, which is just completed and which can house up to 12 breeding pairs of Echos plus their offspring.

If all the captive birds are successfully reared, six to eight fledglings will be soft released by Kathryn Murray at the forest camp site, modelled on her successful surrogate release of captive bred ringnecks last year. This will leave about 30 birds in the aviary

population which is considered sufficient for the supporting breeding programme.

## GENETIC TESTING

Genetic representation in the overall population seems quite good and the genetics of the Echo are being given priority in a study of the three Mauritian species (parakeet, pink pigeon and kestrel) at the Institute of Zoology. Disease problems have been very slight. Our monitoring now suggests that psittacine beak and feather disease is absent, but that polyomavirus and psittacine herpesvirus are endemic in the wild population and in the captive ringnecks, but with no indication as yet that either virus is causing overt disease. Treatment of substrates in the wild nests has been totally effective this year in preventing nest fly attack and fungal infections.

Whilst the Echo still continues to be highly vulnerable, considerably more optimism seems justified than we could have hoped for three years ago. Successful release of the 1996 year's young birds will allow a new phase of the programme to develop, with the hope that these habituated birds may serve to induce the wild birds to use supplementary feeding points and even nestboxes.



Vicky Jones, the fieldworker funded by the WPT USA, holding a new batch of Echos  
Photo: Sam Williams

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