



PROMOTING EXCELLENCE  
IN PARROT CONSERVATION  
AVICULTURE AND WELFARE

# Scene

*The World Parrot Trust*

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## CAROLINA MEDAL AWARDED TO THE ECHO PARAKEET TEAM

In our February 1997 edition of *PsittaScene* we announced the World Parrot Trust's intention to make an annual award of The Carolina Medal for 'outstanding achievement in parrot conservation'. The WPT trustees considered that such an award would benefit the parrots, first, by encouraging initiatives in this rather specialised area of conservation, and second, by providing an opportunity to publicise the plight of the parrots around the world.

The Carolina Medal can be won in four different categories: 'Research & Management', which effectively covers most field and veterinary activity; 'Education', which is capable of including a wide range of educational activities, targeted at schools, the media, bird keepers etc; 'Avicultural Endeavours', which opens the door for many conservation-minded aviculturists; and 'Welfare Practices', an opportunity for all concerned about how parrots are treated.

When the WPT trustees came to reviewing the potential award winners, it seemed clear that, for the first Carolina Medal at least, the winner was likely to come from among those people and organisations working on preserving threatened parrot species in the wild. Apart from the parrot field projects supported by the World

Parrot Trust itself, there are many other projects around the world which have merit and deserve encouragement. Quite a few of these, however, suffer from shortages of funds or expertise, either of which tend to remove them from contention for an award.

Every year the WPT receives invitations to fund a variety of parrot-related field studies, most of which have considerable value in terms of gathering ornithological data. Quite often, however, these studies do not lead on to valid conservation action of direct benefit to parrot species. Pure ornithology is often funded by large charities and institutions which are not



The Echo Parakeet Team 1997/98 (left to right): Sarah Jane Barbe, Arantxa Laliandi, Marc Pierard, Andrew Smart, Audrey Reynolds, Malcolm Nicoll, Mike Reynolds, Lance Wollover, Kirsty Swinnerton, Grant Harper, Carl Jones, Pete Haverson, Mike Thorsen, Nick Reynolds, Kathryn Murray, Kirsty Jenkin, Frederique de Ravel

**“psittacine**

(sit'ã sîn) Belonging  
or allied to the  
parrots; parrot-like”

*If we can save the parrots, we may yet save ourselves* © WPT





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It will of course consider articles or letters from any contributors on their merits.



Echo Parakeet feeding from the supplemental hopper.

Photo: Kathryn A. Murray

necessarily interested in the parrot conservation and welfare objectives listed in the 'Aims of the World Parrot Trust' (see page 15 for a reminder). As a result of exposure to many applications for funding which fail to meet our criteria, we have learned to identify those projects that undoubtedly deserve to receive the limited and precious project funds available to the World Parrot Trust.

#### ECHOS HIGH ON LIST

High on the list of such projects is the ongoing work in Mauritius to rescue the Echo Parakeet *Psittacula eques*. It has received financial support from the Trust since 1990, and continues to be our single most important commitment. Under the direction of Dr. Carl Jones, an international team of experts and volunteers has laboured mightily to bring the Echo Parakeet from a low point of 8 to 12 birds in 1987 to a total of 80+ by the end of 1996.

This has been achieved by effective 'management'. This describes an array of methods designed to enhance the prospects of breeding success for the parakeets. For example, when it became clear that rats were depredating nests, biologists with expertise in trapping exotic rodents were brought in. When it was found that chicks were being attacked by tropical nest fly maggots, every wild nest with chicks was checked every day and its nest material replaced with new material containing an appropriate insecticide. In 1996 first clutches were removed and successfully incubated and hand-reared. Several of the wild pairs re-cycled. Double clutching will continue with the most prolific pairs, and every effort

is made to ensure that each pair fledges at least one young. When a hurricane struck Mauritius in 1996 the team went out and removed chicks in danger of being lost, and brought them in to the Black Gorges aviaries to be reared. Other techniques employed include habitat improvement, supplementary feeding, and nest cavity improvement.

This level of wildlife management can only be achieved by exceptional experience, intuition, and leadership. Carl Jones has demonstrated these qualities previously in Mauritius, first by bringing the Mauritius Kestrel from only 4 specimens to over 450 – 500 birds today, and then by saving the Pink Pigeon from extinction. In 1991 there were only 10 wild pigeons, but by late 1997 there were 330 free living birds. If he had not been in a position to start work on the Echo Parakeet it is very likely that this bird would now be extinct.

#### UNANIMOUS CHOICE

For all these reasons and more, the trustees of The World Parrot Trust were unanimous in choosing to award the first ever Carolina Medal to Carl Jones, together with all those who have worked with him on the conservation of the Echo Parakeet.

The team has benefited from the input of many talented personnel. The management of the captive birds has been led by Kirsty Swinnerton, Frederique de Ravel and Regis Lam. The work in the field has been developed by Kevin Duffy, Tim Lovegrove, Rachel Shorten and Mike Thorsen, and the release work was pioneered by Kathryn Murray. So many others have contributed to the conservation work that it is not practical to list

them all.

The management and conservation of the Echo Parakeet is a joint project of the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation and the National Parks and Conservation Service, Government of Mauritius. The work in 1996/97 was sponsored by UNDP, World Parrot Trust UK, World Parrot Trust USA, Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust, Wildlife Preservation Trust Canada, International Aviculturists Society, and Mauritian Wildlife Foundation. Sponsors also included the Iris Darnton Foundation, International Zoo Veterinary Group, Zeneca UK, the Parrot Society (UK), The Keith Ewart Charitable Trust and other supporting organisations and individuals.

It is planned to present the Carolina Medal to Dr. Carl Jones in London during 1998. In the meantime, the World Parrot Trust invites nominations from any source for an award to be announced in November 1998. Closing date is August 1 1998. Please write for more information and nomination forms to Jo Pagan, Administrator, WPT, Glanmor House, Hayle, Cornwall UK, TR27 4HY.



*The careful but innovative development of the Echo Programme was well illustrated between 1995 and 1997 by a series of trial releases. Other parrot releases have often not been successful, and this is a vital area for psittacine conservation, where it is essential we discover and refine release techniques. See Kathryn Murray's article on the next two pages.*



# Captive-reared Echo Parakeets Released to the Wild

by Kathryn A Murray

## An Update from the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation

The Echo Parakeet has been the subject of intense activity for several years and is the World Parrot Trust's longest running project. This year a landmark was reached when three young Echo Parakeets were released to the wild. Two of these birds were reared from harvested eggs and one was captive bred. These three parakeets are hopefully the first of many and will help to boost the severely depleted wild population. They will also provide a reservoir of trained birds that will readily take supplemental food, use nest boxes and accept other forms of beneficial management. Hopefully they will encourage the wild birds to do the same. The release of Echo Parakeets was only attempted after two years of preparation using Ring-neck Parakeets (*Psittacula krameri*) as model species.

For the first release every factor that could possibly go wrong had to be considered. To try to eliminate potential problems a trial release using the Ring-neck Parakeets was tried between October 1995 and January 1996. Ring-neck Parakeets are an introduced species on Mauritius and are frequently seen flying around in small flocks within the National Park.

### TRIAL RELEASE WITH RING-NECKS

Three groups of Ring-neck Parakeets differing in age, group size and degree of tameness were released using a soft-release technique, developed for the Pink Pigeon in 1987 and adapted for this

release. The basic principle is to release birds about 15 minutes before dusk so the birds are thinking of going to roost. Hopefully they will roost close to the aviary. The next morning small amounts of seed are sprinkled inside the release hatches where the birds may see them. On their return the birds are re-captured and released later that day about 30 minutes before dusk. This process is repeated, bringing forward the daily release time until the birds are spending the majority of their time outside the aviary. This process allows the birds to travel and explore away from the aviary in stages, hopefully avoiding the loss of birds. On re-capture they are rewarded with sufficient amounts of food so that the aviary is constantly reinforced as a place to return to.

Eleven out of the fourteen Ring-neck Parakeets were successfully released. From these releases we established: that the first group is the hardest to establish; a small group size is preferable; the younger the birds are after fledging the better and that tameness should be encouraged for the first group or two. The birds were not very tame, they would come to a call but not allow you to touch them.

They were released into an area in the south-west of the National Park called Bel Ombre, or 'Beautiful Shadows', where a small population of wild Ring-neck Parakeets are frequently seen. Three pairs of Echo Parakeets are also known to breed in that area. Of the eleven released Ring-neck Parakeets, seven are still resident and one pair may breed this

year. One of these birds went missing and three others were removed for various reasons.

The released birds are still being studied. They will be monitored so that we can see how they adapt, whether it is possible for them to breed in the wild and successfully rear their young despite being captive-bred and hand-reared.

### PRODUCTIVE SEASON

The 1996-1997 breeding season was the most productive of recent years for the wild Echo Parakeets. The population reached its highest since monitoring began in 1973, with a total of between 76 and 87 individuals. Unfortunately, out of twenty one chicks produced in the wild only three fledged naturally, and the other eighteen had to be rescued and taken into captivity for rearing. However, this gave the captive population a huge boost and increased numbers to 23 birds; 2 adult males, 4 adult females, 3 sub-adult males, 9 juvenile males and 5 juvenile females. At last there were enough to try a release! The release group therefore consisted of three birds that were surplus to genetic requirements of the captive population. They were screened for a number of diseases and were healthy when released.

Before releasing our young birds to the wild we wanted to put them through a course of pre-release training so that the chances of them being lost would be minimised. We released them from a small enclosure into a much larger flight, 20.15m x 5.0m x 3.65m high. This

allowed me to get to know the birds well and to test some of our release techniques. Each bird had a small bell attached to one of its tarsi. These are high quality brass and silver bells used by falconers on small falcons and can be heard over a considerable distance.

Each individual was trained to walk onto a digital scales balance to be weighed. The Ring-neck Parakeet releases showed that catching the birds regularly with a net and weighing them in a bag made them very nervous. Since the Echo Parakeets were weighed every couple of days we did not want them to avoid the release aviary and the handler. They were all trained to come to a whistle and the words 'Come on!' During the Ring-neck Parakeet releases birds were initially confused by how to get in and out of the release aviary via hatches. Once they learnt how to do this they soon became wary of being caught up. We wanted to teach the Echo Parakeets how to use the release hatches. This was done in the pre-training using the hatch between the flight and the aviary. We did this by feeding them only in the small aviary and closing the hatch behind them. They soon learnt they could get out again and the hatch would never remain shut for long. Soon they were confident enough to fly in and out of the hatch and no longer crawled up and down the wire. The flight also gave them the opportunity to build up their flight muscles. They definitely needed it as they were flying just a metre off the ground!



The three birds on the release platform.

Photo: Kathryn A. Murray



Echo on release platform.

Photo: Kathryn A. Murray





Echo feeding in the wild.

Photo: Kathryn A. Murray

#### SUPPLEMENTARY FEEDING

Most importantly they were trained to recognise and feed from food dispensers. The original design was based on a Kakapo hopper. Only after slaving away to make our own and the release was almost over did we hit on the idea of asking Don Merton, who heads the Kakapo project for the Department of Conservation in New Zealand, if he would donate some spare Kakapo hoppers! He willingly obliged and provided smaller versions to suit the parakeets. Some new MWF team members from New Zealand, ex-Kakapo field workers themselves, transported them over. The birds quickly learned to feed from the new dispensers.

The small feeding stations were attached to the top of a pole with a perch system below each one. For ease of management the individual components are detachable and the entire hopper can be easily moved from place to place. So now the Echo Parakeets and the Kakapo have the same dinner service!

On the 13th July the three birds for release were packed up in boxes and transported to the release site in the back of a 4WD jeep.

The release site, called Plaine Lievre, is situated in an area of upland evergreen forest. It was ideal

for this release because there is an established field station with a release aviary. The field station is used mainly by Pink Pigeon, Mauritius Kestrel and Echo Parakeet field staff. Several Echo Parakeet pairs are found in and around this area.

Following a very wet and windy acclimatisation week, when the birds thoroughly enjoyed themselves with endless rain-bathing, the weather improved and I decided it was time to see if the months of preparation had paid off.

#### ECHOS FLY FREE

It did. Within two weeks all three birds were at liberty and they were allowed to come and go as they pleased. No problems were experienced and the release went exactly as planned. They spent a lot of time foraging in nearby trees sampling everything they could. They were quite partial to the bounteous amounts of guava and privet berries, which was interesting because both these species are introduced and are choking the native flora. They dutifully returned to the aviary and the supplementary feeding hoppers daily.

The bells on the birds proved to be a major bonus allowing me to locate the birds quickly within the trees.

Their green colour blends so well in the trees that they are almost invisible to the eye, especially if they are not moving much, or calling. All three remained within the close proximity of the release area making my job of following them easier.

Within three months they had ventured up to 1km away to a Conservation Management Area called Brise Fer. It consists of a 27 hectare fenced area, weeded of exotic plant species. Most of the Plaine Lievre released Pink Pigeon population resides there and it is known to be a favoured feeding site and roost area of wild Echo Parakeets. We hope that there will be some integration between the release and wild birds in the near future. The release birds are being encouraged to feed in this area with the use of supplemental feeding stations and who knows, it may not be too long before a wild bird is seen feeding with them.

A time-partitioning study is being developed at the moment to help assess the release birds adaptation to being 'free'. All the birds will be intensively monitored just like the release populations of Mauritius Kestrels and Pink Pigeons. The success of this coming breeding season dictates how the next releases will proceed. Three

members of staff from Paradise Park are all helping with the Echo Parakeet breeding season, both in the wild and in captivity. The release group is being encouraged to remain loyal to the release site to act as decoy birds for future releases. This will also remove the need for birds in future releases being quite so tame. To help with future releases it would be advantageous to build a release flight alongside the release aviary. Training would then not be quite so intensive and birds can train themselves to go into and out of release hatches and build up their muscles prior to release. Any donations towards the release flight would be greatly appreciated.

MWF would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this programme, including the World Parrot Trust (UK and USA), Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust, Wildlife Preservation Trust Canada, the National Parks and Conservation Service, Mauritius Government, United Nations Development Programme, International Zoo Veterinary Group, the Parrot Society (UK), International Aviculturists' Society, the Iris Darnton Foundation and many other organisations and individuals. The UNDP provided funding for the new Echo Parakeet release aviary.



'Pablo', the most tame of the three released Echos.

Photo: M. Reynolds