

Wild Echoes: Echo Parakeet Field Season 1998/99

by LANCE WOOLAVER

As we near the end of the Echo Parakeet field season here in Mauritius, we can all look back with a sense of satisfying accomplishment in being involved with the most productive season on record! Under the professional leadership of New Zealander Grant Harper, the season has gone exceedingly smoothly. A total of 8 chicks have fledged in the wild to date with three more expected to fledge within the next few weeks. All are doing well. Ten handraised chicks are planned for the release part of the program which begins January 22. This season's production of 21 fledglings is a significant addition to the 1997 minimum wild population of 73.

By far the most exciting news from this season was the first nesting success of a released female, Gabriella. Gabriella was one of the original trio of Parakeets (along with Pablo and Sanchez) released in July of 1997. Pablo is still fulfilling his function as Echo-Human ambassador and makes regular appearances for VIP visitors and film crews, although his hourly rate has increased substantially with his growing fame. Look for him on the Rolf Harris television show 'Rolf's Amazing World of Animals' on the BBC in May of 1999.

The early part of the season (September and November) was very physical. Trails needed to be recut to known nest sites and 3 hour watches were made at known nest cavities to determine what established pairs were up to. This involved days of hiking up and down the gorges in the national park, often in very wet weather with hungry mosquitoes for company. Any discomfort was

very quickly lost when an Echo was sighted or heard or any new information on them was gained. The individuals on the Echo team seemed to thrive on this intense activity which was often followed by time spent watching, learning and contemplating.

A considerable amount of time was spent and a lot of ground was covered looking for new pairs. Although we feel we have

a good idea of all the present breeding pairs (16 including Gabriella) there are still some areas where we hope new pairs may be found. Apart from Gabriella and her male, we didn't find any new pairs this year but a 2 year old wild fledged female was observed examining a new cavity and we are hopeful that she will nest there next season.

Management Techniques

Our main management technique at the moment is one of downsizing nests. Due to forest loss and degradation, the availability of native foods is a limiting factor. Echoes lay from 1 to 3 eggs but have difficulty feeding more than one chick. Echo chicks have starved in the past. We remove extra chicks from a nest when they are old enough for travel (10 days) leaving the parents a single chick to feed. If a set of parents has shown themselves to be competent in past seasons we

will leave them two chicks and monitor their weights daily to ensure they are putting on weight. The extra chicks are either taken to the aviaries at the GDEWS or transferred to wild pairs whose nests have failed through infertility. Daily monitoring of youngsters through the crucial first 10-20 days allows us to act decisively if the parents are unable to care for them. Weighing is done quickly and carefully and the health of each chick is assessed while the female is being fed by the male away from the nest cavity so that the adults are not being hampered in any way. We have had great success this season with record weights in chicks of 198 and 201 grams despite it being a very poor fruiting due to drought. Care and respect for each individual chick allows us to help the Echo at a species level by ensuring that each season's production is high with the greatest number of fledglings in the wild. The results are certainly there with 11 fledglings in the wild this year.

New Nests Found

Five new cavities were found this season, two of which were used by established pairs who had previously used other cavities nearby. We now know of approximately 25 potential nesting cavities. It appears that Echo pairs likely know of several potential cavities within their traditional nesting area and are able to use alternate cavities if their prime cavity is occupied by a competitor. There are still problems with competition for nest sites, primarily from White-tailed Tropicbirds, Mynahs, Ring-necked Parakeets, bees and termites. At the moment we are preparing cavities for next season to discourage use by these competing species. Since Echoes will use a deep cavity with a small entrance, it is fairly easy to exclude most competitors although it still requires a fair amount of work and patience when you are hanging 10 to 40 feet up a rope.

Each season we have more success and more firsts as each team builds on the hard work and efforts of those before them. The help from Dale



Pablo, Sanchez and Gabriella.



Kirsty Jenkin with Echo chick.

Jackson of the World Parrot Trust was invaluable as he proved himself an excellent field worker and his experience with handling young birds was of great help to the team.

Gabriella's Story

Gabriella was born 12/10/96 to captive parents at the Gerald Durrell Endemic Wildlife Sanctuary (GDEWS) in Black River. She was released in July of 1997 at Plaine Lievre near the Conservation Management Area of native forest at Brise Fer. She was released with two juvenile males of the same age, Pablo and Sanchez. Gabriella was always the most dominant of the three, even though she was smaller and lighter than her companions.

Being the first ever release group of Echo Parakeets their daily progress was closely monitored. For the first two months they spent most of their time exploring the area around their release aviaries. As they became more confident with their flying and orientation skills they began to venture further afield but still spent much of their time nearby. It was an immense thrill when I saw their inaugural flight over the forest of Brise Fer in late September. It caught me by surprise and I felt a feeling of

pride in their accomplishment. They soon began spending most of their time exploring their great new forested world, returning to Plaine Lievre for an evening feed and to roost for the night. In late October the three released Echoes were frequently seen spending time with a wild juvenile of their same age, Zip. They were often observed feeding alongside Zip on wild fruits, their favourite being bois de lait, *Tabernaemontana mauritiana*. It took another few months before Zip reciprocated by learning to use the supplementary feeding hoppers we had provided for the release birds. It was Gabriella that he was seen feeding with at the hopper in January of 1998.

Finding a Mate

Nearly a year later, while searching for new nests on the 26th of October, 1998, Echo team member Daryl Birch saw a single Echo fly into a tree near the Brise Fer management plot. He took a closer look and found what looked like a nest cavity but didn't see any more activity that evening. The next day Daryl sat and watched the cavity for three hours. He saw a female Echo leave to be fed for three minutes by an adult male before going back into the cavity. The female was Gabriella. She had paired with a wild male and had



Gabriella at a feeding station.

found a cavity of her own! Later that day, Echo leader Grant Harper climbed up to the nest and found a single egg. As she was not afraid of Grant, there was a tense standoff between the two and Gabriella made it quite clear to Grant with her body language and strong eye flashing that he had better behave himself.

Unfortunately, the egg was found to be infertile. A plastic dummy egg was placed in the cavity while we planned our next move. One of the main goals of the Echo project is to produce as many fledglings in the wild as possible so it was very important to us that Gabriella be given a chance to raise a chick.

Rearing a Chick

We were able to transfer a 6 day old, 29 gram chick named Pippin, from another wild nest which had two hatchlings. Much to our relief, Pippin immediately began putting on weight. All of us were anxious to see whether such a young female would be able to care for a very demanding Echo chick. Pippin was weighed daily. The nesting material was treated with carbaryl to protect Pippin from nestflies and mites. Gabriella handled herself like an experienced Echo and Pippin

grew well. She was tolerant of our daily checks and would wait until we were finished before going into the cavity to feed her chick. At 12 days old, both of Pippin's eyes were open. On day 13, Pippin was fitted with colour rings for identification (black on the left, light green on the right) and already weighed 65 grams. Gabriella continued to use the established supplementary feeding stations in Brise Fer as well as her own personal feeding hopper we had placed in a tree near her cavity. By day 37, Pippin weighed a respectable 159 grams and was ready for a day of fame. On the 16th of December, Pippin was filmed for the BBC television show Rolf's Amazing World of Animals while Gabriella sat in a nearby tree keeping a watchful eye on the proceedings.

In the late afternoon of December 29, Pippin was seen perched in a tree adjacent to the nest cavity with Gabriella. He was 56 days old and finally fledged. Fledglings are very quiet and nothing was seen or heard of Pippin although Gabriella was regularly seen on her own in Brise Fer and at Plaine Lievre.

Two days ago, January 20, 1999, I was walking in Brise Fer and saw an adult male Echo feeding on flowers of bois de lait. I then saw a younger bird with him and knew it was Pippin. Pippin was also feeding on the flowers and Gabriella was nearby.

Another Season

This experience has given all of us associated with the field and release parts of the Echo project increased confidence that our efforts will work. Next season we hope that some of the 6 female Echoes released last year, still around Brise Fer and Plaine Lievre and doing well, will follow Gabriella's example.

All of us here in Mauritius involved with the Echo Parakeet Project would like to thank Mike Reynolds and the WPT and its members for their continued support of our work. We would also like to thank Kirsty Jenkin for her help with handraising Echoes again this year and Dale Jackson for being part of the Echo team.