

# Psitta Scene

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Cover Picture By © Gideon Climo 2005

With only 86 individuals left in the world, every Kakapo is an important player in the recovery of the species, particularly new recruits like these new chicks - dubbed "dit" and "dot" - who represent half of this years reproductive output for the species.

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# Gold Rush

## The search for Golden Conures in western Pará, Brazil

Text and Photos By TOA KYLE



Dawn rises in the eastern Amazon. The mist hangs heavy in the air owing to the massive amounts of water vapour released by the surrounding vegetation overnight. In the distance I locate the rapid, high-pitched calls of my study subjects. Imagine puppies on helium gas and you'll have an idea what a flock of Golden Conure sounds like. Within seconds a group of seven birds arrives to a large isolated snag found in a cattle pasture. I observe them for half an hour as they conduct their morning ritual of preening and play at this tree. What is evident from the behaviour of this flock is the strong family bond that exists between flock members as opposed to simply being a collection of individual pairs. I focus my attention on a single bird that "makes the rounds", allopreening with three other flock members in a 10 minute period. Others appear to be conducting a game of hide and seek by repeatedly crawling in and out of numerous holes found in the snag. The playful energy of Golden Conures is contagious making them hands down, one of the most entertaining parrot species I've had the privilege of observing in the wild. As the light of the sun begins to dissipate the morning fog, the birds leave the tree for foraging areas. In decent light, seeing a flock of these stunning, saffron-coloured birds in flight is an unforgettably breathtaking experience.

The aim of this study, undertaken in April-May 2004, was to conduct surveys of Golden Conure (*Guaruba guarouba*) in two reserves located in western Pará. It is a continuation of work done by myself in 2002 in the eastern range of the species along the Capim River south of the state capital, Belem. This area has suffered from heavy deforestation and active poaching pressure on the birds was observed. The state of Pará has lost over 70% of its primary forest as logging, cattle ranching and soy bean production have steadily decimated rainforest in a wave heading westward and northward from the state of Mato Grosso. In contrast to eastern Pará, the western side of the state possesses larger tracts of undisturbed forest, including two large reserves, Tapajós

National Forest (TNF) and Amazônia National Park (ANP). Given the tenuous future of private lands in the eastern Amazon, these reserves may be crucial to Golden Conure survival. Research on conures was carried out in these areas in the mid 1970s and 80s by David Oren and colleagues but since then no information of the status of the species in this key region has been reported.

The results from the 2004 survey are encouraging. I located at least four flocks of Golden Conure along a 40 km stretch of the Cupari River which forms the southern border of TNF. Knowledge of birds here is a credit to the efforts of Gil Serique, an ecotourism guide based out of Santarém. He came to the Cupari River for the first



*Typical landscape outside the Tapajós National Forest. The land was cleared within the past year by a local farmer to create pasture for his small herd of cattle. A flock of 4 Golden Conure are occasionally seen in this area.*



Photo: Luiz Claudio Marigo



This picture of the Conures preening in the early morning mist was taken through binoculars.



The Cupari is an attractive river to travel on, being bordered by lush vegetation for most of its course. Flocks of Golden Conure are occasionally seen along the river, but for the most part the species is found in the rolling upland or terra firme forests in the area.

time in 2000 to look for Hyacinth Macaws (*Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*) after reading Henry Walter Bates' account of the species there in the 19th century (Bates makes no mention of Golden Conure during his expedition). Not only did Gil see hyacinths here, he also unexpectedly found 'ararajubas', the common name for Golden Conure. It is of interest to note that the name ararajuba is an indigenous word for 'yellow macaw'. Recent genetic analysis of neotropical parrots has shown that the natives were right, Golden Conure were shown to be more related to Red-shouldered Macaw (*Diopsittaca nobilis*) than any of the *Aratinga* parakeets systematists originally associated it with.

Ironically I'd intended on assessing the status of conure within the TNF reserve but the vast majority of sightings came from the non-reserve side of the Cupari River. This is in part due to the lack of trails in this section of the reserve, making incursions difficult, but also to the apparent preference the species exhibits for isolated snags as roost or nest sites, most often found in areas cleared for cattle pasture. Utilizing isolated trees for nests is a common defense among parrots against arboreal mammals, such as monkeys that

may otherwise be able to gain access to eggs or nestlings from adjacent trees. Golden Conure nests are still vulnerable to avian predators however. Several locals in the Cupari region told me they've witnessed Channel-billed Toucans (*Ramphastos vitellinus*) robbing conure eggs on occasion. Previous researchers have suggested that Golden Conure's communal nesting behaviour may have resulted as a defense against nest predation, as multiple pairs of conures would be better able to repel toucan attacks compared to lone nesting pairs.

Despite the presence of Golden Conure on the non-reserve side of TNF in conspicuous roosting trees, I saw no evidence of nest poaching there. This is strong contrast to the Capim River survey in 2002 where I was offered chicks on numerous occasions for as little as us\$10! The most obvious threat to the species along the Cupari is the continued deforestation opposite the reserve's borders, as local farmers clear forest to grow subsistence crops such as rice and manioc. Several times I found a flock of conures feeding on murucí seeds (*Byrsonima crassifolia*) in forest fragments recently separated by the clearing of 2 ha of forest to plant a meager amount of rice. While it may be argued that deforestation outside the reserve is inevitable, any continued habitat loss for the species, no matter where it lies, should be addressed



A Golden Conure nest tree located directly next to the road connecting a Cupari River community to the Transamazonica highway. The landowner where the tree is located is proud to have the birds on his land and has prohibited anyone from climbing it to take chicks. A flock of 12 conures were observed at dusk briefly visiting this tree in late April before flying to another unknown roost site, suggesting post-fledging dispersal following the breeding season.



The new visitors' guide for Amazônia National Park. Golden Conure were an obvious choice for the cover, as they are a charismatic species endemic to the region, as well as being frequently observed along the highway that transverse the eastern edge of the park.

especially if it is preventable. In this particular example the improved productivity of existing agricultural plots or possibly purchasing important tracts of habitat along the Cupari would better serve Golden Conure populations.

## Murucí: An important resource for western birds

The prevalence of murucí in the Golden Conure's diet along the Cupari during the course of the study was echoed by the time spent at ANP on the opposite banks of the





*Flowers of the murucí tree. The fruits of this tree are the most often cited food item of Golden Conures by locals in western Pará. People also collect the fruits to make juice and ice cream.*

mighty Tapajós River. Murucí fruits are the shape and size of blueberries with two 3-5mm seeds encased in a hard, black seed pod. I was able to observe conures daily while in the park due to the discovery of a 2 ha grove of murucí trees frequented by two flocks of birds. On one occasion I witnessed the smaller flock of 10 birds chase the larger 14 bird flock away from a fruiting tree. Although only one observation, this may suggest that Golden Conure family units maintain and defend foraging territories from one another.

The prominence of murucí in the diet of Golden Conure during this period of the year is supported by interviews conducted with locals. On several occasions along the Cupari River I was shown murucí trees that conures had been observed feeding in during previous weeks. In some communities I was told that the species was only seen when murucí trees were in fruit. The fruiting period for murucí is roughly April to August, thus making it a potentially important resource for recently fledged chicks as well as adult birds during the dry season.

## Begging displays

Based on two mornings of observation in the murucí 'grove', I was able to witness flock members repeatedly begging from other birds feeding on murucí seeds. This begging involved a display in which the birds would extend and curve their wings out, while leaning forward and shuddering with head and body feathers raised. A high

pitched wailing call accompanied the display and it was the incessant noise made by these birds that first led me to the feeding area. The display was repeatedly made around foraging birds until they regurgitated a meal to the 'beggars'. On several occasions I witnessed up to three individuals beg-displaying around a single 'donor'. I've observed both recently fledged chicks and juveniles begging thus making it likely that these younger birds are incapable of efficiently opening murucí seed pods.

Park guards told me I was fortunate to find the conures during my stay as flocks seemingly disappear for months on end. Whether birds are moving into areas deeper within the park or migrating out of its borders is presently unknown. I was told one story, however, of a nest tree located close to the park's entrance in cattle pasture. This nest was cut down by the land owner to gain access to nestlings. Such stories are tragic because not only are chicks likely killed in the process but a valuable nest site is lost for untold numbers of future nesting attempts. Although I was unable to locate nest trees in the park during my visit, I've recently been informed that one nest has been found in a lagoon bordering the main road which passes along the park's eastern border. This is good news for future park visitors as there now exists a potentially reliable location for Golden Conure viewing. As conures are the most sought after species by guests to the park, it has recently become it's symbol, being prominently featured on the cover of a newly published educational pamphlet. Personally, it's a relief to know that protected areas exist for Golden Conure populations. Such is not always the case for other threatened neotropical parrots such as Blue-throated Macaw (*Ara glaucogularis*) and Red-fronted Macaw (*Ara rubrogenys*).



*The Golden Conures penchant for isolated snags for nest or roost trees brings them into contact with humans when they select trees in cow pasture, for example here along the transamazonica highway linking Pará to Rondonia.*

## Future conservation efforts: east vs. west dynamics

Results from the 2002 and 2004 Golden Conure surveys undertaken by WPT raise questions as to where to direct future conservation efforts for this species. In the eastern range of the species, deforestation is widespread and active poaching of birds is taking place. Conversely, in the west large tracts of intact forest still exist and I found little evidence of trafficking in the birds. These basic trends are reflected in the average flock size in the west, 10.3 birds compared to 7.6 in the east. A dilemma exists of whether or not to conserve the more critically endangered eastern birds or concentrate our efforts on western populations which offer more hope for long term survival. These types of decisions are never easy to make, especially when dealing with limited financial resources. Nonetheless at this stage of our project it is still hoped that

Photo: Luiz Claudio Marigo







Brazil's national gas company, PetroBras, has chosen the Golden Conure as its mascot, thus this five foot cartoon effigy of the species is found at hundreds of service stations across the country. Hopefully this raised profile for the species will translate into more concern for those flocks which still persist in the wild.

conservation efforts in both regions of the species' range can be initiated, applying a different suite of methods in each case.

Results from this survey are encouraging in terms of confirming the presence of Golden Conure within protected areas. Future research may utilize these sites for comparative studies of the species' ecology in natural and degraded habitats. IBAMA (the Brazilian government's environmental agency) offices for both the TNF and ANP issued research permits promptly and were receptive to the possibility of future conservation efforts. Given the history of rapid deforestation in the state of Pará these reserves have taken on strategic importance in preserving the state's rich biodiversity. However the tendency of Golden Conure to select nest and roost trees in human altered landscapes illustrates the concept that the presence of a reserve does not necessarily guarantee protection for the birds. Education efforts aimed at communities bordering these reserves, enhancement of enforcement of existing laws, and direct protection of nest/roost sites will minimize negative human impacts on these unique, spectacular parrots.

One final story from the 2004 survey involves a banana farmer I met along the Cupari River. I told him I was looking for Golden Conures and he smiled. Apparently, the birds occasionally raid his banana trees. When I asked him if he shot them to protect his crops, he replied, "No. I don't kill beautiful things."



# Golden Conure notes from the 2005 field season

Text and Photos By TOA KYLE

Conservation efforts for this year's Golden Conure work are progressing well thus far. We've just completed a three week stint in the Cupari river region bordering the Tapajós National Forest and are presently initiating community outreach work and searches for conures found outside Amazônia National Park.

The decision was made to work in western Pará over the eastern part of the state due to security concerns. Brazilian colleagues basically talked me out of working in the east this year. An American nun, Dorothy Stang, was brutally murdered earlier this February in southeastern Pará. Stang was an active force in the region, attempting to preserve rainforest and help the rural poor secure small parcels of land to grow subsistence crops on. Powerful landowners with vested logging interests in the same area allegedly paid gunmen to assassinate her in broad daylight. In addition, Brazilian parrot biologist, Carlos Yamashita, was apparently threatened the last time he worked with Golden Conures on the Cupim river in eastern Pará by loggers who didn't want conservationists in the area. Violent killings are less common in western Pará but conflicts are not unknown. An acquaintance I met last season who was working for IBAMA in Itaituba, requested a transfer after she received a death threat from a local logger. The shotgun diplomacy of Pará is an unfortunate reality for anyone conducting

conservation work in the state.

The goal of this year's efforts is to concentrate more on conure populations found outside reserves, as well as implement educational efforts geared towards those communities living with these 'nonreserve' birds. At present we still don't know if conures regularly migrate in and out of the reserves in search of food resources and nesting sites. Golden Conures, like many other parrot species, readily utilize degraded, open habitats, so ensuring the continuity of flocks in these areas is crucial to the species' survival. The challenge is convincing locals to minimize impacts on remaining habitat and refrain from nest poaching.

André Ravetta, a Brazilian biologist, assisted me by conducting interviews with people living along the non-reserve side of the Cupari River in order to get a better sense of what sort of land use activities occur in this area. We also gave presentations to schoolchildren. To initiate the dialogue with locals we created a poster featuring a beautiful photo of Golden



Brazilian biologist André Ravetta explains the Golden Conure poster to school children at a community found along the Cupari river. This was the first time students had received any kind of environmental education presentation at their school.