

THE BLUE MACAWS – CAN THEY BE SAVED?

by Michael Reynolds

Those of us fortunate enough to spend much time with the parrots tend to become immune to the impact of their appearance. I was reminded of this just recently when I saw a young couple turn a corner in our walled garden at Paradise Park and come face to face with a pair of Hyacinth Macaws. They fell back as if struck a physical blow; he exclaimed 'My God, did you ever see a colour like that? I can hardly believe it.' She agreed, and they stayed to watch while the Hyacinth male gave them the full benefit of his personality.

Say what you will, the blue macaws have a 'presence' which makes them unforgettable. I used to visit the old parrot house at London Zoo in the fifties, and the Hyacinth Macaws are the only birds I can recall from that time. Sadly, it has to be admitted that it is this unique and fascinating appearance and personality that has brought the blue macaws to the edge of extinction in the wild.

The World Parrot Trust participated in the preparation of the ICBP/IUCN/SSC Captive Breeding Specialist Group *Parrot Action Plan* which has just been published in draft form. This reports as follows:-

HYACINTH MACAW

Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus

Mace-Lande Status: Endangered

Project Title: Conservation of the Hyacinth Macaw.

Justification: During the last two decades, numbers of the Hyacinth Macaw have been seriously reduced by massive illegal trade, from an estimated 100,000 to no more than 3,000 at present. *Project Description:* About half of the remaining population survives in the Pantanal, mainly on private ranch land. In recent years the Hyacinth Macaw has become a symbol for the Pantanal's fragile ecosystem among the Brazilian public. Many ranch owners no longer allow trapping on their properties and do not cut down food-trees of the species. However, nest-trees are still often cleared for the sake of cattle and illegal trapping remains a problem in some areas. Strict enforcement of legal bans on trade, and various related action, is needed to save the species in each of its three known main areas.

A continuing effort is therefore needed (1) to increase the already existing sensitivity to the needs of the Hyacinth Macaw (and other

native wildlife), among ranch owners and the general public in the Pantanal. (2) to assist ranchers in improving protection from illegal trappers and (3) to find solutions to the problem of nest-trees. Munn *et al.* (1987) also suggests that management and replanting of the species's food-trees should be undertaken, and that nest-boxes should be erected as an experiment. Surveys are also needed to ascertain the status of the species outside the Pantanal, especially in certain areas of Para, southern Piaui, north-western Minas Gerais and the extensive region of south-eastern Mato Grosso.

Budget: Category B

Literature: Munn *et al.* 1987, Collar *et al.* in press.

Notes: Hyacinth Macaw is protected under Brazilian law, has been listed on Appendix I of CITES since 1987, and is banned from export in all countries of origin.

So let us return to the question: can the blue macaws be saved? To be more specific, can the Hyacinth Macaw, the biggest, best known, and still most numerous, be maintained in the wild without further decline in its numbers?

To answer this question, we can perhaps say that if – and it's a very big 'if' – ALL the measures recommended in the Parrot Action Plan are pursued without significant delay, the Hyacinth Macaw could be expected to be found in relatively similar numbers in the wild in twenty years time.

Positive factors include: the increasingly protective attitude of many ranch owners; the seasonal flooding of the Pantanal which precludes some forms of development; the refusal of almost all airlines to transport wild-caught birds; the fact that aviculture is now beginning to produce aviary-bred



Carlos Yamashita checks a nestling.
Photo: Charles Munn



Hyacinth Macaw *Anodorhynchus Hyacinthinus* Photo: Tim Guthrie

birds to satisfy the demand for these birds as pets.

Negative factors include: the low numbers of Hyacinth Macaws remaining, and their wide dispersal; the desperately low replacement rate of this species; the fact that they are still being trapped and traded. We have just been told by an impeccable source in Paraguay of a group of eight Hyacinth Macaws that were recently confiscated by authorities there. We are trying to find out what happened to them.

As reported elsewhere in this issue, we are giving further support to the work of Charles Munn and his team as they continue to investigate the breeding biology of the species. Here is an excerpt from a recent fax received from Charlie:

'For the Hyacinth research at Estancia Caiman, I see the main work as checking the success of the 11 nest boxes that Carlos Yamashita hung at the ranch and at an adjacent ranch in late Jan and early Feb this year. Simultaneously, the biologist would check the growth rate of the young for the first, critical weeks up to the age of about a couple of months, at which point they are likely to survive anyway. This work would require the participation of just one biologist, either Carlos or Vincente, whom Carlos thoroughly trained on site in the 91-92 season.

Ideally, it would be good to try to do an independent check of the density of natural cavities in a representative subset of the pantanal habitat there at the Caiman Ranch, but if the birds take to the nestboxes well, that fact alone would suggest that there is a scarcity of good natural cavities. By letting the behavior of the birds tell us of this scarcity, we can save the considerable hassle of buying or renting a used motorbike to get around the huge sample areas to look for all natural cavities.'

Such are the realities of field

research, and we are fortunate that our HYACINTH FUND resources are being put to such practical use by a leading expert. The more we can discover, the better the chances of saving this remarkable parrot.

Let us turn now from a blue macaw which is listed as 'endangered' to one listed as 'critical': Lear's Macaw. Here is the relevant extract from the Parrot Action Plan:-

LEAR'S MACAW

Anodorhynchus leari

Mace-Lande Status: Critical

Project Title: Recovery of Lear's Macaw.

Project Aim: To promote a population increase to a minimum of 1,000 individuals in the wild.

Justification: The Lear's Macaw has been one of the world's rarest parrots for a long time. Its present known population is 65 birds in the wild and less than ten in captivity. The recruitment rate is extremely low, and inbreeding depression may be occurring.

Project Description: Continued research into the general biology of the species is of paramount



Aged male Lear's Macaw, held by Harry Sissen. Photo: Rosemary Low

importance for management, and must be undertaken. Enlargement of the Ecological Stations to include more of the species range should be implemented and it is important that roosting and nesting sites remain completely inaccessible to people. Meanwhile, a permanent food supply for the birds needs to be assured by fencing off key areas that hold *licuri* palms, and by planting seedlings chiefly of licuri palm but also of other native and introduced food plants.

In the longer term the creation of new feeding areas (identified in accordance with the results of the continuing programme of biological research) will be needed. Education programmes will be necessary to achieve the support and sympathy of local communities for the conservation of the species and its habitats; in tandem with this should go a programme of wardening and liaison that extends current arrangements. An investigation of the Cachoeira do Rio Preto region may be worthwhile in view of local claims of a second type of blue macaw there.

Several individual birds and a few pairs exist in captivity in

various places around the world. Efforts to maximize their reproductive and genetic potential through the establishment of a consortium under the impartial aegis of the IUCN CBSG, with the full support and involvement of the Brazilian authorities, should be made. A PHVA workshop should be convened as soon as possible.

Budget: Category C.

Literature: Machado & Brandt 1990, Collar *et al.* in press.

A desperate situation, and there is no time to spare. The World Parrot Trust is making one of its largest donations this year to support Charles Munn's forthcoming research into the breeding biology of Lear's Macaw. Briefly, what he proposes is an exploratory expedition to the Lear's nesting site, with the intention of climbing down the cliffs to study the Lear's nests over a period of weeks. The intention will be to try to discover whether the Lear's is similar to the Hyacinth in laying two eggs but normally only fledging one nestling. This expedition will also survey the licuri palms and design a plan for palm regeneration to commence in 1993.



Bleak landscape with sparse licuri palms. Photo: Charles Munn

With so few birds in the wild and only a handful of mostly ancient specimens in captivity, the future of Lear's macaw is indeed bleak. If no serious initiatives are taken in the next year or so, it cannot be expected to survive in the wild for much more than twenty years. So far as the captive birds are concerned, The World Parrot Trust strongly supports the proposal made in the Parrot Action Plan that a consortium should be formed under the impartial aegis of the IUCN Captive Breeding Specialist Group, with the full support and involvement of the Brazilian authorities. We would go further,

and state that all the captive birds should be brought together at one location, to be decided by CBSG and the Brazilian government.

A word about the Glaucous Macaw, *Anodorhynchus glaucus*. Having not seen the bird held by Harry Sissen (Yorkshire, UK), I would not want to venture an opinion on whether it is a Glaucous Macaw. I would only say that it seems unlikely. Having said that, I would point out that bird species entirely new to science are still being discovered, and the possibility of a relict population of this macaw still existing in Paraguay or Brazil can not be entirely dismissed.