

# Psitta



# Scene

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## Visiting the Hyacinth Macaw Conservation Site

Southern Piauí State, Brazil. A Brief Report to the World Parrot Trust and the International Aviculturists Society by Wm. Richard Porter, MD

### INTRODUCTION

The largest native population of the endangered Hyacinth Macaw *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus* is located in the Pantanal region of Brazil.

This population is largely protected on huge cattle estates and as long as they have become of value to the land owners as tourist attractions, their welfare is relatively secure. The next largest remaining population is located over a drier area including the Southern portion of the Piauí State of Brazil. Kaytee Avian Foundation, *World Parrot Trust* and the International Aviculturists Society have been funding efforts to protect this population since photos and video pertinent to its rediscovery were presented by Dr. Charles Munn at the 1995 and 1996 IAS Conventions. Dr. Heather Bowles presented additional information from this population at the

1997 IAS Convention. The reader is referred to those Proceedings for additional history and background information.

In this conservation effort, the basic premise is to offer former trappers an alternative income-producing lifestyle protecting the birds. Early efforts were directed toward utilizing a tractor to prepare ground for subsistence farming and employing former trappers as wardens. In order to provide a sustainable source of income to provide protection for this area,

development of this area as a site for ecotourism has been considered.

Kaytee Avian Foundation sponsored an Ecotour to this site in order to raise funds for this project and to evaluate the financial viability of long-term ecotourism as a sustainable source of funding. Accordingly this report will include more information on the travel than might otherwise be noted.

### TRAVEL

The group of eighteen going on the tour was split into two groups, one leaving for Brazil out of Atlanta and a second leaving out of Miami. This was arranged by the travel agent and Varig airlines such that there would be no problems in accommodating our group as flights run pretty full. Even so, Varig

oversold their flights and left seven out of the eight of us departing Miami at the gate. Despite our confirmed reservations and threehour advance check in, we spent an enjoyable first day of our trip touring Miami's Kmart and Fairchild Gardens while awaiting a flight the following night. Not to fear, our luggage made the flight even though we didn't. (Others travelling to this area may wish to consider alternative flight arrangements as Varig is quite casual regarding seat assignments, reservations and to date has not seen fit to respond to our letters.) Upon arriving Sao Paulo, we fortunately made a connection to Brasilia in time to catch the once daily flight to Barreras, joining the rest of our group. Several days later the

checked baggage caught up with us.

Upon arriving Barreras in early afternoon, the group ate at a local cafeteria and rode in taxis for several hours to the Chapada das Mangabeiras. At this point we transferred to a flat bed truck as the "road" was impassable for automobiles. Even though it was several hours after dark and many had been without sleep for the preceding 24 hours, there was no sleeping on the truck as we viewed the habitat by spotlight on the last hour to the camp.

Arriving at the camp we were greeted with a filling meal and individual huts for each couple complete with mattresses, new sheets and unneeded mosquito netting. Sleeping arrangements were quite comfortable.



10 Hyacinths feeding as seen from blind.

Photo: W. R. Porter

“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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Birders on a morning walk (L-R: Doug Trent, Paula Fox, Terry Fox). Photo: L. Porter

**HABITAT AND FOODS**

Overall the area would probably be best described as a plateau of dry forest surrounded by cliffs. Most trees were less than 7 meters in height and grasses grow between the trees. There were areas of increased moisture with stands of Buritii palms *Mauritia flexuosa*. Although the Hyacinths will work in the young fronds and may at times eat a portion of the fruit of these palms, we did not observe them eating any of the fruit although it was available. In this area the Hyacinths nest in the cliffs, eat in the early morning and again in mid to late afternoon. At the time of our visit, the macaws were roosting at night in remote palm trees. The former trappers identified five primary foods the macaws eat. The two primary palm nuts the hyacinths eat are "Piacava" and "Catole". Another palm nut eaten (though not in season during this visit) is "Tutum" which has a somewhat smaller nut. They also eat the fruit of the "Jatoba" tree (resembling a large fat overgrown green bean) as well as the fruit of the "Sapucaia" (approximately a 6 cm eggplant type fruit with a tough shell containing edible seeds.) By far the most important of these appear to be the "Catole" and "Piacava or Piassava".

No claims are made as to the accuracy of the spelling of these common names nor to taxonomic abilities of the writer. Many different species of palms are called by these common names. In this area the growth habit of these later two is a subterranean trunk with the fronds emerging at ground level and the nuts growing up on a stem six inches or so above ground level. I believe the "Catole" in this area to be *Attalea exigua* (Field Guide to Palms of the Amazons page 161) and the "Piacava or Piassava" to be

*Attalea eichleri* (Palms of the Amazon) although they could certainly be another similar species. These do not appear to be *Syagrus commosa* or *Attalea funifera* as they are reported in other areas. The "Catole" fruit is 1-2 seeded oblovoid 4-6 cm long and 3 -5 cm in diameter. The "Piassava" fruit is similar in shape, often slightly smaller, with multiple (4-7) endosperm per fruit. The "Piassava" seemed to grow in areas that were closer to water than the "Catole". Although some nuts of both were in evidence in June, the "Piassava" was more common with the "Catole" nuts being more immature and reported to ripen during the "egging season" (September through December). It would appear to be much easier and a lot less work for a Hyacinth to chew through the mesocarp of the "Catole" to get the one or two large seeds rather than work through the additional hard fibrous material separating the multiple seed of the "Piassava".

These palm trees grow in areas where the grass is periodically set on fire. With their underground growth habit they survive the fires, and indeed the fires may play a role in eliminating some of their plant competition. When there is a column of smoke, the macaws seem to be attracted and apparently like the partially roasted nuts. Perhaps the cleared areas make it easier to find the nuts without the risk of predation and perhaps the roasting or burning makes it easier to get to the seed in the nut. Apparently the burning of an area to attract the macaws is a technique utilised by trappers for years.

The birds feed on the ground searching for these fruits although they may pick up one, two or three nuts and fly to a surrounding tree to shell and eat same. We observed birds picking up nuts, flying to a

"Jatoba" tree to shell and eat, and eat leaves of the "Jatoba" between bites of the nuts.

**CAMP ROUTINE**

Over the next five days, a portion of our group would go to the blind each dawn till midday and a second shift would go from midday to dusk. The first group to the blind saw in excess of sixty Hyacinths and the number declined over succeeding days, probably secondary to the foot traffic between camp and the blind. Others would go birding, drive in a truck to other areas in the locality to view additional wildlife, eat and sleep.

Holding down the hammocks was a tough job but someone had to do it.

We were told some of the birds feeding at the blind had flown some twenty miles. At the blind some macaws clearly knew we were present. Once they started feeding, they did not seem to be bothered by camera noise. Family groups would come to the feeding site, usually with one and occasionally two offspring. One parent would typically remain high in a nearby tree while the youngsters were coming to the ground to feed. One afternoon after feeding in a nearby "Jatoba" tree, we observed two adults copulating with two younger birds watching. Late in the afternoons the birds would often gather in a distant bare-limbed tree before departing their separate ways to roost.

**NEST SITES**

During the nesting season, the macaws utilise holes and caves in the cliffs overlooking the dry forest. As this was not the nesting season and there were no birds to disturb, the former trappers demonstrated how effortlessly they could climb the cliffs and inspect some of the nest sites. Only a few from our group chose to demonstrate their athletic prowess. Nest caves are quite variable in size. The entrance and cave size varies from openings big enough to accommodate a person to caves and entrances so small the macaws have to back in.

**DISCUSSION WITH THE FORMER TRAPPERS TURNED WARDENS**

Lourival Lima is a well respected man in his village. He owns land, cattle, vehicles, a house and has several employees. For many years Lourival made a substantial portion of his living trapping and selling parrots as had his father before him. He indicates birds have been trapped in this area for at least 50 -60 years and he has been trapping since age nine. He would



Hyacinth nesting cliffs, with intrepid climber.

Photo: L. Porter

trap birds utilising different methods in areas several days away as well as harvest babies from the nest cliffs near his home.

The following is excerpted from notes from conversations with Lorival and one of his workers, Raimondo, over several days.

*How often do the parents feed the babies in the wild?* The male feeds the female with hatchlings at least 3 meals per day. The female does not leave the nest for ten days or so after the babies are born. After that both the parents feed. Both parents fly back to the nest site with huge packed crops.

*How and what did you feed the babies taken from the nests?*

Ideal formula consisted of 50 - 60% "Catole" nut, corn flour, milk and water. The temperature of the formula is slightly above body temperature but not too hot to burn. Cannot be too hot or cold.

*Do pairs return to the same nest site year after year?*

Yes, many pairs return to the same nest hole year after year. We know because of unique calls, behaviour between birds and behaviour around humans.

Some nest holes fail early and a pair might try 3-4 different nest holes within a kilometre.

*Do the birds excavate the holes?*

Some birds do a good portion of the excavation. The cliffs are a form of sandstone and the birds scour and chew in their cave.

*Where do they roost at night (out of the nesting season)?*

They roost in palm trees at night. Usually one pair sleeps in a palm, usually in the same tree night after night.

*How long do the youngsters stay and fly with the parents?*

At least a year. At the cliffs youngsters may be observed with parents as they nest.

*When do they start laying?*

Earliest "egging" is in August. Babies are usually present in October. Some birds are still

"egging" in December.

*When do they fledge and when do parents stop feeding?*

They usually fledge in March or April and are fed for at least 5 months after fledging. Birds probably fledge at three to four months.

*What is the primary food in nest season?*

The "Catole" palm nut is the primary food in the "egging" season. Also the "Piassava" which requires more water.

*When do juveniles reach maturity and select mates?*

They seem to be at least a year and a half before reaching maturity. Then they tend to disappear or disperse.

*How far from the cliffs to the feeding areas?*

Approximately 30 kilometres.

*Is there dominance between pairs?*

Only dominance seems to be exhibited at the nest site area. Fighting between pairs for nest sites has been observed. In trees the birds may displace each other but they are not really fighting.

*How close are nest holes?*

Once observed Greenwing and Hyacinth pair three meters between

holes. There is about a hundred meters between the closest Hyacinth nests. They have a landing pattern to come into the nest and it is perceived to be a pattern to avoid interference between nests.

*Is there a shortage of nest holes?*

No.

*What makes the most successful nest holes?*

Narrow entrance to nest site with deep hole — several feet.

With babies, both parents land simultaneously, one enters and the other watches at the entrance for 3-4 minutes.

*Do hyacinths nest in palms?*

Have always nested in cliffs. If no cliffs they use palms. Near Barrerras they nest in Burritii palms as there are no cliffs.

*What are their predators?*

Large birds of prey can take the babies.

*What is the current incidence of trapping?*

Heard of someone trapping about 8 hours away. Someone is buying and sending out. Mentioned another town where someone was buying.

## HYACINTH NEEDS

We can probably best protect this population of Hyacinth Macaws by securing a large area of habitat and protecting the birds from poaching. The areas in which the Hyacinths feed and roost is poor and is used primarily for cattle. Land can probably be purchased for approximately \$15-\$20 per acre although the flight range of these birds is so great that a lot of land would have to be purchased to be effective. The growth of those palms and other trees upon which they feed could be encouraged. Cattle at low density could be pastured on this land without detriment and could help offset the cost of protecting the area. Land would need to be held through a Brazilian NGO. There would have

to be stringent safeguards to assure the long term use of the land for the benefit of the birds. WPT has funded the initial formation of such a Brazilian NGO (BioBrasil) although I have received no confirmation of the ultimate government approval of same.

## ECOTOURISM AND THE HYACINTH SITE?

Competition is keen for tourists seeking wildlife. Ease of travel, excellent food, and scenic accommodations are standard for safari type trips. Multiple species of wildlife and other attractions are the norm.

Although it would certainly be possible to build an airstrip and lodge on one of the mesas with a spectacular view, it would require considerable investment. There is additional wildlife in the area which could be attracted. A beautiful valley with a small river is nearby and has tourism potential.

At present, travel to this site is quite time consuming and it is doubtful this area can compete for the tourist dollar except for the few diehard Hyacinth aficionados. I do not think it realistic to assume ecotourism to be a significant source of income for the protection of the Hyacinths without major changes. Others may have different opinions.

## CONCLUSION

On a personal note this was a wonderful trip! Thanks to Kaytee for putting it together and inviting us. The people at the site could not have been nicer. Additionally we enjoyed a great group with which to share the experience. I left with far better understanding of the environment and a greater appreciation for this magnificent parrot, the Hyacinth Macaw.



A small group of hyacinths feeding.

Photo: W.R. Porter

# The Status of Macaws - wild and captive

by Rosemary Low

Since the second issue of *PsittaScene* (January 1990), in which we published an article on the Hyacinthine, macaws have featured prominently in the pages of this journal. Most of the articles have focused on a single species, and proved very enlightening to our members. Seven years later it is perhaps time to review the macaws as a whole. Probably the best known and most charismatic group of parrots in the world, the macaws always attract attention. They formerly did so because of their flamboyant colours, large size and marked intelligence. Today they are attracting the attention of conservationists, field workers and concerned aviculturists world-wide.

## RAINFOREST DWELLERS

Macaws are found in Central and South America. They are primarily rainforest dwellers. Because of the extent of destruction of their habitat during the past three or four decades, the ranges of all large macaws have declined and only the two species with the largest range are not yet threatened with extinction. Only in the past decade have field studies commenced on most species, so that we are now gaining a true impression of their decline.

## CAUSES OF DECLINE

The decline has been brought about by trapping for international trade, and by habitat destruction. According to Charles Munn, a trustee of WPT-USA, who has been working in the region on macaw conservation for more than twenty years, the Amazon basin (as large as the 48 lower states of the USA) has had its macaw populations reduced or eliminated by trappers in 50-60% of this huge region. In 1992 the former president of the now defunct Association of Bird Exporters of Bolivia stated that 500 large macaws had been exported from Bolivia every two weeks for 10 years - that is, approximately 130,000 macaws. For every bird exported a minimum of another macaw died (a very conservative estimate), so the total trapped is likely to have been well over a million large macaws in ten years. In 1984 Bolivia stopped the export trade in birds. Most countries where macaws occur no longer permit the export of birds, but illegal trade, legal export from Guyana, and

trapping by natives for pets, food and feathers continues.

## SMUGGLING

In Guatemala, for example, Scarlet Macaws are trapped and smuggled into Mexico, thence into the USA. One of the worst aspects of this trade is that trappers hack open nests or destroy trees in an attempt to obtain young macaws. One of the most serious problems facing most macaws is shortage of nest sites thus this method of collection has much more serious consequences than the removal of the birds alone. The other major problem faced by macaws, in the case of certain species which are specialist feeders, is loss of their food trees.

## BLUE AND YELLOW MACAW

The best known macaw is undoubtedly the Blue and Yellow *Ara ararauna*. As it has a very wide range, from Panama, over most of the tropical northern part of South America, it is still widely distributed in the wild. It is extinct in coastal south-eastern Brazil, where most of the forest has been destroyed. It used to be imported, especially from Guyana, in very large numbers. Today, more Blue and Yellows are reared in captivity than any other species. There should be a world-wide import ban on wild-caught ararauna because there is already an excess of captive-bred birds. This is partly due to the fact that this macaw is easy to breed, and to the greatly increased expertise of breeders, and to the fact that unlike Budgerigars, for example, there is a limit to the number of households which can keep macaws. Of all the large macaws, this is the one most often kept as a pet. Young hand-reared birds make wonderfully affectionate pets for those who can spend much time with them. However, generally speaking the large macaws are best kept in an aviary because they do not receive enough exercise in the home.

## SCARLET MACAW

The Scarlet Macaw *Ara macao* has always been a very popular aviary subject, for its wonderful plumage. However, its temperament is not always so appealing. Generally speaking, *ararauna* is much more suitable as a pet. Although this species has a large range, from

Mexico, throughout most of tropical South America and as far south as northern Bolivia and southern Peru, its range has contracted greatly this century, especially in Central America. Its range there is now fragmented and discontinuous.

## EXTINCT IN SOME PARTS

In Costa Rica it is almost extinct except in the Corcovado National Park, yet it is considered to be a great tourist attraction. In El Salvador it is already extinct and in Mexico much of its former habitat has been destroyed. A serious problem it has to face is that of being hunted for feathers. There has been local trade in tail feathers dating back centuries, in Panama and most of the countries of South and Central America. The problem has not eased in recent years as Aztec dancers from Mexico in traditional dress, tour the USA. Their head-dresses contain about 70 tail feathers of large macaws, nearly all from macao, and some from militaris. In the UK and several other countries, tail feathers from moulted captive birds have been collected by breeders for some years, and sent to a representative who sends them to Panama. CITES permits are needed, as for live birds, thus having a national representative who collects the feathers is the most effective method.

## TARGET FOR TRAPPERS

Although *Ara macao* was placed on

Appendix 1 of CITES in 1985, which should have stopped trade in wild-caught birds, illegal trade continues. In Guatemala, where large areas of suitable habitat for this macaw have survived, the Scarlet Macaw has been a target for illegal trappers who smuggle birds into Mexico, thence into the USA. A rehabilitation centre exists there. Confiscated birds are rehabilitated, either for breeding or for release.

Although there are many Scarlet Macaws in captivity, a large proportion have never reproduced. This fact became known when a studbook was maintained. We must not be too complacent about this macaw in aviculture. Although it may appear common, it is an important species which deserves the attention of serious aviculturists.

## GREEN-WINGED MACAW

The Green-winged Macaw (*Ara chloroptera*) has never been as popular as the Scarlet Macaw, yet it is a wonderful aviary bird. Hand-reared young are gentle and sensitive. The range of this species, although still extensive, is declining - but it is not yet on Appendix 1 of CITES. It is already extinct in Argentina and in south-eastern Brazil, extinct in parts of Bolivia and rare in eastern Ecuador and eastern Peru. Habitat destruction is to blame for local extinctions.

Wild-caught birds were not easy to breed and the myth grew that the Greenwinged Macaw had to be



Free flying Scarlet Macaw at Paradise Park, UK.



Red-fronted Macaw.

Photo: Keith Ewart



Blue-headed Macaw.

Photo: WPT Italy



Buffon's Macaw.

Photo: Mike Reynolds

eight years old before it was sexually mature. This is untrue; captive-bred birds have reared young as early as three years old.

### MILITARY MACAW

The Military Macaw *Ara militaris* is one of only two large macaws which are green. The other is Buffon's Macaw *Ara ambigua*. Much confusion exists regarding their identification. Buffon's Macaw is substantially larger but the three features which identify it easily are the yellowgreen shade (darker in *militaris*), the larger beak in proportion to the head, and the colour of the tail feathers. The long feathers are brown-red in *militaris* and orange-red in *ambigua*.

The Military Macaw is primarily a montane species; it is found in Mexico, Colombia, western Venezuela and the northern-central part of Ecuador. There are also populations in Peru and Bolivia.

### BUFFON'S MACAW

In contrast, Buffon's Macaw is a bird of the lowlands. It is found in Central America, in Honduras, through Nicaragua and Costa Rica to Panama, and a small region in Colombia. A separate sub-species, *guayaquilensis*, is found in south-western Ecuador, in Quayaquil. This population may be as small as 20 or 30 birds, according to field researchers from the University of Amsterdam, who studied it in 1995. In 1994 one pair fledged two chicks, in the Cerro Blanco reserve, thanks to 24 hour surveillance by guards, to prevent the nest being robbed. In 1995 the nest tree fell down, due to destruction by termites. Two artificial nests were constructed but, soon after, the macaws left the area. Some months later the area was ravaged by forest fires. These are lit deliberately by settlers, in order to clear the land and claim it. Around the reserve, agriculture has

increased, mainly growing corn. These are just some of the problems the few surviving macaws have to face.

### BUFFON'S RARE IN AVICULTURE

It has always been rare in aviculture but its numbers are growing slowly, due to increased breeding success. To me, this is undoubtedly the most magnificent of the *Ara* macaws. It is a majestic bird. It is also the *Ara* species which should receive more attention from aviculturists than any other. I would urge those of you who own it to do everything possible to initiate breeding success. Also to join the studbook. The studbook co-ordinator is Martina Muller at Vogelpark Walsrode.

### MILITARY MACAW IS ALSO ENDANGERED

As already mentioned, the Military Macaw has a large range. Unfortunately, its habitat is so fragmented by deforestation that it, too, is endangered. Large macaws need large areas of forest in which to forage. It was placed on Appendix 1 of CITES in 1987. Before this, there was little interest in it from aviculturists. In the USA it was common and inexpensive, due to the number of birds smuggled from Mexico but it had rarely been bred. Now the situation is different and many pairs are reproducing, there and in Europe. Conservation-minded macaw breeders should ensure that this species is in their collection.

### RED-FRONTED MACAW

The Red-fronted *Ara rubrogenys* is a distinctive macaw. In size it is about 60 cm - mid way between the large macaws already described, and the small species. A mountain species from south-central Bolivia, it is a very hardy bird. Unknown in captivity until 1973, it has never been common. It is surprising that it

has not become better known because it can be extremely prolific. This fact and its smaller size, should make it an ideal aviary bird. Unfortunately, however, feather plucking is extremely common, certainly in wild-caught birds. Because it has such a small range in Bolivia, it is of special conservation interest and should be kept and bred by all serious macaws breeders. It was placed on Appendix 1 of CITES in 1983. Unlike the other macaws, it has a well marked juvenile plumage. The red feathers on the forehead do not appear until the age of about nine months. Young birds have a brown frontal band and a small red patch on the ear coverts. Adult birds are very beautiful when they are in good feather.

### THE SMALL MACAWS

Now we come to the group generally known as the small macaws. The Severe Macaw *Ara severa* is about 50 cm in length. It has a very wide range in northern South America, from Venezuela to south-western Brazil, and is believed to have a stable population in most areas. Commonly kept in the USA, it is less numerous in Europe but reared in a number of collections.

### RED-BELLIED MACAW

The Red-bellied Macaw *Ara manilata* will never be a popular avicultural subject. It is too nervous to make a good pet and very prone to obesity if closely confined. Few breeding successes have occurred. It has a very wide range in northern South America and is not known to be threatened. Therefore, and because it is seldom long-lived, I feel that this species should not be trapped. In any case, there is little interest in it.

### BLUE-HEADED MACAW

The Coulon's or Blue-headed *Ara*

*couloni* was the last species of macaw to become available in aviculture. It comes from Peru and adjoining north-western Bolivia, from low elevations up to 1,300m, and is not known to be threatened. Since the early 1990s this macaw has been taken illegally into eastern European countries. There are a number of pairs in South Africa and last year two pairs which were confiscated in Europe were presented to Loro Parque in Tenerife. Last year *Ara couloni* was bred in the Czech Republic, and it may already have been reared elsewhere. The appearance of this species is interesting. The beak colour and eyes are reminiscent of those of Spix's Macaw.

### SMALLEST MACAWS

The remaining three are the smallest macaws: Illiger's *Ara maracana*, the Yellow-collared *Ara auricollis* and Hahn's *Ara or Diopsittaca nobilis nobilis*. They are quite popular in aviculture as they are free-breeding, playful and intelligent. They make excellent pets but their voices can be quite loud. The Illiger's is of conservation interest and was placed on Appendix 1 of CITES in 1989. Due to deforestation it is now very rare in south-eastern Brazil but also occurs in some areas of Argentina and Paraguay. It is the rarest of the three in aviculture, although it can be amazingly prolific.

### YELLOW-COLLARED MACAW

The Yellow-collared comes from Bolivia and is also found in adjoining Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina. Little is known about its status in the wild; it is still common in some parts of its range. This is an ideal species for beginners with macaws, breeders or pet owners.

### HAHN'S MACAW

The smallest of all macaws is the Hahn's, measuring 31 cm and

weighing about 165g. It comes from Venezuela, Guyana and north-eastern Brazil. It is the least expensive of the macaws and readily available. The slightly larger sub-species, the Noble Macaw *D.n.nobilis* is uncommon in aviculture as its range covers Brazil (from which no birds have been legally exported for 30 years) and a small part of Peru. No threats are known to either sub-species in the wild.

### HYACINTHINE MACAW

The blue macaws are a remarkable group of birds. Unfortunately, their beauty has been their downfall. The Hyacinthine *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus* might be called the king of the macaws. It is the largest and the most spectacular. And it has suffered terribly at the hand of man. So many birds were trapped in Brazil for international trade in the 1970s that dealers in Europe had problems in selling them. It was sheer greed - not demand. As a result, an area of about 100,000 sq. miles (259,000 sq. km) of the Brazilian Pantanal has intact habitat for this species but, according to Charles Munn, only 20-30% of the area still holds Hyacinthine Macaws. Unfortunately, these birds are so easy to trap that trappers would wipe out local populations in a single day. Because exporting them from Brazil was illegal, the trapped birds would be smuggled into Argentina (where it does not occur) or Paraguay (where it has a very small seasonal range). Ranch owners in Brazil now protect any Hyacinthines on their properties. Indeed, some ranches fortunate enough to have these birds use them as a tourist attraction and have built guest houses for tourists. In some cases this is more lucrative than farming because this macaw is so high on the list of wildlife attractions. Unlike the Ara macaws, this is not a rainforest species and is easily viewed. It lives in semi-open areas and feeds on the nuts of palm trees.

### BREEDING

Aviculturists must carefully guard the Hyacinthine Macaws in their care, do their utmost to encourage them to breed and part with the young in a responsible manner. In the USA some breeders promote the young as the ultimate status symbol. This is highly irresponsible since very few people have the time or the temperament or the understanding necessary to look after a hand-reared bird. They are extremely demanding and sensitive

creatures. There is a limit to the number of people who can house breeding pairs, thus this macaw will never be common in aviculture though it will always be well represented. The priority should be to encourage all wild-caught birds to breed, to contribute to the gene pool. Only a very small percentage of those taken from the wild have done so, even although breeding successes are now numerous. But many pairs are badly accommodated in small suspended cages - an insult to such a large and magnificent bird.

### LEAR'S MACAW

Lear's Macaw *Anodorhynchus leari* is smaller and very much rarer. Its habitat in north-eastern Brazil was not discovered until 1978. The ornithologist Helmut Sick had been searching for it for 14 years. He found a population of just over 100 birds. Despite the remote and inhospitable area in which it lives, illegal trapping is occurring. In 1995 it was estimated that during the previous two to three years, 20 of the 117 birds known had been caught and sold to smugglers. In June last year two young Lear's were seized from a Singapore national at an airport in France, and confiscated. These are not the only illegal birds to have turned up in Europe in recent years. A number are believed to be in eastern European countries and Gulf states. Due to their high price and illegal origin, they are more likely to be bought by collectors than aviculturists. Their whereabouts may never be discovered. There are no known breeding pairs in captivity at the present time and the only legalised pair was stolen in the UK in December last year. Several years ago a second small population, consisting of 22 birds, was found in Brazil. As the area is one where marijuana is grown, the trappers will be afraid to go there. The future of this critically endangered macaw is highly uncertain. It is a tragedy that no effective way has yet been found to protect the main population. If enough funds were available, this could be done.

### SPIX'S MACAW

Finally, the sad story of the macaw which by 1988 had a wild population of a single known bird: Spix's *Cyanopsitta spixii*. Its small population was almost trapped to extinction. In recent years, the developments have received more coverage in the world's press than probably any bird in existence. Fortunately, the captive population

of over 30 birds is increasing annually. Legal export of this species has not occurred for several decades; when the original amnesty was declared by the Brazilian Government in the late 1980s, four holders of this species declared their birds. A recent amnesty ended on October 1 1996. Anyone subsequently found with Spix's Macaws, other than those who have declared them, are liable to prosecution.

Of all the macaws, I believe that Lear's is in greatest danger of extinction. All the other endangered species, even Spix's, will survive in captivity even although they eventually become extinct in the wild. The decline of the macaws is a sad indictment of man's reckless use of forests and wildlife. In the span of 50 years, a group of parrots which contains some of the most spectacular birds in the world, has gone from common to threatened, endangered or critically endangered. A number of species have been studied in the field over the past decade, resulting in actions, such as provision of nest sites, which will help to assist their survival. But the large flocks of even half a century ago are gone forever.

### INADEQUATELY HOUSED

Although most macaw species are very well established in aviculture, the trend towards small aviaries or even cages for breeding pairs means that a large proportion of macaws are inadequately housed. Fortunately, this is less often the case in Europe, but in the USA even pairs of the largest macaws seldom have a cage larger than 2.4m (8 ft)

long. To me this is unthinkable. The large macaws have a wingspan of 90 cm (3 ft) or more yet many pairs are kept in cages only 1.2m wide and high and no more than 3m (10 ft) long. This is the farming concept where no thought is given to the quality of life of the birds. As a matter of fact, macaws like a high aviary, 4.5m high and at least 6m (20 ft) long. They look magnificent in flight, enjoy life and breed well because they feel secure at that height. The owner can take great pride in macaws kept in this way. There is no satisfaction, except possibly financial, in those kept in small all-wire cages. Surely it is better to keep one pair well, than several pairs in conditions which are the equivalent of a pet Budgerigar in a small cage of the type sold in pet stores.

Macaws are exceptionally intelligent creatures. So many are condemned to a prison-like existence, presumably because it is expensive to build real aviaries. Yet the cost is small when one considers the high return many breeders gain by continually removing eggs. In addition to the moral issue, I believe that over the course of several generations of birds bred in such cages, small degenerate young will be produced. The macaw is one of nature's most magnificent creations. We should deem it a privilege to have such birds in our care. We must ensure that the birds we breed are the equal in size and appearance to their wild-caught parents or ancestors. If we cannot do this, we should keep Aratingas instead.



Lear's Macaw. One of the two females held at Busch Gardens, Florida.

Photo: Mike Reynolds

# PARROTS IN THE WILD



## HYACINTH MACAW *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*



the  
**HYACINTH**  
F · U · N · D

In this issue of *PsittaScene* we have had a lot to say about this extraordinary parrot, both in the wild and in captivity. This superb shot of a macaw enjoying his favourite palm nut was taken by Richard Porter on his recent visit to Piauí. See his report on pages 1 to 3 of this issue.

The Hyacinth Macaw will always be a focus of attention, due to its phenomenal beauty and unique character. Truly, this bird is its own worst enemy. In captivity it attracts more attention than any other parrot, first, because a young handraised bird makes a most amiable pet or companion (provided it can be given as much care, time and consideration as a human infant), and second, because it has a high financial value.

In the wild, with perhaps 3,000 or more Hyacinths still existing in three or four locations, the species has a reasonable chance of sustaining itself over the next twenty years or more. It is still being poached, but more and more effort is being put into its protection. Since 1990, the World Parrot Trust has raised substantial amounts through its 'HYACINTH FUND', and used this to support the work of Dr. Charles A. Munn III in Brazil.

You can help the effort to save the Hyacinth Macaw. A small number of the spectacular limited edition print 'The Noblest of Them All' by Nicholas still remain to be sold, and they are now available at £30 or \$50 **including postage**. Please send your cheque or credit card details to the UK address of the Trust, and we will do the rest. If you don't want the print, a cheque made out to 'World Parrot Trust Hyacinth Fund' would be very welcome.

