Psitta scene

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Cover Picture

A Lear's Macaw at the Serra Branca site, enjoying the evening sun.
Picture Jamie Gilardi

Good news from the Land of Lear's

By JAMIE GILARDI

It was well after dark when we left the gravel road and headed up the rough trail toward the Lear's nesting cliffs. Despite the ruggedness of the two vehicles, the ancient Jeep leading the way broke down and the sturdy BioBrasil 4x4 ended up with a severely punctured tire. Par-for-the-course apparently and we arrived no worse-for-wear. We pitched our tents surrounded by moonlit cliffs. Once the jeep pulled away, the peace and quiet of the 'caatinga' dry forest took over and we plotted our next few days of exploration.

We timed our trip to the state of Bahia in eastern Brazil to coincide with the end of the Macaws' breeding season, just after the fledging of this year's chicks. As readers of PsittaScene know, the Lear's population hovers just under 200 wild bird total, and the Serra Branca cliffs hold about 15 of the 20 nests that the wild Lear's make each year. So our expedition took us to the epicenter of this species miniscule range. I was lucky enough to visit this site as an advisor to the BioBrasil Lear's Macaw project - the Trust has supported the work of this foundation for many years and finds their commitment to parrot conservation to be consistent and effective. The BioBrasil field team is now laying the groundwork to protect and study the nesting birds, to develop methods to photographically identify all the wild birds, and to test ways of restoring and enhancing their palm habitat.

Lear's in flight. Photo: Jamie Gilardi

Our slumber late that night was broken by a falling tree. The exhilarating part was not the crash of the tree itself, but the raucous squawks of the Lear's I heard for the first time. Responding to the tree fall, the birds growled first on one side of the gorge, then on the other, as if to say, "what the heck", except in Portuguese of course. A few hours later at the crack of dawn, the first Lear's Macaws to arouse growled a few times and flew off down the valley to forage. These were followed by literally hundreds of other parrots who spent the morning flying about and filling the gorge with a cacophony of screeches and squawks - in addition to the Lear's, we saw dozens of Cactus Conures, White-eyed Conures, and Blue-fronted Amazons.

Pedro Lima at Lear's cliffs. Photo: Jamie Gilardi

I was traveling here in the Serra Branca with biologist and veterinarian Pedro Lima, of the BioBrasil Foundation and Cetrel Corp, and Richard Hartley, who

manages BioBrasil's day-to-day operations. The three of us set off early to climb up to a dramatic natural arch that we jokingly called the "eye-of-the-Lear" from which you can see three nest sites and get a fabulous view of the whole area. It was a hot climb from the valley floor, but we saw brilliant bromeliads and flowering cacti along the way. We arrived at the top to discover not only shade, but also a refreshing breeze flowing through the 'eye.' If this wasn't enough, we were greeted by a column of ten King Vultures rising from the valley floor in the distance.

The vantage point also afforded us a great opportunity to observe the distribution of Licuri Palms in the valleys on either side of the 'eye.' Although these palms are now scarce in many areas, we were encouraged to see several patches of very high palm density. The Licuri (Syagrus coronata) is a slow growing palm that seldom reaches more that about ten meters in height. Although the Lear's occasionally eat other foods, it is essentially dependent on the seeds of this one species of palm for its entire diet. So the conservation of the bird is inextricably linked to the health and distribution of the palms - as the Licuri goes, so goes the Lear's. If we can determine what limits seed production by the licuri palm, what seedling palms need to survive to adulthood, and how adults can thrive in the presence of fire, goats, and cattle, we'll have a chance to develop solid plans for the restoration and sensible management of the parrots' palm habitat.

We spent the day visiting all the historic nest sites in the area, including the place where the local ranch hands found a rope left behind by poachers. The rope was simply more hard evidence that, until recently, about a quarter of nests were being poached every year. Clearly there is a need to halt this poaching immediately if the Lear's is to recover.

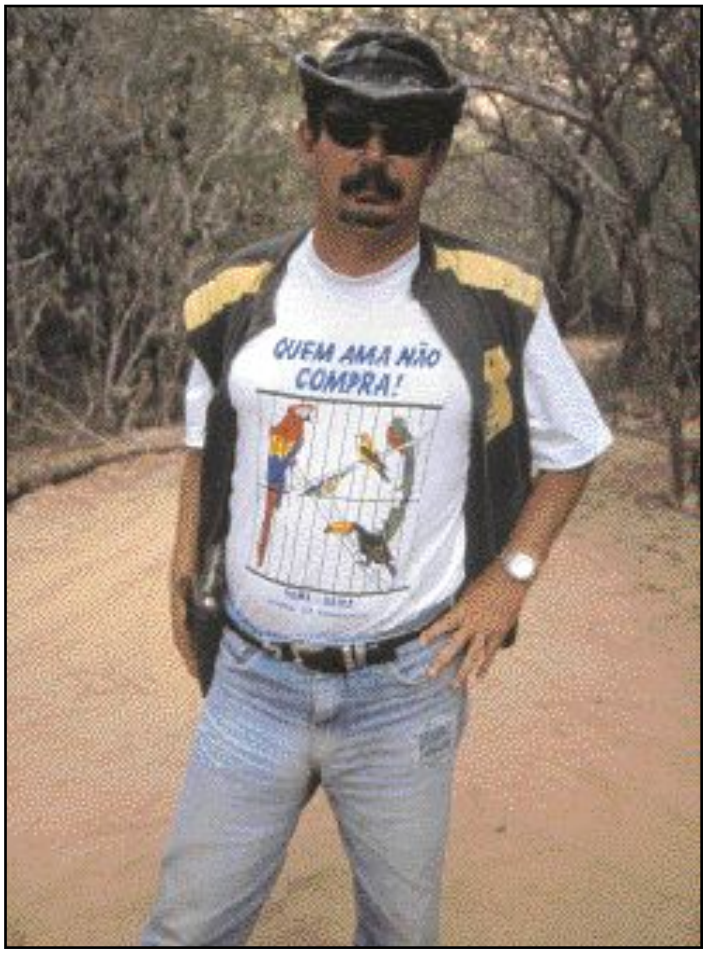
Early the following morning, we met a large group of officials from the IBAMA Bahia office - these are the people who protect and manage wildlife in Brazil. It turned out that the landowner at Serra Branca, Otavio Nolasco Farias, had clear evidence of trespassing on his property in the previous week. He promptly informed IBAMA in hopes that they would investigate. The fact

Licuri Palms in cattle pasture. Photo: Jamie Gilardi

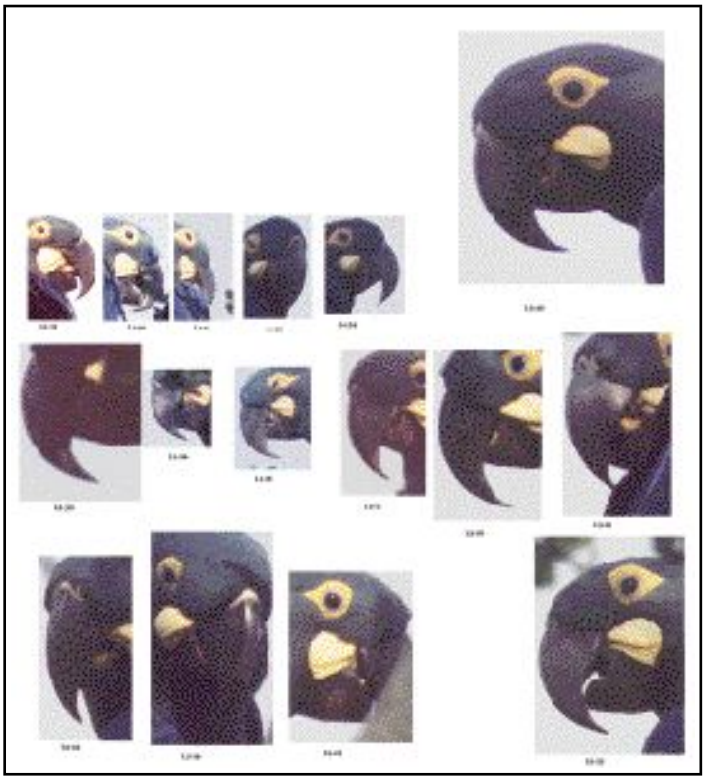
that they made the long hard trek to the nesting site is an encouraging sign, indicating to us that they're taking a deep interest in protecting the rare macaws.

Back down in the valley where most of the wild Lear's forage, I assisted the BioBrasil team in setting up a pair of blinds for photographing the birds. By baiting the sites with natural food, the hope was to photograph the birds using extreme telephoto lenses (1200mm), to try to document individual differences in beak markings. Doing so will allow BioBrasil biologists to study the basic natural history of the Lear's Macaw by calculating the population size, monitoring their recovery, and detecting potential problems such as low juvenile survival. By placing a huge quantity of licuri seeds in one palm, we managed to attract several birds, and I'm pleased to say that we were able to document the individual beak markings of several individuals. Improving the blinds, increasing the number of sites, and baiting the sites over time should provide enough photo documentation to generate these key insights into the life

Bait tree. Photo: Jamie Gilardi



IBAMA enforcement. Photo: Jamie Gilardi



Lear Dossier. Photo: Jamie Gilardi

history of the Lear's Macaw.

Returning from the blind in the evening, Pedro, Richard and I had a chance to discuss the future of the Lear's with Otavio. Because he owns the land that contains critical breeding and foraging habitat for the Lear's, his views and decisions are crucial to the birds survival. Luckily, Otavio is eager to see the birds protected from poachers and has been extremely helpful in facilitating BioBrasil's habitat restoration work. Just after my return to the States, he signed his name to a long-term agreement with BioBrasil that will provide this World Parrot Trust partner group with the opportunity to help protect and save the Lear's for many years to come. As with many conservation issues, the future of many species lies in the hands of private individuals. One of our biggest challenges on nearly all field projects is to develop flexible approaches to land use so we can work productively with all the critical parties and facilitate their contributions to conservation.

Yamashita with Lears. Photo: Jamie Gilardi

Licuri Plantation. Photo: Jamie Gilardi

On my last day in the Sierra Branca area, Gil Serique took me to visit the licuri palm plantation which we've reported on several times in past PsittaScenes. This program which was supported early on by the World Parrot Trust, has been run as a collaboration by BioBrasil, Cetrel Corporation, the Biodiversitas Foundation and WPT. Growing from seed planted in the mid-1990's, the palms are doing well and the project has provided a wealth of insight about how to restore palm habitat. While examining the palms, their individual cattle-exclusion fences, and the elaborate watering system in place, we were greeted by the loud squawks of several groups of Lear's arriving for their morning feed near the plantation - almost as though they were anxious for these young palms to get cracking and make loads of licuri nuts. Now the focus of the restoration experiments is to test the relative merits of different techniques for managing palm habitat, such as fire, grazing, seed and seedling planting, and the possible value of transplanting juvenile palms.

In the last two months, we have heard two additional pieces of great news on the Lear's Macaw front. Carlos Yamashita of IBAMA wrote to say that the recent Lear's census indicated that Lear's numbers are up to 246 individuals! That's a substantial increase from 170-180 animals back in the late 1990's. And very soon thereafter, the Lear's Macaw got a huge shot in the arm when the Disney Conservation Initiatives funded a Lear's Macaw conservation proposal to the tune of $19,500! The proposal includes the habitat work described here, the protection of nest sites, and the photo identification work. Now we not only have a clear plan of attack, we also have some much-needed support to carry it out!

Please stay tuned for more progress reports. And of course if you're interested in supporting this project, as always, we at the World Parrot Trust will happily ensure that every penny will go straight to the field to speed the recovery of these spectacular birds.

Baby Licuri, 6 years old. Photo:Jamie Gilardi