

# The people who live with Lear's Macaw

by RICHARD HARTLEY

It is a near mythical experience watching clamorous flocks of up to 40 Lears macaws swooping through arid fields replete with the sinuous palms whose nut serves as their primary food source. To think that this single conglomeration of the birds comprises one third of the total wild population is to imbue the jarring realisation that the future survival of these spectacular creatures is in severe jeopardy.

A mere 20 years after the scientific discovery of the species, the Lear's Macaw is on the brink of extinction. The paucity of Lears is largely a result of unabridged illegal poaching of the bird in the backdrop of a native habitat ravaged by drought and social misery. The actors involved in preserving the wild populations are eager to recount the history of the bird. And the principal figures responsible for the pillaging now wish to undo some of the damage they reaped. What unfolds is a fascinating tale, which reflects in a more general sense the great challenges involved in preserving species with high commercial value.

Jose Cardoso de Macedo, 60, looks out with an air of proprietorial pride over the green valley nestled between spectacular deep red cliff faces that form the canyon where the Lears nest. The land has been in his family since the turn of the century so if there is such a thing as a guardian of the Lears, it is Sr. Zequinho, as he is known. "There used to be 200, maybe 300 birds flying overhead every day," he says, dragging deeply on his cigarette rolled with tobacco so strong it is referred to as rat killer. He leans on the mud house where he was born, his avuncular face curling up into a grin as he strokes the turquoise-fronted parrot caged above his head. His wife, Dona Raimunda, frets to make sure all the visitors are served with coffee.

"After the gringo came, people from all over the world have visited. But we also saw that the amount of birds went down a lot. That's when the traffickers came here all the time."

The gringo referred to was Helmut Sick, the intrepid expatriate German scientist considered

Brazil's premier ornithologist. Until his discovery of Lears in 1978, the birds' origin had been shrouded in mystery and misunderstanding. Described in 1856 by Charles Lucien Bonaparte, Napoleon's nephew, it was valued as a great rarity and was first painted by Edward Lear, an English artist known more for his nonsense poetry. Numerous theories abounded about the bird, one of the most accepted being that it was a hybrid between the Hyacinth and Glaucous macaws. Sick was convinced otherwise and after several frustrated attempts, managed finally to locate the Lear's roost, a moment he describes as the most thrilling in his illustrious career.

## Inhospitality of their habitat

Sick's difficulty in finding the birds was compounded by the extreme inhospitality of their native habitat. Referred to as the Caatinga, which in the Tupi native language means white forest, the area is naturally prone to

droughts. The vegetation consists of succulent plants, cacti, terrestrial bromeliads with thorny trees and bushes hitched to a sandy soil.

At the turn of the century, a messianic priest called Antonio Conselheiro and his 30,000 followers, royalists who were resisting the imposition of republican rule, were slaughtered to the last man in a town right next to the Lears population. The region has also produced other charismatic characters, able to harness the discontent prevalent among the peasant classes against an exploitative elite. But a rugged local population struggles on, stubbornly proud of the land which has let them down so often in the past.

Sr. Zequinho continues. "You see that field over there," he says, pointing to a parched open plain seemingly devoid of cultivation. "We used to swim there. And next to it we used to grow rice."

This scenario is almost impossible to fathom. Countless riverbeds, which have apparently been dry

for decades, dot the area. And an unrelenting drought over the past year has made a population already mired in poverty even more desperate. Clearly the Lears have also suffered, since their food staples are drying up and the native population clawing out a living is resentful of conservation efforts they regard as valuing the lives of a hundred birds more than theirs. A recent economic downturn also fares badly for the Lears, as traffickers are more easily able to lure members of the local population to scale the perilous cliffs and pluck Lears from their nests to feed the continuing illicit international demand for the bird.

Since 1992, official efforts to protect the birds have been the responsibility of the National Lears Committee who in 1997 received a \$200,000 grant from the Brazilian government for Lear's preservation. From the start, however, discord between the various actors charged with formulating strategies to save the Lears has been rife. The two opposing camps fundamental disagreement centres around the idea of using ex-traffickers and the extensive knowledge they possess about the Lears as a pillar in the conservation strategy.

"Yeah, I know Carlinhos, that no good thief," says Eurivaldo Macedo Alvez, 28, nicknamed Coboco, who is charged with guarding the Lears area against poachers. He is paid by Fundacao Biodiversitas and his assessment of Carlos Araujo Lima, the trafficker most responsible for depleting the Lears population, is widely held. Another foundation, BioBrasil, of which the author is executive director, has over the past four years been paying Lima whom it believes has forsworn



Licuri palm nuts, the most important food of Lear's Macaws Photo: Priscilla Old



Guide Gil Serique in Lear's habitat, with audio equipment Photo: Priscilla Old



Lear's Macaws answering the calls from the audio equipment Photo: Priscilla Old

trafficking and has provided vital information in locating feeding grounds and possible undiscovered populations.

"Last year I apprehended two guys who said Carlinhos paid them R\$1,000 each to get Lears. I handed them over to the authorities, but nothing happened," says Coboco. "If I find them here again, I won't hesitate to shoot."

He is perched on a rock looking up at two active Lear's nests, donning fatigues and brandishing two firearms he seems itching to use. His youthful yet hardened face and compact muscular frame belie the innocence and affection he exudes when talking about Lears, which he considers his personal patrimony. His father, Eliseu Pereira Alvez, guided Helmut Sick's successful discovery expedition, so the family's involvement with Lears has a deep history.

"They're checking us out," he says, pointing to the pair of Lears circling overhead, squawking loudly before swooping into their nest holes. Teams of parakeets flutter in the valley, and the operatic crescendo of their high pitched cries combined with those of the more baritone Lears are the only sounds reverberating against the cliffs. Almost immediately after entering, the gargling of the Lear's chicks becomes audible. The adult pair spend the next two hours either perched on the edge of their nest hole, or out of sight inside the hole that is over six feet deep. At around 3pm, they take off again in an interminable search for food and will only return at dusk.

The drying up of funds means that Coboco and Sr. Zequinha, who also guards the site, will be deactivated. His frustration is obvious and his fear for the birds' future palpable.

"Without me here, the traffickers will have free range. And more than likely, the Lears will suffer the same fate as the Spix's," he continues, referring to the smallest blue macaw, now extinct in the wild (see page 17). "But what can you do?" he concludes, shrugging his shoulders in resignation and continuing his observation of the nesting pair through the monocle bequeathed to him by his deceased father.

## Carlinhos and friends

The infamous Carlinhos lives in Petrolina, a bustling town of 100,000 perched on the banks of the San Francisco, a massive river that winds through the arid north-eastern region of Brazil known as the Sertao. He is in a jovial mood, spurred on by Sunday afternoon celebration and a good amount of beer, he seems proud to interject. He is surrounded by friends though obviously is the centre of attention, and basks in his primacy.

Around five feet six inches tall with a jocular face formed with mestico features, he is given to wearing his shirts open to show his multiple gold chains, large belt buckles and cowboy boots. He greets his visitors warmly and immediately launches into a tirade against the present day traffickers, and those in the conservation community, including his current employer.

"These guys are going to finish off the Lears," he states forcefully, "the level of theft is so bad that they actually took an adult pair who were nesting, leaving the chicks to starve to death. Can you believe it?"

At 11 years old, Carlinhos was asked by his neighbour to look after some birds he was rearing. This neighbour was forced to

leave the area and told Carlinhos he could sell what had been under his care.

"I put all the birds in a cart and went round through the streets trying to get rid of these animals," Carlinhos says. "I found that it was quite easy to do, so I started to get more serious about it."

He had soon become a very successful dealer, buying a car at 17 and gaining notoriety throughout Brazil and even the world. If you wanted to buy a Brazilian macaw from overseas, you got it through Carlinhos.

"One of the first pair of Lears I sold, the guy gave me US\$13,000 cash and a brand new Opala" he continues, "I probably sold between 40 to 50 Lears in my heyday. But money is just money and after I got arrested, I realised that I had to stop."

He spent seven months in jail, during which time he was visited by members of the foundation, who offered to post bail and pay him a monthly salary and with his knowledge and network, help to preserve the Lears. In two recent expeditions based on information he provided, the foundation has located two unknown feeding sites and a possible separate population.

"I bet you there are 1000 Lears out there," Carlinhos says, more than five times the official count of 181. Aside from the salary he receives from the foundation, Carlinhos has a pet shop and a farm near the city to where he wants to retire and raise Emus and Capybaras. But what of those persistent rumours that he continues to traffic? Before receiving that question, he is first asked whether he believes in God. He grimaces with indignation, as if he has just chewed on a lemon.

"How absurd! Of course I believe in God, and I swear to Jesus Christ that I am not trafficking anything. But if you guys would listen to me, I could tell you who is and stop it."

Regardless of the merits of the various conservation strategies, it is clear that they are not working well. The birds seem harried, the feathers have fault bars, and according to experts they show signs of in-breeding. Their sources of food are in decline and there still remains a great dearth of basic information on the bird. Of the forty three breeding age pairs in the area visited, only three produced young this year, yet no one knows why. And just this February, when Coboco was on holiday an intern to the project watched helplessly as two men captured a pair of Lears and catted them away, no doubt spurred by the money the birds can fetch on the market.

The extinction of any species is a tragedy in its own way but the extinction of an intelligent and beautiful being such as a macaw is a harsh testament to man's fundamental disregard and disrespect for his fellow inhabitants on the planet. Much time has been lost to petty inter-institutional squabbling, but it is incumbent on those with the knowledge and means to save the Lears to put aside their differences and pool their resources together. They will be doing the world a real service.



This article is a frank account of the extreme difficulties that face those working for parrot conservation in the field. It illustrates the harsh realities that exist on a day to day basis and the hard decisions that have to be made. Ed.