

# Lear's Macaw

## Some history, the current situation, and proposals for its preservation

A Report by MICHAEL REYNOLDS

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It will of course consider articles or letters from any contributors on their merits.

### Background

The World Parrot Trust (WPT) has taken a special interest in this species for the last eight years, working with Dr. Charles A. Munn III and his Brazilian associates, notably Dr. Carlos Yamashita and Dr. Pedro Lima. After attending the important 'Blue Macaws' meeting in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, in 1992, WPT pursued the long-term objective of growing and transplanting Licuri palm trees to boost the food supply for Lear's Macaws at their Rasa da Caterina location. A more immediate and urgent requirement was, and remains, to provide adequate protection at this first known site to prevent the illegal capture of Lear's Macaws for collectors within Brazil, and also in other countries.

A degree of protection has been in place for several years, with guards arranged by IBAMA (the official Brazilian conservation agency), and Biodiversitas, a conservation non-governmental organisation (NGO). It is difficult to know how constant, reliable and effective these guards may be, faced as they are by a difficult task in a large and challenging terrain, but it is generally accepted that macaws are still being removed from the wild population at a rate of as many as twenty birds each year. Obviously this loss is totally unacceptable, since it could lead to the extinction of Lear's Macaw in the wild within six years or so. WPT has highlighted this appalling prospect in previous issues of PsittaScene (see Vol.7

No.4 November 1995 'Lear's Macaw: a second population confirmed', and Vol. 9 no.2 May 1997 'Lear's Macaw - next in line for extinction?').

### WPT Proposal

In our May 1997 article we included an extract from a letter sent to IBAMA in March 1997, and it is relevant to re-print this here:

"In our opinion this is the most prominent and threatened of all



Dr. Charles Munn

parrot species currently under pressure from international trading activities.

The confiscation of two young Lear's Macaws at the Paris Orly airport last July was reported globally, and we believe it is generally agreed that at least 19 birds were stolen from the wild population in 1996. With an estimate of around 120 birds in the wild, it is obvious that, without a solution being found, this species could follow the pattern of Spix's Macaw and be

### COVER PICTURE

We are most grateful to Roland and Julia Seitre for providing us with a set of photographs of Lear's Macaw. This striking head shot of Lear's has captured the slight green tinge that is sometimes seen in the plumage of this bird, and clearly distinguishes it from the Hyacinth Macaw.



Lear's Macaw

Photo: Roland Seitre



Dr. Carlos Yamashita checking Hyacinth Macaw Chicks.

effectively extinct in the wild within a very few years.

We have a copy of an excellent 'Action Plan for Conservation of Lear's Macaw' compiled by the Special Working Group in 1994. The Action Plan states on page 10: 'Capturing wild animals is also quite common in the region; they are smuggled to zoos, collectors and aviculturists all over the world. A. leari is certainly one of the most coveted species, since it is very rare today. It is believed that with the sharp decline in the natural population of *Cyanopsitta spixii*, hunters will turn to A. leari, which will require an increased inspection effort in its area of occurrence on the part of the appropriate agencies'.

There are no proposals in the Action Plan on how to deal with the root cause of this loss of birds from the wild populations, which as we all know, is the continuing demand by unprincipled collectors, both outside Brazil and within.

We realise that our organisation has no official mandate to make proposals relating to what is clearly primarily a national concern for Brazil, but nevertheless, our eight years of involvement in global parrot conservation, and our substantial financial commitments to work with Brazilian experts to help six parrot species, encourage us to offer what we think could be a suggestion to assist the survival of Lear's Macaw.

That is that Brazil might bring up the question of international

trade in Lear's Macaw at the forthcoming CITES Conference of the Parties in Harare, Zimbabwe in June 1997. Your government could ask for stronger enforcement measures from all CITES signatories, especially those that may have been - no doubt without their knowledge - involved in illegal movements of this macaw.

If Brazil were to ask its fellow CITES members at the COP to pay especial attention to traffic in this species, we think it would improve vigilance by all countries and agencies. It might also have the effect of generating funds from major international conservation foundations for the in-country proposals made in your Action Plan. At the same time, you might want to make it clear that there is no possibility of an amnesty being declared for illegal holders of Lear's Macaw, but that all diplomatic and legal means would be used to secure the return to Brazil of illegally held birds.

This proposal aimed at choking off international demand for Lear's Macaw is given extra significance by a report from today's press which quotes your President Fernando Henrique Cardoso as saying at the 'Rio Plus Five' Conference: 'We don't have the means to stop deforestation. In those regions, there's hardly any presence of government capable of imposing the law'.

With these difficulties to contend with inside Brazil, would it not be a good idea to make every effort to attack the 'demand' side of the equation as well as the 'supply' side? We hope you may find our comments of some interest.

Please be assured that our desire to help parrot conservation is closely followed by our wish to work with the appropriate authorities in all countries."

We received no reply to that letter, but in July this year an international press release was issued by IBAMA. It seems likely that our 1997 proposal may have helped stimulate this useful action. Here is the press release in full:

## IBAMA Press Release

Brazil reports that the endangered Lear's Macaw is threatened by illegal bird collectors  
14 July 1998.

Brasilia - The Lear's Macaw (*Anodorhynchus leari*) is one of the world's most endangered species. Occurring only in the semi-arid northeastern region of Bahia in Brazil, its area of occupation was only located in 1978 by a team led by Dr Helmut Sick (who was one of Brazil's best known ornithologists). Due to habitat alteration, hunting and capture for the illegal trade, the species is facing a very critical situation - the populations of Lear's Macaw have been reduced to less than 130 individuals in the wild. The illegal capture of these birds for trade has been recognised as one of the most important factors in the species' decline.

The rarity and precarious status of the Lear's Macaw in the wild has accorded it the highest level of protection provided under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora - CITES. Brazil has been a party of the CITES Treaty since 1975.

In addition to being a party of CITES, Brazil has strict domestic legislation prohibiting the export of wildlife species. The Brazilian Wildlife Protection Act of 1967 prohibits the commerce of wildlife and products or objects that implicate their capture, pursuit or

destruction. According to this law, it is considered illegal to keep Lear's Macaws in captivity. It is important to note that since the legislation came into effect, Brazil has never issued any permits for the export of this species.

In 1992, the Brazilian Government created a Working Group today called Committee for the Preservation of Lear's Macaw. This Committee is responsible for the development and implementation of the conservation management plan for this species, which includes habitat protection, anti-poaching efforts, field conservation, research and educational programs.

Legal protection and the involvement of a number of institutions have contributed to the conservation of the Lear's Macaw in Brazil. Contributing organizations have included the Brazilian Institute for Environment and Natural Renewable Resources (IBAMA), National Fund for the Environment - FNMA, Sao Paulo Zoological Foundation, Biodiversitas Foundation, Busch Gardens (USA), Houston Zoological Gardens (USA). Other groups that have supported conservation efforts include the World Parrot Trust (UK), the Wildlife Conservation Society - WCS (USA), CETREL S.A. and PETROBRAS - the Brazilian Oil Company.

The Brazilian wildlife authorities of IBAMA, in collaboration with state and local municipal agencies have been conducting a major campaign against the poaching in the region. Successes



Guard at Rara de Caterina

Photo: Roland Seitel

include the arrest in 1995 of a smuggler called Paraiba, who was caught with a Lear's Macaw in his possession. In early 1998 the field team was able to observe a poaching attempt and apprehend the infractors in the act of placing the nets for the capture of the birds. In May of 1998, eight more birds were confiscated from an aviculturist called Zezao in northern Brazil. Despite increased security and ongoing efforts to control poaching, the Lear's Macaw populations are still threatened. Many birds are still taken from the wild by trappers going to a few illicit collectors of rare species.

Unfortunately, Lear's Macaws are also being smuggled internationally from Brazil. In 1996 two birds that did not have any legal documentation or permits were confiscated from Mr Lawrence Kuah Kok Choon at an airport in France. The French governmental authorities collaborated fully with the Brazilian conservation effort by repatriating the birds to Brazil. Sadly, one of the birds died at the French airport before it could be returned to Brazil.

In an international effort to conserve this species, the authorities in Singapore confiscated two Lear's Macaws from a private collection, of Mr Lawrence Kuah Kok Choon, the same infractor of the episode in France. This issue and the eventual disposition of the birds is now being addressed by the Singaporean legal system. Also this year, the British government confiscated three birds from a collector in Yorkshire. The Brazilian Government has requested the repatriation of all of these birds.

There is an expectation that both the Singaporean and the British governments will support the conservation of this species by acting quickly to repatriate the confiscated birds to Brazil, following the example of the French government and according to the CITES regulations. It is hoped that these governments will access the heaviest penalties possible under their

laws and jurisdiction against the infractors.

The position of the Brazilian Government and the Lear's Macaw Committee is that all undocumented and illegal birds should be confiscated by the authorities of the country in which they are found, and be returned to Brazil as part of the conservation program. As there have been no official permissions for legal export of Lear's Macaws from Brazil. All repatriated birds, as well as those confiscated in Brazil, will be evaluated for possible return to the wild or for participation in a coordinated captive management program.

There is a strong national commitment to the preservation of the Lear's Macaw in Brazil, as has been demonstrated by a recent grant of \$200,000 to the project by the National Fund for the Environment - FNMA. In conjunction with project collaborators, this major grant has facilitated the protection of the area against poaching, supported field research, habitat restoration, conservation and educational programs.

The conservation of endangered species and the preservation of the world's biodiversity is a responsibility that all governments must take seriously. The illegal trade in rare and endangered species is a problem that has crossed national boundaries and can only be addressed through cooperation and support of all parties.

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## Reactions to the Press Release

This initiative by Brazil was well reported in the UK press, and the following extract from a national paper is typical:

**Brazil wants rare Macaws seized in British raids**

Brazil is demanding the return of three of the world's rarest birds, which are being held at a secret location in northern England.

The Lear's macaws were seized in raids by Customs and Excise investigators on houses in Northallerton and Driffield, in Yorkshire, four months ago.

In an attempt to save them from extinction, Brazilian authorities are attempting to track down and repatriate all rare native parrots smuggled out of the country and sold to private collectors and pet dealers. The campaign reflects efforts by wildlife-rich developing nations to get back the rare and endangered animals and plants that have been taken from the wild over recent years.

The Lear's Macaws in Britain were found after an investigation into an international network of bird dealers that covered Belgium, Germany, the Czech Republic, Bosnia and Britain. Three men were arrested in the raids and released on police bail while the haul is being evaluated.

This UK case is still under investigation, and will be reported in PsittaScene as it develops. The situation of the two birds held by the Singaporean authorities seems unlikely to be resolved soon. We understand that the person who imported them claims they were brought out of Brazil before 1967. The authorities therefore need to prove that the birds are less than 31 years old. WPT has offered its expertise to try to settle this issue, but progress seems slow. The return of these birds to Brazil - which the World Parrot Trust supports unequivocally - is likely to be delayed for some time.

## Questions for Brazil

We have asked for updated information from Brazilian sources but have not received anything in time for this issue. It would be helpful to have the answers to a number of questions, for example:

- What facilities are available in Brazil for any returned Lear's Macaws?
- How many Lear's have been confiscated in Brazil?
- Have any prosecutions resulted?
- How is the FNMA funding of \$200,000 being used?
- What is IBAMA's evaluation of the effectiveness of the guarding activities?
- Are IBAMA and Biodiversitas willing to work with other Brazilian and international organisations?

Sadly, we have to report that we

hear nothing from IBAMA, and receive only negative responses from a spokesperson on Brazilian wildlife issues who works in the USA. It seems that, despite the substantial funds provided by WPT for the conservation of parrots in Brazil (over \$60,000), there are those who are more interested in perpetuating political disagreements than pursuing conservation. Fortunately it is quite practicable, and indeed enjoyable, for WPT to work directly with Fundacao BioBrasil, a recently established conservation NGO based in Salvador, Bahia. This city is only a few hours drive away from the location of Lear's Macaw, and is better placed to provide support for this macaw than groups based more than a thousand kilometres away.

This brings me to the latest news, reporting the discovery of a third population of Lear's Macaw. Here is a report and a request for funding from Richard Hatley, a volunteer with BioBrasil:

# Request for funding to protect newly discovered populations of Lear's Macaw and exploratory missions to find other unknown populations

by RICHARD HARTLEY

## Background

The dwindling population of the Lear's Macaw (*Anodorhynchus leari*) has caused alarm in conservation circles, particularly among groups concerned with the global well-being of psittacids. The gravity of the situation has galvanised conservation NGOs and government agencies to enact programs that assure the continued protection of the known populations in the region known as the Sertao in the Brazilian state of Bahia. Most of the attention has been focused on the population of approximately 119 Lear's near the town of Canudos. A permanent staff member of IBAMA, the federal government's environmental protection wing, has been installed in the region and the planting of the licuri palm (*Syagus coronata*), whose nut serves as the primary food source for the macaws, has recommenced. An agronomist has been contracted to oversee the transplanting of the palms. Supervision of the project rests in the hands of the National Lear's Committee with Fundacao Biodiversitas acting as the non-governmental caretaker.

Informants in the area, however, have alerted Fundacao BioBrasil to the potential of further significant populations of these macaws. A population of 30 has been confirmed in a previously undocumented area, east of Canudos. Rumours, corroborated by physical evidence (the remains of the shredded palm nuts) point to the strong possibility of a population of 50 birds in the western Sertao and an unspecified number in Bahia's neighbouring state of Pernambuco to the north.

The confirmed newly discovered population is still extremely vulnerable to trappers given that all official efforts are focused on

the Canudos population. This area contains some of the most preserved Caatinga vegetation, typical Lear's habitat, and there is a strong likelihood that additional populations of birds live in the immediate vicinity.

## Plan of Action

BioBrasil Foundation has embarked on a two-pronged strategy aimed at protecting existing known populations and launching a vigorous search in the field for new populations.

The 120 birds in the Canudos area are currently the exclusive target for conservation by the National Lear's Committee. The foundation intends, therefore, to



The team entered this dirt road near Petrolina and travelled on it for four hours, leading them to the site of the Lear's  
Photo: Gil Serique

concentrate its protection efforts on the 30 birds in the newly discovered population. This would entail the construction of lodging for guards contracted to protect the birds and the installation of a short wave radio system for daily contact between the site and BioBrasil's president in Salvador, Pedro Lima. Trapping activity would be immediately relayed to Dr. Lima who in turn would inform IBAMA.

A team from BioBrasil is due to undertake an expeditionary field research trip to an area west of Canudos where strong evidence of the bird's presence exists. Spearheading the research will be Dr. Lima who will be accompanied by Luiz Carlos Lima (no relation to Pedro), a reformed trapper and BioBrasil consultant whose inside information is pivotal to the success of the project. Mr. C. Lima is considered to harbour extensive knowledge about and contacts in the bird trade but is keen to share this knowledge with the foundation for the sake of the bird's conservation and improvement of his image.

## Long Term Outlook

Once more populations of Lear's Macaw are found and subsequently protected, BioBrasil plans to implement a

specialised ecotourism program that offers as a guaranteed attraction one of the world's rarest parrots. BioBrasil's successful ecotourism efforts with the Hyacinth Macaw in the state of Piaui, where over 60 Hyacinths are lured to one spot for observation from a hide less than 15 meters away, were inaugurated last year. Small rustic lodges have been constructed as accommodation and two birding groups from the United States have already visited the site. The idea would be to replicate that experience in the areas with Lear's populations.

The success of such an endeavour would ensure the self-sustainability of the Lear's protection efforts and thereby embody the principles underlying BioBrasil's mission in environmental protection.

## Budget

Construction of lodging for Guards in new locality: US\$ 1000

Two expeditionary trips to find new populations (car rental, gas, and miscellaneous costs for food etc): US\$ 2500

Purchase of two short wave radios and solar panel: US\$ 2500

Total funds solicited US\$ 6000 (already funded by WPT)



Bahia, Northeast Brazil: Lear's nesting sites.

Photo: Roland Seitre



A group of Lear's Macaws at one of the 'new' locations. Photo: Pedro Lima

## Accounting

Responsibility for accounting and monthly progress reports is entirely in the hands of BioBrasil Foundation. In addition, following completion of the expeditionary trip occurring this week, BioBrasil will provide photographs and first hand accounts and recommendations of future strategies from the trip's participants.

To add to this good news, we can say that a further expedition, funded by a new donation from World Parrot Trust UK, is about to explore an area in Pernambuco, the state just north of Bahia. There have been strong reports of further populations there, and we expect to have

more to inform you about in the February 1999 PsittaScene.

## Fascinating history

We have had the good fortune to receive some photographs of Lear's Macaw from Roland and Julia Seitre, distinguished wildlife photographers, conservationists, and veterinarians. It is their shot on the front cover of this PsittaScene. They also sent us a most interesting article describing some of the history of Lear's Macaw and its discovery by Professor Helmut Sick. Although written in 1992, this article is a useful addition to these notes on this critically endangered macaw.



Lear's feed off the palm right in front this house, despite the fact that there are six children running around. Photo: Gil Serique

# LEAR'S MACAW (*Anodorhynchus leari*)

by ROLAND SEITRE

The story of Lear's Macaw has been one of the great ornithological mysteries. First painted from a captive bird by the famous British illustrator Edward Lear, the species was described a few years later (in 1858) by Charles Lucien Bonaparte, Napoleon's nephew. The scientist had recognised, from Lear's painting and from a specimen at the Museum d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, a different bird from the regular (in those times) Hyacinth and Glaucous Macaws. All these birds were coming through the trade and, if the origins of Glaucous and Hyacinth were rather clear, that of Lear's was a total mystery. The unusual bird appeared from time to time in a shipment of blue parrots from Brazil and that was it.

The situation remained the same during all the 19th and most of the 20th century, except that Glaucous Macaw, in the meantime, became extinct. Brazil had then been reasonably explored and it was unbelievable, at least thinking from outside this country, that such a large, vocal and conspicuous bird, as macaws are generally known to be, could have remained unfound. Therefore, it was either suggested that the 'species' was made of aberrant birds or, eventually, that they were only hybrids between Glaucous and Hyacinths. An ornithologist had already been looking for the unknown blue bird since 1954. This hybrid theory, printed in 1965, only stimulated him as he could not believe it for a second. His name, Helmut Sick, will be attached to the story of the Lear's forever. Prof. Sick studied ornithology in the Berlin Museum with Prof Stresemann and was sent to Brazil in 1939 to look for *Crax blumenbachii* the curassow of the Atlantic forest and for a ground cuckoo restricted to Espirito Santo. He was supposed to stay only three

months but got stuck because of the war. After five years in South America, he could not come back any more, in love with fabulous Brazil, its diverse flora and 1600 species of birds. He stayed there all his life.

He joined, as a naturalist, the first expedition to cross Central Brazil from Amazonia to the Cerrado, by the Roncador-Xingu-Tapajos river Systems. It was quite an adventure from deep swampy jungles to the forested savannahs of the high plateau. He also accomplished other expeditions. Wildlife, in those times, was abundant and, as far as blue macaws were concerned, Hyacinths were often to be seen. Gradually, Helmut Sick got himself involved in tracking the Lear's especially after 1950, when another famous Brazilian ornithologist told him he had found a pet specimen in a fazenda of Pernambuco state. But this bird had apparently been bought in Bahia. Other information was collected and analysed: an aviculturist of Teresopolis had a live bird he claimed being from



Prof. Helmut Sick

Photo: Roland Seitre



Lear's Macaw in flight.

Photo: Roland Seitre

Amazonia, in the Rio Negro region; in Joazeiro, a border city between the states of Piaui and Bahia, 'black' macaws coming from the north or the south were sometimes sold. Nevertheless, all this was quite puzzling due to the confusion with Hyacinths and even Spix's.

Prof Sick decided to explore this immense region of North-East Brazil, still a large 'white spot' on the vast ornithological map, as no one had ever collected there. This is a place of extreme poverty, very different from the general image of Brazil, with few roads or tracks. The land is dry and holds a short, bushy and thorny vegetation. Trees grow only in dry river beds. Rains can be totally absent for months or even years. People speak a basic Portuguese and have suffered deeply from civil wars, revolutionaries and bandits up to the 20th century. Moreover, the Sertao has been a place of chronic famine at all times.

Five expeditions led by Prof. Sick explored localities where blue macaws had been reported. On some occasions, Hyacinths were found, nesting in rock cavities among cliffs. The last expedition, during summer 1978-1979, was the most tenuous. At the height of the warm and dry season, in the suffocating heat, lacking water and almost stuck in the sand, Prof. Sick and his companions were offered by a hunter, on 29th December, a few feathers. The unmistakable blue colour of these was the first authentic proof that the species still existed in the wild, and in this region of Brazil. The man said he had killed the bird only few weeks earlier to eat

it. This is a common attitude among natives in macaw's country. Boosted by this finding, the team found the energy to continue and was rewarded on 31st December, by the sight of a few birds flying. For the first time ever, ornithologists had seen the bird in the wild and the locality of the rare bird had been discovered. A mystery had been unfolded after more than 120 years of puzzling.

Contrary to what might have been said or written, this was not a 'rediscovery', but a genuine 'discovery'. For the scientist, it also initiated an intellectual fight that was to end only with its own life: to prove his finding he had to shoot one of these birds, an act which the scientist in him understood but which the conservationist and extremely life-attached man he had always been deeply abhorred. All the same, he had to publish the locality of the collection but then this was vital information for the poachers. Only a few tens of birds were found. Not only was it time (maybe already too late!) to locate the colony, but it was then very urgent to give it local protection rapidly enforced by local authorities in the Reserva do Raso da Catarina.

Today the population is estimated to number about 60 birds divided into two colonies which inhabit large sandstone cliffs where they roost every night, away from predators. Arriving at dusk, they leave at dawn and their raucous calls echo among the stones. Their main diet consists of the small nuts of the licuri palm (Syagrus coronata). 450 producing

palm trees are said to be necessary for each bird which also feed on numerous fruits of trees and shrubs. Bird distribution certainly used to be much wider, as indicated by their presence forty years ago on the other side of the Rio Sao Francisco, in Pernambuco. It is also difficult to understand why they were not found in other parts of the range of the licuri palm, which is huge, basically from the Nordeste states down to Minas Gerais. Although deforestation has been very severe, licuris are usually kept in the pastures as shade for cattle and eventually food for humans. Therefore, plenty of feeding habitat appears to be left but maybe not as many nesting sites, although stone cliffs are not so rare either.

Hunting was also a problem but now that the bird is a state monument, people are aware of its rarity and proud of it. Unfortunately, so far numbers do not appear to have risen and genetic abnormality such as crooked bills or tails have been reported as a consequence of inbreeding. In captivity, about 15 birds are legally kept but most are very old and captive breeding has been very poor so far. Therefore, maintaining the free population is more than essential. Prof. Helmut Sick left us in 1991, just as the English version of his excellent book on the birds of Brazil was ready for printing. This will also keep his name for posterity but no doubt that he would be more satisfied to know that the bird to which he dedicated most of his life still roams and will keep on roaming free in the vast expanses of North-East Brazil.

## WHAT FUTURE FOR LEAR'S MACAW?

We have some notes from Dr. Charles A. Munn, the leading authority on macaws in the wild. He writes as follows:

'There are between 100 and 200 confirmed sightings of Lear's Macaw in the wild. The main threat to the survival of this species is continual illegal trapping from the location of the first known population at Toca cliffs. This is a vulnerable site, and many Lear's macaws have been netted over the past two or three years and sent to Rio or Sao Paulo for specialist collectors. Some birds are traded on to international destinations. The second, more remote population has also been raided, and climbing ropes have been found there.

To take control of this situation and ensure the survival of the macaw, we need to pursue two priorities:

First, work co-operatively to make sure the macaws are effectively guarded.

It is high time the various interested parties resolved their differences and set about providing reliable and co-ordinated guarding for all Lear's populations.

Second, put in hand essential biological studies.

Knowledge is strength, and we are woefully short of the essential information about all biological aspects of Lear's Macaw, for example: nesting ecology, ranging patterns, food requirements, population dynamics. If we could secure this information we would be better able to evaluate management techniques, such as those employed with the Echo Parakeet in Mauritius, that might help accelerate recruitment to the threatened and dwindling population of Lear's Macaw.

I have high hopes that the new Committee for the Preservation of Lear's Macaw, under its chairman Luiz Francisco Sanfilippo, will have the wisdom and determination to use all available resources and skills to save this remarkable bird from extinction.'

Charlie Munn