

News from El Cóndor, Patagonia, Argentina

By Dr. JUAN F. MASELLO and Dr. PETRA QUILLFELDT.

Photos by DON PREISLER and JAMIE GILARDI

Since 1998, we have been conducting a study of the breeding biology of Burrowing Parrots (*Cyanoliseus patagonus*) at the largest and most important colony of this species (see *PsittaScene Vol 15 No 4: 12-13*). The colony is located west of the village El Cóndor, 30km southeast from Viedma, in the province of Río Negro, Patagonia, Argentina. Remarkably, after an extensive literature review on parrots breeding biology, this population appears to be the largest known colony of parrots in the world.

In February 2003 we wrote desperately to James Gilardi at the World Parrot Trust about poachers taking, during our absence, about 1,200 nestlings from the Burrowing Parrot colony at El Cóndor. Unfortunately, our study was interrupted at the end of 2002 because of the lack of funding. As a consequence we could not work at the colony during the breeding season 2002-2003 and the poachers took advantage. Until now, our field work was the only protection this colony has against illegal poachers and irrational local management. Neighbours of the close village of El Cóndor who have been helping us during all these years told us about hundreds of

Burrowing Parrot chicks taken from the nests before fledging and put in cages for the pet trade. They also told us about many of them left dead on the beach down the cliff where the parrots breed. Fortunately, and thanks to the unconditional help of James Gilardi and the financial support of Rosemary Low and the World Parrot Trust, we could return to the fieldwork during the breeding season 2003-2004. And it was one of our most fruitful seasons both from a conservation and scientific point of view!

At the very beginning of our fieldwork we participated, thanks to a generous invitation of Aves Argentinas (who has backed the project since last year), in the 4th

Workshop on identification of 'Important Bird Areas' (IBA) for conservation in Patagonia. This workshop was organised at the end of November 2003 by Aves Argentinas and *BirdLife International* in Puerto Madryn, Patagonia. As a result of that and with the complete help and agreement of all the scientists at the workshop the Burrowing Parrot colony at El Cóndor was declared a priority 'Important Bird Area' (IBA) for Patagonia under the programme organised all over the world by *BirdLife International*. Great news! This adds to the good news brought recently to us by Claudio Chehébar and his team at the National Park Administration

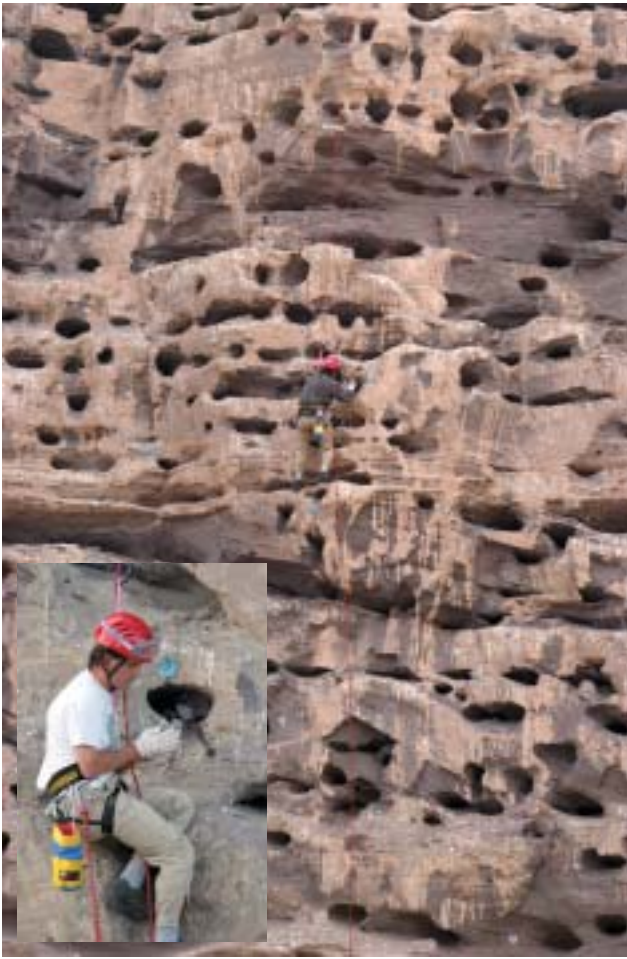
Photo: Jamie Gilardi



Photo: Don Preisler



Juan Masello (second from left) presides over the workshop.



Climb cliff face to each nest and check nestling.



Record various measurements and details.

(APN) of Argentina. The parrot colony area is now also considered a candidate for the new National Park in the Arid Patagonian Steppes of Argentina.

Another very important event from our recent season was the meeting we had in El Cóndor with local and international NGOs in order to co-ordinate a joint conservation programme for this, the largest known parrot colony in the world. Graham Harris from Fundación Patagonia Natural (FPN), Bill Conway from Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and James Gilardi from the World Parrot Trust participated in this meeting. Lots of ideas arose for the concrete protection of the colony, an educational campaign between the local people, especially the young people, and the impulse of ecotourism in the region. This year 2004 will find all of us working in all these aspects of parrot conservation. Rosemary Low and Krystyna Szulecka, both members of the WPT, also joined us at El Cóndor bringing help and a lot of enthusiasm. Rosemary and Krystyna together with one of our students, María Luján Pagnossin, are now working on the organisation of 'Friends of the Burrowing Parrot' which will raise funds for the protection of the colony at El Cóndor and for educational campaigns.



Each stage of a chick's development is recorded. Inset, chick waiting to be fed.

Indigenous Mapuche people of the Patagonian Andes, in the Argentinean province of Neuquén, celebrate the fledging of Burrowing Parrot chicks every year with a festival. The idea of Rosemary, Luján and Krystyna is initiating this tradition in El Cóndor in order to promote pride about the wonders of this magnificent parrot colony in the local people. The local Fundación Uñopatun has been working in the same direction during 2003, through a photographic competition (<http://www.avesdelcondor.s5.com>) and an educational campaign they organised. We were very surprised when, as a result of this educational campaign, a taxi driver in the nearby city of Viedma told us very proudly 'Do you know? We have here the biggest parrot colony in the world!' We think that the tragedy of the poaching in December 2002 made some of the locals realise the necessity of protection of their natural heritage, the parrot colony at El Cóndor.



Photo: Don Preisler

Photo: Don Preisler



See how close the visitors at the beach are to the nests!

From a scientific point of view, the season was also a complete success. We finished counting the nests in the colony. We are now working on a detailed description of the colony and we hope to publish it soon. This year, for the first time, we caught breeding parrots which we ringed as chicks 4 years ago. And they were breeding only a few metres from the nests where they grew up! During this season we monitored the development of 145 chicks and studied the immunocompetence of some of them, we caught, measured and ringed 52 breeding adults, carried out a census of non-breeders, studied the load of ectoparasites, investigated the presence of hemoparasites and took feather samples for the study of parrot coloration using spectrometry in the lab. A lot of work with data and in the lab is waiting for us now!

We hope to meet some of you in El Cóndor during the next breeding season!



Photo: Don Preisler



Paintings for Patagonians

By ROSEMARY LOW

Visiting the colony of Burrowing Parrots (*Patagonian Conures*) at El Cóndor was an inspirational experience. I had the pleasure of spending a few days with the parrots, and with Juan Masello and Petra Quillfeldt. I watched them working at the colony and was impressed by their thoroughness and dedication.

It felt strange to be watching parrots in a beach environment on an Atlantic coast, to see them swooping around in small flocks. My first impression was how superbly aerodynamic they are, and how wonderful is the yellow plumage of flanks and rump when highlighted by the sun. I was mesmerised by the grace of their flight.

Sitting in the brush on the cliff-top, the only sounds I could hear were those of the sea and the wind and the strident calls of the *Loros Barranqueros*, as they are known locally. They were seldom silent in flight when there were humans around. Every couple of minutes a group of perhaps ten parrots would rise above the cliff top, then sink down again to where the multitude of nest entrances decorated the cliff face. The flight of these parrots is exquisitely graceful; they move through the air like gulls, hanging on the wind and letting it carry them backwards, as they stay motionless.

It saddened me to think of how they suffer at the hands of local people but, at the same time, I was inspired to try to start a conservation education campaign. Juan's field assistant Luján, and her brother Adrián, are enthusiastic and dedicated about the project. Juan and Adrián suggested organising a series of lectures in the local primary schools; Adrián would give these talks. Simple illustrated brochures would be given to every child, asking them to take them home and show

them to their parents. It might also be possible to organise activities with teachers. Adrián's best idea is to hire coaches to take children to see the colony.



The framed African Grey print up for sale for the Patagonians. (£75)

Juan estimated that in this way most of the public in Viedma and Carmen de Patagones (the relevant area) could be reached in about three months. Interviews with local newspapers, radio stations and television would raise the profile of the parrot even further.

Juan has estimated that Euros 1,000 (about £710) would cover the subsistence costs for Adrián for three months and another £710



Hyacinth Macaws painted by Malcolm Ellis donated by Rosemary Low. (£950)



Photo: Don Preisler

would meet the expenses of designing and printing the brochures. How could we raise this money? It occurred to me that some members might have a parrot painting, drawing or print that they would like to donate to the Trust. These are hung in the gift shop at Paradise Park and are also shown on the WPT website for members to observe.

I started the ball rolling by donating a painting of a pair of Hyacinthine Macaws in flight that was presented to the Trust by the artist Malcolm Ellis about 15 years ago. I bought it and would now like to use it to raise some funds for the Burrowing Parrots. Krystyna Szulecka, a photographer who was with me when I visited El Cóndor, has presented a magnificent large head study of a Great Green Macaw and artist Paul Stavely has contributed a very attractive print of his painting of three Grey Parrots. We have also been fortunate to receive five of the highly original works of the Czech artist Dagmar Simkova. I was very impressed with her work when I met her in Prague last year. I would like to thank all these people for their generosity.

In addition, if anyone would like to make a donation to the project it will be warmly received, as there will be much follow-up work after the initial part of the programme. So let's see how much we can raise for this wonderful, gentle and beautiful parrot!



One of the five pictures donated to the fund by Dagmar Simkova. (£60)



Buffon's Macaw unframed photographic print donated by Krystyna Szulecka. (£60)