



Twenty Years

www.psittascene.org

Saving Parrots

February 2009

We have been working at the Burrowing Parrot colony of El C6ndor in NE Patagonia, Argentina since October 1998. Over all those years, one thing that has become more and more clear for us, to the local people and to the friends of nature everywhere, is the immense value of this

NATURAL WONDER

NATURAL

by Juan F. Masello



Our work includes intensive research particularly in the breeding biology and the behavioral ecology of the Burrowing Parrot, or Patagonian Conure (*Cyanoliseus patagonus*) and this, its major colony. Education has also played an important role in our work since the beginning. We have spread the word about the colony through lectures, guided visits, leaflets and many articles in 9 different languages. The value of this cliff-side colony, known to few people since the time Charles Darwin visited the place, was severely underestimated. Over time we have worked on increasing awareness of the amazing fact that this is the largest colony of parrots known to exist anywhere in the world.

Finally after years of work in our educational campaign, the importance of the colony and the necessity for its protection started to receive strong support among the local people and media. In addition, recent work has also demonstrated that the area around El C6ndor is a refuge for important biodiversity. Our surveys around the parrot colony, particularly the remaining Monte patches and the marshlands (“marismas”) of the R6o Negro river, host a rich biodiversity, which includes at least 176 bird species, an important population of bottlenose dolphins, the southernmost population of Franciscana dolphins, and a large population and spawning area of several vulnerable Patagonian fish species.

Based on the importance of the Burrowing Parrot colony and on the presence of 9 globally threatened birds species, Aves Argentinas, following our advice, declared El C6ndor an Important Bird Area (IBA) under the program carried out all over the planet by BirdLife International. Currently, it is considered one of the 4 “high priority” IBAs within Patagonia. Nevertheless, it is the only IBA of the province of R6o Negro lacking legal protection. The lack of legal protection



Photo: © Mauricio Failla

poses serious risks. First, there are still some local farmers who claim that the parrots are a serious pest (see *PsittaScene* 17, N64: 10-11), and repeatedly ask the government to exterminate them (something that has been tried in the past, see *PsittaScene* 15, N64: 12-13). Second, some local politicians want to build more ramps through the cliffs in the parrot colony in order to easily reach the beach at the bottom with their cars. Third, the village of El C6ndor is expanding very quickly, menacing biodiversity-rich sections of the IBA. And last but not least, the Monte vegetation, the ecosystem sustaining the parrots and the terrestrial biodiversity at El C6ndor, is disappearing at a rate of 3.7% per year: four times faster than the clearance of the Amazon.

Our next step was clear – to pursue the legal protection and declaration of El C6ndor area as Nature Reserve of the

WONDER

IBA DESIGNATION
brings parrot colony
closer to protection



Photo: © Matthias Helmer
The Burrowing Parrot nesting cliff at El Cóndor, Patagonia, Argentina is the world's largest parrot colony with an average of 35,000 active nests spread over 12 km (7.5 mi) of cliffs facing the South Atlantic Ocean.

province of Río Negro in Patagonia, Argentina. During 2007-08, we achieved very important steps in pursuing this legal protection. First, two main parties at the local government confirmed their intention of legally protecting the area. Next, the proposal needs to be discussed at the Parliament, something that, at present, we are intensively pursuing together with the World Parrot Trust, the Dirección de Fauna Silvestre of Río Negro, Wildlife Conservation Society, Liz Claiborne / Art Ortenberg Foundation, Fundación Patagonia Natural, Fundación Ameghino and Aves Argentinas.

During a recent interview in October 2008, an influential representative and ex-minister of Río Negro assured the BBC journalist that "the Act Proposal for the creation of the Nature Reserve at El Cóndor will be discussed at the Parliament during the 2009 legislative sessions."

In order to spread the word regarding the importance of the IBA El Cóndor and the urgent necessity of approving the Act Proposal that would declare it a Nature Reserve, we held an "opening" event in November 2008. We hosted an official opening of the signs that mark the starting points of the two core sectors of the El Cóndor IBA (the parrot colony and the marshes of the Río Negro river). We designed colorful signs together with Aves Argentinas and the Dirección de Fauna Silvestre of Río Negro. For the official opening, we invited every possible politician of Río Negro and ... they all came! This was very good news that let us hope for the creation of the Nature Reserve in 2009!

View a January 2009 BBC interview with Juan and links to our numerous articles on this species at www.parrots.org/burrowingparrots

