

# Towards a Conservation Strategy for the Red-faced Parrot

By Paul Toyne PhD.

Until recently the Red-faced Parrot *Hapalopsittaca pyrrhops* was a little-known parrot endemic to southern Ecuador and northern Peru. Within its range it inhabits the temperate montane forests of the Andes between 2300m and the treeline. Forest clearance is so great in this region that the IUCN lists the parrot as critically endangered and cites habitat destruction to be its main threat.

However, the future is not as desperate as first suspected. Recent research supported by the World Parrot Trust and the International Aviculturists' Society has revealed new locations for Red-faced Parrots. The work also substantiated the importance of Podocarpus National Park for the long-term threatened White-breasted Conure *Pyrrhura albipectus*. The Park covers 146,200 ha and is situated in Loja Province. It comprises the only protected Andean forest in southern Ecuador. Such forest is important for other parrots, most notably the threatened Golden-plumed Conure *Leptosittaca branickii* (see also *PsittaScene* 1994, vol. 6, no. 3). Roughly 20% of the park is suitable Red-faced Parrot habitat, however simply preserving the park might not be sufficient for the parrot's future. Evidence for this is based on the fact that they have only been seen there in small numbers, suggesting that here they occur in low densities.

A rough population estimate within the park of a couple of hundred birds could be an exaggeration. This begs the following questions: Does the park support a viable population of Red-faced Parrots? Is this population at its optimal level? If not, can it be supplemented by immigrations of Red-faced Parrots from other areas? If at its optimal level what factors limit its size . . . food availability, nest site availability, predation? Without a detailed study it is very difficult to answer these questions. One worry is that factors such as disease and possible inbreeding leading to low reproductive rates could further reduce the population.

So, how can we best conserve the Red-faced Parrot? Fieldwork during 1992 and 1994-5 surveyed potential Red-faced Parrot habitat north of the park in the Saraguro area. The results were encouraging as new locations were found and information on diet and breeding

were collected. Within these new locations they occurred in larger numbers, flocks of up to 20, compared with the small groups between two and four usually recorded in the park. This has led to the belief that Red-faced Parrots are more common in the Saraguro area. Why this should be is unclear. Maybe they were easier to detect in the smaller forests than in the large continuous forests in the park. Species with low average population densities are less likely to be encountered in surveys of large patches of their habitat such as within the park. Or maybe there is optimum habitat area whereas the park's habitat is of poorer quality. Or perhaps, as I suspect, the Saraguro area is close to the centre of their geographic range and as with other animals, the closer they are to this centre the greater their abundance. Scientific studies are needed to answer these questions, but do we have the time necessary to complete such studies? Can we propose a conservation strategy based on our current knowledge that will successfully conserve Red-faced Parrots? I believe we can.

Previous studies on animal distributions provide some clues as to how to conserve species. There is some variation in the results from these studies but in general, and all other things being equal, geographically restricted animals (like the Red-faced Parrot) tend not to have large local populations making them vulnerable. However we have a good idea where Red-faced Parrots occur, year round, in good numbers. Researchers are presently mapping the distribution of the remaining Andean forests in Loja Province and relating them to the known distribution and abundances of the parrot within the same area. When completed, key areas can be identified and targeted for either further research or possible reserve acquisition.

The long-term aim would be to have a network of reserves. Some reserves could be linked by "corridors" of treeline Andean forest, as such forests are usually the last to be felled. These "corridors" could provide habitat through which parrots and other animals could disperse. Such reserves would provide habitat for other threatened Andean birds including Golden-plumed Parakeet, Bearded Guan *Penelope barbata*, Grey-breasted Mountain Toucan

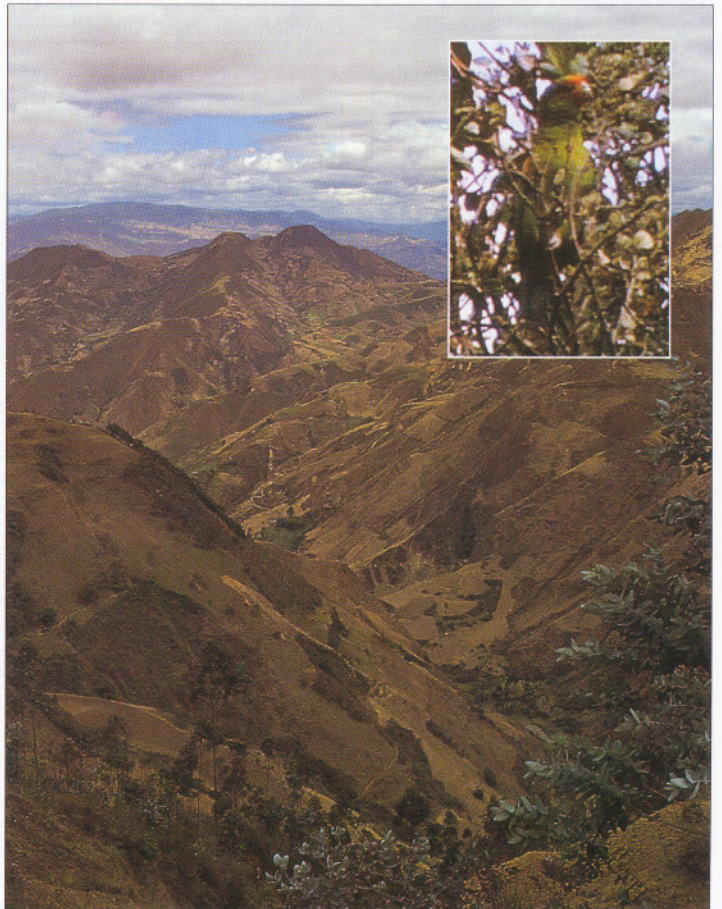
*Andigena hypoglauca* and threatened mammals such as Spectacled Bear and Mountain Tapir.

For any proposed reserve to be successful the local communities must be involved in its management. An environmental education programme emphasising the importance of their forests for wildlife and for watershed protection is vital as these communities will become the guardians of these reserves. This is not a far-fetched idea. Within Loja Province there is already a community-owned forest called Huashapamba, near Saraguro. This 400ha forest managed by three Indian communities is a wildlife reserve. On this reserve all of the above Andean bird species have been seen. Indeed, the reserve supports a sedentary population of at least eight Red-faced Parrots.

Those wishing to see parrots in Ecuador should include Huashapamba on their itinerary;

despite this low number they can be seen on most days feeding in trees near the forest edge. Permission to enter the reserve can be obtained by contacting Promusta at their office in Saraguro (Juan Antonio Montesinos y Esquino mercado central - on the corner of the market square). A small, volunteer donation for the up-keep of the reserve should be paid. This will encourage the Saraguro people to understand that these forests have other benefits than just firewood.

Current research on Red-faced Parrot is set to end this year, when complete recommendations for the conservation of the Red-faced Parrot will be made to the World Parrot Trust and other nature conservation organisations. Hopefully, some of the recommendations can be implemented (dependent as ever, on the availability of funds) and the future of the Red-faced Parrot secured.



Inset: Red-faced Parrot foraging.

Photo: M. Slocombe

Main picture: Habitat loss in the inter-Andean valleys threatens the long term future of Red-faced Parrots.  
Photo: E.P. Toyne