

Editor

Rosemary Low,
P.O. Box 100,
Mansfield, Notts.,
United Kingdom
NG20 9NZ

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Cover Picture

Philippine Cockatoo in the wild

Photo: Olivier Morvan & Philippe Garguille, Pygargue Productions, France

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Philippine Cockatoo hanging by a thread

By ROSEMARY LOW

The lovely little Red-vented or Philippine Cockatoo (*Cacatua haematuropygia*) has the dubious distinction of being classified as Critically Endangered. The definition of the threat category is that it may suffer an estimated 80% reduction in the next ten years in the wild, or the next three generations (estimated 45 years) with decline which has happened based on direct observation, decline in extent of occurrence, area of occupancy and / or quality of habitat plus actual level of exploitation. It joins 181 other birds in this sad category.

The other cockatoo in the same predicament is the Lesser Sulphur-crested (*Cacatua s. sulphurea*) - which might come as a shock to some members. In contrast to the Philippine Cockatoo, it is a very familiar avicultural subject. And that is precisely why it is so endangered; it has been trapped almost out of existence, although no wild-caught birds have been legally imported into Europe for more than a decade.

The principal reason for the decline of the Philippine Cockatoo is deforestation of lowland forests. Trapping for the local cage-bird trade seriously affected its numbers but the fact is that most of its habitat had already gone. Eighty percent of the Philippine forests and many of the mangroves have been cut down. As recently as 50 years ago this cockatoo was still common in the wild; now it has an estimated population of 1,000 to 4,000 birds. If this figure might not seem critically low, it would be because the rapid rate of decline has not been considered. In any case, the figure of 4,000 might be over-optimistic.

For the past ten years a number of initiatives have been taken to try to prevent the extinction of this cockatoo. Unfortunately, laws have had little impact because they are largely unenforceable. In 1992 there was a total ban on logging; the forests continue to be depleted. In the same year the cockatoo was placed on Appendix 1 of CITES; commercial trade in Appendix 1 species is forbidden. But local illegal trapping continued. It has become obvious throughout the tropics that laws without conservation education are more or less useless.

Also in 1992, Marc Boussekey from France took up the cause of this cockatoo. From the zoo of St Martin-la-Plaine, Marc visited the Philippines on many occasions. He persuaded the zoo to sponsor a poster showing the cockatoo and describing its plight in three languages. Three thousand of these posters were distributed throughout the islands of the Philippines. From September 1994



Philippine Cockatoo.

Photo: Olivier Morvan & Philippe Garguille

until March 1995 the zoo sponsored a public awareness programme. This included a one-hour radio programme, broadcast every Sunday morning. More than 130 listeners responded, resulting in the location of more than 300 cockatoos and over 30 nest sites which were previously unknown to researchers. Even former trappers co-operated. The radio programme has continued weekly between January and August every year, resulting in a network of informants and protectors.

The island of Palawan is the last stronghold for this species, with an estimated population of between 750 and 2,800. This figure assumes a mean population density of one bird per square km of suitable habitat. On the island of Tawitawi the estimated number of 100 to 200 might be over optimistic according to Nigel Collar et al in 'Threatened Birds of the Philippines' due to a mistaken estimate of intact forest. On Mindanao the cockatoo is close to local extinction with only 130 to

350 left in three locations. There are 50 to 70 on Masbate. There might be a few other populations which are so small they have no long-term prospects of survival.

In 1992 it was estimated that 50 to 100 birds remained on the islands of Siargao and Dinagat. In 2001-2002 these islands will be surveyed with funds donated by private breeders in the USA. Illegally collected birds are still to be found in the bird market in Manila which are thought to originate from these islands. The cockatoo is extinct on Cebu and probably also on Negros. There is one pair left on Siquijor. Two recent records from Luzon probably represent escaped cage birds.

One of the earliest field surveys of this cockatoo was made in 1991 by Dr Frank Lambert for the World Conservation Union (IUCN). Dr Lambert is one of the most experienced field workers in the region and is now based in Indonesia. He suggested that this cockatoo might need mangroves as a refuge, if it is to survive.

On Palawan, the rapid human population explosion in recent years has been highly detrimental to the cockatoo's survival. Nearly all the nest holes are known to trappers. The young are removed as soon as they are old enough, sometimes also the brooding parent. A few nests have been guarded since 1996 but the majority are too inaccessible to make this possible. Some former trappers are used for this purpose; known as wardens, they received cash incentives, radios, rice and T-shirts for their services. As a result, in 1997, for example, ten young actually fledged into the wild. This is extremely important because the population was obviously an ageing one, as nearly all young birds had been poached. So even though several hundred birds still survive, many or most of these will soon be beyond reproductive age, with no young birds to replace them, until the nest incentive scheme was introduced. Hopefully, in future years this will be more widespread.

In 1994 students from Palawan State University became involved with their native cockatoo. They formed a movement whose name meant Save the Cockatoo. Together with the Philippine Environment Ministry and the Palawan Local Authority, Marc Boussekey initiated a conservation programme. A protection network was set up in five areas where the cockatoo still had viable populations. A co-ordinator and several members spread the information and tried to obtain the participation of the rural people. From July 1994 to March 1995 a certificate of participation was offered to 130 local people, including 16 ex-poachers.

Young hatched in protected nests are now ringed with stainless steel rings bearing identification codes. One ringed bird was snared in a rice field. When its presence was discovered the man who trapped it stated that the cockatoos were eating his crop but was persuaded not to trap any more.

Looking into the future, the wardens have gathered saplings and seeds from trees preferred by the cockatoo for nesting, feeding and roosting. Two small nurseries have been established, with saplings cultivated in bags. In September 1996 the first mass tree-planting was carried out. This has become an annual event which eventually will hopefully result in increased food availability for a growing cockatoo population.

Rasa Island

The small island of Rasa (8sq km), by Palawan, is now the main focus for research. The PCCP (Philippine Cockatoo Conservation Program) is mainly funded by Loro Parque Fundación and coordinated by a new team since September 1998 (a German ecologist, Peter Widmann and two Philippino officers Indira Lacerna and Siegfried Diaz) through 'Le Parc des Oiseaux', the Birdpark of Villars-Les-Domes, France since June 2001. During the breeding season from January to June 2000, 15 nest trees were located. It is of interest that horizontal rather than vertical nesting cavities were preferred. Six eggs were lost to predation by the common monitor lizard. One noteworthy nest fledged four young. Five other nests held three nestlings. The normal number of young is two. Other very positive news was that no cases of poaching were recorded. Intensive monitoring of nests was carried out by wardens from the middle of February until the middle of July. The 'Adopt a Katala' fund-raising project was launched to raise funds. Interested people 'adopt' a cockatoo and receive a certificate with information relating to a specific bird, identified by its ring.

In aviculture

Marc Boussekey has worked with tireless energy and enthusiasm for the Philippine Cockatoo. He was responsible for setting up the EEP (European programme for an endangered species administered through zoos). He states: 'Even if priority is currently being given to *in situ* conservation of the remaining wild population of the Philippine Cockatoo, the

possibility of future reintroduction of captive-bred birds should not be ignored, particularly for those islands where the species has been eradicated. Co-ordination of effort, including co-operation between private aviculturists and institutions maintaining the species in captivity, is required if the captive-breeding programme is to be effective.'

EEP programme

By the end of the first full year (1993) of the EEP and its studbook, 32 males, 21 females and five unsexed birds were held in 16 collections; 11 of these were private. At the end of 1994, the total had risen to 48 males and 39 females. Of the 24 participants, 16 (67%) were private breeders. The participants were from six European countries. By the end of 1996, 48 males, 41 females and one unsexed bird were registered in the EEP, of which 52 (57%) were captive-bred. The 22 participants consisted of seven zoos and 15 private aviculturists from seven countries in Western Europe. By the end of 1999 the EEP population consisted of 41 males and 25 females. This reduced figure reflected the fact that some private holders of this species had left the EEP and, in 1999, nine birds were transferred outside the programme.


From 1992 to 1996 50 chicks were hatched from nine pairs. Numbers reared annually fluctuated as follows: 1992 - 9; 1993 - 11; 1994 - 12; 1995 - 13 and 1996 - 6. The number of breeding pairs had gradually declined from six to three and the number of non-breeding pairs has increased from 13, no doubt because some were too young to breed. (This cockatoo does not usually start to breed

until the age of six or seven years). The latest studbook available, that for 1999, shows that seven young were reared.

The Philippine Cockatoo is by no means as easy to breed as most of the *Cacatua* species. However, the co-operation of private aviculturists has been disappointing. In 1997, for example, five left the EEP without explanation, which lost at least 10 cockatoos from the programme. Furthermore, some breeders sell young to non-EEP participating collections.

On the other hand, responsible breeders refuse to sell young females to breeders with mature males, knowing that there is a high risk of an immature female being killed. Sadly this has happened in the past. Some breeders are not responsible enough to have this critically endangered species in their care but, of course, a breeder is at liberty to sell to anyone.

There is a regional studbook for the United States in which 100 birds are registered. In the Philippines, Antonio de Dios, holder of the world's largest parrot collection, also has the largest group of Philippine Cockatoos, approximately 20 pairs of which are breeding. Some of his young birds have been exported to Europe.

Marc Boussekey believes that the integrated approach to the conservation of the Philippine Cockatoo, involving *in situ* protection, captive-breeding and fundamental research, represents a real hope for preventing its extinction. It is my hope that all private breeders will take a more responsible attitude to this critically endangered cockatoo. 

Cockatoo Walkabout 2002

This is the male of the pair of Philippine Cockatoos in California owned by the respected cockatoo breeder Chris Shank. After many years in her care they bred for the first time in 2001, producing two young which are destined to have free-flying sessions with her other cockatoos, including their parents.

In May 2002 Chris will host the second 'Cockatoo Walkabout' to be held at her property, Cockatoo Downs in Grass Valley, USA. This meeting will focus on the behaviour, care and conservation of cockatoos. Jamie Gilardi will be a speaker at this event. We are also delighted to announce that any profits will be donated to the World Parrot Trust.

Further information can be obtained from Chris Shank, telephone (001) 530 268 3593 or email her at cockatoodowns@earthlink.net.

Photo: Rosemary Low

