

Tambopata Research Center

(TRC), Madre de Dios, Peru

by LARS LEPPERHOFF

It is still dark. I try to get in my humid clothes still tired. The calls of Bamboo-rats shout into the concert of insects. Soon we are sitting on a boat which goes up the Tambopata river into the mists of the early morning to a river bank. Expectantly we are sitting on a fallen tree trunk and are looking into the beautiful rise of the sun behind the rain forest in the east. First small Macaws appear. A flock of Chestnut-fronted Macaws and Red-bellied Macaws fly over the river bank where we are sitting. Red-bellied Macaws are easy to identify in flight because they are yellow under their wings; Chestnut-fronted Macaws are brown. Also the calls are different. More and more small Macaws fly from the Eastern Andes to the famous clay lick or collpa at Tambopata. Suddenly the sun is shining on the clay lick which is now a shiny red. Soon there are large Macaws coming. Blue and Yellow, Scarlet and Green-winged Macaws are flying into the *Cecropia* trees on the upper river bank. They prefer the branches on the top of the trees without leaves. I am really in a paradise, in a Macaw-land!

When I decided to travel the long way from Bern in Switzerland to Tambopata in Peru I did not expect that I would be so fortunate to observe so many different bird species in such a beautiful tropical rainforest. It was only possible because I had such a good and friendly guide. Edwin Salazar Zapata is a Peruvian biologist and ornithologist who is extremely knowledgeable about the wild life and particularly about the birds of Peru. Everything was well organised. Someone came to pick me up at Lima-airport. I spent one night at Lima. The next day I flew from Lima to Puerto Maldonado which is the capital town of the department of Madre de Dios. At Puerto Maldonado Edwin came and picked me up. Afterwards we were sitting in a boat which was driving for about 2 hours up the river to Posada Amazonas lodge. During the three days we spent there I observed many interesting bird species. Of course I was especially interested in parrots.

As human beings we were confined to the grounds in the shade of the wonderful neotropical rainforest. It was very exciting to hear parrot cries



Part of the famous clay lick at Tambopata.

but we could not see the parrot because life in a tropical rainforest goes on mainly in the canopy. Therefore it was a good opportunity to climb up a tower which was built into the rainforest about 30 minutes away from the lodge. On the top of this tower, which was next to a Brasil nut tree, we could overlook the whole rainforest which was like an ocean. In the far west I could see the Andes. From this tower (where we spent many hours) we could observe so many birds.

Quite close there was a nest of Yellow-thighed Caiques. These beautiful parrots were always my favourites and now I

observed a family of three of these amusing birds climbing in a tree and whistling. After some minutes they flew to their nest which was formed by a rotten branch which had fallen down. All of the birds disappeared into this nest.

I will never forget the early morning on this tower where the mists over the trees vanished and the sun sent its first rays of light. Feeding flocks of multicoloured tanagers roamed the tree tops. Macaws shouted on the other side of the brown river which was full of sediments. In the tree tops grew epiphytic plants like Bromelias, Orchids and Tillandsias. We

continued for eight hours up the river. We stopped on a lake with giant otters, caimans, hoatzins and whole flocks of *Ara ararauna*. The boat trip up the river was most fascinating. After some hours there were no signs of human civilisation, only remote neotropical rainforest with its wild life. In the evening we got to Tambopata Research Centre.

During the following two weeks Edwin and I walked many kilometres on the trails of the rainforest around TRC. We observed the sloths, different monkey species like red howler monkey (*Alouatta seniculus*), common squirrel monkey (*Saimiri sciureus sciureus*) and brown capuchin (*Cebus apella*), a lot of different insects like ants, spiders, tarantulas and butterflies and reptiles like snakes, turtles and lizards. Daily we saw tapir and jaguar foot prints on the muddy ground, different fish species in the clear water of lovely little rivers and, of course parrots and other birds.

I was very impressed with the plants. There were different forest types: typical lowland forests with *Monstera* and *Philodendron* climbing up the trees (often in symbiosis with termite nests), palm swamps with *Mauritia flexuosa* palms, drier forests on soft hills, bamboo forests and *Cecropia* forests on river banks which took over new places as pioneer trees. Around TRC and, especially every morning on the clay lick, we could observe:

- White-eyed Conure (*Aratinga leucophthalma*)
- Dusky-headed Conure (*Aratinga weddellii*)
- Black-capped Conure or Rock Conure (*Pyrrhura rupicola*)
- Barrabands Parrot (*Pionopsitta barrabandi*)
- Blue headed Parrot (*Pinous menstruus menstruus*)
- Yellow-thighed Caique (*Pionites leucogaster xanthomeria*)
- Natterer's Amazon (*Amazona ochrocephala nattereri*)
- Chapman's Mealy Amazon (*Amazona farinosa chapmani*)
- Cobalt-winged Parakeet (*Brotogeris cyanoptera*)



A group of parrots waiting to descend onto the clay lick.

- Blue and Yellow Macaw (*Ara ararauna*)
- Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao*)
- Green-winged Macaw (*Ara chloroptera*)
- Chestnut-fronted Macaw (*Ara severa*) and,
- Red-bellied Macaw (*Ara manilata*)
- Blue-headed Macaw (*Ara couloni*), are sometimes in the area but we could not observe them.

One day after several hours of waiting quietly we even observed a flock of the recently discovered Amazonian Parrotlets (*Nannopsittaca dachileae*)

The best opportunity to observe the parrots was in the early mornings from 5.30 to 7am when most species came to the collpa (Quechua name of clay lick). Afterwards it was always possible to observe some species in the rainforest but it was much more difficult. Several nesting sites of Scarlet and Green-winged Macaws could be found around the lodge. From a blind above the collpa it was possible to observe several species quite close. I was particularly impressed with the large numbers of Blue-headed Parrots in this tree. In a *Mauritia flexuosa* palm swamp Blue and Yellow Macaws were nesting. We just came at the right time when a chick flew out. It was a very special environment. The Macaws were feeding on the fruits of the *Mauritia* palms. I observed that they mostly drank the liquid from the nuts. Always at 5.30pm a flock of Cobalt-winged Parakeets disappeared into a large termite nest which was on a trunk of a palm in the swamp.



A trio of Mealy Amazons.

The clay lick of Tambopata is in the Tambopata-Candamo Zona Reservada. This place is the heart of the largest uninhabited jungle in the world. It is without hunters and about 1 million hectares in extent and reaches up to the department of Puno at the foot of the Andes 200 kilometres away from lake Titicaca. In the area of Tambopata there are about 600 bird species living, as many as in the USA. It is known that Tambopata-Candamo is a place with a tremendously high biodiversity, much higher than the Brazilian lowland forest, for example. It comes from the rivers which carry the minerals and nutrients from the Andes down to Tambopata-Candamo.

Already before the Zona Reservada was founded this place was owned by the Mobil, Exxon, Elf oil company together with a large area in the west of the department Madre de Dios. According to this company there is a 12% chance that they will find petroleum in this area. A Zona Reservada does not have the status of a national park. Therefore if they find petroleum there, they will turn this place into an industrial place with all the inevitable pollution. The company will replace the land they take for the petroleum industry with a similar area in the Bahuaja Sonene National Park. It is very important to protect the Tambopata-Candamo Zone because there are so many endemic animal species living there.

Rainforest Expeditions, which own the Tambopata Research Centre (TRC) is a very good and effective Peruvian company which runs a beautiful tourist lodge and cares for nature and

does important research on the wildlife. Most guides are biologists who also work in projects for TRC and do research on butterflies, termites, birds of the bamboo forest, clay lick, macaws and other items. It is important to support the research there so that more and more people get to know about this unique area. The government and the petroleum company might be impressed and might hesitate to start the petroleum project. As an example, the Macaw research project at Tambopata helps to spread information about macaws (whose life in nature was not well known before TRC started with its work). The knowledge of the intact Macaw populations of Tambopata will help other populations which are in danger.

For people who are interested in parrots Tambopata is just a paradise. It is not only the home of the three spectacular and beautifully coloured large Macaws but also for a lot of other parrot species of which some are not kept in Europe.

Most of us know parrots from aviaries and cages. It is so interesting and it would impress anybody to see how they live in the wild and how they fly. It makes us think a lot and, I am quite sure, every parrot keeper would return home and try to improve their aviaries. To other parrot enthusiasts I very highly recommend a visit to Tambopata. The best time to travel there seems to be from April to October. Of course you have to be prepared for hot weather and for very high humidity. There is always the possibility of heavy rains. In our summer it can be very cold (about 8 °C for some days!).

For further information or tour organisation please contact directly:

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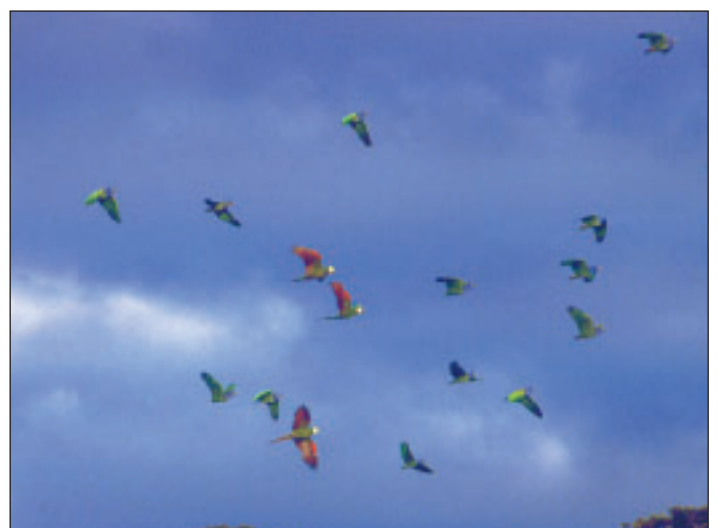
Miss Maria Esther Stagnaro is the trip co-ordinator and she speaks English very well.

The best field guide is:

- Hilty, Steven L. / Brown, William L. (1986): *A guide to the birds of Colombia*, Princeton University Press, ISBN 0-691-08372-X (pbk.)

A book which should be of great interest for bird watchers in Peru (the first one to be published) will be:

Clements, James F. / Barnes, Eustace: *A Guide to the birds of Peru*, Pica Press, c. 400 pages. (Not yet published)



Red-bellied Macaws and Blue-headed Parrots in flight.