

ALL ABOARD THE CONSERVATION EXPRESS!

By Rosemary Low

The loud, slightly metallic calls of the parrots suddenly brought the forest to life. Light was slowly filtering through the trees but the rainclouds hung overhead, giving the Buccament Valley a slightly brooding air. Yes, I was on St Vincent, home of one of the most magnificent parrots in the world. This species has been the subject of much controversy over the years mainly because of its value as an item of illegal trade.

No-one seeing this large, colourful Amazon could fail to understand why it would be coveted by those without scruples but possessing plenty of financial resources. These days, however, it is a rare event for illegal export to occur. The higher standard of education on the island and promotion of the importance of the protection of the forest and its inhabitants, has resulted in a gradually changing attitude towards the environment.

The World Parrot Trust is playing a significant role in this, which is how I unexpectedly found myself on St Vincent. I had been invited to speak at the second convention of the International Aviculturists' Society in Florida where Michael and Audrey Reynolds had been very

successfully promoting the Trust. They were leaving for St Vincent immediately afterwards and as I had three days available before flying back to the Canary Islands, I decided to accompany them.

It was nearly 14 years since I had been on St Vincent; it would be interesting to see for myself what had been accomplished in the intervening years and, hopefully, to again catch a glimpse of parrots in the forest. So, as the parrots started to move from their roosting sites Mike, Audrey and I found ourselves at an altitude of about 4570m (1,500ft) in the Vermont area. Our guide was Fitzroy Springer, the Wildlife Protection Officer. We were strategically placed, with a view over the lush rainforest which forms part of the parrot reserve. This is an area of 10,870 acres in the centre of the island, set aside in 1987.

At that early hour, parrot calls came from all directions. Sightings of pairs flying overhead were frequent. Initially, the birds were silhouetted against the dull sky. As the light intensity increased slightly, the brilliant orange patches in the wings were lit against the green backdrop of forest. For an hour or so, the forest vibrated with their calls as they greeted the day and flew off to find food. By about 7.45am the calls grew less frequent but we lingered for an hour, hoping for a few more glimpses.



A breeding pair of St Vincent parrots in the government aviaries.



The St Vincent Parrot (*Amazona guildingii*) is found only on this island, where its numbers are believed to be in the region of 450. If the population is declining, it would be as a result of deforestation which is perhaps about 1% per annum. Some reforestation is also occurring. However, there is no evidence of decline. The next census is due to be held in March this year. A census is carried out every second year. This year five or so forest officers will spend a week in five different parts of the forest, trying to estimate numbers. There has been a suggestion that 500 would be the maximum number that the forests could hold. I asked Fitzroy Springer if he thought the population had reached this number. He thought not and inferred that the population was increasing because parrots are being seen in agricultural areas where they had not occurred since those areas ceased to be forested. Could this mean that new feeding areas have been sought because some forested areas hold populations at maximum levels?

As yet it is not possible to answer this question. Parrots are difficult to study in this mountainous habitat. However, there appear to be several populations which do not overlap and which may be genetically identifiable. The St Vincent Parrot is interesting in that it has two or more colour morphs. When I asked Fitzroy Springer if the morphs could be related to different localities, he told me that parrots of the green morph occurred in the Richmond area, also that they tended to be larger. (Most St Vincent Parrots are basically a tawny brown.)

Until recently, visitors to the island who wished to venture into the rainforest, had no particular path to follow if they were interested in observing parrots. Then, in 1990, the Vermont nature trails were opened. We used one of these trails to reach the look-out point. The trail is maintained in good condition: log sections form steps in the steeper areas. The number of visitors using the trails rises annually, as environmental awareness increases.

This is encouraging as it helps Vincentians to realise that the forest and parrots attract tourists and therefore tourist dollars. American visitors make up the

majority of tourists as St Vincent is only 1,600 miles south east of Miami. It can be reached via a 3½ hour flight to Barbados, then a 35 minute flight to St Vincent and the Grenadines. St Vincent is situated in the chain of islands which curves from Puerto Rico in the north, down to Tobago, just north of the northern tip of Venezuela. It is one of the most southerly of the islands (Windward group of the Lesser Antilles). Situated only 24 miles south of St Lucia, it cannot be compared with St Lucia where the tourist industry is concerned. St Vincent captures a much smaller number of tourists, partly because it lacks an international airport. For those interested in natural beauty St Vincent has more un-spoiled forest and less development. However, as in all the islands of the Caribbean, a rapidly expanding human population inevitably results in the forests being even further encroached upon.

St Vincent can boast of the oldest botanical garden in the western hemisphere. This location is one of particular interest, for here St Vincent Parrots can be seen at close quarters. The aviaries currently house 30 birds. Most of these are former pets; others have been hatched there since 1988. A short while before that, Vincentians who kept native parrots were permitted to keep them, provided that they registered and ringed them, but it is not permitted to keep any bird not registered at that time. Today, 47 are registered.

Fitzroy Springer took us inside the aviary, whose occupants looked in excellent condition. Those not set up for breeding had an adequate area in which to fly. The diet is carefully controlled, as obesity is a major problem unless the diet is carefully controlled. The birds are fed once daily on fruits such as guavas, various citrus, banana and local fruits grown just behind the aviary, such as plum rose and golden apple. Fitzroy told me that he sometimes supplements their diet with gommier seeds, Spanish ash pods and figs, collected from the forest. The parrots receive no seed; a limited quantity of peanuts are fed (50lbs are bought every three months). Those rearing young receive cooked chicken.

On this diet the birds remain slim - but fertility is not high. In 1993, 13 of the 15 eggs laid were infertile. However, more young

would be an embarrassment as the existing accommodation is already stretched to its limit. Five pairs are set up for breeding, one pair per aviary, the other birds being housed in three flights, the construction of which was financed by Palmitos Park, Gran Canaria.

To date, I was told, 12 of the 15 young hatched have all survived, all parent-reared. All concerned are to be congratulated on this excellent result. However, young bred in the future cannot continue to be added to the existing aviaries. In a leaflet published by the Forestry Division, the goal of the programme is stated to be "to breed parrots for eventual release into the wild and to provide genetic support for an international breeding programme." It must be time for a decision to be made regarding the destination of the young birds, before their numbers are reduced as a result of over-crowding.

Mike Reynolds' main purpose in visiting the island concerned the Vincie Express, the bus donated to the Forestry Division by The World Parrot Trust. It had recently arrived and was about to be introduced to a group of children. The bus is destined to convey a message of conservation awareness to all the island's schoolchildren. It follows in the path of the Trust's buses on St Lucia and Dominica. They have been outstandingly successful in promoting conservation in a manner which grasps the attention of the younger members of the community. Then their parents listen to the enthusiastic response of their children.

So it will be on St Vincent. We watched the absorbed interest of the children exclaiming at the colourful mural on each side of the bus. It depicts a St Vincent Parrot in its forest habitat - a colourful scene which lingers in one's mind. Then the children entered, to learn about forest and parrot protection from the exhibits inside. One is a jigsaw which the children must

piece together. It demonstrates how different aspects of the environment are dependant upon each other. Another is a scene of deforestation with water running down the mountainside. The water is brown as a result of soil erosion. The next exhibit shows intact rainforest. Here the water is sparkling and clean, for the soil is protected by the trees.

From the speakers at the front of the bus, came the appropriate sounds of a song written by Paul Butler (a pioneer of conservation education in the Caribbean). It broadcasts the message that "Vincie" is their special parrot, unique to the island, and must be protected. WPT's bus will, we hope, become synonymous with survival of its Amazon and with the pride which its people feel for this majestic bird.

Before leaving St Vincent, Mr Reynolds was able to meet the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Labour. They discussed the work of the Trust and the role it is playing on St Vincent and the Grenadines. He was also able to obtain video footage of the bus, the forest and the parrots. This will be incorporated in a video which will show the various projects which the Trust has supported. All in all, the three day visit to this beautiful island was an outstanding success.

Acknowledgement

Grateful thanks are due to Forestry Division personnel for their time and hospitality.

This short speech was kindly delivered on Mike Reynolds' behalf by Alleyne Regis of RARE, at the official handing over ceremony on St Vincent.

I cannot tell you how disappointed I am not to be present at the handing over of the Vincie Express. As you may know, this is the third conservation bus we have sent, working together with RARE Centre, to the Caribbean; the previous ones went to St Lucia and



A class of St Vincent children about to experience the 'Vincie Express', guided by Ruth Knights (on right).

Dominica. But for me personally, and for all of us involved in the work of The World Parrot Trust, the 'Vincie Express' is easily the most important.

If I give you a little history, you will see why this is so. 22 years ago I started a bird garden in England, specialising in breeding endangered species. I wrote to your government to say that if, by some miracle, it might be possible for us to have a pair of St Vincent Parrots, we would be delighted. About a year later we heard that a pair of parrots had been confiscated, and could be sent to us with full government approval.

That was in 1974. In 1980 we hatched a chick, but it did not survive. Only in 1991 did we succeed in rearing our first St Vincent Parrot, the first in Europe, and only the second in the world in zoos and bird gardens which are members of the government approved St Vincent Parrot Consortium. All the birds held by consortium members remain the property of St Vincent. So, far away in a remote corner of England, we have added to the numbers of your beautiful, endangered national bird.

A little more history: in 1978 I visited St Vincent because I wanted to see your parrot in the wild. With the help of Dr. Earle Kirby and 'Nicky' Nicholls, my wife and I had the enormous pleasure of seeing the St Vincent Parrot flying free in the Buccament Valley. It was the first time I had seen any parrot flying in the wild, and it had a great effect on me.

It made me realise that nothing was more important than preserving the wild places on which the parrots rely for their survival around the world. This realisation, this flash of inspiration which I experienced on St Vincent, led eventually to our setting up The World Parrot Trust in 1989. Why parrots? Because they, alone among birds, have won a special place in the hearts and minds of man. This is demonstrated by the

fact that over 50 million parrots are kept as pets all over the world. If we can persuade people to care about the birds that actually live in their houses, perhaps we can get them to care about the whole of nature.

The World Parrot Trust is still very small, but it has 2000 influential members in 43 countries. We have projects for parrot survival in 10 countries; it would be more, but our funds simply don't allow any more at present. About one third of our annual income has been spent to create the Vincie Express. That is how important this project is to us, and we hope you will be as proud of it as we are. The main message we try to get across to people who keep and enjoy parrots is that they must 'put something back' to help the survival of parrots in the wild. At The World Parrot Trust and at Paradise Park where the Trust is based, we feel indebted to St Vincent for entrusting us with their precious birds. Now, however, we can feel we have 'put something back'.

We will write about the Vincie Express, and 'Vincie' himself, in our own publications and in other media worldwide. A very large audience will come to know how well St Vincent is developing its vital agriculture, while protecting its forests and its unique national bird. Like ripples on a pond, this knowledge will spread, and hopefully it will help the development of your tourism. We attend avicultural conventions worldwide, several every year, and in the next few months I will be able to tell audiences in Australia and the United States of the excellent conservation work that is under way here on St Vincent.

Note from Hon Director:
Rosemary Low and Mike and Audrey Reynolds met all their own expenses on this visit to St Vincent.



Rosemary Low (wearing new WPT T-shirt) standing by a mural on the aviary wall.