

WPT visits Fiji

by KIRSTY SWINNERTON Wildlife Preservation Trust Canada (WPTC)

At the beginning of the year, the National Trust for Fiji (NTF) contacted the World Parrot Trust on the advice of Mr Michael Dibben, the British High Commissioner in Fiji. Mr Dibben was instrumental in the World Parrot Trust's education work in Paraguay and had suggested that WPT might support NTF's parrot conservation programme. Thus I found myself on a 26-hour flight via Los Angeles and Hawaii, on behalf of the WPT to spend 12 days in Fiji as a guest of the NTF. My trip in May was to coincide with the launch of a parrot conservation poster produced by the NTF but I was also to investigate the problems facing Fijian parrots and look at ways in which the WPT could become involved.

I was fairly used to tropical islands, having lived in Mauritius in the Indian Ocean for 12 years, but Fiji was nearly ten times the size with half the population, more forest and a lot more wildlife. Fiji comprises over 300 volcanic and coral islands covering a total land mass of 18,300km². There are 4 main islands of which Viti Levu is the largest at 10,390 km² and Kadavu is the smallest at 411 km². Fiji ranks third for numbers of restricted-range bird species in the Pacific and 26 species are endemic. Fiji has 6 parrot species, the most charismatic of which are the Shining parrots, *Prosopaea sp.* In Fiji Shining parrots are known as Musk parrots on account of their musky smell and are also referred to by the island on which each species or sub-species lives. The Collared Lory *Phygis solitarius* is the most common parrot and the Red-throated Lorikeet *Charmosyna amabilis* is the rarest with less than 2,500 restricted to mountainous areas. The Blue-crowned Lory *Vini australis* is found only in the southern islands of Fiji but also on Samoa, Tonga and several other islands in central Polynesia. The Red-throated Lorikeet and the Vini lorikeets were identified in the recent Parrot of Action Plan as priority species for conservation.

I flew in to Viti Levu and was greeted by the Director of the NTF, Birandra Singh, who drove me to the capital city Suva where I would be based. Birandra told me about recent news of illegal trafficking in the Kadavu Musk parrot *P. splendens* and how NTF had begun an



A pair of Collared Lorries (*Phygis solitarius*)

Photo: K. Swinnerton

awareness programme to educate the Kadavu people about their unique wildlife. On our way back from the airport we stopped at a print shop where the final changes were being made to the parrot poster due to be launched that week. A ceremony was to be held in Kadavu to coincide with the Provincial Administration meeting and several thousand people were due to attend. However all that week heavy rain flooded the runway which prevented us from landing and the ceremony was cancelled. My first week was therefore spent meeting Government officers and local organisations involved in conservation and getting to know the NTF.

National Trust for Fiji

The NTF is affiliated to the

discovered in 1979. They have help from many overseas organisations such as Taronga Zoo and the Brehm Foundation who advise on species recovery programmes. In addition to species work, the NTF manage the Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park and the Yaduataba Iguana Sanctuary. At the headquarters in Suva I met a group of very dedicated and enthusiastic staff including local and overseas volunteers working on many aspects of conservation. During the week I also met NTF Park staff, Deputy Director Elisabeth Erasito and Vice Chairman Robin Yarrow. Through them I was able to make some assessment of the priority problems facing Fiji's parrots and glean some ideas of how WPT could contribute.

Finding wild parrots

But so far I had not seen a parrot. Aseela Waqairoba, a venerable volunteer for the NTF, suggested that we visit Colo-i-Suva, a small reserve only 20 minutes from Suva, where we might find some. Within 10 minutes of arriving and despite the rain a flock of 4 to 5 Yellow-breasted Musk parrots *P. personata* (known locally as the Viti Levu parrot) flew into the tree above us and squawked. Unlike the other 2 species, these birds are bright green with a large splash of yellow and orange on their breast. They were very noisy, constantly calling to each other and after 10 minutes flew off with a peculiar gliding flight. Inspired, the next day I visited the neighbouring Wailoku Forest Reserve. Although the tall trees obscured good views over the



Habitat degradation in Nausori Highlands, Western Viti Levu. Photo: K. Swinnerton



Red-shining Parrot (*Prosopeia tabuensis*)

Photo: K. Swinerton

valley, once I recognised the Musk Parrot's calls I seemed to hear them constantly and watched several small groups perched by the path. One particularly inquisitive individual sat just 20 feet from me.

I needed to see first-hand some of the problems facing the parrots in the wild and I also wanted to see the terrain in which the Red-throated Lorikeet lived so that I could assess the potential for fieldwork. I recruited 2 Australian volunteers and we set off for a two-day trip across Viti Levu via the central highlands. I was told there was only one road across the island, it was not tarred and I had no idea what conditions to expect, but getting lost did not seem likely. However, we found ourselves in a maze of small village roads with no signposts and the mountains far ahead. Fortunately, villagers spoke excellent English and after a few wrong turns we were on the 'main road'. As we climbed into the highlands, immaculate villages with manicured gardens appeared in between peaks and valleys cascading with lianas and lush with trees. We stopped and watched Golden doves, Many coloured fruit doves, Vanikoro flycatchers and Fruit Bats but surprisingly few Musk parrots. I had expected to see more as the forest seemed ideal habitat, but they were hard to

find. As we were nearing Tomanivi or Mt Victoria, the highest point of the island, a bright green bird shot across the windscreen, possibly a Red-throated Lorikeet as we were in the right place, but it disappeared. When we reached the peak it was cold and wet as we were in cloud; the trees had gone and were replaced with stunted bushes and tree ferns. We descended to Tavua on the northern coast where we spent the night before heading the next day for the Nausori Highlands in the west. The west of the island was in total contrast to the east, which gets much more rainfall. We drove all day through a sea of sugar cane and grassland where the only forest was in tiny sheltered pockets or on remote mountain tops. The grasslands are burnt every year which prevents any forest regeneration. There was certainly little habitat for parrots left, although we saw flocks of Collared Lories which seem to live anywhere, even in the centre of Suva.

Kula Eco-Park

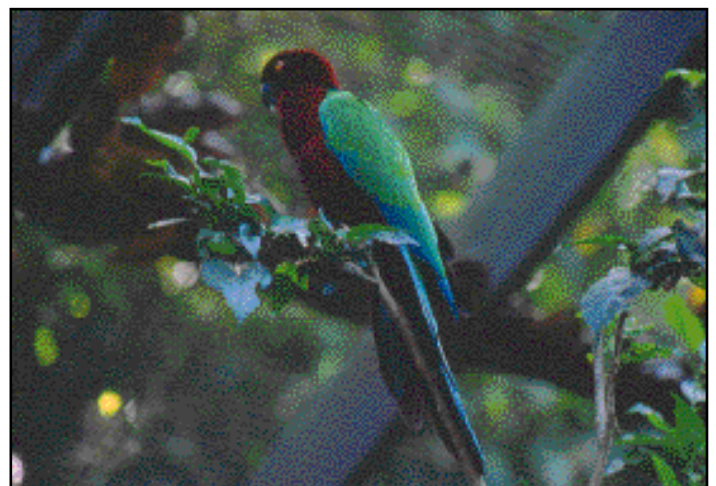
Kula Eco-Park is a small privately funded wildlife park owned by Philip and Judy Felstead on the south coast of Fiji. The Felsteads rescued the Park from ruin in 1997 and have restored it into a centre for native Fijian wildlife with a

strong emphasis on environmental education. I was interested to visit the centre as I had spent the last five years as Manager of the Gerald Durrell Endemic Wildlife Sanctuary in Mauritius and was keen to see similar projects. Judy and the Park Manager, Ramesh, gave me a guided tour and explained what they were trying to achieve. Kula is currently involved in captive-breeding programmes for the Crested Iguana and the Fiji Peregrine Falcon, working with the NTF, Taronga Zoo and the Brehm Foundation. Ramesh showed me around their state-of-the-art falcon breeding facility which housed several pairs of Peregrines as well as the endemic Fiji Goshawk. The Park has a collection of about 25

Musk parrots from several islands, with a large proportion of the Kadavu species. Some of the parrots were in a huge planted free-flight which must have been like home for them. Many of the birds had been rescued and birds had not yet bred but a captive-breeding programme was their next goal. Judy and Ramesh showed me their plans for an Endangered Species Breeding and Research Centre which included artificial incubation and hand-rearing rooms and off-show breeding enclosures for Musk parrots. I was very impressed with the dedication and enthusiasm of the staff at Kula and with the facilities they had built. I knew from experience that running such a centre in the tropics, where supplies are hard to get, electricity is erratic, food rots within a day and ants live in the fridge is very hard work.

Kadavu

The highlight of my trip was a visit to Kadavu, the fourth largest island which sits 100km south of Viti Levu. Kadavu is about 75% covered in forest with only 8,000 inhabitants. In addition to 20 native species of birds, 4 of which are endemic, Kadavu boasts one of the world's largest coral reefs, the 50km long Great Astrolabe Reef. As Asesela and I approached the runway in our colourful 20-seater plane, I could see why we had not been able to land before. The runway was as wide as the island, stretched across an isthmus separating the eastern from the western half and very exposed. I thought I was pretty blasé about tropical



Red-shining Parrot in Kula Eco-Park, Fiji.

Photo: K. Swinerton



Asesla Waqiroba handing over a WPT T-shirt to the Tui Namuana, Kaduva Island, Fiji. Photo: K. Swinerton

island paradises but Kadavu took my breath away. Turquoise seas, lush green forests, palm-tree lined beaches and birds everywhere! Kadavu parrots were sitting in the trees behind our guesthouse and the landlady said that they fed early morning in the cassava plantations. That afternoon, Asesla and I were invited to meet the 'Tui Namuana' who was the headman of the nearby village. We were welcomed into the meeting house and offered 'Yaqona', a mildly narcotic drink made from the root of a pepper plant. I found that it numbed my tongue and it also apparently numbs the legs, but fortunately being a woman I was not expected to drink a lot. Asesla presented the Tui with some parrot posters and I presented him a WPT T-shirt. Asesla was well respected in Kadavu having been the Provincial Administrator there for 16 years, and discussed the NTF's project and my trip with the villagers. We left worse the wear for mosquitos but happy that the villagers were very interested in the information we had given them.

The Kadavu parrot is brilliant red with blue-and-green wings and tail and a blue nape. The females are slightly smaller than the males with daintier heads. I watched them flying around the slopes above the villages, apparently using native and exotic habitats and feeding in vegetable patches. The high number of endemic species still remaining on Kadavu may be due to the lack of introduced mongooses, mynah birds and

red-vented bulbuls which are so abundant on other islands. However, the potential for these pests to disperse between islands has increased in recent years owing to better transport, and they are a constant threat to wildlife in Fiji. Leaving the island I had a birds-eye view and realised how much of the interior seemed untouched. Most villagers travel around the island by boat and there were few paths. Kadavu was a true jewel in this fantastic archipelago.

Problems and solutions

One of the problems facing wildlife conservation in Fiji seemed to be a lack of local and scientific knowledge and little is known about species' status, ecology and current threats. Obtaining this basic information means that we could anticipate population declines caused by habitat degradation and trade. Much traditional wildlife knowledge seems to have been lost through the generations and there is little concept of sustainable land-use. The NTF's education campaign is a step towards providing information to villagers but further support is needed. In Fiji the indigenous people retain ownership of 83% of the land which could make them ideal wildlife protectors.

Captive-breeding can be a valuable component of an endangered species recovery programme, to safe-guard wild populations, to aid in recovery of depleted populations and as an educational tool. A captive-

breeding programme had been suggested for the Kadavu Musk parrot and the Red-throated Lorikeet. The lorikeet is unknown in captivity and the Musk parrots breed poorly outside of the Pacific. I did not think that an international breeding programme was a high priority for these species at the moment, and firstly information was needed about their status in the wild. If a breeding programme was necessary in the future, Kula Eco-Park would be an ideal site particularly if reintroduction was a long-term aim.

Politics

On my return to the UK, I was quite optimistic that funding for parrot conservation in Fiji was available from the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP). However a few days later, Fiji went into political turmoil. The Prime Minister and his cabinet were held to ransom and civil unrest broke out. Consequently, overseas donors were reluctant to invest in any new conservation initiatives and the WPT also felt it prudent to wait. I subsequently heard that the NTF's already small budget was

reduced to only 40%. Unfortunately it is often in these situations that wildlife needs even more help. As peace breaks down, lawlessness may result in illegal poaching, wood-cutting and wildlife trafficking with everyone trying to survive. Fortunately, the situation in Fiji has now largely been resolved and we hope that stability will return and WPT can continue their efforts to support the NTF and Fiji's parrots.

I would like to thank Birandra Singh, Asesela Waqairoba and all the staff at the NTF for welcoming me so warmly to Fiji and making my trip so successful. Thanks to Jo Andrews for all her support and to Dick Watling for advice and hospitality. Many thanks to Judy Felstead and Ramesh Chand at Kula for an inspiring visit and to Michael Dibben for his help. Thanks to William Cross, Dieter Rinke and Greg Sherley for help and advice. My grateful thanks go to my employer Elaine Williams and WPTC who continue to support me and to Andrew Greenwood and the World Parrot Trust for making the trip possible. 



National Trust for Fiji Team at HQ in Suva.

Photo: K. Swinerton