Part I: The Road to Madera: Observing the Thick-billed Parrot
By Steve Milpacher

Day 1

I rose wearily that morning, at 3:50 AM to catch the first of many flights that would ultimately take me to my destination. Despite the early hour I was wide awake and ready to go, as this was to be my first venture into the world of wild parrots, in Mexico, a land far away from my Canadian home.

My mission on this trip was twofold – I was first to visit conservation and research projects for the endangered Thick-billed Parrots in Madera, then would be off to see the vulnerable Maroon-fronted Parrots further south.

Both species are in trouble in the wild.

The Thick-bills are declining due to reduction in suitable habitat, nesting availability and deforestation. The Maroon-front population is being reduced from land use conflict issues – principally logging – and more recently, threat from forest fires.

My tasks were to gain a first hand knowledge of research at both sites to better learn about ongoing efforts to save each species, and to explore the potential for the World Parrot Trust and its Canadian branch, to increase our support for these birds. On a personal level, I was also realizing a life-long dream. After having spent a lifetime caring for parrots in captivity, I was going to see wild parrots for the first time.

The flight through the United States was uneventful and I met with my fellow WPT associate, Dr. Jamie Gilardi in Phoenix. After a short flight to Tucson we were joined by Dr. Nadine Lamberski, a veterinarian from the Conservation and Research for Endangered Species center (CRES) at the San Diego Zoo, and boarded her large white truck that would take the three of us to the border and then to Mexico.

During the trip, my head swam as I tried to absorb all of the fascinating Thick-billed parrot facts that were being bandied about – both Jamie and Nadine having spent many years working to save this species. From Tucson we made it as far as Douglas, AZ, a border town where we spent the night.

I slept fitfully, full of excitement about the road ahead.
Day 2

Early the next morning we set out for Madera, a small logging town in Northern Mexico, where we would spend 2 days with the birds. The drive was relatively uneventful and allowed me some time for me to re-evaluate some general misconceptions I had made, given my somewhat northerly bias. Having never traveled this far south I had a few preconceived notions of what I might see.

While the landscape gradually changed, it was not the stereotypical cactus-laden, hot and dry climate I had imagined. Rather, it was a progression of flat plains and undulating hills on the horizon, peppered with low growing oak, scrub and – at higher elevations – pine.

We drove past several military checkpoints, and endured the sudden onslaught of cloudbursts more akin to waterfalls than rain; weather events which I learned are typical for this time of year. Finally after several hours and a number of mountain passes we came to Madera, situated in the midst of some very splendid valleys and peaks. After a long day we welcomed our rustic lakeside cabin which was to be our home for the next 2 days.

Day 3

We awoke early this day, and were greeted at dawn by the cacophony of calls from Thick-bills flying high overhead. A short while later we met our guides, researchers Sonia Gabriella Oritiz Macil (Gaby for short); researcher Javier Cruz, and the rest of the Thick-billed Project group, all from Instituto Technologico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM). It was they who would take us out to see the Thick-bills, and the research they had been conducting for more than a dozen years.

All of us piled into two trucks and set out to drive up the mountain trails to the areas where Thick-bills roost. The logging roads to get to the nesting sites are narrow, and include a series of switchbacks and hairpin turns through awe-inspiring terrain. I was glad to not be driving as our big diesel Ford F350 chugged up the hill; a small tank teetering on a tiny, bumpy goat path. Due to the season several areas of road were washed out making the drive slow and bumpy. More than once I ricocheted off the insides of the truck because of the rough landscape.

As we progressed up the mountain the parrots’ nesting area, I was surprised to note the changes in landscape. Thick-billed habitat is very high up – at 5000 or more feet – and temperate. The hillsides were covered in boreal, boggy forest and shrouded in a surreal mist as the moisture hung in the air.
As we pushed on, we began to hear the faint calls growing louder as the parrots called to one another. My heart leapt. In a few short moments I would achieve my lifelong dream of seeing parrots in the wild. I anxiously looked from tree to tree, hoping to catch a glimpse.

And there they were.

Their plumages were brilliant olive-green, with spots of bright red on their foreheads and at the bends of their wings. They were close by, and near enough to photograph. I was elated, watching a group of them fly in synchrony, knitting through the air like raptors, calling and chattering as they went. They seemed unafraid of us, curious even.

We began hiking. I had been told the terrain would be hilly and they weren’t kidding. It turned out to be a steep hike over peaty, squishy soil and through drenched foliage that turned my clothing into a sodden mess. But none of this mattered. I was seeing wild parrots.

We finally reached the study area, and Gaby and her team got to work. Today they needed to measure the success of this nest, and to do that Javier needed to climb a tree, a big tree used for several seasons by successful pairs. Once Javier got to the nest the bright-eyed babies were retrieved, one by one, and sent down in a makeshift elevator to the gentle hands below, where vital weights and measurements were taken. Then back up the tree to the nest, with as little stress as possible. Meanwhile, the parents of the chicks were sitting nearby, looking on benignly as the strange-looking creatures handled their young.

To my joy, I was given the honour of holding one of the babies. I blissfully and carefully sat holding the downy, trembling bundle, which was very warm in my hands. As I briefly visited with this precious youngster I was struck by how difficult the situation had become for these parrots, and how I was holding part of their future in my hands.

Having spent the better part of that day in observation, we headed back down the hill to discuss the days’ events with the entire research team over dinner.
Day 4

Our second day out to the Thick-bills was quiet. It was very misty and rainy, and the parrots were as subdued as we were. I took many pictures of the gloomily beautiful surroundings, captivated by the quiet and stillness.

I reflected on these parrots, so animated, so vital to their ecosystem and on what the World Parrot Trust could and should be doing more of, to help save this species. And I thought about what they needed from people in general to survive into the next millennium.

Having wrapped up the first leg of my journey, I boarded a plane to head over to Monterrey, located in eastern Mexico near the Gulf coast. Settling into my seat, I reflected on the serene and exhilarating moments of the trip so far.

I revelled in the joy of seeing the beautiful Thick-billed Parrots, cavorting and circling through the air, calling to one another. I thought about the babies, and how important each and every one is to the survival of this species. And then, feeling a little overwhelmed by it all, I drifted off to sleep.

Next month: Agave spines, steep cliffs and Maroon-fronted Parrots

For more information about Thick-billed Parrots and links to previous PsittaScene articles, please visit: www.parrots.org/thickbills