

# PsittaScene



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Hope for Thick-billed Parrots  
Reintroduction of the Kuhl's Lory

[www.psittascene.org](http://www.psittascene.org)

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# Psitta Scene

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## from the director

For years we've planned to run a WPT member survey to learn more about who you are, what you think we're doing right, and where you think we could improve our work. We deeply appreciate so many of you taking the time to provide us with such valuable feedback. It has been a pleasure reading over all the responses we received both by mail and online.

Of course those of us who work for the Trust - either as volunteers or staff - are committed to the conservation and welfare of parrots ... indeed, just getting the job done is very rewarding in its own right. But reviewing the survey results was especially delightful because you were so enthusiastic about our work, about *PsittaScene*, and the Trust in general. We learned a great deal just as we had hoped. We'll take all your comments to heart and incorporate your suggestions as we find opportunities. You may see some of your *PsittaScene* ideas in this issue and others we will work in over time.

Among the outstanding results was your enthusiasm for recommending the Trust to others. Even non-members and former members felt the same way! Since we often get the question, "What else can we do to help parrots and help the Trust?" this survey result prompts a powerful suggestion: recommending us and our work to others is an easy, fun and effective way to achieve these goals. So share an old *PsittaScene* with a friend, send out links to our website, and tell your friends what it means to you to be a member of the Trust - they'll thank you, we'll thank you, and most important of all, the parrots of the world will thank you.

Jamie Gilardi  
Director

## on our covers

**FRONT** With quiet dignity, a pair of Thick-billed Parrots (*Rhynchopsitta pachyrhyncha*) wait out a storm in the mountains of Northern Mexico. While Thick-bills are declining throughout their range, recent success with artificial nest boxes provides a ray of hope for this swift, pine forest specialist. © Steve Milpacher

**BACK** Proud parents look on as one of the newest generation of wild Kuhl's Lory (*Vini kuhlii*) fledges on the island of Atiu and takes to the trees. Twenty-seven adult birds were reintroduced to the island just last spring in a grand effort involving 6 countries, 11 biologists, 7 organizations and countless enthusiastic island residents. © Robby Kohley/San Diego Zoo



“After a lifetime of caring for parrots in captivity, I am in equal parts thrilled to see Thick-bills in the wild as I am deeply concerned...”

RAYS OF HOPE, page 4

Photo © Steve Milpacher

# Rays of Hope *for a declining species*



All Photos on this page: © Jamie Gilardi

By Steve and Desi Milpacher





Photo: © Steve Milpacher

The striking green birds dive, swoop and knife their way through the cool misty air. Pairs and small groups of Thick-billed Parrots alight on the tops of tall pines and aspens, surveying their surroundings before continuing on. They then make their way to the conifers which provide them with their main food - pine seeds - and begin foraging, muttering and chuckling as they go. Most of their activities are done in moderate sized groups, unlike most other parrots which travel in pairs or family groups. A day in the life of the Thick-billed Parrot, among the most endangered parrot species in the world, is a very busy one, with hours of foraging, flying and socializing. These birds persist in a rapidly declining and largely unprotected habitat; the forests they once thrived in now almost entirely destroyed.

I've travelled from Canada to Northern Mexico with WPT Director Jamie Gilardi to learn more about these threatened parrots and their closely related cousins, the Maroon-fronted Parrots, and to better understand what we at the Trust can do to help save these species. After a lifetime of caring for parrots in captivity, I am in equal parts thrilled to see Thick-bills in the wild as I am deeply concerned for their long-term well being. We are there to visit with researchers from a university in northeastern Mexico called Monterrey Tech (ITESM) - a dedicated group of scientists that have been studying the ecology of Thick-bills and their decline for more than a decade. During our brief visit, we travel to the field to view the parrots in their natural habitat and gain a first-hand look of the factors affecting their decline. The field experience is

◀ Chicks are handled quickly and quietly during routine nest checks. Weights and measurements are taken to assess growth progress, whilst the parents watch with surprising calm nearby.

nothing short of remarkable on a personal level, yet with disconcerting undertones due to the uncertain future for these parrots in the wild.

While carrying out nest inspections researchers Javier Cruz and Francelia Torres carefully remove chicks out of the tree cavities and nest boxes to measure growth rates and collect other data to ensure the birds are developing properly, adding to their growing knowledge of the Thick-bills' breeding biology. To assist with their efforts I hold one of the chicks and, as captive bred parrots often will, the nestling trembles against my hands as I cup him gently; his warm body is covered in white, furry down punctuated by a few pinfeathers waiting to come out to form his juvenile plumage. The parents are perched nearby and remain remarkably calm as these strange two-legged creatures handle their youngster. By now, they are well accustomed to researchers' frequent visit to their nest sites and patiently wait for the exam to be over before entering the cavity to feed the chicks. Somehow, in being here in this beautiful foggy Mexican forest with a parrot chick in my hands, I am powerfully struck by the urgency of this situation. And then comes the feeling that something has got to be done to save this species at once. They have already disappeared from many parts of their former range. The urgent challenge is to prevent them from disappearing altogether.

### Threats to the Thick-bills

Historically the threats to this species have been numerous. Formerly ranging throughout Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental and as far north as the southwestern United States, Thick-billed populations were initially decimated by shooting, disappearing from their US range by 1920. Their remaining habitat (less than 10 percent of the original old-growth forest in the Sierra Madre Occidental in Northern Mexico) is

**Range:** Breeds almost exclusively in north-central Mexico in the mountains of Chihuahua, the largest of Mexico's 31 states. Breeding populations are concentrated in three regions: Tutuaca, Madera and Mesa, in the Sierra Madre Occidental mountains, with small numbers of additional pairs breeding elsewhere.

**Diet:** Primarily seeds from pine and fir cones, acorns and other seeds and leaf buds.

Often fly 20 to 40 km (12-24 mi) a day in search of food, making them elite athletes of the parrot world. Flight is swift and direct with shallow wing beats and impressive agility, due to their falcon-like form.

**Nesting:** Mainly in dead or dying trees, usually well above 2000m (6500 ft), thereby avoiding tree-dwelling predators. Breeding coincides with pine seed ripening with eggs laid in June and July.

WPT has supported Thick-bill translocations, conservation planning, and nest box research.

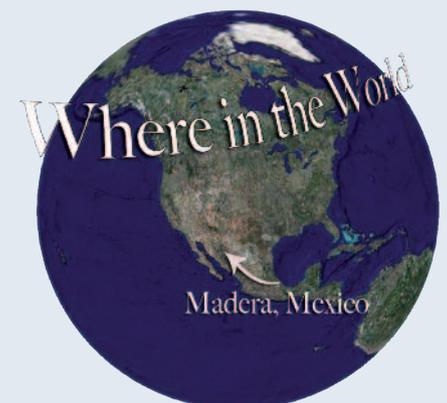




Photo: © Jaime Gilardi

Thick-billed Parrots live primarily on a diet of seeds from pine and fir cones.



Photo: © Steve Milpacher



◀ The Thick-bills keep a watchful eye in a nearby tree, waiting for project researchers to complete their nest inspections.

now endangered by a number of threats: fire, insect damage, logging and agriculture, with global warming adding to all of the above. Recently there have been a number of years of poor pine cone crops although the reasons for this trend remain unclear. The breeding area we visited, Madera, is unique because Thick-bills here nest almost exclusively in old aspen trees. Unfortunately, these trees are now naturally dying off in large quantities with many of these ageing trees falling each year, often with active parrot nests inside. Javier and Francelia have borne the grim task of salvaging fallen nests, collecting dead adults and rescuing surviving chicks, sometimes going so far as re-attaching fallen nest logs, chicks and all, to new trees.

## Solutions

In the last twenty years a number of dedicated groups have taken measures to study and shore up the remaining populations of Thick-bills. These efforts include habitat protection, translocation of wild birds to new areas, and captive breeding and release. Studies of the wild birds began in the 1970s and 1980s along with attempted releases of confiscated and captive bred birds in the USA. In the mid 1990s, ITESM and ProNatura began researching the wild birds and ITESM continues this work today. In 2002 the Wildlands Project with the Mexican government and Pronatura saw that

protection for an important nesting area - the Tutuaca Forest Reserve - was achieved through the cooperation with a local ejido, a 40,000 acre agricultural cooperative with 74 local members. With growing concerns for the wild birds, ITESM, Pronatura, and WPT co-hosted meetings in Chihuahua in 2005 including many parrot researchers and several other non-governmental and governmental organizations from both sides of the border. Planning meetings have continued since and in 2007 ITESM, Pronatura and WPT conducted aerial surveys to evaluate suitable habitat and potential new release sites in northern Chihuahua and Arizona.

Three releases of confiscated and captive-bred birds were conducted in the US in the late 80's and early 90's. These met with partial success with some breeding attempts although released birds eventually dispersed. Three experimental translocations of wild adult birds in Mexico have been partly successful although in each case, the adults returned to their original nesting area either just after the release or the following year.

ITESM is now conducting all the field conservation work in Chihuahua, and their focus has been on the Thick-bill's ecology and breeding, with a special emphasis on chick survival. This past year, the Trust supported

their work to design, build and hang 20 new nest boxes in suitable trees. Amazingly, the birds took to them immediately, some producing chicks in the first year. The biologists from "Tech" also closely monitor chick survival and indications are that these measures are working, for a start, by increasing chick survival rates and breeding opportunities. For the approximately 270-300 breeding birds working to raise chicks successfully, developing these tools is proving to be an important aspect of the species' conservation. In recent years, just over 100 known active nests have proven successful - far fewer than previously thought.

## Future Needs

Over the years we've learned a great deal about Thick-billed Parrots, exploring their biology, the threats they face, and solutions for their long-term recovery. This knowledge will shape the decisions regarding their preservation. But one thing is abundantly clear: much more needs to be done. There are still opportunities to save this species. A comprehensive approach to solving the problems which plague these birds is needed, including:

- Securing more land in a protected sanctuary, in Madera, the size of which is being discussed as of this writing. This action is the result of efforts by federal and local governments, and community groups.



Photo: © Javier Cruz



Photo: © Steve Milpacher

The recent use of artificial nest boxes has brought new hope for this declining species as their preferred aspen trees die off. The birds took to the boxes immediately, fledging chicks in the first year of use.

- Engaging local communities to use their natural resources in a sustainable manner through increased education. This ensures that the biodiversity of the area is preserved for animals and humans alike.
- Intensively managing captive populations to prepare them for potential releases in future years to re-establish the birds in parts of their former range.
- Continuing the development of translocation and captive release techniques as a management tool for wild and captive birds.
- Undertaking genetic research to determine how best to manage both the wild and the captive bird populations ensuring the species' long-term genetic viability.
- Conducting disease research, particularly focussing on West Nile virus, an important disease in both people and captive Thick-billed Parrots.
- Studying the effects of global warming on the remaining habitat (evident in increased destructive fires and insect damage).

- Introducing ecotourism and craft development projects to bring income to the local people and to encourage non-consumptive use of habitat areas.

Thick-billed Parrot populations are declining throughout their range and without more direct intervention they will likely continue to decline in the near future. The loss would be tragic. Please help the World Parrot Trust and its Mexican partners to aid the bird's remaining nesting sites, enhance their breeding success, conduct vital studies and help to secure important breeding grounds.

Steve Milpacher is WPT Director of Business Development. Desi is editor of FlockTalk, our monthly eNewsletter.



Photo: © Javier Cruz

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



Photo: © Jamie Gilardi

The Madera population of Thick-bills has a strong preference for nesting in aspen trees which puts them at risk. As aging trees die off they sometimes take nests with them. A few lucky chicks have survived the fall and with some effort, and more luck, have been saved. Researchers have gone so far as to haul the broken cavity back upright, attaching it to another tree.



Photos: © Gerald McCormack

In August 2008, the community of Atiu in the Cook Islands witnessed an event that had not been seen in over 200 years - the fledging of a Kuhl's Lory, or Kura (*Vini kuhlii*), from a nest on Atiu. The parent birds were recent arrivals, released only months before as part of a group reintroduced to Atiu from Rimatara. This brilliantly feathered lory, dressed in the brightest red, yellow and purple plumage was once again flying over Atiu, eating from the tropical flowers and fruits and causing the native Atiuans to once again look to the skies.

The Kura ("Kura" in Cook Island Maori means "red"), once common on Atiu, was nearly extinct by the time Captain Cook landed there on Atiu over 200 years ago, having been zealously hunted by the native Maori islanders who coveted its bright red feathers for adornment and trade. This year's successful nesting of this species on Atiu was one more step in a conservation effort that took over fifteen years to accomplish.

In 1993, following the successful translocation of the Ultramarine Lory (*Vini ultramarine*) from Ua Huka to Fatu Hiva in the Marquesa Islands, we first discussed the possibilities of using the same translocation concept to protect the Kura, still found on the French Polynesian Austral Island of Rimatara. Although in the end translocation was selected as the best conservation strategy for the Kura, several other options were considered.

As new technologies and skills are developed and as we gain new experiences, conservation biologists have more strategies to choose from when it comes to species recovery. Such strategies may include captive-propagation and reintroduction (example: Echo Parakeet, *Psittacula eques*); reintroduction to historical islands of distribution (Seychelles Warbler *Acrocephalus sechellensis*); cross-fostering endangered eggs and/or chick under parents of a non-endangered relative (Chatham Island Black Robin, *Petroica traversi* fostered under Chatham Island Tit, *Petroica macrocephala chathamensis*); head-starting wild-collected eggs in captivity and releasing young once hatchling/fledgling risks are over (many species of raptors); and even such simple strategies as



# ISLAND ENDEMIC

## Reintroduction of the Kuhl's Lory

By Alan Lieberman and Gerald McCormack

manipulating diet to reawaken quiescent hormones that may jump-start reproductive cycles (Kakapo, *Strigops habroptilus*).

Although several of these strategies might have been appropriate to establish a new population of Kura on Atiu, translocation was the favoured option for reasons of logistical feasibility, cost, cultural considerations (i.e. historical links between the island populations of Atiu and Rimatara) and the desire to move wild birds with natural behaviours rather than hand-reared individuals.

The Kura historically inhabited several islands in the Southern Cook Islands and the nearby island of Rimatara in French Polynesia. But, since about 1800 it has survived only on the island of Rimatara. This low-lying, small oceanic island is only 3 km (1.9 mi) in diameter, with a human population of about 1000 people who work on agronomy and handicrafts. The Rimatara Lory, as it is called there, (or "Ura" in the Tahitian

language which also translates to "red") enjoys a fairly stable population of about 750-900 birds based on 5 surveys; 1992, 2000, 2002 (twice) and 2004. There are several primary reasons for the stability of the Ura population: a taboo placed by Queen Tamaeva III around 1900 forbidding any Rimataran from exporting, exploiting or harming the lory in any way; an abundance of food thanks to the density of horticulture and agriculture on the island; and perhaps most important of all, the absence of Black Rats (*Rattus rattus*). Following the first fieldwork on Rimatara in 1992, Gerald McCormack dedicated himself to finding an island in the Cook Islands that would support a second population of the lory within its natural range - an island that had food, nesting opportunities, a supportive human community and most importantly, an island without the predatory Black Rat. Atiu was selected because it was the only island within the former natural range that fit the profile.

Gerald received early support from the Polynesian Ornithological Society (MANU) and spent several years gaining the cooperation of the Rimatara and Atiu communities as well as approval from government administrators in French Polynesia and the Cook Islands. Finally, authorization was sought and granted to permit a direct, transboundary reintroduction between two remote islands separated by an international border.

In April 2007, with all of the governmental, cultural and legal authorizations in order, the field team was assembled on Rimatara to begin the job of capturing the 27 birds authorised by the island community. Eleven biologists and conservationists from six countries organised themselves into three "teams". Two teams dedicated themselves to setting and monitoring the mist nets and the third team manned the "bird house" where the captured birds were isolated and maintained for observation and health evaluation. The two mist net teams worked in distinct areas: one team concentrated on the areas planted in coconut and garden fruits, while the second team

At one of two observed nest sites, the adult lorries attentively coax their chick to emerge. It finally appeared during the second day of observation and climbed out a day later (below), only to be attacked by Common Mynas. The lorries prevailed and a second chick fledged 2 days later (right).





Top Photos: © Robby Kohley/San Diego Zoo

The juvenile Kuhl's Lory, on the left in these photos, is fed and tended by the adults who have made a remarkably quick adjustment to their new surroundings on Atiu. Like all of the Vini lorries, the juveniles have dark plumage and a black bill.

focused on bananas as the primary food target of the lorries. Both teams enjoyed success and over the span of six days, the goal of capturing 27 birds was reached. All the birds quickly acclimated to the captive diet of papaya, fresh blossoms and nectar made from commercial concentrate. Immediately following capture, birds were weighed and treated for ectoparasites. As pre-transport health screening was a key component of the effort, all the birds were given a thorough physical examination. Finally, each bird was banded with uniquely coloured and numbered bands to identify it as to time, date and location of capture. This allowed us to monitor the health and weight of each individual and later to monitor them in the wild.

Six days following the capture of the last bird, representatives of the Rimatarua community, several members of the field team and the 27

birds were flown to the island of Atiu where the local community greeted everyone (both human travellers AND the birds) most warmly and enthusiastically. The birds were transported by truck to two sites on Atiu, separated by several kilometers to allow the birds a chance to find foods without the additional burden of competition. Each bird was syringe-fed 2 cc of liquid nectar in-the-hand prior to release. The Atiu dignitaries, officials, and school children all participated in the actual release, and were given the opportunity to put their hands around those of the biologists who were responsible for holding and releasing each bird.

Over the 15 months following the release on Atiu, pairs and small flocks of the Kura were seen feeding in the areas of cultivation over the entire island. Additionally, four birds were confirmed on the neighbouring island of Mitiaro, 50km (30mi)

distant. In August 2008, several biologists from the San Diego Zoo and the Cook Islands Natural Heritage Trust returned to Atiu and documented two active Kura nests. One nest fledged two young and the other nest was assumed to have young based on the behaviour of the parents. Although the young birds from Nest One fledged successfully from the nest, it was apparent that management and future reduction of the introduced Common Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*) would be necessary in order to establish the Kura as a self-sustaining native species on Atiu.

The ultimate success of the program will be measured by how well the new population of Kura can maintain and sustain itself on Atiu without the assistance of the human community. It may be that the flock will always require some intervention in the form of nest protection, especially from Common Mynas. However, to this



Photo: © Bruce Rideout/San Diego Zoo



Photo: © Bruce Rideout/San Diego Zoo

# Kuhl's Lory *Vini kuhlii*



point, the project has been very successful on several levels. The capture, transport and release of the release flock went flawlessly. The Rimatara and Atiu community have been incorporated into the effort from the very initiation of the program and have endorsed it without reservation. As such, they are now fully engaged stakeholders in not only protecting their populations of Kura, but as well, are aware and dedicated to the goal of keeping their respective islands Black Rat-free. This is critical to the long-term health (both avian and human) of these islands. Although the goal was to re-establish the Kura on Atiu, ultimately, success can best be measured by the native communities' recognition of the importance of protecting their island ecosystems from the impacts of introduced species that could do irreparable harm to their respective islands' endemic lory populations.

The authors are indebted to the British Birdwatching Fair through Birdlife International and Te Ipukarea Society; Cook Island Natural Heritage Trust, San Diego Zoo with support from Loro Parque, World Parrot Trust and the American Lory Society; Air Rarotonga and Atiu Villas. On Atiu, the program has enjoyed strong support from the Mayoress and the Island Council, the traditional leaders especially Rongomatane Ariki, Man Unuia, Maara Tairi, Nooroa Teipo, Kau Henry, Roger Malcolm, George Mateariki, and Eddie Saul, along with Jean Pierre Montagne and Robby Kohley of San Diego Zoo.

Alan Lieberman is Conservation Program Manager at the San Diego Zoo and Gerald McCormack is Director of the Cook Islands Natural Heritage Trust



Photo: © Marshall Humphries

◀ Twenty-seven Lories were carefully captured on the island of Rimatara using mist-nets (left). This method uses very fine netting to safely and effectively catch birds of all kinds. The birds were thoroughly examined and uniquely colour-banded (middle). After a charter flight to Atiu and a grand welcome they were given a dose of nectar prior to release (right).

▼ Rats are a real cause for concern for the new lory population on Atiu. An extensive education campaign was instigated to stress the importance of keeping the island Black Rat free and to report any evidence of encroachment. Coconuts gnawed at the base (left) are evidence of either the Black Rat or Pacific Rat (*Rattus exulans*). A side hole (right) through the hard shell is indicative of Black Rat.



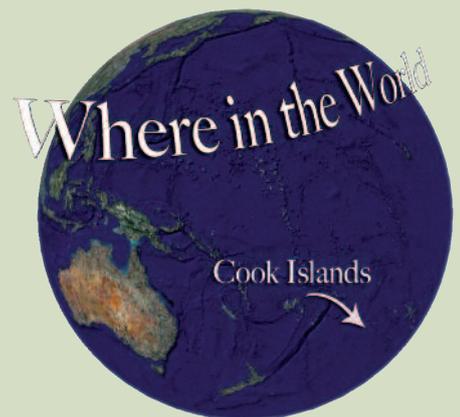
**AKA:** Kuhl's Lorikeet, Kuhl's Ruffed Lorikeet, Ruby Lorikeet, Scarlet-breasted Lorikeet, Rimatara Lorikeet

**World Population:** ~2000  
**Feeds on** nectar and pollen, preferring coconut palms and banana flowers.

**Range:** Before Europeans arrived the Lorikeet lived on several of the Southern Cook Islands and Rimatara, a nearby island in French Polynesia where there is presently a population of about 1000 birds. Another ~1000 birds live in the northern Line Islands of Kiribati, where they were introduced in prehistoric times. Birds were recently reintroduced to Atiu (Cook Islands).

The prehistoric extinction in the Cook Islands was a result of exploitation for this species' red feathers. The significant present-day threat is the Black Rat, *Rattus rattus*.

**WPT Connection:** This translocation project was a 2007 WPT Action Grant recipient.



# Parrots in Paradise

By Ellen Walford

I touched down in the Seychelles with a feeling reminiscent of Dorothy finding herself in Oz. The black, white and grey shades of early morning London drizzle transformed into a thousand different shades of turquoise ocean, vibrant green vegetation outlined with sparkling ivory beaches against a cornflower sky. I was there as part of a Master's course at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. With support of the Seychelles Islands Foundation (SIF) I spent three months conducting field research on the Seychelles Black Parrot to gain a clearer picture of their ecology and the threats they face.

The project concentrated on priority areas of research previously highlighted by SIF in collaboration with the government and the Island Conservation Society (ICS, a local wildlife conservation NGO). Goals included identifying the Black Parrots' preferred habitat and obtaining a current population estimate. I also investigated the parrots' feeding ecology and the relationship between humans and parrots on the Seychelles, with semi-structured interviews of fruit farmers, residents, visitors and secondary school children. I also looked for any evidence of illegal trade in parrots, a query of particular interest for the WPT.

My first week was spent making preparations on Mahé, the largest of the islands, before embarking on the one hour journey to Praslin, the main

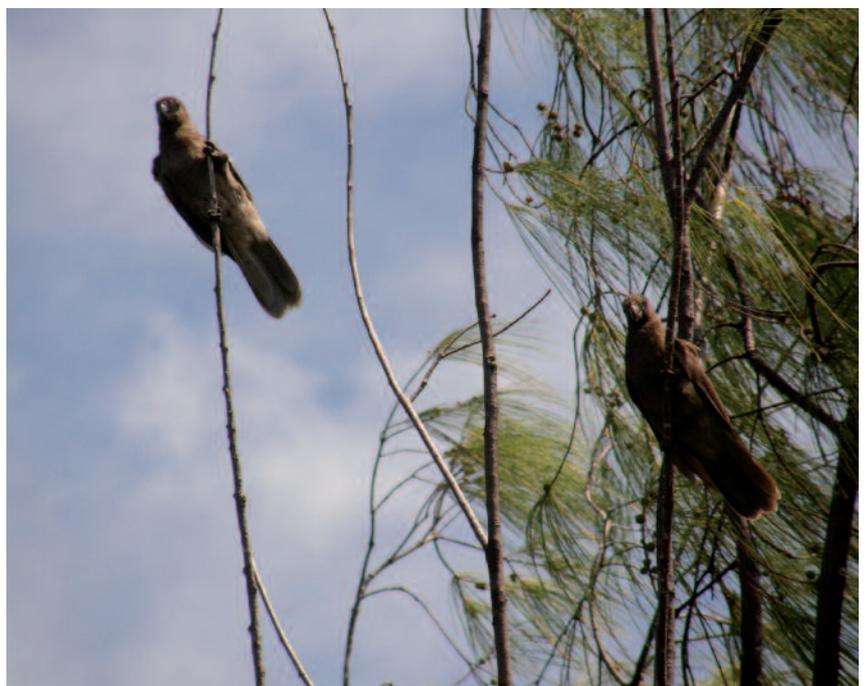
island where the parrot occurs. Skimming across the glass calm ocean accompanied by flying fish was a fantastic way to arrive at the island I would be calling home for the next three months.

The first morning when I awoke - what should be somersaulting about in the fruit tree in the garden, but two lovely parrots! What a great start. I caught the bus up to the jewel of the island - the stunning Vallée de Mai palm forest, one of the smallest UNESCO Natural World Heritage Sites. After meeting several smiling SIF staff and my Seychellois field assistants Uzice Samedi and Exciane Volcere, we made our way into the Vallée to begin work.

On entering the forest, peace descends like a blanket, occasionally broken with the low "putter putter" of the Seychelles Blue Pigeon (*Alectroenas pulcherrima*) or the hysterical shriek of the Seychelles Bulbul (*Hypsipetes crassirostris*). Occasionally there will be a softer, double tone whistle of a Black Parrot, always high up in the palms and elusive as a shadow. In this primeval palm forest, one expects to come across slightly larger residents; a pterodactyl or two, or perhaps one of those velociraptors from Jurassic Park. Instead the only pterodactyls are large Seychelles Fruit Bats (*Pteropus seychellensis*) gliding above the canopy and the only velociraptors are introduced hedgehog-like creatures called Tenrecs (*Tenrec ecaudatus*), snuffling about in the thick leaf litter for unfortunate insects and lizards that cross their path.



Photos: © Ellen Walford



# Seychelles Black Parrot

*Coracopsis nigra barklyi*



Photo: © Linsay Chong Seng

The essence of the forest however, is the palms themselves, including several endemics which are thought to be intricately linked with the Black Parrots' survival. Coco de Mer trees (*Lodoicea maldivica*) tower 30 m (10 ft) above you, their juveniles having the largest leaves in the plant kingdom. These palms bear seeds known as "double coconuts", which are thought by some to bear an uncanny resemblance to a lady's posterior and have inspired a number of erotic myths as a consequence. The seeds are coveted by many and were granted legal and international protection in the 1980s, today being sold only by licensed dealers. The nut is the largest seed in the world and can weigh in excess of 28 kg (60 lb) - the ultimate example of dispersal by gravity! In this fascinating habitat lives the Seychelles Black Parrot.

◀ Ellen, Uzice Samedi and other SIF staff on a Praslin beach (left). Local SIF staff assisted the Seychelles Black Parrot project which included survey work to determine population size. (right) Black Parrots in Casuarina.

▼ The palms on the island of Praslin, some of which are found nowhere else, are the key to the parrot's survival here. The Coco de Mer Palms (below) are famous for their huge leaves and double coconuts - the largest seeds in the world.

Our sites first centred on the Vallée de Mai, so getting familiar with the palms was a must. One morning we were admiring a particularly fine "millionaire's salad" palm, so-called because when harvesting the young bud or "heart of palm" the whole tree must be chopped down. We noticed a handsome Black Parrot highlighted in a shaft of early morning sunlight, enjoying his breakfast of new palm fruit. He did not appear to be disturbed by our presence in the slightest, and continued to strip the long inflorescences, ending up with pollen all over his face. In the days to come, we saw the parrots feasting on trees by the roadside only inches from the vehicles roaring by, showing a single minded determination to reach that tasty berry just over there...

The Seychelles Black Parrot is a little known and isolated sub-species of the Madagascan Lesser Vasa Parrot (*C. nigra*).

Range: Resident to only two of the 155 islands in the Seychelles archipelago in the Indian Ocean, the Seychelles parrot may be a separate, endemic species but for now, it is still considered a sub-species.

Studied previously by scientists working with the Ministry of the Environment. However, this new research was necessary since up-to-date information was lacking. That fact combined with the inevitable problems which accompany island development (habitat loss and introduced predators) leave us with real concerns for the conservation of this species.

WPT supported Ellen's Masters thesis field research.



Photo: © Nancy Bunbury



Photo: © Linsay Chong Seng





Photos: © Ellen Walford

The Seychelles Black Parrot thrives on cultivated fruit in gardens and small plantations. Local farmers are decidedly laid-back about the species' penchant for exotic favorites like these star fruit.

The tropical, relatively wet climate in the Seychelles makes it ideal for growing an array of fruit locally at little cost, so most homesteads boast at least a couple of papaya, mango and banana trees. The more enterprising go further to grow fruit on a commercial scale adding guavas, passion-fruit, star fruit, oranges and lemons. Less familiar fruits like breadfruit, jamalac, golden apple and the huge ungainly jackfruit are also grown. However, many of these delicacies never make it into fruit bowls. Although fruit production on a broad scale is little affected by the resident wildlife, the combination of Fruit Bats, Black Parrots, introduced Common Myna birds, Blue Pigeons and even African Land Snails leave few of the more palatable fruit like mangoes and star fruit unblemished.

Taking all of this into consideration, I was amazed at the hospitality and warmth with which we were received when house owners were asked, somewhat tentatively at first, if we could possibly have access to their land as we are studying the "kato nwar" (Seychellois Creole for Black Parrot). Their faces often became animated as they launched into high speed patois about specific trees the parrots feed from, what

time of day they come to this particular spot, and where one pair nested in 1985 until the old tree fell down. Fruit farmers shrugged when I mentioned their potential losses at the market and put it all down to nature. Many of them are Rastafarian, and I wonder if that peaceful philosophy has anything to do with this tolerant attitude.

“Fruit farmers shrugged when I mentioned their potential losses at the market and put it all down to nature.”

One particularly warm day we were measuring various habitat variables on a high footpath with a magnificent view across the island, accessed through the last house at the top of a hill. It was so hot that as soon as you drank any water it seemed to just run off you again. Uzice and I took turns darting into the pocket handkerchiefs of shade provided by the stunted thief palms. We were just debating who should climb down the hill to refill our water bottles when the boy from the farm below appeared with a bag at least half his size full of passion fruit, guavas, papaya, bananas and two chilled bottles of water that his father had sent up. Of course it was only polite to accept!

With the end of the fieldwork drawing near, I set out to do the final and from my point of view one of the more enjoyable parts of the research; socialising! As well as talking to more fruit farmers and quizzing tourists and residents, I also spoke to students from the local secondary school. The school was a delight to visit; the pupils were receptive and very forthcoming about what they knew (or didn't) about parrots, although I suspect bribing them with lollipops may have helped! Although environmental education and awareness is very good in the Seychelles, there appears to be a gap when it comes to Black Parrots, which we hope to address. Our semi-structured interviews and informal chats with locals showed that, on the whole, parrots do not appear to be threatened by human activities on Praslin for the time being.

To further raise parrot awareness, an article written by my supervisor at SIF, Nancy Bunbury, and myself appeared in the Seychelles national newspaper together with an announcement of a presentation I was to give to the public about Black Parrots the following week. The talk went very well - people seemed to enjoy it and, judging by their questions, were interested as well. The presentation was even featured on national television later that evening!



Photo: © Exciane Volcere



Photo: © Uzice Samedy



Photo: © Atterville Cedras



Photo: © Ellen Walford

In addition to informal interviews with fruit farmers, Ellen (above right) spoke to schools and community groups about the island ecology and the birds. Environmental education and awareness are high in the Seychelles, but knowledge about the parrots was much needed and well-received.

## Findings and Suggestions

This research highlighted the vital importance of natural palm forest on Praslin, especially the Vallée de Mai, in the parrots' ecology. The continued protection of these areas is crucial to this species' survival on the Seychelles. I also discovered first hand during the project why parrots are so notoriously difficult to count in the wild. Our abundance figures of 550-750 birds were actually quite a bit higher than past numbers derived from various simultaneous counts organised by MENRT and ICS of 200-300 individuals. Whilst parrots are locally common on Praslin, their distribution is limited by the lack of natural palm forest on other islands. Expanding this distribution will be the key to their conservation. This will be particularly important if the Seychelles Black Parrot is found to be distinctly different from the Madagascan and Comores parrots at the species level, as appears likely due to behavioural and physical differences. Such a finding would mean another critically endangered species of parrot materialising almost overnight.

Through observations, several new food plants for the parrot and one new plant part (young seed cones) were identified during this project. Although native palms produce flowers and fruits all year round, the parrots seem to have an overwhelming preference for introduced fruit,

and like other psittacids, it is primarily seeds and not the fruit pulp, which are favoured.

Although we encountered no feelings of animosity towards Black Parrots, nor found any evidence of anthropogenic threats such as trade, egg collection or persecution for crop raiding, government recognition for the loss of livelihood to fruit farmers and possible compensation may need to be considered in the future. Increasing public awareness of the Seychelles' national bird would also be beneficial. SIF intends to do this by first highlighting this research in a visitor display at the Vallée de Mai and following up with future research, newspaper articles and website information.

Introduced rats are known to be a major threat to natural nest sites of the Seychelles birds. Whilst this remains to be investigated further, the research on nest boxes should be moved forward. It may be possible to modify and rat-proof "tried and tested" nest boxes which have been used successfully for captive lesser Vasa Parrots.

Investigations into the suitability of other predator- and fruit farmer-free islands for potential Black Parrot translocations should be considered to assure their conservation. Now,

with a better idea of their habitat and feeding requirements, such translocations are one step closer to reality. There is so much more these birds can teach us, and I hope that my all too brief sojourn to their island home in the Seychelles has laid the foundations for the further conservation of these remarkable birds.

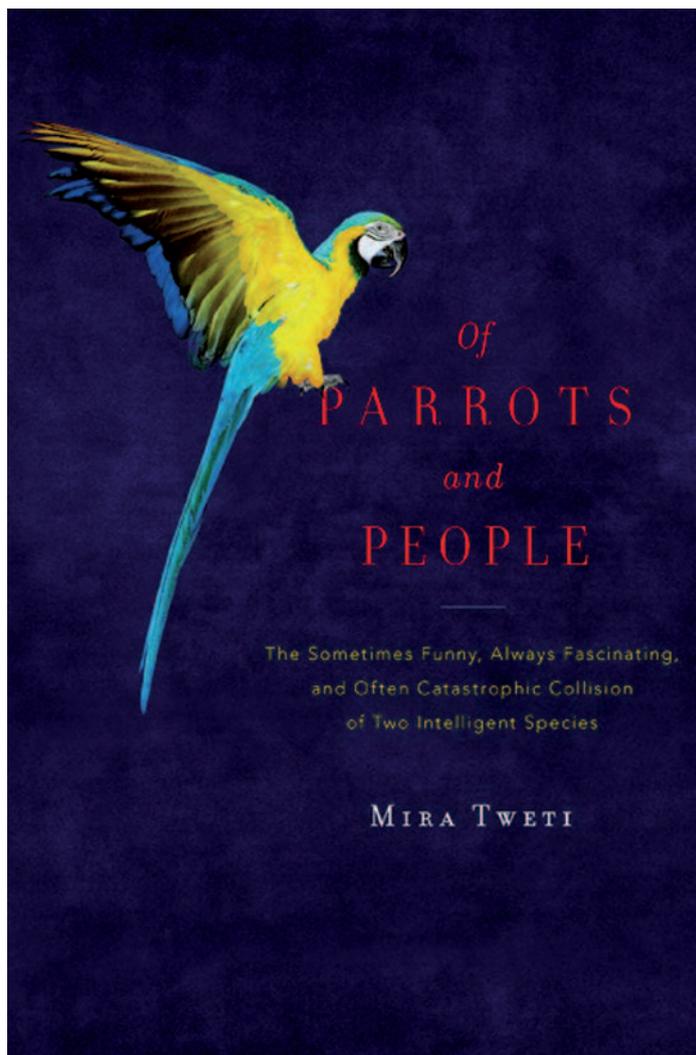
The Seychelles Black Parrot project would not have been possible without the instrumental support from the World Parrot Trust. This research is the result of a collaboration between the Seychelles Islands Foundation, the University of East Anglia and the Seychelles Ministry of the Environment, Natural Resources and Transport. For their instruction and guidance throughout, I am grateful to my supervisors Dr Diana Bell and Dr Iain Barr at the University of East Anglia and Dr Nancy Bunbury at the Seychelles Island Foundation. I am indebted to my friends and colleagues at the Seychelles Islands Foundation for their wonderfully positive overall support and guidance in a multitude of ways, thanks too many to mention. Expert advice and help for all aspects of the project throughout came from Victorin Laboudallon, Dr Jamie Gilardi, Sam Williams, Dr Christopher Kaiser, Dr John Klavitter, and Jez Bird.

Find out more about the work of the Seychelles Islands Foundation at: <http://www.sif.sc/>



# > > Book Review *By Rosemary Low*

**M**ira Tweti is an award-winning journalist based in Los Angeles. A cat lover from childhood, she admits: "I assumed the phrase 'bird brain' was an insult for a reason." Then a Green-naped Lorikeet called Mango came into her life and her whole outlook changed. "I only realised the scope of Mango's intelligence when he apologized for biting me", she wrote. After that, whenever she heard him say: "I'm sorry", she knew he had done something naughty. Sadly Mango died in 2006 but he inspired Mira to write a book that will enlighten people about "the huge, unexpected, and often terrible consequences of taking these complex creatures out of the wild and into our homes."



Her first chapter, entitled "Bird Brains" looks at what is known of the intelligence of parrots, sparrows and other birds and starts off with Alex, the famous Grey Parrot. She also repeats the much publicised story of N'Kisi the Grey Parrot. His owner says she has documented 10,000 sentences, stories and expressions that are "N'Kisi originals", such as "TV toy" for video game.

However, the strength of this book lies in her investigative work, especially relating to the enormous problems of unwanted parrots and smuggled parrots. On the former subject, she writes: "... many bird owners realise parrots are a lifetime commitment and the question that finally plagues them is whether it's even appropriate to keep parrots that need constant environmental challenges and social interaction in captivity. It is a moral issue not easily resolved. 'I'm a slave owner', said one parrot owner. 'I'm a good slave owner but that's what I am.'"

I found that interesting as I too have likened the trade in parrots to slave-trading. This is because their intelligence and sentience is on a much

higher plane than that of other companion animals. This problem is discussed in the chapter "Parrots and Parronts". I admit I find the use of the word parronts for companion parrot owners somewhat tedious.

I would recommend this book to anyone who is considering the purchase of a parrot, especially the chapter "No Joy". Let me quote its opening lines: "The biggest and best-kept secret about parrots is that they make excellent companions but terrible pets. They are intelligent, loyal, and loving. But the never-ending demands of a bird that is high maintenance by nature will wear anyone out. Add to that the screaming and squawking, wrecked furniture, and biting, and it is understandable why many people don't keep parrots for long." She could have been describing a Moluccan Cockatoo! Fortunately, not all parrots are like this - but many are, due to lack of stimulation and attention and, as Mira states, by owners who "psychologically and physically debilitate" their parrots by wing-clipping.

Mira's research on bird rescue centres, of which there are, she says, hundreds in the United States,

will make shocking reading for those people who were previously unaware of the extent of the problem and the terrible lives endured by some of the parrots relinquished to them.

The author's exposé of the bird breeding industry and outlets such as the large chain pet stores is absolutely shocking and much of what she wrote made me shudder. Everyone involved in parrots should read this, especially commercial breeders who might want to examine their consciences.

Mira's investigations into the illegal smuggling of parrots across the Mexican border into California are to be highly commended. Hopefully, people who formerly bought such smuggled birds will read this and realise how their unwillingness to

pay a fair price to breeders instead of a low price to smugglers is decimating populations of Amazons and other parrots in Mexico and has already put certain Amazons on the endangered list.

As investigative journalism, this book is brilliant. Where it falls down is on knowledge of parrots, indicated by incorrect names of species and occasionally naïve comments. But they do not detract from the overall value of this book which, in line with my own title *A Century of Parrots* (that covers a century rather than a decade) exposes the injustices to which these beautiful and charismatic birds have been subjected to by man.

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Rosemary Low is a parrot expert, past Editor of *PsittaScene* and author of over twenty books on aviculture.

You can purchase this book via Viking Press (US) or Penguin Books (UK) ISBN-13: 9780670019694, ISBN-10: 0670019690 or other good book stores.

# SPECIES PROFILE

## Lilac-tailed Parrotlet (*Touit batavica*)

AKA: Seven-coloured Parrotlet, Black-winged Parrotlet, Scopoli's Parrotlet

Size: 14cm (5.5 in)

Adult Weight: 58-72g (2-2.5 oz)

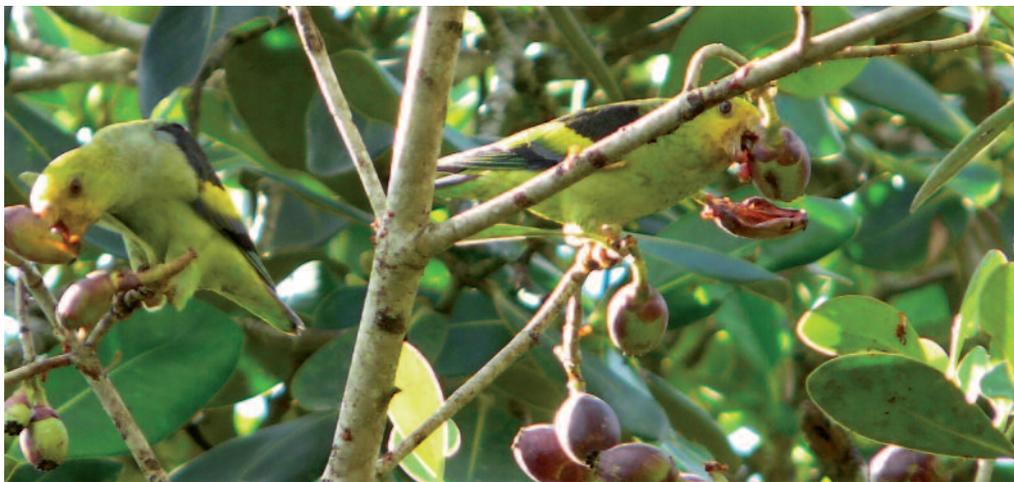
Range: Trinidad, Guianas, and possibly Amapa, N Brazil; also scattered across N Venezuela, reaching N Colombia.

Habitat: Found up to 1700m (5576 ft) in primary forest or taller secondary growth in tropical and subtropical zones; also may be seen lower down at forest edge and at clearings in dry deciduous and humid forest.

Wild Diet: Feeds on flowers, fruits and seeds.

Threat Summary: This species may have declined locally owing to deforestation.

Ecology: Seen generally in flocks of 10-30 individuals or more outside breeding season. Highly social when feeding and at roost. Keeps to upper stages of canopy, but comes lower in fruiting trees. Continuous chattering whilst in flight.



Photos: © Maria Isabel Fernandez

# Psitta News



Photo: © Glauca Seixas, Wildlife Direct



Photo: © Dudi Nandika, Indonesian Parrot Project

## Mexico trade ban

A new bill, signed into law with near unanimous support, bans the capture and export of Mexican wild parrots. It provides an unprecedented level of protection for Mexico's 22 species of parrots.

An estimated 65,000 -78,500 wild parrots and macaws are captured illegally each year, with more than 75 percent of the birds dying before ever reaching a purchaser. Approximately 50,000 to 60,000 parrots die this way each year in Mexico alone.

"It is readily apparent that unless we immediately halt the capture and trade in all parrots and macaws, we could lose these species entirely. This bill signifies a milestone though which we can finally address conservation and recovery of these unique birds," said Juan Carlos Cantú Guzmán, director of Mexican programs for Defenders of Wildlife.

Source: *Defenders of Wildlife* ([www.defenders.org](http://www.defenders.org))



Photo: © Chuck Bergman

## Amazon chicks seized in Brazil

After receiving an anonymous call, Police made the seizure of 377 parrot chicks - the largest seizure ever in Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil. Fifteen were Yellow-faced Parrots (*Amazona xanthops*), and the rest were Blue-fronted Parrots (*A. aestiva*). Fifty-three nestlings died.

The parrots were being transported in boxes of vegetables and the smugglers were using children to collect the nestlings and eggs from the nests. The animals were brought to the Center for Rehabilitation of Wild Animals (CRAS) in Campo Grande. Sadly, the Blue-fronted Amazon parrot is still illegally collected in Brazil. These animals will stay at least for one year at CRAS and might be released after that.

Source: *Blue-fronted Parrot Project - WildlifeDirect* ([www.blueparrot.wildlifedirect.org](http://www.blueparrot.wildlifedirect.org))

## Record breeding year

Unprecedented progress has been made towards the conservation of the Critically Endangered Yellow-eared Parrot (*Ognorhynchus icterotis*) in Colombia. A total of 80 nests, both natural and artificial, were reported and monitored by ProAves as well as the successful fledging of a fantastic 203 chicks.

These results highlight the successes of ten years work that have led to a sustained population increase for this flagship species in Colombia. Importantly, the Yellow-eared Parrot population has now climbed to over 1,000 individuals from an original 81 birds discovered by ProAves in April 1999.

Source: [www.proaves.org](http://www.proaves.org)

## Island Cockatoo hangs by a thread

The Yellow-crested Cockatoo (*Cacatua sulphurea*) is Critically Endangered in the wild, with four recognized subspecies which live on various Indonesian Islands. The rarest of these, the abbotti subspecies lives only on the Masalembu Islands north of Java. A survey in the fall of 1999 by Kutilang Indonesia and Birdlife Indonesia (now Burung.org) found only five individuals left, two pairs and a juvenile.

This past summer, the Indonesian Parrot Project and Konservasi Kakatua Indonesia launched an expedition to the Masalembu Islands led by Dudi Nandika and Dwi Agustina, both of KKI. Ten cockatoos were identified - four males, four females, and two juveniles - and the two primary threats to their recovery were identified as capture for the illegal pet trade and logging of nesting and feeding trees. A conservation program has been initiated on behalf of these cockatoos, including education, awareness, protective legislation, and enforcement.

Source: *Indonesian Parrot Project* ([www.indonesian-parrot-project.org](http://www.indonesian-parrot-project.org))

## Tree of bird life

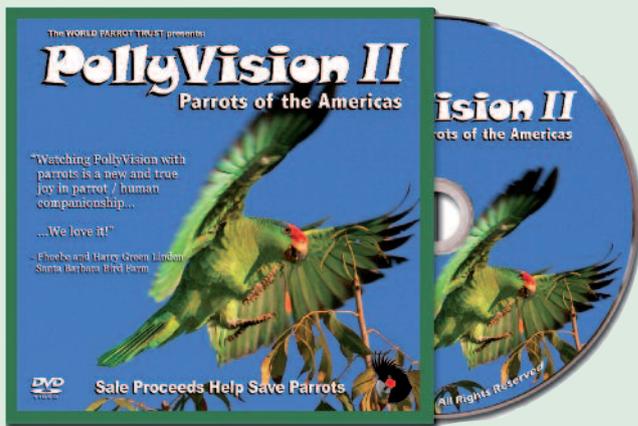
New research indicates that parrots are closer to passerines than previously thought and that the family Falconidae is very closely associated with parrots. While the eventual repercussions of these findings are hard to predict, it is possible that some uprooting of the basic avian tree of life could become a reality.

Source: *Science Vol. 320* (27 June 2008)

## Thankyou

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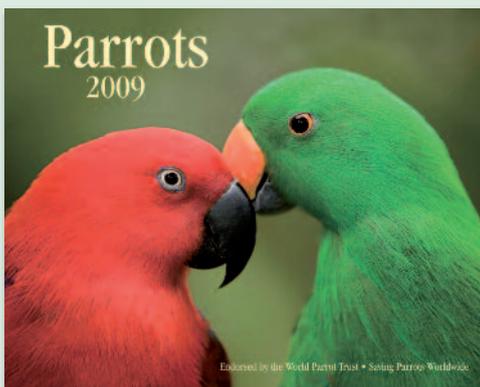
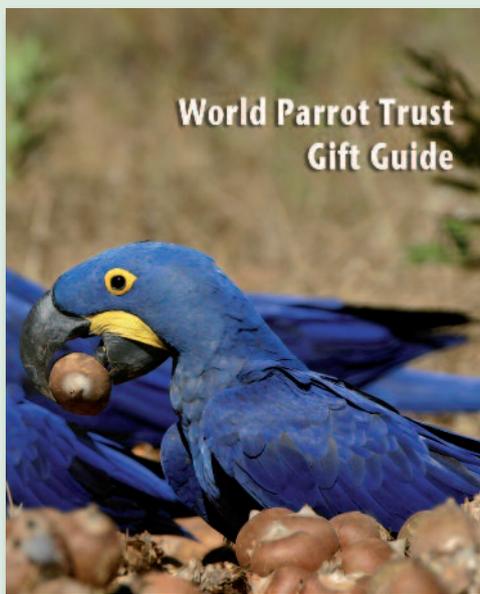
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# Parrots in the Wild

