

# PsittaScene



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# Psitta Scene

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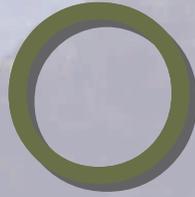
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## from the director



One aspect of parrot conservation which never fails to amaze me is how each project presents its own unique set of challenges and opportunities. Some threats are nearly universal, like honey bees colonizing nest sites, and others unique to only one site. In this issue, it's intriguing to run stories about the Puerto Rican Parrot and the Blue-throated Macaw – both are Critically Threatened New World parrots, and both have suffered from a long history of trade and habitat destruction, but the specific threats and solutions to those are remarkably different.

Despite the differences, it is also true that nearly every parrot conservation project has something to teach and something to learn from every other project. Therefore, we work hard to encourage as much exchange of ideas, techniques, and sometimes staff between them. Efforts to save Puerto Rico's unique Amazon date back to the 1960's and have been going strong ever since. As it turns out, the remarkable success of the birds at the “new” release site in Rio Abajo (see page 3) has taught us a lesson which may be crucial to the recovery of the Blue-throats. The lesson is a simple one: just because the last remaining birds of a given species are found in one particular area may not mean that that area is the best place for them to be now... it's just the last place they were left after trapping or deforestation eliminated them elsewhere.

Due to an extraordinary coincidence, quick thinking, and clever field work (see page 6), we now know that – just like nearly every other parrot – we can successfully release Blue-throats back into the wild. We have long considered releases as a potential tool to apply to their rather desperate situation in the wild, but now we know it really works. Not only can we add new birds to the wild population, we can put them exactly where they are most needed, best protected, and most likely to thrive. With any luck, this simple-but-critical lesson, learned from decades of work in Puerto Rico, can now be applied with similar success in Bolivia, allowing us to carefully select sites for new populations which will hopefully lead this species to a speedy recovery!

Jamie Gilardi  
Director

## on our covers

**FRONT** The ARA Project has now released over 60 Scarlet Macaws (*Ara macao*) in Costa Rica. Females "Austin" and "Pretty Face" released in 2005 and 2003 respectively, now visit the release area occasionally for wild guava and to check out the new birds awaiting release. (See page 8). © Christine & Franck Dziubak

**BACK** Kaieteur Falls in Guyana is the largest waterfall on earth by volume and one of the tallest single drop falls at 731 ft (223 m). After many visits in hopes of seeing macaws against this stunning backdrop, Marc Johnson and fellow travellers were rewarded with this incredible spectacle. Marc leads parrot trips to this area twice a year. For more information visit [www.wildrupununi.com](http://www.wildrupununi.com). © Marc Johnson



## Raise...Release...Repeat

Puerto Rico's Only Amazon by Jamie Gilardi

Very few parrot enthusiasts have had the pleasure of seeing a Puerto Rican Parrot (*Amazona vittata*) in person. After all, there are no legal birds "off island," and for that matter there have been very few birds "on island" for most of the last century. These birds have an amazing history and are only now emerging from their close and long-standing brush with extinction. So what are they like in person?

PUERTO RICAN PARROTS make a bold first impression; they are quite unlike any other Amazon parrot. They are animated, bold and boisterous – all around, they are simply very comfortable with themselves.

Shortly after Steve Milpacher, Steve Martin and the gang from the 2010 Parrot Lover's Cruise visited in November, I was invited by Iván Llerandi-Román to observe and film the Puerto Rico's Department of Natural and Environmental Resources' (DNER) fifth release of captive bred

birds. Biologist Kirsty Swinnerton, a long-time friend of the Trust, first introduced us to Iván who heads up the DNER's portion of this recovery effort, a project based in the forested hills of northwest Puerto Rico in an area referred to as Rio Abajo Forest. The DNER team works in close collaboration with a US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) conservation program in the eastern forest of El Yunque (aka Luquillo Forest) and the US Forest Service, which manages the National Forests in the Commonwealth. This area is an unincorporated



territory of the USA, hence the deep commitment and involvement of the two US Government agencies. After the previous four releases and 10 fledglings from wild nests in four breeding seasons, the population at Rio Abajo had grown to 40–50 wild birds. These birds and their progeny remain in the release area, and most of them visit feeding stations on a daily basis.

The ten lucky birds selected for release were 1-2 years old and were hatched in captivity specifically for this purpose, being managed as “wild” even before they hatch. This age was specifically chosen to promote faster integration into the wild flock. Now, ready to go, they are fitted with radio transmitter collars, each antenna adorned with a unique combination of small plastic beads. This allows researchers to track

individuals even after the batteries on the radios give out. As we visited the huge release flight cage the first morning, Iván explained how they had been “training” the birds for the past six months, effectively chasing them back and forth with long-handled nets. Not only does this tactic build their flight strength and stamina, but it also helps the birds develop a healthy fear of humans. Both traits will serve the birds well in the wild. The birds also receive predator aversion training using a live Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) as this is the main predator they’ll face in Puerto Rico. Lastly, they receive the same natural foods the wild birds were eating – yet another tactic for easing their transition to the wild.

In the warm sunny days leading up to release we visited an additional site ear-marked for future

releases, observed and filmed the wild birds, checked up on nest boxes, toured the breeding and holding aviaries, and built a simple blind close to the release flight to enable close observations of the birds during the release. The DNER’s head aviculturist, Ricardo Valentin, gave me a thorough tour and helpfully explained their creative methods and the layout of the breeding and holding facilities (see *PS 21.2, May 2009* for Ricardo’s article on the avicultural aspects of the program). I also had the pleasure of meeting most of the DNER parrot field staff who were all clearly committed to these birds and excited about the upcoming event.

The night before the release, about twenty staff from all three agencies involved – the Puerto Rican DNER, the US FWS and the US Forest Service arrived full of anticipation and the head of the



Thorough health checks are performed on each individual before release. These birds are hatched to be wild and raised accordingly.

# Puerto-Rican Amazon *Amazona vittata*

Birds are initially released into a large flight cage to acclimate and hone "wild bird skills" before being given access to the wild.



© S Milpacher

DNER Fisheries and Wildlife Bureau, Miguel A. García, cooked up a delicious feast for all. That evening I also had the pleasure to meet and talk at length with the FWS's head parrot biologist, Dr. Tom White, who, among other things, has been deeply involved in the recovery of this species since 1999. Finally, with alarms set for the wee hours, we all went off to sleep in preparation for the release in the morning.

As it turned out, the rain which started that evening came on strong in the early morning hours of December 16th. However, given that rain is a very real fact of life for these birds, the decision was made to carry on with the release as planned. Before dawn, DNER field staff hiked off to a series of lookouts, carrying handheld radios and telemetry receivers to track the released birds should they come their way. Most of the rest of us headed for the blind at the release aviary and quietly got prepared for the big moment.

Just after first light with everyone in place, a hinged panel near the top of the flight was opened, allowing the birds to fly free for the first time in their lives. Theoretically that is. The rain refused to let up and the birds stayed put. With each period of clearing, the activity increased both inside the cage and out. The wild birds added to the anticipation by flying about and calling loudly and we grew increasingly hopeful.

Finally, after several hours of these false starts, one bird got up the nerve and headed out the door, then another, and another. Soon they started to really fly in earnest, sometimes perching on the lip of the exit before flying to a feeding station, sometimes boldly flying right through the exit to freedom. It was wonderful to see just how well conditioned these birds were – all strong and confident on the wing. Once they'd fed and been rained upon a bit more, they eventually flew off and up into the rainforest to join the wild birds.

This release was the culmination of years of hard work, and for me, it was a great privilege to be present for the truly special moment of their liberation. And although ten birds doesn't sound like much compared to the hundreds of grey parrots which have been released in Africa in recent years, for Puerto Rican Parrots, this group represented about a 10% increase in the entire wild population, a huge step forward by any measure. Captive and wild pairs in both programs are now on eggs or chicks, so the 2011 breeding season is shaping up to be another successful season.

It is deeply encouraging to see so many people collaborating so effectively on the recovery of this unique bird. The Puerto Rican Parrot is far from out of the woods, but if the current trends continue, it has certainly turned a crucial corner after some forty years of concerted conservation effort.



Puerto Rico's only remaining native parrot was once widespread and abundant. By the 1950s, there were only 200 parrots in the wild, and in 1975 the wild population reached an all time low of only 13 individuals.

In 1968 the US Fish and Wildlife Service started efforts to conserve the species. In 1973 the Luquillo Aviary was established in the El Yunque Rainforest, where captive breeding efforts commenced. Gradual increases in the total numbers of birds continued for the next 20 years. In 1993, a second captive population was established at the Vivaldi (Rio Abajo) aviary, located in the Rio Abajo Forest. In this new location 271 chicks hatched between 1993 – 2010.



As of the start of 2011 the wild population was 34 to 40 individuals in the wild Río Abajo State Forest, and 20-30 in the Caribbean National Forest. The captive population is now 269 parrots, split evenly between both locations.



# Black Market Blue-

ON NEW YEAR'S EVE José from our Blue-throated Macaw field crew was running an errand by taxi in Beni's capital, Trinidad. Imagine his surprise when the driver turned to him and said "I have some macaw chicks for sale, do you want to buy them?" Eager to chase down such a lead, José said, "Take me to them and we'll see." The driver took him to a house where there were indeed two macaw chicks. But these weren't just any macaws. They were two young Blue-throated Macaws!

JOSÉ WAS STUNNED by the sheer coincidence and irony of the situation. He had to think fast; especially as such birds tend to disappear in minutes when you're off trying to organize an authority to confiscate them. José simply and boldly said, "These birds are totally illegal, and either you give them to me, or I'm calling the police immediately!" Luckily the driver realised he was in a bind and relinquished the birds without much protest. José rushed them back to the project house, fed them and gave them a thorough examination. They were nearly of fledging age and were in relatively good condition. They seemed to be reasonably well

cared for which meant they were recently poached. Still, they needed a bit more time and some rehabilitation to finish developing properly.

Whilst the birds were receiving supportive care and being moved to a safe site outside the city, Igor met with Ing. Aldo Claire Banegas, the head of the wildlife office in La Paz (Dirección General de Biodiversidad y Áreas Protegidas) and explained the situation with the birds, José and the taxi driver. Luckily the Director was quick to understand the predicament. He knew that while there are many of these birds in captivity, there are just a precious few in the

wild. He agreed that we should do our best to see if the chicks could fledge successfully. It would be the best thing for the birds, for the wild population, and also for us to see whether such a release could succeed for this critically threatened species.

We immediately began the process of getting the birds ready for fledging. We fed them both food for captive birds as well as local wild fruits and seeds, especially the fruit of the Motacú Palm which is the staple of the wild Blue-throats. We selected a release site where there were small numbers of both Blue-and-Gold (*Ara ararauna*) and Blue-throated Macaws – a common situation throughout the historic range of the Blue-throat. We proceeded with a "soft release", providing food for the birds and a place to sleep as they developed their flight skills. Over the next few weeks, they became more confident on the wing. They began to socialise and vocalise with the wild birds, and gradually became more and more independent and less interested in humans.

NOW MORE THAN FOUR MONTHS LATER, the birds are essentially independent – feeding on their own, and only occasionally stopping by or flying over the release site. It's truly an amazing sight to see these spectacular birds, flying free over the fields and forests of the Beni ... especially when pondering what might have been their destiny, had the serendipitous encounter in the taxi not occurred.

**Bad News:** Two critically endangered Blue-throated Macaw chicks poached from one of the few remaining wild nests. **Good News:** By a stroke of luck these two were discovered by precisely the right people – our field team! They have now been rehabilitated and released to join wild birds in an ideal area. Lightweight wing tags help researchers keep track of the chicks.



# -throats

By Igor Berkunsky  
José Antonio Díaz Luque  
Gonzalo Daniele

Photos by José Antonio Díaz Luque

For us on the Blue-throated Macaw project, this event has been an eye-opener in many ways, and couldn't have come at a better time. It has taught us a number of important lessons which will guide our conservation work for years to come:

1. Clearly there is some occasional nest poaching going on which is deeply troubling given how few pairs nest each year.
2. The authorities were responsive and flexible when this unique situation arose and their collaboration proved vital to the successful outcome.
3. Although only two birds were released, they were the only wild Blue-throat chicks that we know of that fledged during this entire breeding season – anywhere in the world!
4. This release was unplanned and not designed as an experiment, but it shows that releases of young birds, even under challenging circumstances, can not only work, but work very well.

WE'RE QUITE RELIEVED that this situation turned out so well, and we're inspired by the birds and their remarkable transition to freedom. We also feel that we have a new tool at our disposal. Releases have worked very well for other macaw species, and are a strategy we have long anticipated needing for Blue-throats as well. How effectively we can use these techniques to release captive bred birds in the future still needs to be determined. We are excited to know however, that we have the expertise to do so.

We are grateful to the MBZ Species Conservation Fund and the Natural Encounters Conservation Fund for their financial support of our efforts.

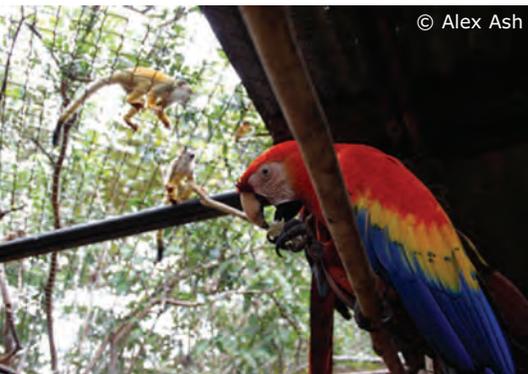




# Hatched to Fly Free

By Ilona Thewissen

**S**quirrel Monkeys scamper over the roof of the aviary where ten Scarlet Macaws (*Ara macao*) await release. Free flying macaws careen over the release site, calling raucously and inciting curiosity and excitement in the new birds. Until recently, there were no (wild) macaws left here.



© Alex Ash



© Ilona Thewissen



© Ilona Thewissen

THE NEW BIRDS will join the established flock of over 50 released macaws and their wild hatched offspring in Tiskita Private Biological Reserve in the lush jungles on Costa Rica's pacific coast. They are in the midst of a two-month acclimatisation in a new onsite pre-release aviary. The aviary was built with the help of the Beirute Family of Costa Rica, Ford Motor Company, the World Parrot Trust and BOSS Orange (see *PsittaScene* 23.1, February 2011).

The ARA Project is a non-profit organisation that has been releasing captive bred macaws for over ten years. The largest release site is at Tiskita where seven groups of Scarlet Macaws were released between 2002 and 2009. The birds are now repopulating an area where the species disappeared some 40 years ago. These are "soft releases", meaning that the newly released macaws receive locally collected food at the release site until they learn to forage for themselves. The released birds have been monitored almost daily since 2002 to ensure successful adaptation to the wild and to collect scientific data on Scarlet Macaw reintroduction. To date, the overall survival rate is close to 90% and at least five pairs have successfully fledged chicks in natural nest cavities since 2008.

After release, the new macaws will experience the established hierarchies and social bonds of the released macaws and establish their own position within the flock.

In the pre-release aviary, the macaws get accustomed to the surrounding forest and its inhabitants. Monkeys and previously released macaws pay frequent visits.

For now, in the pre-release aviary, there are no exclusive pairs but strong preferences are apparent. The females named Alice and Rogue stick together as do the females named Orange and Scarlett O'Ara. A male named Hugo is friendly with the other macaws in the aviary, but frequently squabbles through the mesh with his sibling Rigsby who was released in 2009. Three males, named Boss, Ford and Splice, are quite excitable. They often engage in playful squabbles and pretend take-off flights, especially when the released macaws are around. Two other males named Bob and Weasel are calmer. They will all be released in mid-May, when food availability will begin to be at its peak.

Generally, the newly released macaws remain in the release site for up to about six months before slowly expanding their home range. Using experience gained in the pre-release aviary and by social learning from the previously released macaws, they quickly discover new aspects of their natural existence, like foraging on infinite Tropical Almonds, flocking high above the ridge tops, chasing King Vultures, getting drenched in the rainy season, and snoozing in the ocean breeze.

Because many of the birds remain near the release site, The ARA Project has the opportunity to study them intensively, often for years. Because of this, not only is it possible to



© Christine & Franck Dziubak

## Scarlet Macaw *Ara macao*

Scarlet Macaws were gone from this part of Costa Rica until releases began in 2002. Now, after being hatched and reared to live free, a new, more colourful era has begun.

measure survival and reproduction, but also to collect valuable data on Scarlet Macaw behaviour, from foraging activities to social behaviour like mate selection. Studying mate selection in captive bred and released Scarlet Macaws offers an insight in pair formation because the age and sex of the macaws are known. This is usually not the case when studying their wild hatched counterparts.

An example of how the life of a released macaw may evolve is that of a female named "Cyndi", one of the first seven macaws released in 2002. Now, nine years later, she still maintains her home range within an estimated two kilometers from the release site. Around the time of her release she paired up with a male named Big Boy, also released in 2002. After initially having an eye for her sister Rainbow as well, he became Cyndi's mate for years. Big Boy was alpha male for most of this period and fiercely protected Cyndi. After some years of trying, they successfully fledged their first two chicks in 2008. These chicks were the first fledged to any of the released macaws in Tiskita and are another indicator of success for the project. In 2009 this pair successfully fledged another chick. Shortly afterwards, Big Boy and Cyndi separated. He has since paired with a female named Red who was released in 2007. Months later, Cyndi also found a new mate in a male named Cosmo (2007 release) and is presently in the process of fledging her first chicks with him.

To achieve long term success at the release site in Tiskita, The ARA Project will continue to

monitor the released macaws and to develop new and more extensive education programs to involve the local communities in protecting them.

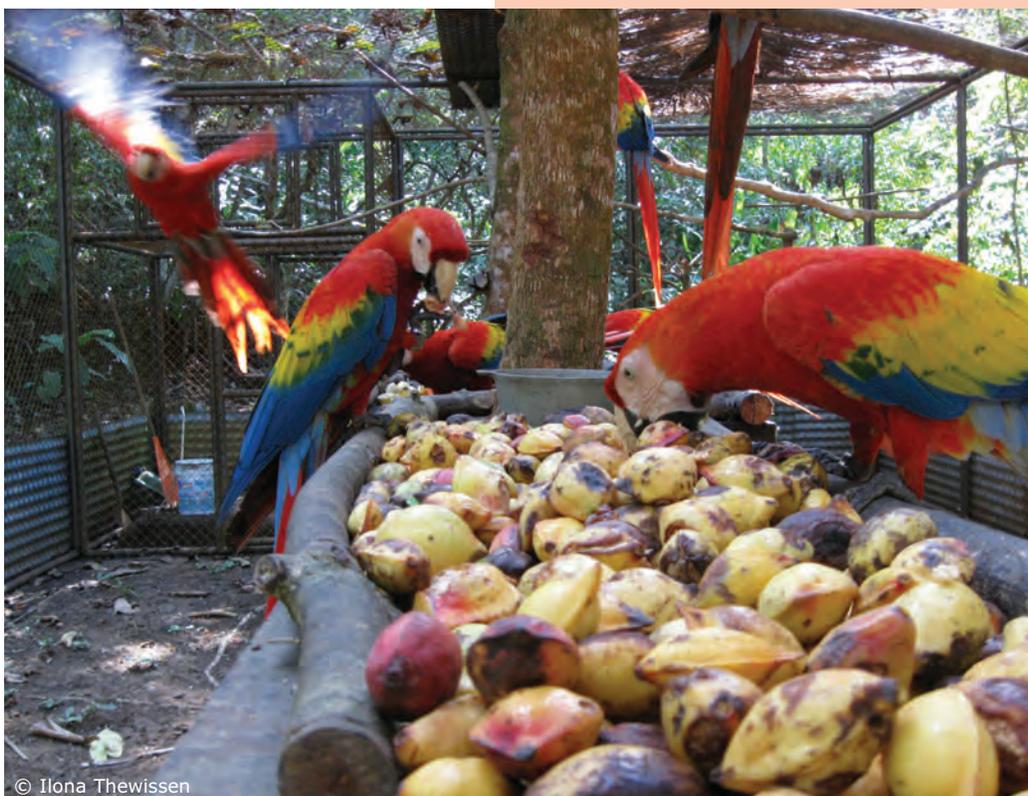


Ilona Thewissen is originally from Belgium. She joined The ARA Project in 2005 as a volunteer at Tiskita Biological Reserve while writing her thesis on Scarlet Macaw Reintroduction. She joined the staff in 2006 as the field biologist at Tiskita and is now preparing for her 4th release.

### Tiskita Releases

- #1, September 2002, 7 macaws
- #2, May 2003, 6 macaws
- #3, May 2004, 7 macaws
- #4, October 2004, 5 macaws
- #5, April 2005, 10 macaws
- #6, May 2007, 12 macaws
- #7, May 2009, 16 macaws
- #8, May 2011, 10 macaws (pending)

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



© Ilona Thewissen



© Eugenio Villanueva

# A Ban and a Plan

## Decreasing Illegal Trade in Mexico

By Juan Carlos Cantú  
& María Elena Sánchez

Mexico is home to 22 species of parrots and macaws. Of these, 11 species are classified as Endangered, 6 as Threatened and 4 as Specially Protected. Habitat destruction and illegal trade are the major threats that have brought several Mexican psittacids to the brink of extinction.

In 2007 Defenders of Wildlife and Teyeliz A.C. released a comprehensive report on the illegal parrot trade which estimated that roughly 65,000 to 78,500 parrots and macaws are unlawfully captured annually. About 50,000 of them die from stress, disease, rough handling, crushing, asphyxiation or dehydration during capture and transport before reaching the consumer. In response to this crisis, Mexico placed a ban on trapping and trade of wild parrots in October of 2008 – and it's working!

The ban was a last resort to save these species. Naysayers predicted that it would only result in the immediate skyrocketing of illegal trade, but exactly the opposite has happened – illegal trade has declined. We analysed the data on annual parrot seizures by the Environmental Enforcement Agency (PROFEPA) before and after the ban, to assess its impact on the illegal trade as well as the effectiveness of an accompanying communications campaign led by Defenders and Teyeliz.

Total parrot seizures by PROFEPA were showing a decreasing trend and that trend continued after the 2008 trade ban. Only 566 Mexican parrots were seized in 2010, the lowest quantity in almost ten years, and a full one-third less than the year before (See Fig 1).

However, the data on seizures alone don't demonstrate a trend in illegal trade, but instead reflects inspection effort by PROFEPA. The agency doesn't have enough personnel to police all the wildlife capture, transport and sale sites in Mexico. Instead, it acts on citizen complaints, so the majority of inspections are a direct result of illegal parrot trade reports by the public. Thus, an increase in complaints results in an increase in inspection effort and, consequently, an increase in seizures.

To be able to identify a real trend in the illegal parrot trade, we needed to know the number of annual complaints and compare it with annual seizure information. Citizen complaints to PROFEPA on illegal trade of wild parrots show a steep increase between 2008-2010 (see Fig 2).

Assuming that most of the seizures occurred as a result of complaints, we can infer that in 2002-2007 PROFEPA was seizing an average of 52 parrots per complaint, while after the ban the number decreased to only 4.6 parrots per complaint. The fact that reported complaints of illegal sales increased dramatically in 2008-2010, while seizures of wild parrots decreased signals that the volume of Mexican wild parrots for sale has in fact declined. This is the very first time that

an increase in inspection effort by PROFEPA has returned a decrease in seizures of wild parrots.

A very high peak in the number of complaints occurred in 2008 after the approval of the ban by the Congress was announced publicly by Defenders and Teyeliz. However, the highest peak occurred in 2009 when we started a nationwide communications campaign, along with PROFEPA, to inform the public about the trade ban and how they could get involved.

### Communication Campaign

A trade ban by itself has minimal effect if people do not know it exists. After the ban entered into force in October of 2008, we designed a nationwide communications campaign to inform the Mexican public about the threats parrots were facing, the changes to the law, and ways they could participate to help save these species.

We launched the campaign in February 2009 at a press conference with PROFEPA. A vital component of it was a parrot web page, [www.pericosmexico.org](http://www.pericosmexico.org), which presented information on the 22 species of parrots and macaws native to Mexico, and explained the threat of illegal trade and laws and regulations regarding trade. It instructed users on how to present a complaint of illegal trade to PROFEPA, and the do's and don'ts of buying a parrot. It also featured downloadable education materials and listed participating institutions and organisations that were helping to distribute them.



© Claudia Mácias



© Juan Carlos Cantú

Mexico's parrot trade ban was augmented by a broad plan to engage citizens in learning about parrots and reporting illegal birds. Thousands of posters and colouring books were distributed all across the country, increasing awareness dramatically.

Thanks to generous donations from individuals like Bill & Terry Pelster, and the World Parrot Trust, Folke H. Peterson Foundation and IFAW we produced more than 71,000 posters, children's storybooks, colouring books, comic books and stickers and distributed them throughout Mexico. Dozens of institutions and organisations joined in this effort, including governmental institutions like the Environmental Enforcement Agency, Environment Ministry, National Commission of Natural Protected Areas, Mexico City's Environment Ministry, Mexico City zoos; universities like UNAM, UAM, UDG, Tec de Monterrey, among others; NGOs like Greenpeace, Pronatura, IFAW, CEMDA, Comarino, GEMA, among others; as well as scientists, private companies and individuals.

Dozens of stories appeared in the media (newspapers, magazines, radio, television, internet news services and blogs) since the communications campaign began. We have constantly talked about the campaign against illegal trade of parrots on our weekly radio program "Supervivencia" and given dozens of presentations in symposiums, bird festivals, children's festivals, schools, etc.

A fact revealed by the complaint data is that from 2002 to 2007 PROFEPA received complaint reports of illegal parrot trade from 21 states, while between 2008 and 2010 there were complaints from all 32 of Mexico's states. Thus, the campaign reached the whole country, making people aware of the problem and getting them to participate in its solution by not buying wild parrots and denouncing illegal trade.

Illegal trade of parrots is a very difficult problem to solve; in fact, we will never stop it altogether. However, it can be diminished considerably and controlled so that it doesn't have such a negative effect on wild populations. We have now documented that the illegal trade of Mexican wild parrots has started to decrease, and that this decrease is due to the 2008 parrot trade ban and the communications campaign we started in 2009 with the help of a great many people and their organisations. Trade bans do work, and decision makers should not balk at using them to control illegal trade and help wildlife conservation.



Juan Carlos Cantú is Director of Programs for Defenders of Wildlife México. María Elena Sánchez is President of Teyeliz A.C

Figure 1 - Parrot seizure trend from 2002 to 2010

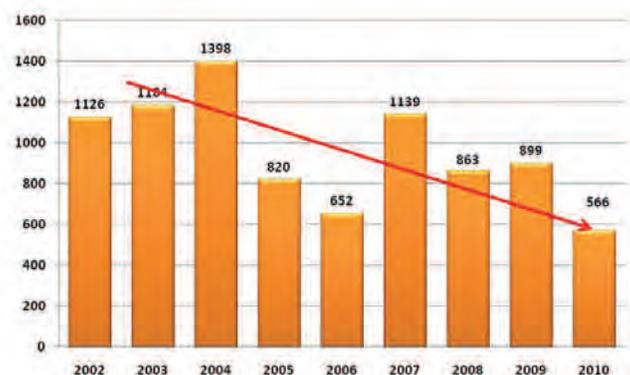
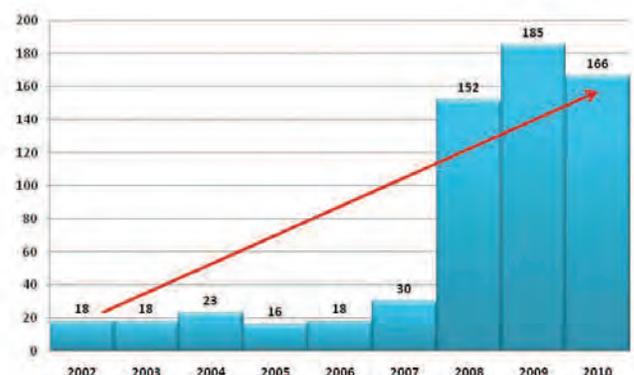


Figure 2 - Illegal parrot trade complaint reports



The trade ban and communications campaign have resulted in more citizens reports and inspections, yet the number of seizures have declined, thus illegal trade has decreased.



# A Rare VISITOR

By Rick Simpson. Photos by Elis Simpson

In February 2009, I got a most amazing phone call. "Ah! Rick! I have 40 Brown-backed Parrotlets sitting in a tree outside my house!" exclaimed my friend Jeremy Minns. The conversation ended there. My wife Elis and I dropped everything and sped to Jeremy's house....

THERE WE FOUND THE RARE BIRDS settled in a tree in front of his property. Elis took what we understand to be the first photographs of the species in natural surroundings. I say "natural surroundings" because in 2006 one flew into an office window at a hotel here in the city of Ubatuba on the southeast coast of Brazil. It was photographed sitting on top of a computer screen and this is believed to be the first photograph taken of the species alive!

Brown-backed Parrotlets (*Touit melanonotus*) were first described by Prince Maximilian of Wied-Niuwied in 1820. Since then, until very recently, nothing much had been learned about the natural history of these birds. There had been sightings from various localities in the south-east of Brazil where good Atlantic forest still exists, but the birds were not regularly seen anywhere. Ironically it was in a condominium and not in pristine Atlantic forest that these birds were finally studied for the first time.

The history of Brown-backed Parrotlets in Ubatuba is sparse. Jeremy Minns first discovered that the species was present in the area one day when sharing a beer with another well known and respected Brazilian Ornithologist Ricardo Parrini when Ricardo suddenly heard the parrotlets. Unfortunately they didn't find the birds that day.

◀ *Touit* parrotlets have such unobtrusive and shy habits that they are frequently overlooked. This wonderfully cooperative group of endangered Brown-backed Parrotlets was observed for weeks after selecting just the right place to visit. Fans from all over Brazil came to watch and photograph them and even witnessed the birds feeding young for the first time.



In January 2011 a local resident found a group feeding in his garden. He phoned a local birder who visited and photographed the birds, putting his shots on the internet four days later!

At that time Elis and I were in São Paulo doing some research at the museum. We wrapped up our work early and sped back to Ubatuba. There we found the parrotlets easily. Over the next few weeks we had the chance to study them every day at close quarters, noting their feeding behaviour, social interactions, calls, and patterns of movement. We watched young being fed and discovered their begging calls.

One interesting thing we noticed was that these birds, unlike other parrot species, never use their feet while feeding. Instead they pluck fruit from

the tree, carry it in their bills, and secure it in place to eat by applying pressure with their bill whilst teasing out the seed with their tongue.

We spent many hours in the birds' company, sometimes spending more than two hours at a time watching them loaf around, preen and squabble in the uppermost branches of the Beach Almond trees (*Terminalia catappa*). They would be quiet and peaceful one minute, and then quite suddenly and without warning or provocation, the whole group would burst from the tree, calling loudly, and fly off together.

Then began the search for the fruiting tree in which they were feeding. By the end of their stay we had identified five different trees that they used with some frequency. After that, it was a matter of doing the rounds looking for them.

During this time, many people came to visit. We found ourselves in the role of marshals – locating the birds, making sure everybody saw them but at the same time respecting the property and privacy of the residents. Never in the history of Brazilian birding have so many birdwatchers and photographers descended on one spot to see a single species. This constituted Brazil's first twitch. One well known Brazilian photographer, Ciro Albano, came all the way from Ceará in the north-east – a journey of some 2,000 km (1,240 miles).

The birds remained faithful to the area for several weeks, gradually being seen less and less, and then becoming decidedly unreliable. They continue to this date (March 2011) to be seen and heard in flight, but where they are currently feeding is not known. That's a study for next year!





## The Carolina Medal

March 2011

Dear Don,

It was wonderful to be able to speak to you this morning and to give you the news that you have been awarded the Carolina Medal by the World Parrot Trust in recognition of your contributions to parrot conservation. I was given the special honour of telling you since we have worked together closely for so many years.

All the trustees and staff at the World Parrot Trust unanimously agreed that you should have the medal since your work has always been greatly admired, and Mike Reynolds was a true friend and keen supporter of your achievements. More than anyone you have demonstrated the value of managing endangered birds and that even the most threatened species can be restored. You have developed techniques and shown us how to boost productivity and enhance survival in the rarest species. You have illustrated that these techniques can be applied to all bird species and with the appropriate will and skills all species are saveable.

Don, it is not only your work on New Zealand that is so important but you have influenced successes elsewhere. Your work restoring islands and species on Mauritius and Seychelles helped kick start the active conservation projects in both these island groups. It was you more than anyone who showed us here in the Indian Ocean that island conservation was possible and there was hope for species like the Echo Parakeet. You have effectively inspired a generation of bird managers and have gone to considerable lengths to mentor and nurture people and projects over many years.

I well remember a conversation we had where you lamented how short our life span was and that in some cases we could not see projects through from beginning to end because they will take decades or centuries. You urged that we had to do what we could to leave a legacy, but also to ensure that we trained the next generation of field workers to be conservation managers and leaders, to carry on the work. This you have done, the Kakapo now has over a hundred individuals and the Echo Parakeet about 570 and there is a thriving culture of conservation workers all following in your footsteps. You have contributed more than you could ever imagine.

My very best wishes,

Handwritten signature of Carl G Jones.

**Prof Carl G Jones MBE**

International Conservation Fellow, Durrell Wildlife  
Conservation Fellow, North of England Zoological Society  
Scientific Director, Mauritian Wildlife Foundation

The Carolina Medal is intended to be a constant reminder of the fragile status of one third of all parrot species and the welfare needs of millions of captive birds. It is named for the extinct Carolina Parakeet, the only native parrot in the USA. Once so numerous it was considered a pest, it was deemed extinct by the 1920s due to shooting, hunting for sport and the millinery trade and habitat loss.

We awarded Don Merton the Carolina Medal as a small token of appreciation for his pioneering work with the Kakapo (*Strigops habroptilus*), Echo Parakeet (*Psittacula eques*) and other parrot species, but also for developing a range of management techniques that are applicable to parrots worldwide. Don was exceedingly grateful, expressing his appreciation and acknowledging how much he had benefited from his contacts with the World Parrot Trust over the years.

Don was a consummate field man and many of the techniques in bird management, predator eradication and habitat restoration that he helped develop have now become accepted practice. The conservation programmes he developed in New Zealand and on Indian Ocean Islands have become iconic case studies of what can be achieved.

Sadly we lost Don to cancer in April 2011. His legacy lives on not only in the countless people he mentored but in the Kakapos, the Chatham Island Black Robins and in all the many species that have been aided by his work.

Carolina Medal nominations  
may be sent to [uk@parrots.org](mailto:uk@parrots.org)



© Errol Nye, National Kakapo Team, DOC

# In memory

February 22, 1939 -  
April 10, 2011

Don with the famous (and his favourite) Fiordland Kakapo "Richard Henry," November 2010.

The World Parrot Trust has lost a great friend. Don Merton, the renowned New Zealand conservationist died on 10 April 2011 at age 72. Although many knew that he was fighting terminal cancer the news of his passing still came as a blow, since Don, or "Mertie" to his friends, had been an important figure in bird restoration and a mentor to many of us for over forty years.

Don played a leading role in saving many New Zealand birds including the Saddleback and Chatham Island Black Robin. He will probably be most remembered for his work with the Kakapo. It was Don who had the most intimate knowledge of the Kakapo having been deeply involved with this species since the 1960's. He was the one who discovered their lek breeding system which is unique among parrots. Don played a huge role in providing the vision and expertise for the species recovery and saw it increase from 51 individuals in 1995 to 100 in 2009. The honour of naming the hundredth bird was given to Don. He named the bird Te Atapo, meaning "the dawn after the night" because of its significance to the recovery effort. He went on to point out "the 100th bird symbolises a very significant milestone in the ongoing struggle spanning more than a century of literally blood, sweat and tears by countless dedicated individuals to save one of New Zealand's – and the world's – most remarkable and iconic birds."

All the flightless Kakapo now exist on predator free islands outside of their natural range. Their

historic habitats are now unsuitable because they are badly degraded and inhabited by mammalian predators. Don recognised the threat of rats and other introduced pests early.

“They are our national monuments. They are our Tower of London, our Arc de Triomphe, our pyramids... No one else has Kiwi, no one else has Kakapo. They have been around for millions of years, if not thousands of millions of years. Once they are gone, they are gone forever. And it's up to us to make sure they never die out.” -Don Merton

He and his colleagues developed techniques for clearing islands of mammalian predators and then restoring them so they would be suitable for endangered birds like the Kakapo. Don saw each and every one of these Critically Endangered birds as precious individuals. During the breeding season all Kakapos were (and still are) monitored 24 hours a day. The birds are provided with supplemental food and every effort is made to maximise productivity. Many of these techniques came from aviculture. Don often used to say that the intensive management of endangered birds involved taking captive breeding techniques into the field. He more than anyone bridged the gap between aviculture and field conservation.

Don was a very generous man, who readily gave his time and helped projects outside New

Zealand in Australia, Mauritius, Seychelles and Fiji. On Mauritius he helped develop the Echo Parakeet restoration project and provided advice and guidance for over 25 years.

He was an optimist who showed us the way forward with his belief that most Critically Endangered species are restorable. He and the species conservation programmes he was involved with in the 1960's and 1970's have matured into projects restoring whole suites of species and their island habitats.

Don was a modest man who never bragged about his achievements. He was always eager to talk and share his knowledge with anyone who was interested. He travelled widely and often spoke at international conferences. He was the greatest ambassador of conservation that New Zealand has ever had. He will be greatly missed but he leaves behind a rich legacy of techniques and a generation of field biologists on New Zealand and on islands throughout the world, all following in Mertie's footsteps. We are proud to have known him.





## from the FORUMS

This issue's contributor, **Pamela Clark**, is a well-known author, speaker, and parrot behaviour consultant whose experience with parrots dates back 40 years to the purchase of her first pair of lovebirds. Her special interests include feather destructive behaviour, training, flight and nutrition.

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For more advice from parrot experts visit [www.parrots.org](http://www.parrots.org) > Forums, Experts & Bloggers

A well-rounded life for these young African Grey Parrots (*Psittacus erithicus*) requires an understanding of their basic physical and social needs.

From Debra  
United Arab Emirates

I have a wonderful African Grey that is now about ten months old. She is a gentle, kind accepting bird and is generally a joy to have.

I have 2 questions: First: Her feathers are so soft! Will this change when she gets older? Second: I have been told that there is a period known as the "Terrible Twos" when birds change dramatically. I don't want to lose the gentle girl I have. What would you recommend I do? Should I start exerting more control over her now so she knows who is in control? Thank you for any help.

From Pamela Clark  
Oregon, USA

Your baby Grey is exceptionally lucky to be in the hands of someone like you who seeks to prevent problems, rather than wait to get help until they occur.

The fact that her feathers are soft reflects the fact that she has been well-nourished. The diet a parrot eats dictates the quality of the plumage. The best way to keep her feathers soft is to make sure that you feed her the most appropriate diet. A seed mix is a poor diet for any parrot, so if she is currently eating a seed mix as a staple, you will want to teach her to eat a better quality diet.

African Greys have higher needs for protein and fat than many other parrot species. The easiest way to make sure that she is eating a well-balanced diet is to make sure that at least 30% to 70% of what she consumes is a good-quality formulated diet. I feed my own Greys the Harrison's High Potency pellet, since this has been formulated with their nutritional needs in mind. The protein content in this

pellet is 18% and the fat content is 15%. If you feed a different pelleted diet, with lower protein and fat content, you can supplement with other foods to raise the levels slightly. To supplement protein, you can offer a one-inch square piece of scrambled egg or well-cooked chicken or fish a couple of times a week. The fat content can be elevated by providing a few nuts as training treats. Too much protein or fat can be a problem also, however, so supplementation should be done in moderation. In addition, she should have raw vegetables and fruits, especially vegetables. If you would like more information on diet, you can read my articles "Feeding the Companion Parrot" and "Grey Matters" a two-part article specifically about African Greys. Both are posted at <http://www.parrothouse.com/pamelaclark>.

In regards to your behaviour concerns, I can state absolutely that there is no truth to the myth that parrots go through any period called the "Terrible Twos." Older parrots can be less compliant than young birds, but this does not



© Pamela Clark

Provide your bird with a wide variety of interesting toys and foraging opportunities and plenty of praise for interacting with them.



© Pamela Clark



© Kris Porter

have to be the case. Generally speaking, the best way to avoid problems with a parrot as she grows into adulthood are to:

- 1 Avoid allowing the parrot to form a pair bond with you,
- 2 Make sure that all her needs (physical, social, mental) are met, and
- 3 Provide clear communication about what you want her to do followed by plenty of positive reinforcement for complying with your requests.

**Regarding #1:** The goal with a young parrot must be to teach her to play independently and to keep herself busy. While it is very comforting to have a parrot on your shoulder, this is to be avoided for two important reasons. First, it will lead to the development of a pair bond with you. Once such a pair bond has formed, she will reject other people and will seek to be with you more and more, gradually losing her independent play skills. Second, while she is on your shoulder, she is not learning anything else. She is only learning to be dependent. Thus, it is important to encourage her to enjoy a variety of perching sites and to interact with toys and foraging opportunities in those locations. She should not be perched on your shoulder or lap for any longer than 5 minutes once or twice a day.

**Regarding #2:** One pitfall in keeping parrots is the tendency to focus only on their social needs. Social relationships are only one of her many needs. Others include regular bathing, excellent nutrition, learning opportunities, adequate rest, annual veterinary visits (if you have access to an avian vet), fresh air and sunshine, foraging opportunities, exercise, the ability to be out of her cage for at least 3 to 4 hours a day and to move around to different perches throughout the day, and a sense of safety and security. Thus, as

you guide her toward adulthood, you will need to make sure that all of these needs are met.

You may have to teach your bird some of these important living skills. For example, if she does not yet enjoy bathing, you will need to teach her that bathing can be a pleasant experience. If she does not keep herself busy, you will need to introduce a wide variety of interesting toys and foraging opportunities and then provide her with plenty of praise for interacting with them. If there is something in the environment that scares her, it should be eliminated if possible.

One of the most important things you can do for your bird is to make sure that she has plenty of learning opportunities. I recommend Barbara Heidenreich's training DVDs ([www.parrots.org](http://www.parrots.org)). Training a few simple behaviours, such as targeting and turning around on cue, is a wonderful way to provide enrichment to a companion parrot while satisfying their need to learn new things.

**Regarding #3:** There is no room in a relationship between a human and a parrot for concepts such as control or dominance. Embracing such concepts will lead to interactions in which you choose to use coercion and other behaviour approaches that will result in a lack of trust in her towards you. The best way to keep her as sweet as she is now is to learn how behaviour works and then to guide her behaviour using positive reinforcement.

The truth is that all creatures behave in order to get what they want. A human will not continue to work at a difficult job unless she receives a pay check. A dog will not come when called unless he anticipates that good things will happen when he does. A parrot will not continue to step-up if

there is not some "pay check" present in the experience for her.

Many parrots develop problem behaviours simply because the owner reacts when the behaviour is performed, and this social attention can be a powerful reinforcer. I recommend that you get into the habit of asking yourself continually, "What am I teaching her right now?" If she makes a noise that you don't enjoy, you must ignore it completely. If she talks, and this is something you want her to do more frequently, you should respond immediately with a "Good girl!" and a small food treat.

The best way to maintain compliance in a parrot is to make sure that you reward all desirable behaviours, especially all "cued" behaviours. This means that every time she steps onto your hand when you ask her to, she immediately receives some reward that she finds of value. This might be a food treat, such as a small piece of walnut or a sunflower seed. It could also be a head scratch or a small foot toy. Watch her carefully to figure out what she likes the best and then use that. Try also to have a variety of rewards, so that she does not get bored with the same one. Stepping off of your hand should also receive a reward, and every time she goes back into her cage, she should get a highly valued treat. Every time you ask her to do something, she should receive some form of reinforcement.

Following these guidelines will produce a happy, healthy, well-rounded, and compliant parrot. Moreover, she will choose happily to cooperate with you and you will never have to worry about maintaining "control." Thanks for such a wonderful opportunity to discuss problem prevention!



# Psitta News



© Vienna Zoo



© Mehd Halaouate

## Goodwork

### Future for Nature Award

Ofir Drori, founder of The Last Great Ape Organisation (LAGA), was awarded the Future for Nature award. LAGA protects great apes, elephants, and other threatened species from illegal hunting. He has also been a great partner to the WPT in taking on large confiscations of African Grey parrots and preparing them for release.

The Future for Nature award is given to individuals for internationally outstanding species protection efforts. The award acknowledges individuals who embody an approach to conservation that is entrepreneurial, in that it is innovative, impactful and shapes the future of conservation. Recognising that approaches need to change, this award recognises the power of individuals and their influence on conservation.

Congratulations Ofir!

### RIO opening fundraising

WPT member Debbie Johnson's "meet and greet" fundraising event at the Rio movie opening was a rousing success, raising \$300 for the Trust in just couple of hours!

Thank you Debbie! ▶

## Parrotnews

### Smuggled eggs seized

Slovak police, in cooperation with colleagues from Austria and Germany, have seized the highest number of smuggled exotic bird eggs of in the history of the European Union. The smuggled consignment contained 74 eggs of critically endangered Amazonian parrots and have been placed under the strictest protection.

The seized eggs were taken to a zoo at Schonbrunn in Vienna and 54 parrots have since hatched. We don't know yet what species the eggs are from. Stay tuned to *PsittaScene* for "baby pictures".

Source: <http://spectator.sme.sk/>



© Debbie Johnson

### Tiger-parrot family tree

Researchers have found that the tiger-parrots of New Guinea's rainforests – named for their striped or barred plumage – are not, as has been widely accepted, closely related either to a group of rosella-like parrots found in Australia and Oceania, nor a similar group found in Asia and Africa.

In the latest edition of *Molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution*, they report that tiger-parrots instead occupy their own perch on the parrot evolutionary tree.

Co-author Dr Leo Joseph said the findings will help improve our understanding of how parrots have evolved. The research team's quest has been to understand the true places of parrots such as the Night Parrot and the tiger-parrots in the ecological and evolutionary history of parrots across the Australian continent.

"During our research on these oddball parrots of Australia and New Guinea, we affirmed that the Australian parrots are far from one cohesive group. They appear, instead, to be made up of about five different main branches of the parrot evolutionary tree," Dr Joseph said.

Source: *CSIRO*



© Robert Newcomb, University of Georgia

### African Grey "speech"

New research by scientists at the University of Georgia has shown, for the first time, that an African Grey parrot can develop a deeper understanding of the sounds – words to us – than researchers previously thought. The findings were recently published in the *Journal of Comparative Psychology*.

The research team studied an African Grey parrot named Cosmo that lives with UGA Professor Betty Jean Craige.

In order to study the effects of social context on parrots' spontaneous vocalizations the team videotaped Cosmo in four distinct social contexts.

First, Craige began recording Cosmo and left her house for the duration of the session. Second, Craige interacted with Cosmo in the room normally. Third, Craige was in an adjacent room interacting with Cosmo normally by voice. Finally, Craige and a colleague Colbert-White were in the same room with Cosmo simulating dialog and ignoring Cosmo.

Analysis of the results showed that Cosmo's spontaneous vocal production changed significantly across the four social situations. They also indicated that Cosmo's "vocal production is largely affected by the presence and responsiveness of the social partners in her environment."

# Caribbean

Go ahead. Get carried away in the Caribbean.



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# Parrots in the Wild

