

# Recovery at Río Abajo

by Jamie Gilardi, WPT Executive Director

When we arrived at Puerto Rico's Río Abajo rainforest in late May, I had an overwhelmingly positive first impression. It was bright and sunny, beautifully green, with great views of ridges and valleys I'd never seen in past years. Slowly it dawned on me what was wrong; after all, you don't normally get any views or see the sun in a tropical forest. It then hit me just how dramatically it had changed since my last visit.

**O**n September 20, 2017 Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, leaving the entire island without power or water, most of the main roads impassable, and indeed much of the island's forests seriously degraded.

Many of the large trees were felled by the storm, and those remaining lost nearly all their leaves, branches...in some cases much of the bark was stripped from their trunks as well. Hence the newly open view from the Río Abajo aviaries and reintroduction site, with most trees that remained standing looking like telephone poles with desperate signs of new life sprouting from their trunks.

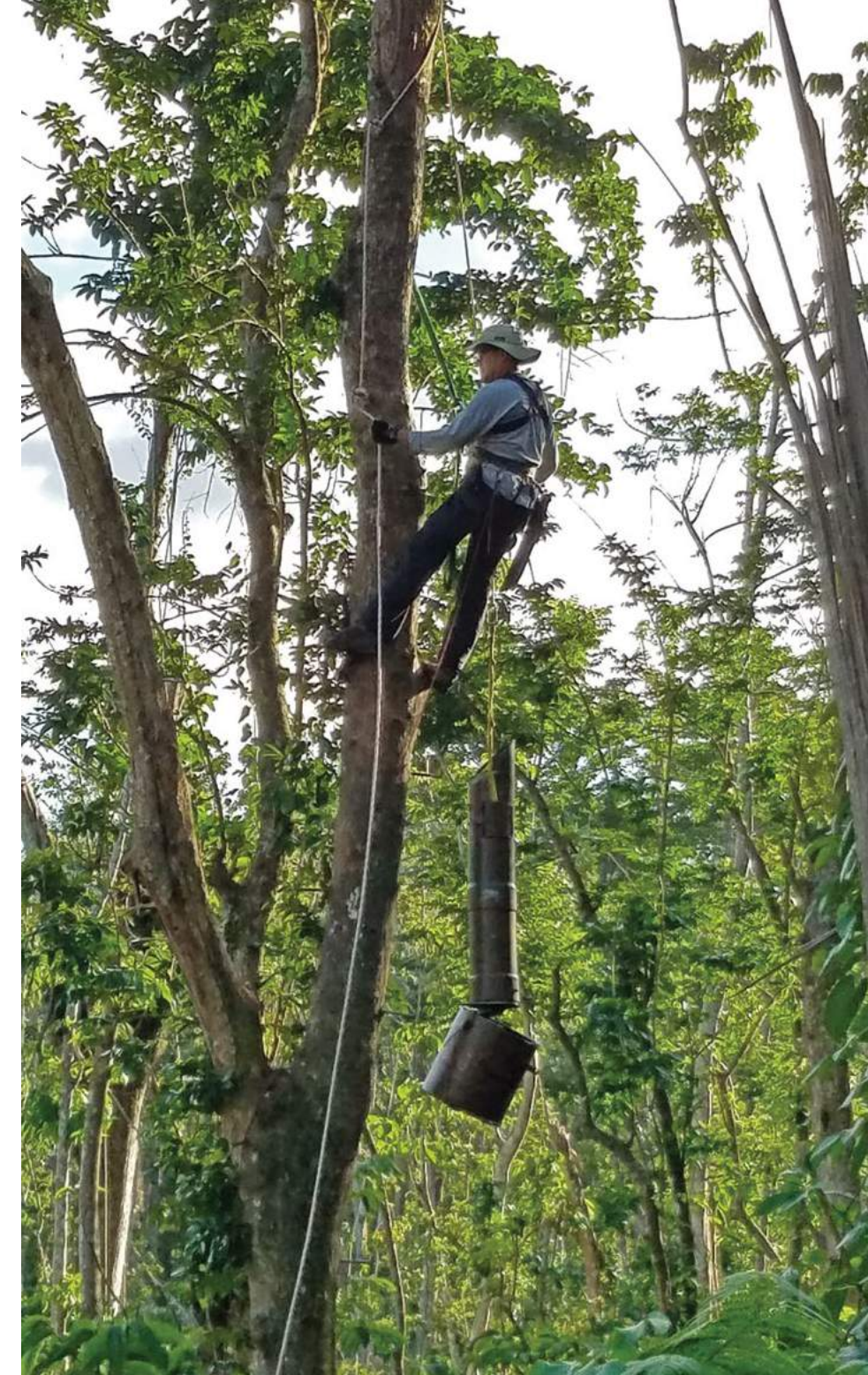
Indeed the lack of limbs on most trees became an issue a few days later when we sought a good climbing tree to practice techniques for accessing natural cavities and other parrot work high in the canopy - or what was left of it. One of the purposes of my visit was to work with an extremely committed field team from Puerto Rico's

Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DNER) and share with them some tree climbing tools, including the use of an enormous sling shot to shoot ropes over very tall trees, and then to teach the use of safe methods for climbing and descending on ropes. But finding a stout tree with amply strong limbs to place the climbing rope proved surprisingly difficult, driving home the reality that Maria had stripped most of these trees of all such branches - just one of many experiences demonstrating just how such a hurricane can destroy the very structure of the forest itself.

For us the most pressing concern after the storm was the fate of the small population of reintroduced parrots - one of the rarest of all Amazona. In short, the great news is that a good number of the wild birds at this site in Río Abajo survived the storm, and although late by a few months, **a substantial number of the wild pairs not only survived, but actually made a serious effort at breeding this year.**



Above: Repairing and replacing nest boxes for the parrots has been ongoing since Hurricane Maria hit. Photos © Tanya Martinez



It never ceases to amaze me how quickly and generously parrot lovers around the world respond to wild parrots in crisis, whether that's a man-made crisis causing thousands of birds to be taken from the wild for the pet trade, or natural disasters like Hurricane Maria both killing birds outright and causing habitat destruction on a massive scale. Immediately after the storm, hundreds of supporters donated thousands of dollars to help save Puerto Rico's endemic parrot.

As we had an established relationship with the conservation team at the DNER, the World Parrot Trust was well positioned to both generate this support from around the world and then to work closely with our partners in Puerto Rico to ensure that the funds were (and are) focused as efficiently as possible on the recovery of the parrots themselves, both the captive and wild birds.



Naturally, there were a lot of pressing needs in the aftermath of such a destructive storm. The highest priorities were basic necessities like power and water - not only was power cut off to the Río Abajo aviaries, the whole power grid in the area was literally laying on the forest floor. So, in evaluating what was most critical, especially during the breeding season, the DNER team identified the need for a backup power system to ensure that incubators and brooders could be kept running overnight, particularly when generators were not running. With a combination of an inverter and charger shipped from the United States and locally sourced golf cart batteries, the team wired up and tested a system to do just that.

We were also able to use it to power the cameras and DVRs so we could continue monitoring three of our nests. The unexpected post-Maria breeding of the wild birds created other challenges as well, particularly as some pairs have begun venturing beyond nest boxes and are now using natural cavities.

When parrots choose their nest tree — rather than the field team carefully selecting a site to hang a nest box — new difficulties generally ensue and require new tools and tricks to monitor, protect, and support such nesting pairs. Sometimes they select a dead tree, making climbing it potentially treacherous, sometimes the cavity has bats or stinging insects in or near it, and sometimes the eggs are laid in deep cavities, well beyond arm's length.

In practice, many natural parrot nests have several of a long list of difficult features. On my last day in the field, we visited one such

natural nest site, and caught a glimpse of one of the parrots climbing out and flying off.

We discussed how best to climb and assess the situation, the value of lowering a camera into the cavity to see what, if anything, was inside, and how to cut an access door if that proved necessary. Upon closer inspection, the field team discovered the cavity was too deep and would require a door to manage any eggs or chicks. So we purchased a battery powered reciprocating saw so that could be done quickly and safely. As it turned out, behind that new door was a perfectly healthy Puerto Rican Parrot chick (*see images to the far right*), well on its way to fledging!

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These are just a couple of examples of the many ways parrot lovers' contributions in the aftermath of the hurricane are helping get the species and the conservation program back on its feet. And while this support is just a small part of an overall budget from the government of Puerto Rico and the US Fish and Wildlife Service, having the flexibility to quickly fill urgent needs as they come up means the WPT's contributions help enhance the agility of the conservation efforts with both captive and wild parrots at Río Abajo.

We're all looking forward to continuing with this collaboration, and hope to branch out in the future to support more technical exchanges and visits among projects elsewhere in the Caribbean and Central America. So, please stay tuned not only for upcoming articles from the team in Puerto Rico, but also new project developments in the coming year. 📺

IN THIS BRIEF UPDATE, I'VE FOCUSED ON HOW PARROT LOVERS FROM AROUND THE WORLD RALLIED TO SUPPORT THIS BIRD AND ITS DEDICATED PROTECTORS IN PUERTO RICO, AND HOW THAT SUPPORT IS NOW FOSTERING THE SPECIES' RECOVERY.

PLEASE STAY TUNED FOR UPCOMING AND MORE DETAILED ARTICLES IN FUTURE PSITTASCENES IN WHICH WE'LL RUN A SERIES OF ARTICLES ABOUT THE DETAILS OF THE AFTERMATH OF THE STORM, STORIES TOLD BY THE BRAVE AND CAPABLE CONSERVATIONISTS WHO EXPERIENCED MARIA FIRST HAND, AND HELPED PICK UP THE PIECES IN THE STORM'S AFTERMATH. I'M SURE YOU'LL ENJOY THEIR GRIPPING ACCOUNTS OF THE IMPACTS ON THE CAPTIVE BIRDS AND THE WILD BIRDS, AND THE PHENOMENAL CHALLENGES OF KEEPING EVERYTHING AFLOAT IN THE WEEKS AND MONTHS AFTER HURRICANE MARIA.



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