

The Golden Conure Survival Fund

by GLENN REYNOLDS

What is aviculture? The Webster's Dictionary states that aviculture is, "The rearing or keeping of birds". I have spent the last 22 years of my life chasing the meaning of this word. I, as most of us, started out with only a few small birds. Observing the beauty, the habits, and the intelligence of these creatures mesmerized me and the addiction grew. I have learned through the decades, the more appropriate defining factors separating a bird owner from an aviculturist, are in the knowledge obtained through years of experience managing and raising parrots. More appropriately, aviculture is a collaborative effort of individuals, groups and organizations to compile and disseminate information that will enhance and extend the lives of captive birds and preserve wild populations and the ecosystems that they reside in. The techniques that we have cumulatively learned through captive breeding programs are now helping to save the rarest species of parrots in the wild. I have found the true meaning of the word aviculture in my association with the World Parrot Trust.

How It Began

In the month of September 1998, I met Mike Reynolds, founder of the World Parrot Trust, for the first time at the IV International Parrot Convention in Tenerife, Spain. My name being Glenn Michael Reynolds and his being Michael Reynolds had inadvertently brought us together: One evening I entered my hotel room and found a package for Michael Reynolds. I wondered; was this a mistake, did someone forget to put my first name on the package, or was there someone at the Hotel named Michael Reynolds? I had been a supporter of the WPT for years but didn't make the association with the name. I was soon introduced to Mike. I thought that our meeting was a fluke but as I think about it today, writing this article for the PsittaScene, it was not a fluke, it was fate.

I had been seeking information on Golden Conures for a web site and had run into dead ends everywhere that I inquired. The US Fish and Wildlife

Service and the US Office of Scientific Authority had no viable information on these birds. Upon my introduction to Mike, I inquired about any knowledge he may have on the status of the wild populations of the Golden Conure. He was very interested in my inquisitiveness, as he owned Golden Conures himself, which had just produced their first offspring. After a short conversation about these wonderful birds, Mike said that he would check into the matter and get back to me. I didn't realize that I had just planted the seed that has now grown into the WPT-USA Golden Conure Survival Fund.

A few weeks after the convention Mike e-mailed me stating that he couldn't find any documented data on the Golden Conures and that as far as he knew there had never been a formal study done on this species. I had previously read that these birds had been considered endangered as far back as 1946. In the United States, because of the rarity of this species, I was required to obtain an endangered species permit prior to ownership. I couldn't understand this dilemma. Why was something considered to be so rare for so many years not getting any help from the conservation community? Thanks to



Young Hand-reared Golden Conures

electronic mail Mike and I rapidly agreed that this bird needed our help. We both share a passion for this species and we concluded that the WPT-USA would bear the burden of raising the funds for this project. I volunteered myself as the primary fundraiser.

I have been informed that only once before in the history of the WPT has there been an independent fund set up for a specific species. It was for the Hyacinth macaw, and that fund was very successful. I have tried to personally absorb any administration costs of this fund so as not to dilute the contributions. Mike started the fund by pledging \$20.00 US for each of his seven Golden Conures, and I followed by contributing the same for each that I hold. We are asking that all keepers of this species do the same. Mike challenged the avicultural community for the first private donation of \$1,000.00 by offering a dollar for dollar match from the WPT-USA. We received the \$1,000.00 donation, from WPT member Susanne Schrader soon after the official beginning of the fund in May 1999.

Good Progress

We have come a long way in just a few months. Contributions are now over \$7,500. Cyd Riley of Firefly T-shirts has produced a stunning Golden Conure Survival Fund T-Shirt. Grant Hacking, a world renowned

wildlife artist, has agreed to do an original oil painting of the Golden Conure and donate it to the fund. Charles Munn has written the formal proposal for the field project. And I have spent a huge amount of my time writing letters asking for donations and travelling about lecturing on our fund to bird clubs and organizations.

A detailed list of contributors can be found at the end of this article, which was current at the time of writing. I would like to personally thank each and every contributor for helping to make this project a reality. Every donation large or small will go a long way toward the end result of saving this species and the entire ecosystem that it resides in. A few of the contacts I've made have expressed concerns that donating to this project will not help the WPT as a whole, stating that, this money is specifically earmarked for the Golden Conure Fund. This is a stand-alone fund, which isolates the financial burden of itself from the rest of the WPT funded projects. In turn, it frees up an equal dollar for dollar amount within the WPT International Fund to go toward the numerous other projects the WPT is currently supporting instead of supporting this project; therefore, supporting this fund will indirectly support all of the WPT projects.

Cyd Riley has stated that the Golden Conure T-shirt is a hot seller. She has shipped nearly 200 of them since the first printing in late August 1999. It bears a beautiful Cyd Riley original of the Golden Conure on the front and a map of Brazil highlighting the rapidly shrinking range of the Golden Conure on the back. Cyd very elegantly utilized the space on the back of the shirt for stating what little information we



The beautiful design donated by Cyd Riley of Firefly T-shirts. All profits from this shirt go to the Golden Conure Survival Fund

currently have on this species and a tactful plea for help. The T-Shirt is now available through the US and UK administrators.

Grant Hacking is a South African wildlife artist who has moved to Isle of Palms, South Carolina, USA. He is world famous for his African wildlife oil paintings. I have seen his work, and it is spectacular. His paintings are as defined as a photograph and usually full of action. The depth of his work is three-dimensional. Since moving to the US, he is shifting his interest to indigenous wildlife and he has also found a passion for parrots. Grant will be doing an oil painting of the Golden Conure and donating it to the project to help generate income. I will try to get a good photo of it upon completion to be printed in a future issue of *PsittaScene*. We have not yet

decided whether it will be auctioned off or if prints will be made and sold.

The Proposal

Charles Munn writes; In an application for 'Small grant funds' to American Bird Conservancy (ABC) The Golden Conure (*Guaruba guarouba*), which also is known as the Golden Parakeet or the Queen-of-Bavaria's Conure, may be the most beautiful of the 150 species of New World parrots (its only competition being the four most colorful species of large macaws). Yet it has never been studied in the wild and no data exists about the status of its wild populations. Furthermore, there are no targeted conservation projects for this species or for its rainforest home, which is the eastern part of the Brazilian Amazon. Surely this species should be able to generate support to

save itself and large portions of its rainforest home if the conservation community can provide modest funding now to jump-start what should become a self-financing conservation program supported by visits by photographers, filmmakers, and parrot enthusiasts. Currently, the only way this species is utilized is as a cage bird, but with the support of ABC and WPT, the Golden Conure should become an internationally famous flagship species for the conservation of Amazon rainforests.

Though found over a large swathe of the Eastern Amazon of Brazil, the species seems to occur at greatest density in the tall rainforests south of Belem in the eastern Amazonian state of Para, particularly in the drainage of the Cupim River. There are enough organized conure trappers in that part of the Amazon that without urgent action, the species could melt away without the slightest analysis of the situation or concerted attempts to save it in the wild. This part of the Amazon is also under great threat from deforestation for cattle ranching and other agriculture as well as from destructive logging, so any incentive or projects to save major portions of this forest are extremely important. Properly studied, protected and visible in the wild, this beautiful parrot species should be able to save considerable tracts of wild forest. The initial funding is critical to start this conservation process.

What little is known of the biology of the Golden Conure suggests that it lives in what appear to be family clans of approximately 8-15 birds. All the birds in one clan travel together all day to forage in the forest and then return each



Carlos Yamashita and Charlie Munn are supervising our WPT Golden Conure Project



Golden Conure in juvenile plumage

Photo M. Reynolds

afternoon to play just outside and then finally to roost in a single, conspicuous cavity in the trunk or branch of a large canopy tree. Their fidelity to specific roosting cavities (which also are used for nesting by the adult breeding pair in the nesting season) makes these birds easy to trap.

There are two favored trapping techniques: One involves erecting a pole with glue-covered branches near a roosting tree and tying a live calling conure near the pole. When the family clan hears the calling conure and comes to investigate they get stuck to the branches. The trapper will then remove them from the branches using water to loosen the glue. The other method involves loosely wrapping a nesting tree with a net to cover the cavity entrance during the night. Pounding the tree will then startle the birds scaring them into the net. The thrust of this project would be to find and map active roosting and nesting trees. Once identified, appropriate acreage surrounding these trees could be purchased by WPT and BioBrasil Foundation and guarded year round by trained

guards. An ecotourism site could be developed, so visitors could take predictably high-quality photos of these amazing birds.

The project would provide for guards and guard dogs to patrol the proposed sites around the clock for the first year. Once trappers have been deterred, the human guards could be reduced in number and guard only during daylight hours. The night-time hours could be adequately guarded by a reduced number of dogs. It may be necessary to erect modest but impassable barbed wire fences around the roosting and nesting trees, eliminating the need to fence the entire tract of land. The purchased tracts could then be patrolled on foot, dirt bike, horseback, or by car once or twice a day or several times a week depending on necessity. Once conspicuous and aggressive guarding has been established, bird trappers would probably give BioBrasil forests a wide berth and protection costs would drop accordingly.

Ecotourism Development

Income from ecotourism should eventually support year round protection of the mapped out nesting and roosting sites. This project will be modelled after a very successful ecotourism site that BioBrasil has established to protect a large flock of Hyacinth Macaws in Piaui. On June 15, 1999 BioBrasil purchased 2,000 hectares (5,000 acres) of dry tropical rainforest to protect the Hyacinths. From May 1, 1999 through August 15, 1999 the BioBrasil preserve has hosted numerous scientific researchers and photographers, and most recently a TV crew from the Fox-Family Channel. The gross receipts from this camp are about \$14,000.00 of which half are profit. It is projected that the income from this camp should be between \$100,000.00 and \$200,000.00 in the year 2001. This same strategy should work with the Golden Conure in areas identified as feasible and purchased by WPT and BioBrasil Foundation

The most viable sites for tourism-financed protection of Golden Conure nests would be those that can be reached easily by conventional road or river transport from airports. In practice, Belem and Santarem are probably the two cities most likely to serve as jetports for visitors who wish to predictably see protected Golden Conures.

The objectives of this proposal would be to search for and survey the species and locate roosting and nesting trees in the area of Cupim River south of Bele.

This search would pinpoint the best roost trees in accessible sites, which will allow BioBrasil to unlock earmarked funds that currently are restricted to two activities: One is habitat purchase around the nests of this species and two is implementation of an ecotourism infrastructure. For each dollar that ABC/WPT contribute to the search for roost trees, BioBrasil should be able to access as many as 5-15 dollars of matching funds for purchase of forest tracts and for the installation of permanent guards and a rustic ecotourism site. The matching funds are rigidly restricted to forest purchases and protection of the purchased habitat and cannot be used for the initial research. Thus \$5,000 of support from ABC could unlock from \$25,000 to \$75,000 of restricted funding.

To unlock this funding, the nest tree search must be successful. The potential for ABC's support to unlock 5-15 times as much funding should make this project especially attractive, because it greatly increases the chances that the initial seed money will produce an ongoing, self-funding conservation

program for this amazing, but little-known species.

Symbol of Conservation

The importance to bird conservation would be to show that a bird that is primarily known as a cage or aviary bird could become a symbol of conservation of intact Amazon forest and pay for its own protection in the wild. Of course, if Golden Conure nests can be used to generate protection of the entire forest ecosystem, then this project will have generated protection of about 300 other species of birds as well. The Eastern Amazon forests of the state of Para are under particular attack now by the forces of destruction, and any model projects that can add value to that part of the Amazon is particularly important.

The lack of even the most basic survey data on Golden Conures makes it impossible to design a conservation strategy for the species. All current efforts at conservation of this popular bird focus on captive breeding without regard to the dire situation of the wild population. We feel that the best hope of ensuring the species' survival lies in first surveying and mapping

roost trees and then implementing a program of land purchase and ecotourism to pay for recurrent protection of the sites.

The research portion of this project is slated to be done between March 1, 2000 and June 30, 2000. The best way to evaluate the success of this project is to send an experienced, Portuguese-speaking biologist to visit the identified nest sites after July 1, 2000. BioBrasil has a full-time field staff of four employees working in other conservation projects in Brazil, who can provide advice to the field staff of the conure project.

Help from Brazil's Greatest Parrot Expert

Carlos Yamashita will contribute his field expertise at no charge in order to be able to observe Golden Conure behavior in the wild. Having Brazil's greatest parrot expert available to help design and execute this project is an enormous opportunity and should greatly increase the chance of success in locating nest sites. Mr. Yamashita is pursuing a doctorate at the University of Campinas. His

thesis topic is the genetics of Golden Conure clans, so after the ABC survey project ends, he may wish to visit some roost trees to take small blood samples from a few clans.

Contributors List

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Central Indiana Cage Bird Club
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Luescher, Andrew
Majestic Cocka2s
Mertens, Kathy
Mitchel, Leslie
National Capital Bird Club
Peninsula Cage Bird Society
Reynolds, Glenn
Reynolds, Mike
Shrader, Susanne and Alan
Lurie
Southern Maryland Cage Bird Club
Walling, Miriam
WPT-USA Matching Funds

Update since the publishing of this article

The field study actually started ahead of schedule. It started on January 1, 2000. Thirteen active nesting sites have been located and mapped. BioBrasil is actively seeking land acquisitions in the Golden Conure's range.

The Golden Conure painting has been completed and prints may be purchased through the WPT USA administrator, the UK administrator, the Golden Conure web site <http://www.breedersblend.com/goldenconurefund.html>, or the artist's web site <http://www.granthacking.com>

We have currently raised over \$20,000.00 for the Golden Conure Fund.

Additional Contributions

have come from multiple donations from several of the contributors listed above and additionally from:

Allender, Barry
Bompart, Farm; Pamela
Bompart
Narrowsburg Teachers
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