

The Golden Conure in danger

WPT funded research reveals new insight on behavior and threats

by RICHARD HARTLEY

It is ironic that in the country named after the Brazil Hardwood tree (*Caesalpinia echinata*), that the species nearly went extinct before measures were taken for its rescue. If current trends continue, such a hapless fate could befall another Brazilian species, the beautiful Golden Conure (*Guaruba guarouba*). With its yellow and green markings, the country's national colors, this popular parrot's habitat is being ravaged in a region currently weathering the bulk of Amazon rainforest destruction. Accentuating the bird's plight is its rapacious trapping by smugglers who feed the illicit market demand this species still creates. This parrot's future in the wild is at best precarious; it will require courageous and innovative conservation efforts to ensure that at least some bands are able to continue to live and prosper in their natural habitat.



An adult Golden Conure feeding in a croton tree.



An area that has been selectively logged, removing large trees essential to the conures.

Given the dearth of information on the bird's behavioral and reproductive patterns, the World Parrot Trust resolved to fund new research, spear-headed by one of Brazil's premier parrot experts, Dr. Carlos Yamashita. In his two months of research, based out of Paragominas, Para, Dr. Yamashita set out to identify and map nesting trees (or snags), observe and document group behavior and analyze blood samples to determine the degree of relatedness among members of bands (small flocks) identified in specific snags.

The range of Golden Conures extends far westward into the Amazon basin reaching all the way to the right bank of the Madeira Rio in Amazonas state; the bird reaches as far east as the Gurupi in Maranhao state. It is found in much higher density (almost ten times) within the confines of the study area. This coincides almost directly with the heaviest deforestation zones.

Devastated landscape

The town of Paragominas, at the heart of the region, is now surrounded by a devastated landscape. Over the past several years, two thirds of the town's lumber mills have ceased to operate, indicating an exhaustion of local wood sources. This means the forests that provide food for the local fauna are likely to be razed in the very near future.

The rural social conditions spawned by this boom-bust cycle of timber tend to be abominable, presenting a further obstacle in the bird's struggle to survive. A group of the birds were encountered near a community of "sem-terras", landless peasants who receive plots to farm through a controversial government agrarian reform program. Completely isolated and neglected, the hygienic conditions were so dreadful that malaria had permeated the community. It was simply good fortune that none of Yamashita's team contracted any grave illnesses.

During the period of study, Dr. Yamashita located 13 nesting snags within a 90 kilometer radius of Paragominas, all of them located in cleared areas either next to or at maximum 3 kilometers from intact rainforest patches. This does not mean that cleared areas are able to sustain populations of



Golden Conures drinking from a fork in a large tree.

Golden Conures; merely that many of the forest patches nearby have been selectively logged and therefore lack snags large enough to support the birds. These snags in open areas are much more vulnerable to winds and often will topple, causing the birds to seek other suitable nesting sites and exposing the flocks to further dangers. In addition, the fact that these snags are not within the protective labyrinth of the forest facilitates the work of the local trappers.

A fascinating aspect of the Conure's behavior is the presence of "helpers" and their supporting role in the life of breeding pairs. Loyal to one pair, as yet it is undetermined whether the helper is the direct offspring of the pair, or a member of the group incapable of reproducing. Another interesting behavioral trait is the group living situation. Roosting groups are between 6 and 8 individuals, but up to 30 individuals can be concentrated in a feeding ground. What has yet to be determined, however, is whether these communities are all related or whether the clan loyalty extends beyond blood-lines.

The birds are extremely social and spend a lot of time preening. They lay between

one and three eggs in November, and on average two chicks fledge. It is difficult to know which falcons or hawks are their main predators since they tend to nest deep inside the tree. But like so many other basic behavior questions, we are still at a speculative stage. Analysis of the blood samples gathered by Dr. Yamashita will shed some light on this spectacular species, but much more needs to be known about the birds' wild habits.

No room for complacency

The fact that the bird reproduces relatively well, unlike other highly endangered species such as Lears Macaws, tends to inure a certain complacency since numbers in captivity are relatively abundant. But for this symbolic bird to become extinct in the wild would inculcate both Brazilian authorities and the conservation community in general. The challenge is therefore to find viable ways to protect specific wild groups which bring some kind of material improvement to the local population that coexists in the birds habitat.

A conservation tool with proven effectiveness is ecotourism. In the case of the

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The logging activity that threatens the future of Brazil's 'national bird'.

Golden Conures, its rarity and aesthetic beauty is appreciated by a wide range of serious bird watchers and nature enthusiasts. Indeed, despite the extensive destruction of primary forests, the secondary forest re-growth still harbors impressive bio-diversity. A mere 40 kilometers from Paragominas, and over a period of two hours, the author saw four types of parrots, including a group of five Golden Conures, a pair of Hawk-headed Parrots, pairs of Green-winged and Scarlet Macaws as well as three King Vultures, all in a degraded forest patch. The mind boggles as to what it must have been like before the destruction began.

Conservation strategy

There are a series of indigenous reserves within the region. While wood extraction is taking place in some areas, other tribes leave their forests intact. Dr. Yamashita believes the best conservation strategy, therefore, would be to buy forested land that hosts some birds and abuts the reserves where wood extraction is absent or minimal. Once the land was secured by the BioBrasil Foundation, a Brazilian environmental NGO that already owns 10,000 acres

of Hyacinth Macaw habitat in another region of the country, a program to set up a guaranteed animal attraction would be implemented.

Given the magnitude and elevated pace of destruction in the eastern Amazon, people tend to throw up their hands in despair. But such a defeatist outlook obscures the fact that there it is still possible to implement measures to ensure the protection of at least some of the region's flora and fauna. Such a positive attitude should be adopted by those who wish to see the Golden Conure continue and survive in the wild.

The World Parrot Trust and BioBrasil will continue their efforts to save this threatened species.

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