



Conservation success:

Captive raised parrots fly free in Venezuela

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Aviculture means different things to different people. For many it is a way to produce the pet birds that are so loved world wide. Many also see breeding parrots as a way to save species from going extinct. Some breeders hope that the birds they produce will one day be able to fly free in the wild. This lofty ideal has often been a stated reason for breeding, but there are many problems that may prevent this dream from becoming a reality. Two of the principle problems are the risk of spreading disease from captive to wild populations and the difficulties of raising parrots that can survive in the wild. Hopefully continued research by veterinarians will help reduce the disease risks of parrot releases, but I will leave this topic to the vets in the audience to explore. In this article I will focus on a recent success in Venezuela that provides hope that some of the difficulties in releasing parrots can be overcome.

Releases or reintroduction of parrots are known to be extremely difficult. A number of high profile projects have failed to produce healthy populations of wild parrots. For this reason, the news that captive-raised Yellow-shouldered Amazons (*Amazona barbadensis*) were successfully reintroduced to Margarita Island, Venezuela is extremely exciting.

The Yellow-shouldered Amazon has declined much in recent years due in part to exploitation for the pet trade and destruction of its dry desert scrub habitat for a variety of uses ranging from strip mines to tourist resorts. Since 1989 there has been a major project underway to reverse the decline of the species on Margarita Island off the coast of Venezuela. This work has used many different techniques to help the parrots. The first step was to protect the birds and their nests in the island's main breeding areas. Before the project began the young were removed by collectors from nearly every nest in the study area resulting in no young fledging. Now as many as 53 young fledge in an average year. In conjunction with this increased protection the project started a community education project that fostered local participation and raised local awareness of the threats facing the species.

During the course of the project the researchers received a total of 14 young Yellow-shouldered Amazons from a variety of sources. Many of the birds were confiscated from poachers, rescued from predators or donated by local people. These young birds were between 20 and 50 days old when received. They were hand fed 3 times a day until fledging (around 55 days) when they began to feed on fruits that were offered to them. Once the birds were feathered and could feed themselves the birds were split up and put into two large outdoor aviaries (about 15 ft. x 15 ft. x 15 ft.) until their release. Upon release four of the individuals were fitted with radio-collars so the researchers could follow them.



When the cage doors were opened, the parrots seemed unwilling to leave the safety of the cage. Only one of the birds left the area in the first day. In fact for the first 5 days all of the radio-collared birds remained in the area and continued to return to the cage. The two youngest birds remained for over a month regularly returning to take food placed near the cage. In all the release was a great success. At least 10 of the 12 birds released survived for a year or more. Of the birds with radio collars, all four joined stable social groups, and three of the four paired with wild birds. Most birds avoided humans from the very beginning, flying off whenever they were approached. As soon as six months after release two of the birds were seen inspecting potential nest sites with their wild mates. But the highlight of the introduction effort was the day when the researchers found a nest with three eggs that belonged to one of the radio-collared birds. Two of the eggs hatched and the captive raised bird and its wild mate successfully fledged two young.

The high survival, rapid integration of birds into wild flocks and successful breeding indicate that this project has succeeded where many others have failed. But why? What were the keys to success and what does this mean for the future of parrot conservation? It seems that there were a number of very good reasons for their success. All the birds entered the program as nestlings meaning that there were no captive raised adult birds in the group. This is important, because the birds were able to quickly learn the skills they needed to survive in the wild. Equally important, the birds had a chance to learn a lot before they were released. From an early age the young were given natural food sources. The fruits and seeds they were given were not cut up and put in dishes, but given as whole fruits often still attached to the branches just as they occurred in the wild. For this reason, the birds knew how to recognize and open their native foods before they left the safety of the cage.

Speaking of safety, the parrots also learned an important lesson about predators that likely remained with them as long as they lived. At one point a pair of Harris' Hawks attacked one of the aviaries. The hawks reached through the bars, into the cage, and killed one parrot and injured another. As horrible as this was, it put the fear of predators into the minds of those that survived. This may have been an important reason for why the remaining birds survived so well once they were released.

Another reality of this release was that flocks of wild parrots would often come into the vicinity of the aviary. During these times the captive birds could see and hear the wild birds. They watched wild birds feed and avoid predators. Given parrots great learning abilities, the opportunity to watch wild birds may have been very important. Finally it should be noted that most of the birds were at least 20 days old when they were obtained and all had their eyes open. This suggests that all knew their natural parents by sight and sound. This too may have been important in the social development of these birds.

Implications for the future parrot conservation.

Does this mean that parrot reintroduction is simple? Is it now just a matter of following the directions to release anything from Spix's macaws to Palm Cockatoos? I strongly doubt it. Other



projects have shown us that trying to reintroduce adult birds doesn't work as the birds lack the basic skills to survive. This success with Amazons is heartening, it shows that reintroductions can succeed. But much still remains to be learned. Will macaws, cockatoos and other species react the same way as these amazons? Can birds be hand raised from eggs and still be introduced successfully? Can parrots be reintroduced into areas that no longer have wild populations? These are important questions and ones that we should all be very interested in finding the answers to, especially if we ever hope to see the progeny of our captive birds flying free in the wild. The need for parrots to learn the basic survival skills provides a great challenge to any who wish to reintroduce them to their natural habitats. I hope that future projects continue to meet with the success of this intrepid group of researchers in Venezuela.

For more information on this topic please see Sanz, V. and A. Grajal. 1998. Successful Reintroduction of Captive-raised Yellow-shouldered Amazon Parrots on Margarita Island, Venezuela. *Conservation Biology*, vol. 12:430-441.