

# MY MACAWS

BY DONALD BRIGHTSMITH; PHOTOS BY THEO ALLOFS

Hey! What's up with all that flapping and squawking? (See photo at [right](#).)

I guess it's my own fault. That's me, under attack from a mother scarlet macaw. And those are her babies I have in the bucket (see close-up [below](#)).

I'm a scientist who usually enjoys studying wild macaws—the world's largest parrots. They're strong, smart, and loud—*very* loud. But this is kind of scary. After all, I'm dangling 100 feet (30

m) up in a tree. And there's a big, angry macaw dangerously close to my face! What she doesn't understand is that I'm there to help—not hurt—her family.

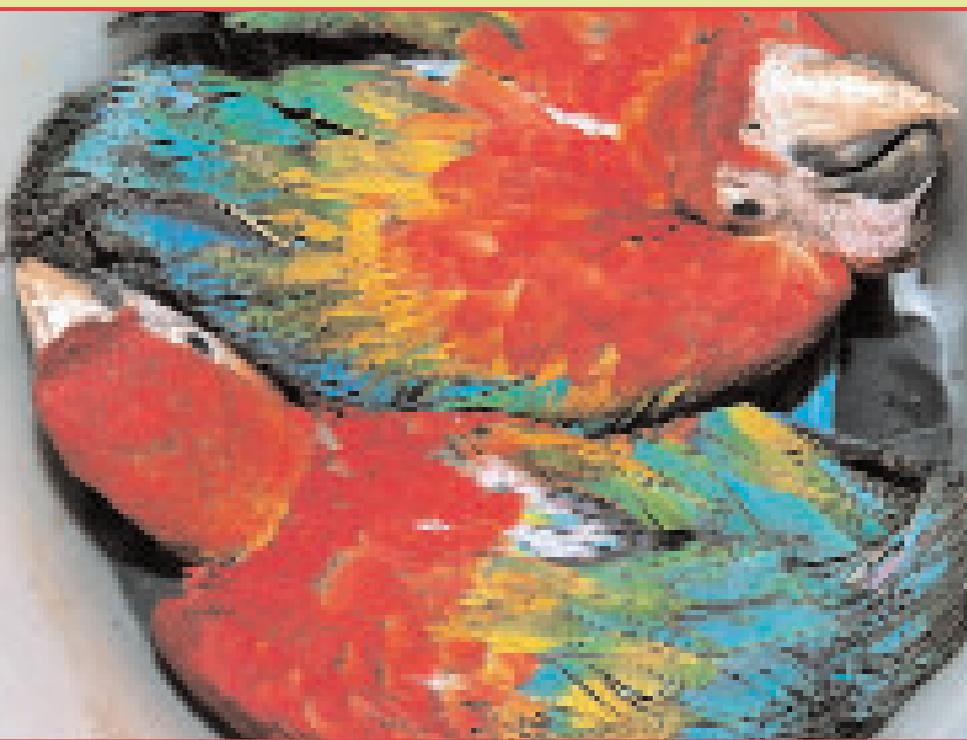
## TO THE RESCUE

You see, macaws are in trouble. Big trouble. People are cutting down too much of the tropical rainforest where these birds live. Even worse, many kill them for their meat or feathers. Others catch the birds or steal their babies to sell as pets. All that means there just aren't as many macaws as there used to be. If we don't do something, most of the world's macaws could disappear forever. And I think that would be a real shame!

That's why I'm working in the Amazon rainforest of Peru (see map). My job is to find and study the macaws that live here. Then I try to figure out how to help them survive.

## PIPE DREAMS

See that odd gray tube hanging from the tree in the photo at right? That's actually a big piece of plastic water pipe. But it also makes a great birdhouse.



Macaws nest in big holes in giant trees. But people often cut down these trees, which makes too many macaws homeless. So we hung up some pipe houses, and the macaws think they're perfect substitutes.

We put a handy little door near the bottom of each bird-house we make. That way, it's easy to reach in and take out the chicks to check them over. I just wish that it didn't make Mama Macaw so upset. Once, a macaw landed on my back and bit me

on the shoulder. It hurt for a whole week!

#### **QUICK CHICK CHECKUP**

In each nest, up to four chicks hatch, but normally only one or two survive. The chicks that hatch last get pushed aside by the ones that hatch earlier. The biggest, noisiest brother or sister gets all the attention—and food.

That might seem unfair, but it's natural. Before macaws became so rare, it wasn't a problem. But now it is. So, what can we do to

help *all* the chicks survive?

Every day, we give them a health check. First, I lower them to the ground in the bucket. Then my helpers take over. They work fast, so we can get the babies back to Mom fast.

The barely feathered chick in the photo at **far right** is being checked over for skin pests. Next, the little bird gets wrapped in a cloth sling and weighed (**right**). For macaws, a fat chick is a healthy chick.

If a chick is losing weight and getting weak, it gets some special



“macaw chow.” That gives it just enough strength to “speak up” the next time the parents get home with food. Then Mom and Dad do the rest. Before too long, the weak little chick is just as strong as its nestmates.

The chick in the photo at **far left** wasn't doing well, so it was brought to our “jungle lab” for a little extra nursing. A curious adult bird stopped by to see what all the fuss was about. It wasn't afraid of us because we had rescued and raised it years ago. But fear of people can be a good thing. It can save a macaw's life in places where the birds are still hunted. Now we try not to let the chicks get too used to us.



## BEAUTY'S CURSE

Bright feathers make a scarlet macaw a beautiful sight. But they also make it an easy target.

It makes me sad to think that people still steal or kill these rare birds in some places. But here, where I work, people are learning that it's better to share the forest with macaws without harming them. That way, all the little chicks we save will have a safe place to live when they grow up. 🐦

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