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Blue Hyacinth Macaw



Many people are familiar with macaws and parrots as pet store animals. It might be difficult, then, for people to imagine what these large, loud, beautiful birds look like in the wild. The spectacular flash of color of a wild macaw is becoming more and more of a rare sight.

Species Description and Range

The largest species of macaw, the brilliant-blue hyacinth grows to be up to 40 inches (1 m) long. The hyacinth macaw survives today in three known distinct population in southern Brazil, eastern Bolivia and northeastern Paraguay. It is possible that smaller, fragmented populations occur in other areas of its range.

Although it is difficult to estimate, some people believe there were more than 100,000 hyacinth macaws before the arrival of Amerindians in South America. In 1990, the wild population was estimated to be 2,500 birds. The world's captive population is probably much larger, numbering in the thousands.

Natural History

The hyacinth macaw is found primarily in riverside tropical rain forest and palm swamps. Its habitat varies throughout its range, however, from seasonally moist forest with a broken canopy, to mature palm forest, to grassy marshes. The hyacinth macaw nests in holes in trees. The clutch size is two or three eggs, although usually only one fledgling survives.

The hyacinth macaw eats seeds, nuts, fruits, and vegetable matter. Eight species of palm are central to its diet. Its exceptionally powerful bill, the largest of its kind in the world, allows it to eat otherwise inaccessible nuts and seeds. Macaws can eat some poisonous seeds and unripe fruits that no other animal can digest.

Scientists believe this is possible because the birds eat chunks of clay from river banks. The clay is thought to help absorb the poisons or make them harmless. Macaws play an important role in seed dispersal. They are messy eaters, carrying and dropping many nuts and seeds.

Causes of Endangerment

Overexploitation and Habitat Loss

Of the 145 species of parrot in Central and South America, 45 are in danger of extinction. All 18 species of macaws are threatened. The primary causes are habitat loss and heavy exploitation for the pet trade. The hyacinth macaw is especially vulnerable to capture and habitat destruction because it is noisy, intrinsically fearless, predictable, and dependent on palm trees.

Hyacinth macaws brought \$5,000 to \$10,000 each in the pet trade as of 1988. This high price fosters a dangerous level of poaching and smuggling. Data and anecdotal evidence suggests that as many as 10,000 Hyacinth macaws were taken from the wild during the 1980s. Trees are cut down to remove the young from nest holes, which not only removes that generation of birds, but permanently destroys the nest site.

Hyacinth macaws do not breed every year even under the best circumstances, so this predation on chicks is particularly bad for the species' survival. Since captured young survive so poorly (up to 99 percent die between capture and final sale), adults are sometimes trapped through liming of perches or use of baited clap-nets. Still, for every macaw that arrives safely abroad, it is likely that five died on the way.

The United States is the largest market for the exotic pet trade. In the last decade, 8.5 million birds, at least 85 percent of birds captured in the wild, were imported or smuggled into the United States. Even when the export of birds is controlled, the domestic bird trade often is not regulated.

Millions of tropical birds, including parrots and macaws, are captured for local sale. About 50 percent of hyacinth macaws trapped in Brazil were bought by Brazilians rather than being sold overseas.

It is common in many rural areas for households to have a pet bird. Half the households recently surveyed in northern Argentina had some kind of parrot.

Another threat to the hyacinth macaw is the increased commercial sale of feather art by the Kayapo Indians of Gorotire in southern Brazil. The feathers from up to 10 hyacinth macaws are needed to make a single headdress.

Once used only for local religious purposes, increased tourism in these remote rain forests has led to more visitors bringing home art made with endangered species.

The hyacinth macaw's habitat has been lost to hydroelectric power development; vast tracts of their former riverside habitat have been flooded by dam building. Habitat modification through human encroachment and conversion to cattle ranching also are significant threats.

In addition, ranchers kill macaws because they believe that hyacinths damage palm trees, which ranchers use for fenceposts, and scare cattle with their noisy behavior. In some places, local people still hunt macaws for meat.

Conservation Actions

Trade Regulation

All macaws are now listed on CITES Appendix I, except for two species which are on Appendix II and thus can be traded under limited circumstances. Improved monitoring of the pet trade and a crack-down on smugglers is needed (see also Spotlight on Freshwater Turtle). Since CITES does not address domestic trade, the governments of the countries where endangered birds occur also need to step-up regulation of local bird markets.

A prohibition of commercial sale of Indian feather art would be helpful. Some zoos and private breeders save feathers that are dropped naturally and send them to native people in Central and South America. It is hoped this will reduce the number of wild birds killed to make ceremonial headdresses and jewelry.

Habitat Protection and Restoration

Ranchers are being encouraged to leave nest trees standing, replant food trees, and erect nest boxes for the macaws.

Captive Breeding

Prized acquisitions for their beauty and size, macaws are well represented in zoos and private collections around the world. Captive breeding programs may be key to saving some of the rarer macaws (see Spotlight on the Spix's Macaw).

Question for Thought

It is often people's love of animals that causes them to desire exotic animal pets. What can be done to educate pet owners about the impacts of wild-caught birds and other animals?