

The last Yellow-eared Parrots *Ognorhynchus icterotis* in Ecuador?

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Una pequeña población de la amenazada *Ognorhynchus icterotis* fue localizada en Ecuador en 1994. Un resumen detallado de su ciclo de vida, importancia de su conservación y peligros de esta población son presentados. Los esfuerzos que se están realizando para salvaguardar la bandada son descritos, y los observadores son estimulados para priorizar sus esfuerzos para buscar esta declinante especie por Ecuador y el sudoeste de Colombia.

In 1994 NK located a flock of the endangered Yellow-eared Parrot *Ognorhynchus icterotis* in Ecuador. These birds represent possibly the last population in the country. During interviews with the local people, primarily by FS, a gloomy picture unfolded. They had used the same communal roosting palm for decades. When the palm fell in 1992, the parrots moved to the adjacent palm. In previous years hundreds had gathered there, and local people from the entire area regularly shot them for food. Yet the parrots did not relocate. Currently just 19 birds remain. They nest in the area, and are present from July to November or early December. It is unknown where they spend the rest of the year. It is possible that they do not travel far, but it remains a distinct possibility that they move long distances. Earlier records from further north are from:

1. near Guallupe, Imbabura province, c.1,200 m, where a small group occurred annually between November and February, at least until the late 1980s or early 1990s (T. Arndt pers. comm.), a specimen in MECN, Quito, labelled "vía San Lorenzo" "Lita?" was perhaps collected from this flock
2. the Tulcán-Maldonado road, Carchi province, on the Pacific slope at 3,200 m, where a group of seven were seen on 6 August 1994 (J. Hendrike *vide* P. Coopmans)
3. south-western Colombia at La Planada, Nariño department where birds appeared in February, once remaining until mid-May, but not seen since the late 1980s¹

These records may all refer to the same population (the dates are consistent with this), but could also indicate small independent populations that are now probably extinct. According to local people a flock remains further north in Colombia (M. Kelsey pers. comm.), but its presence is highly

seasonal, and the birds absent during the only two recent visits by ornithologists.

The tameness and gregarious habits of the Yellow-eared Parrot render it exceptionally vulnerable to man. The Ecuadorian population is now so small that it is highly vulnerable to extinction from natural forces, such as a lightning strike. Its specialized habits make it unlikely that a reintroduction scheme could be successful. We therefore advocate that the last individuals are not caught for captive breeding programmes, and that instead all possible efforts are made to protect it in the wild. The Zoological Society for the Conservation of Species and Populations (Munich, Germany) donated US \$2,000 for this work, which FS used to investigate the parrot's movements and use of food plants in the nesting area, as well as to interview all the local people in the area.

The parrots were found to nest in the large wax palms *Ceroxylon ventricosum* (very similar to *C. quindiuense*, the palm used for nesting in Colombia) at 2,000-2,600 m, and feed principally on the *Ceroxylon alpinum* fruits at elevations between 1,600 and 1,800 m, but also on *Saurauia tomentosa* (Actinidiaceae) fruit. It should be noted that in western Nariño, Colombia, all observations of feeding over a three-month period involved fruits of *Sapium* sp. (Euphorbiaceae)^{2,3}.

The parrots use the same hole for nesting every year. One nesting tree was cut down in 1994 by a local, who wanted to sell the parrots. The nest contained four young; all died when the palm was felled. Two local people have reported nest holes being excavated by the entire flock. One bird excavates the trunk before being replaced by another, and so forth. More than two individuals apparently conducted the excavation. The species's unusually heavy beak is perhaps an adaptation to this behaviour. Providing nest boxes may prove futile.

All the local people agreed not to persecute the parrots in the future, and many agreed to take notes of their observations of the species. The wax palms which are left in open fields in the area, including the palm used for roosting, suffer from a disease which slowly dries out the leaves and eventually (after at least 10 years) kills the palm. Ing. L. M. Rojas of Herencia Verde, a Colombian organisation working for the protection of wax palms, kindly informed us of the diagnostics of the disease, and explained that it is probably caused by the interaction of a beetle (Coleoptera: Scolytidae) and a fungus (Plectascales: Ophiostomataceae: *Ceratocystis* sp.). The disease apparently does not attack palms within forest.

In order to secure the survival of the wax palm in the region, we are currently searching for funds to buy a 21,000 ha forest near the area where the parrots nest, which holds many wax palms, and is situated at suitable elevations (1,200-3,000 m). The price of the land is US \$300,000, and an additional US \$200,000 are needed to secure its future management. A group of people (including the authors) within CECIA, the ornithological society of Ecuador, has agreed to manage the area, if the requisite funding are found. Another immediate task is to purchase and conserve the field containing the roost palm. Funding for this may be available from the Zoological Society for the Conservation of Species and Populations (Munich, Germany).

In the hope that small populations persist elsewhere, and to locate the whereabouts of the known group between December and July, we urge observers to search for Yellow-eared Parrots in north-western Ecuador and south-western Colombia. Copies of the parrot's vocalisations are available from the British Library of Wildlife Sounds (BLOWS), London. We would be grateful if observers encountering this species could report their observations to NK at the address below.

References

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3. Rodríguez, J. V. & Hernández Camacho, J. (1988) La familia Psittacidae en Colombia: una aproximación del conocimiento de su estado actual. Unpublished paper transmitted to the Second Parrot Specialist Group Meeting, Curitiba, Brazil, October 1988.

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For obvious reasons, the exact location in Ecuador of this population of Yellow-eared Parrots is not being divulged. *Eds.*