

# Parrots in the Wild



“On my flight home from Guatemala I made customary small talk with my seatmates as we all settled in for the trip. From their first brief comments though, it was clear that we had much in common. The couple had spent the previous three weeks exploring some of the richest ecological sites in Central America. I listened as tales of magnificent sights unfolded, including lots of birds, and I smiled to myself as I probed them for details. I asked if they had seen any parrots. They replied enthusiastically ‘Not many, but there was one amazing place where we saw the most incredible Scarlet Macaws.’ They proceeded to describe a Mayan archeological site in Honduras called Copán. There Scarlet Macaws fly free over the excavated Mayan pyramids, a glimpse back in time.”

- Jamie Gilardi, WPT Director

## A New Generation

By Joanna Eckles



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Bird Park and Nature Reserve in Copán, Honduras. Just down the road at about the same time, Ricardo, an archaeologist, was unraveling the ancient culture of Copán, one of the Maya's most important cities.

Both men developed an interest in the macaws and together they set forth to improve the conditions for the existing birds and to tell the story of their long history with Mayan culture. What they didn't realize is that they were in the process of creating a model release program utilizing captive-raised and confiscated birds to repopulate a species where it once thrived. They also did not plan the host of other benefits that flowed naturally from there.

Key changes to the macaw's care and diet helped get those existing birds off the ground and behaving naturally – flying, foraging and stunning visitors around the park. From there, the vision was to add to their numbers by releasing birds that came to Macaw Mountain either through donation or confiscation or their own captive breeding efforts.

For technical help on the management of the birds for release, WPT sent José Antonio Díaz Luque (see page 8) for a visit to Copán. Jose helped to unite and excite the international team of partners. They realized, perhaps for the first time, that what they were attempting had global significance and could really serve as a model for others working to restoration elsewhere.

AS IT HAPPENED, Jamie was on his way home after visiting a series of World Parrot Trust projects throughout Central America, including Copán. Part of his trip had included Honduras where he was checking up on those very birds. Once common in the region the sacred “sun-birds” are represented prominently on many stone sculptures in the Copán Ruinas Archeological Park. The Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao*) is now the National Bird of Honduras, but sadly, after generations of trapping for the pet trade, it is near extinction and is now seldom seen in the wild.

Thankfully, with financial sponsorship provided by clothing brand BOSS Orange, an effort to save the species was initiated by the Macaw Mountain Bird Park and Nature Reserve, the Copán Association, the Honduran

Institute of Anthropology and History (IAAH), the Institute of Forest Conservation (ICF), and the World Parrot Trust (WPT). Together we launched a multi-year plan starting in 2010 to return Scarlet Macaws to the Mayan Ruins of Copán, a national park and UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The unsolicited testimonial on the plane reinforced the impact of this project on so many levels.

FOR DECADES SCARLET MACAWS had a presence at Copán but the resident birds displayed behavior more akin to roaming peafowl than the royalty they were. Fortunately, two forces were on their side. One was Lloyd Davidson and the other was Ricardo Agurcia. Lloyd got hijacked by parrots some 30 years ago and now runs Macaw Mountain



© Rene Maturte



© Lloyd Davidson



© Michele Braun



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Years ago, a few Scarlet Macaws scoured the ground for handouts at Copán Ruinas Archeological Park in Honduras. Now, they bring joy to the classroom and transformation to a community. A rich collaboration between two bright minds, Lloyd Davidson (L, above) and Ricardo Agurcia (R, above) has resulted in a model program of macaw rescue, release (top) and education.

(left) Beautiful graphic displays help bring the messages taught in schools to the whole community.



© J. D. Gilardi

Macaws are prominently represented in the ancient stonework at Copán.

SOON, THE MACAWS OF COPÁN were no longer a novelty, but a spectacle. The tour guides were modifying their schedules and their messages to include the macaws, starting tours early by popular request. The birds had become a highlight for tourists, making this an up and coming bird-watching destination. At the same time the macaws began rejuvenating pride in the local community as a symbol of the mythology that formerly guided day-to-day life.

Now in its third year, the release program at Copán (Guaras en Libertad la Belleza Regresa) is a huge success. BOSS Orange has provided international advocacy for the World Parrot Trust (WPT) through marketing efforts utilizing social media along with on-site activities in various fashion retail locations. The clothing giant produced special edition T-shirts which has helped draw attention to the need to save parrots.

Now, not only are the birds back, healthy and breeding in an ever-wider radius around the park, but their presence is rippling through the community and culture of Honduras.

Traditionally, the root of the Scarlet Macaw's problem has been people – trapping for the pet trade, hunting for meat and destroying habitat. Therefore, it was imperative that this new generation of wild macaws be

welcomed by a new generation of people – a community that knows, understands and values the birds as their Mayan ancestors did naturally.

EDUCATION IS THE KEY to making this change. With construction of the release facility underway at Copán and discussions about which birds to transfer taking place at Macaw Mountain, a ten-month education program was crafted for teachers of 1st – 6th graders in the community funded through the Copán Association. In 2011 the first educational module was presented. Each month, a new module was issued to teachers and covered a different aspect of Scarlet Macaw biology, conservation and history. Teachers received special training to present the lessons and the children got a special treat when live macaws from Macaw Mountain visited their classrooms. Over 4,000 children got a chance to see a macaw and touch a parrot or have one sit on their shoulder. Many family members also visited the schools when word of the macaw visits got out.

Throughout the community, educational signs have been posted in strategic locations – the local market area, hardware stores and on paths throughout the valley. These messages reinforce the training the children receive in the schools and spread the word about macaws through multiple generations.

At Copán Archeological Park permanent educational signs were installed to

teach the more than 100,000 annual visitors about the birds. Additionally the “Festival de las Guaras” (Macaw Festival) has been held for the past two years in the town’s Central Plaza and it has now been deemed an annual event. Scarlet Macaws from Macaw Mountain Bird Park are brought to the Central Plaza area where hundreds of local area children, adults and travelers gather to enjoy the birds, the sights and the festivities.

Better management of existing birds and releases of both captive bred and confiscated birds are having a visible impact. As of April 2013 there were three newly hatched Scarlet Macaws chicks and seven eggs located throughout the Archaeological park. Nine additional artificial nests are being installed (funded by World Parrot Trust) and pairs of macaws have been spotted in outlying areas investigating natural tree hollows. Within the next several years experts estimate that the flock will grow to dozens of Scarlet Macaws in the Archaeological Park and the surrounding Copán Valley. The feeding stations are also attracting many other bird species into the site and it is becoming a destination for bird watchers, creating an additional attraction to Copán.

THE SCARLET MACAW RELEASE PROGRAM at Copán is truly becoming a highlight for other release programs in Central America. This is the only release program where Scarlet Macaws are being released in such close proximity to a populated area. The Copán Valley has over 15,000 inhabitants benefiting from the program, and it is an exciting additional attraction for the many visitors to the area but more importantly, a source of pride for the local community – everyone uniting to bring back the National Bird of Honduras.





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© Lyod Davidson



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(top) Children's art is displayed at the annual Macaw Festival. Area visitors not only have a chance to see the birds in this magical setting but may also take part in community celebrations like this, honoring the revered birds and the effort to bring them back.



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### By the numbers

**8** macaws released from Macaw Mountain in 2 separate events join 14 original macaws living free at Copán Ruins Archeological Site—those original birds are now in great health and flying well.

**14** chicks (at least) have hatched in the wild throughout Copán Archaeological Park and macaws are being sighted outside of the park as exploratory forays are beginning.

**10** monthly Scarlet Macaw educational modules presented during the school year for children in grades 1 through 6. Written in Spanish, the modules are available for free online.

**4,000** students in 50 local schools have now taken part in this program, now in its 3rd year. Overseen by the Asociación Copán, the educational components have been funded for 3 years by their sister organization in the USA, Copan Maya Foundation.

**120,000** visitors per year to Copán to view the ruins and marvel at the wild, free flying macaws

**100** free-flying macaws predicted within the next 5-7 years.

> see [www.psittasce.org](http://www.psittasce.org) for links