

AN EFFORT TO LEAVE WILD: CONSERVING THE YELLOW-HEADED PARROT

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Due to exploitation in the pet trade, loss of habitat, and poaching, the Yellow-headed parrot population has decreased by nearly 90% from the 1970s to 1994 (Birdlife International, 2006). This Amazon parrot, which is found in Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and areas of Mexico, has slight color variations throughout its range (Howell, 1995) and is a very popular species in the international pet trade due to its great ability to mimic sounds (Wells, 2005). A subspecies, the Belizean Yellow-headed parrot (*Amazona oratrix belizensis*), has only one remaining viable population in Belize, which is located in the pine savannah region of the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area (Snyder, 2000). The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) classifies the Yellow-headed Parrot as one that can be commercially traded on a “strictly controlled basis” (CITES, 2002). Organizations such as Defenders of Wildlife have submitted a proposal to have the Yellow-headed parrot reclassified to provide for greater protection; though, as of the date of this writing, this has not yet occurred. Local conservation groups, such as Programme for Belize (PFB), have been trying to protect this species through habitat preservation and behavior studies.

My main project objectives were to (1) gather information on the natural history (e.g., habitat selection and food preference) of the species and possible anthropogenic influences (e.g., poaching and habitat destruction); (2) compile various educational materials that will work to improve the local attitude in an effort to move toward protecting this endangered species; and (3) distribute this material to the schools on the periphery of the Rio Bravo Conservation District.

GROUND WORK

Mr. Ivan Gillett, a PFB ranger leading this species’ recovery project, shared his knowledge and expertise about the poaching problems. We also visited the pine savannah to learn more about the bird’s habitat and how habitat destruction and poaching is influencing this population. One of the main challenges Gillett expressed was that older individuals in the neighboring villages suspected of poaching grew accustomed to entering the protected area prior to the establishment of the preserve, making it hard to now convince them to stay out. For this reason, my main efforts were aimed at educating the younger generation.

Once I returned from Belize, I wrote *Leaving Wild*, a bilingual (English and Spanish) children's book. Even though the official language of Belize is English, I wanted the older generations, many of whom don't speak English, to have access to the book's message. Written at a middle-school level, *Leaving Wild* centers on the Yellow-headed parrot and the problems this population faces. Currently being sold through the McMaster School, Defiance College, and the Toledo Zoo, I have been excited to see the positive response from both children and adults to the book and its message about the plight of the parrot and other endangered species. In addition to the book, I created an awareness poster that explains problems contributing to the decline of the Yellow-headed parrot population. Both the book and the awareness poster were taken to Belize with the 2007 team and distributed in the villages on the periphery of the preserve.

This project also developed in another unanticipated direction. Sales of the books in the United States have allowed me to compile "field packs" that include binoculars, a field guide for Belizean birds, a birding checklist, and a waterproof notebook. In December 2007, these packs were delivered to schools on the periphery of the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area where I conducted a short workshop to train students to compile bird counts. Equipment to engage students with the amazing environment that is their own backyard is sorely lacking in the schools we visited. This will, I hope, heighten their awareness about their environment and the birds that



live in it, and perhaps even inspire one or more of these students to pursue science. It would be wonderful if the next generation of researchers at Hillbank were Belizean.

REFLECTION

I still have not figured out quite how to explain my experience in Belize and how it has, in so many different ways, impacted me. Even so, I will try. First, applying academic knowledge in a real world setting by listening to people and forming partnerships to share expertise and experience is amazing. Second, working in a learning community and being so in sync when on the ground despite the variety of members' projects provides a feeling of togetherness that seldom happens in regular day-to-day life. Third, working in partnership with the local people to make a real difference is the best experience anyone could have. Fourth and finally, identifying my hidden passion for birds and field work made the whole experience life changing. Working with Ivan Gillett in Belize's pine savannah and learning about this endangered species brought something out in me that I have never before felt. While in Belize I felt that I was doing the right thing, that I was in the right place, and I knew deep down in my heart that I had found the place where I truly belong. Since coming back to the United States, I live and breathe my project every day. I still think about Belize and the people who impacted me tremendously while I was there.

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