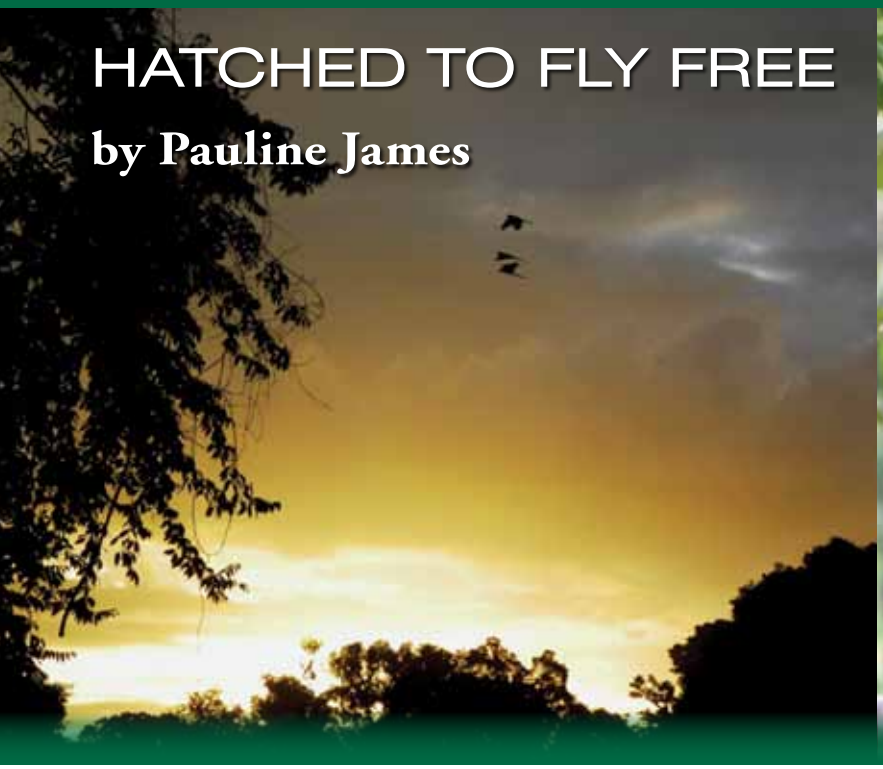
Buffon's Maca

HATCHED TO FLY FREE

by Pauline James



Three released Buffon's going off to roost in the wild.
Photo: Allan Taylor

A released Buffon's feeding in a tree.
Photo: Allan Taylor

As the ARA Project in Costa Rica prepares for their second release of Buffon's Macaws (August 2012), they unfortunately have other things on their mind too...

The second release of captive Buffon's Macaws (Ara ambiguous) into the wild, and due to begin in a few days' time, is a momentous occasion for the ARA Project. Over the last 20 years they have built up the largest captive flock of Buffon's Macaws in the world, and it now represents the macaw's last chance to be saved from extinction in Costa Rica.

The worldwide population of the Buffon's Macaw, distributed from eastern Honduras through Central America to Ecuador and western Colombia in South America, could now be as low as 1,800, significantly down on the 2008 estimate of 2,500. In Costa Rica, it is thought only 25-35 breeding pairs from a population of 200-250 wild 'Great Green Macaws,' as they are known locally, remain - tucked away in isolated pockets of rainforest.

Only 50-100 years ago, these stunning macaws were widespread in Costa Rica's lowland tropical rainforests on the eastern, Atlantic side of the country, but their habitat has been dramatically reduced by 95.7 per cent and they are now restricted to the northerly region between the San Carlos and Sarapiquí Rivers.

Preparing foods for the Buffon's.

100 Scarlets already released

It all started back in the 1980s when Margot and Richard Frisius bought ten acres (four hectares) of land in the Alajuela hills of Rio Segundo, just north of San Jose, and got the area licensed as a zoological park. They started caring for Scarlet and Buffon's Macaws that had been given up by private owners or confiscated by the government, and eventually began breeding for release. More recently security has been an issue, but the

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The rainforest habitat of the Buffon's.

Buffon's Macaws at the breeding centre at Alajuela just north of San Jose.

macaws are now guarded by a pack of 17 rescue dogs.

Margot and Richard first of all established a Scarlet Macaw reintroduction programme. To date, more than 100 Scarlets have already been released, mostly on Costa Rica's southern border with Panama, a region where macaws had been extinct for over 30 years. By releasing Scarlet Macaws in this area the ARA Project is serving to re-establish the southern corridor with the Osa Peninsula, in conjunction with Zoo Ave's released flocks and the wild population, bringing the total number of Scarlets in the wild up to around 2,000.

40 Buffon's ready for release

Starting in August 2011, the first ten Buffon's Macaws were slowly released, either singly or in pairs, near Manzanillo on the southern Atlantic coast. The liberating process took eight months, using 'soft release' methods. As this was the first release in the area, it was undertaken gradually and over a longer period of time, than is planned for follow-up releases, to establish the core flock.

Two young Buffon's being hand-reared.

Chris Castles, co-director and Release Site Coordinator of the ARA Project explained, "Eight of these birds have been monitored daily since being introduced to the wild. The other two have not been identified since their release, but there have been sightings of macaws in areas outside the current range, but as yet we have been unable to confirm whether these birds are the two 'missing' individuals."

Currently, there are ten Buffon's Macaws in the release aviary waiting to be liberated, which will bring the total number of captive-bred birds released into the wild to 20," Chris told me. In addition, the ARA Project has another 30 Buffon's lined up for release over the next 18 months. It is hoped, the reintroduced birds in the Manzanillo area will eventually expand their territory to link up with the genetically distinct wild population living near Sarapiquí, a three-hour drive away further north and inland.

Dependent on mountain almond tree

Buffon's are a specialised species evolved to survive on just one or maybe a few types of food, and feed mainly on the nuts of the mountain almond tree *(Dipterix panamensis)* which fruits in six-monthly cycles. They are also reliant on these trees for nesting too, as they grow large enough to accommodate the good-sized nesting hollows in their trunks, preferred by these macaws.

But, these trees are now also endangered and up until 2008 were targeted by loggers for their superior hardwood. The Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court eventually called a halt to the felling of this tree, "...until such time as the tree and the Buffon's macaws are no longer endangered."

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Scarlet Macaws in their release flight, feeding on beach almonds.

Buffon's harder to breed

Buffon's have proved to be harder to breed and establish in captivity than Scarlets. Chris explained, "Buffon's are very sensitive in the breeding season and do not like disturbances, and one of the key factors to breeding success is stimulating the macaws to breed. We have found 'flock mating,' works best, and here at the ARA Project there are sometimes up to 50 individuals in the flocking flight, including our 16 fully-bonded adult breeding pairs."

Jenny Pettigrew the ARA Project's veterinary technician oversees much of the macaw's daily care. Newly-hatched chicks are weighed and measured daily, they are fed a commercial formula via syringe every 90 minutes around the clock, and quite often her day starts at about 5.30am.

The older birds get rice and beans loaded with oils and fats for breakfast to supplement their natural food of mountain almonds. Later on in the day, 2-3 hours is spent chopping fruits, which just in the last year have all been harvested from their own trees, and are used to supplement the macaws' meal offered late afternoon. Although wild birds would eschew fruits in favour of nuts and seeds, the ARA Project does not have the resources to feed all their charges a steady diet of almonds.

Chris also revealed that although nine chicks were parent-reared this year and five chicks were hand-reared, the ARA Project is disappointingly not able to breed the macaws annually, due to a lack of resources and space restrictions.

A bonded pair of Buffon's now living in the wild.
Photo: Allan Taylor

Heavily reliant on volunteers

The ARA Project relies heavily on volunteers to maintain daily operations. After feeding the birds Jenny and the volunteers check nesting-boxes for newly-laid eggs and carry out maintenance work on the aviaries. With beaks that generate as much as 1,000 lbs per sq inch of pressure the macaws could bite through their enclosures and leave if they were so inclined. Other duties include: observing behaviour, providing environmental enrichment and maintaining the grounds around the breeding centre.

Volunteers also help out at the Buffon's release site working under the supervision of the ARA Project's field biologists. Here the duties include: monitoring released macaws and collecting behavioural data, collecting food and feeding newly released macaws at the release site.

The macaws in the pre-release aviary also have to be monitored and fed, and their behavioural data collected and processed. Release site maintenance and working and planting trees in the tree nursery, are also an important part of the job, and will eventually provide greater food resources and nesting sites for the wild Buffon's.

The daily charge for working as a volunteer at the ARA Project in Costa Rica is just $US23 (£15) a day, which includes accommodation and meals and a $US5 (£2.75) donation to the ARA Project, to go towards the macaws' food, veterinary care and aviary maintenance.

Released macaws visiting the release flight for supplementary food.
Photo: Allan Taylor

The ARA Project's eviction order

But, apart from the huge amount of hours put in on a daily basis and the release taking place in a few days time, the ARA Project has other things on its mind too. They are due to be evicted from their breeding centre location in the next few months...

A new location has been offered to them next to one of their Scarlet Macaw release sites, near Punta Islita in north-western Guancaste. But, the ARA Project lacks funding to develop the property, which needs roads, electricity and multiple aviaries and buildings constructed, to enable them to relocate their resident 86 Buffon's and 64 Scarlet Macaws. Chris estimates the project needs to raise approx $US250,000 (£160,000) to relocate, but time is not on their side.

Chris explained, "All of this has thrown a real spanner in the works and just at a time when we were becoming more and more self-sufficient. Here at the ARA Project we're proving you can do so much with so few resources. There is huge potential to spread this project: 'Hatched to Fly Free,' and do this work all over the region, and save not just two species, but many more too." ■

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*Read about the plight of the Buffon's Macaw in Ecuador in the September 2010 issue of *Parrots*, and more about the ARA Project's work with Scarlets in the December 2011 issue.

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