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the Adventures of Baloo

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*‘I’ve got 3 birds here flying above
the property, squawking and playing!’*

THIS ENTHUSIASTIC CALL CAME FROM A NEIGHBOUR LIVING 3 KM from the macaw release site. These calls have become more frequent, and that is good news because with the community’s involvement we are able to monitor and protect Great Green Macaws in Costa Rica.

The Ara Project provides sanctuary for rescued and confiscated macaws for breeding and release into the wild at its breeding and reintroduction centres in Costa Rica.

Our first-ever reintroduction of Great Green Macaws (*Ara ambiguus*) raised in captivity was in August of 2011, with a second release occurring in 2012, and another in early 2014. The reintroduction station is located up on a ridge approximately 2 km from the Caribbean coast. The tendency of the first group we released was to fly down; most of these macaws ended up staying near the shoreline. We were worried that the macaws could be vulnerable to disturbance by people, but our concern quickly became an advantage. The coastal vegetation has abundant Beach Almond trees (*Terminalia catappa*) with plentiful nuts that the macaws learned to eat during their adaptation process in the flight aviary. Additionally, the local neighbours responded very positively, reporting the Great Green sightings to our staff. This area’s economy is driven by eco-tourism and most folks understand the importance of preserving natural resources and a healthy environment. Our releases have gone very well and the reporting is very helpful, and in some cases, vital.

Occasionally, the birds go on a bit of an adventure.

The Great Green Macaw, Baloo (RM145), was released in late April, 2014 from our reintroduction station in Manzanillo to join the more than 30 macaws that had already been released to fly free in our area. Shortly after his release,

Baloo disappeared. Generally upon first flying off, the macaws spend several days disoriented, perfecting flying techniques and getting their bearings until they find their way back to the reintroduction site aviary, usually guided by the already free flying birds. Ten days passed and we had neither seen nor received information about him. We were becoming concerned that Baloo might be lost and might not have the strength to make it back to the site where we maintain outside feeders and water to supplement their diet until these birds learn to survive on their own.

We put out an alert on our social networks, asking for sightings, and surprisingly we received a call from Kherson Ruiz, a biologist based south of the border in Panamá. Ruiz runs a conservation NGO program in the coastal San San-Pond Sak Wetland Reserve and he informed us that they had discovered a Great Green Macaw on the beach, weak and tangled in some debris.

They rescued the bird and brought him back to their centre, noting that he was run down and some of his feathers appeared damaged; they also observed a silver band on his foot with the number RM145. Kherson had heard about our reintroduction program and obtained our phone number through our vital community outreach program. We were elated and relieved! We gave him instructions on how to care for Baloo, but upon receiving photos and conversing further we decided it was best to bring him back to our release station to care for him.

Transporting an endangered species across international borders is no easy task, and nearly impossible to expedite under “normal” circumstances. We contacted our local Costa Rican Ministry of the Environment authorities while Kherson contacted the Panamanian ANAM authorities.

As both groups are active conservation NGOs* that have worked closely with our respective environmental ministries over the years, both governments' agencies enthusiastically agreed to facilitate Baloo's return to our Manzanillo station.

The Costa Rica – Panamá border region has several bi-lateral cooperation agreements, including a bi-national UNESCO protected area, Parque Amistad (Friendship Park). The Panamanian authorities offered to deliver the bird to the Costa Rican authorities at the Sixaola River border crossing. This action, however, did require quite a bit of coordination by phone, email and radio due to Baloo's remote location at San San and the challenge of determining a mutually convenient time. After a few days of organizing, the two delegations met on the bridge and the transfer was carried out successfully.

Baloo has now regained his strength at the pre-release aviary and is preparing for his next opportunity to fly free!

Although this was our first transnational experience of *The Ara Project's* reintroduction of captive Great Greens back into their natural habitat, we have had eight instances of birds being initially released that have required rescues. All have been successfully integrated into our growing flock flying free in the Talamanca region; one macaw required two initial rescues but for several months now he appears well adapted and continues to enjoy flying and feeding in the wild. ☐

**Association of Friends and Neighbors for the Coast and Nature (AAMVECONA) in Bocas del Toro, Panamá and The Ara Project (El Proyecto Ara) in Costa Rica.*



Baloo's team of rescuers (above), getting him on his way back to the safety of the pre-release aviary at Manzanilla, where he can recover for his next attempt at freedom (below).



A message of thanks

We are grateful for the broad community support we have received due to our outreach and education efforts. Local residents, tourists and birders marvel at the spectacular sights and sounds of these magnificent creatures. Great Greens were at one time common in our Central American Caribbean habitat, became virtually extinct in our southern zone, and now are being helped to fly free once again, contributing to the rich biodiversity of the area and delight of local communities. Our dedicated station staff and volunteers have greatly contributed to our success.

Enrique Pucci, Vice President
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