

## *The American Federation of Aviculture and the Ara Brasil Institute; a Partnership for the Conservation of the Spix's Macaw and Brazilian Psittacines*

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**T**he American Federation of Aviculture (AFA) and the Ara Brasil Institute, a newly organized Brazilian Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), have recently partnered to help in the Brazilian conservation efforts for the Spix's Macaw (*Cyanopsitta spixii*), one of the world's most critically endangered psittacines.

(See AFA Special Spix's Macaw Report by Natasha Schischakin in Nov/Dec '99 issue *AFA Watchbird*).

The mission of the Ara Brasil Institute is to work on the conservation of psittacines in Brazil, with particular emphasis on the "blue" macaws (Spix's, Lears and Hyacinth). The Institute is founded on the philosophy that suc-

cessful conservation programs need to incorporate a multi-faceted approach, including field research, habitat conservation, community-based conservation, and, when necessary, captive breeding and reintroduction. It is a goal of the Ara Brasil Institute to provide linkage opportunities for the avicultural and zoological communities to partner directly on "in-country" parrot conservation programs in Brazil.

Following publication of the above report in the *AFA Watchbird*, a donor came forward with a pledge of \$30,000 to AFA in support of Spix's conservation. These funds were received in May 2000 and were earmarked by the donor for the implementation of the Ara Brasil Institute and their conservation activities relating to the restoration of Spix's Macaws into their native habitat. This major donation also provided the impetus for the development of various AFA projects that will lend additional financial support to this compelling and critically urgent conservation effort.

In this direction, the Ara Brasil Institute will continue the successful techniques of developing in-country, community-based conservation programs for other Brazilian psittacines, enhancing protection for habitat and ecosystems. By developing a campaign in support of the Spix's Macaw Conservation program, the AFA is providing its members with an opportunity to contribute to the recovery of a species that was considered practically extinct, but which is recovering because of captive breeding and management. It is also a chance to support a multi-faceted conservation approach that has united aviculturists, field researchers, government officials, zoo professionals and the local rural villagers with a single goal—the recovery of the Spix's Macaw, one of the world's most endangered species.

### **Why the Spix's Program is Important to Aviculture**

The Spix's Macaw conservation program is a program that is closely associated with and dependent upon aviculture to save the species from extinction. The Spix's Macaw is endemic to an arid region of savanna scrubland in Northeastern Brazil known as the



Photo by Natasha Schischakin

*The female Spix's Macaw that was released into the wild.*



"caatinga." The loss of habitat from five centuries of human colonization of the region likely contributed to its decline. However, this very rare species was also valued in both the national and international avicultural markets. Because of indiscriminate collection, this already vulnerable species was believed extinct in the wild by 1989. At that time, there were only 11 confirmed birds in captivity worldwide, although many more were rumored to exist. Some ornithologists considered the last few captive birds to be mere relics and that, for all practical purposes, the species could be considered to be extinct. The Brazilian government rejected that view and made it possible for aviculturists to help save the species.

After 10 years of intensive conservation efforts administered by the Brazilian government and the Permanent Committee for the Recovery of the Spix's Macaw, the captive population presently consists of 60 individuals and continues to grow. A reintroduction effort is now in the planning stages. This could not have occurred if

Photo courtesy of Birds International, Inc.



*The future of the Spix's Macaw program – part of the 1999 production at Birds International, Inc. Some of these birds are destined to be reintroduced into the wild.*

the wildlife authorities of the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Natural Renewable Resources – IBAMA (the equivalent of the US Fish and Wildlife Service) had not initiated a unique approach in their last minute initiative to save this species.

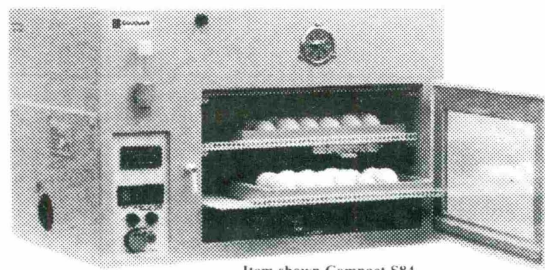
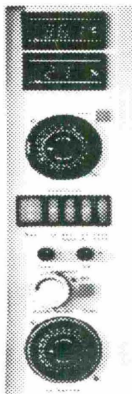
The Brazilians chose to develop a program whose primary focus would be the recovery of this species, and instituted a Permanent Committee for the Recovery of the Spix's Macaw. This

Committee is comprised of a diverse group which includes government officials, ornithologists, zoo specialists, as well as national and international aviculturists holding Spix's Macaws in captivity. The inclusion of aviculturists on the Committee was a bold step for the wildlife authorities, as there had been many calls by ornithologists and conservationists to simply confiscate the birds held by private aviculturists.

In the late 1980s, aviculture was

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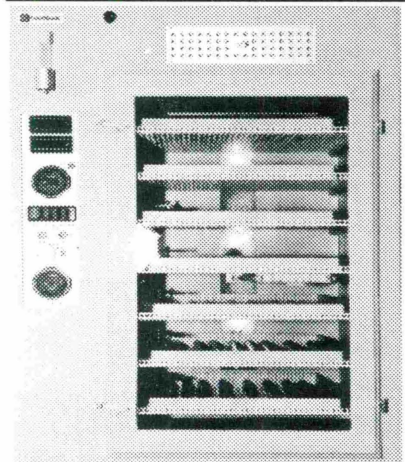


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often cited as the primary reason for the near extinction of this species, which was indiscriminately poached to the brink of extinction for the internal (within Brazil) and international bird trade. However, aviculturists were also involved in sounding the alarm that this species, always considered rare, was going extinct. The Spix's Macaw Conservation Program recognizes the value of aviculture, in particular the fact that private aviculturists involved in the program are key to the recovery of the species.

In the past 10 years, research associated with this program has generated important tools, such as the genetic information that is now used on a regular basis by aviculture (DNA sexing). Another key element of the conservation research involved in the Spix's Macaw Program is the reintroduction effort which is testing previous assumptions about the potential for re-establishment of wild populations using captive-bred birds.

### Project Status

As the breeding program is reaching potential sustainability, it is now possible to utilize offspring for reintroduction purposes. The lengthy process of reestablishing birds in the wild will begin this year with the transfer of five captive-bred birds to the already established reintroduction facility for eventual release. This milestone in the conservation program is reason for cautious optimism for the recovery of a species many considered lost only 10 years ago.

A number of organizations, including the Brazilian wildlife authorities of IBAMA, the Fundacion Loro Parque (Spain), Birds International, Inc. (Philippines), the Sao Paulo Zoo (Brazil), and Houston Zoo (USA) have been actively involved in the development and support of the conservation program for this species. The Fundacion Loro Parque alone has provided over \$ 500,000 in funding over the last 10 years of the project, contributing greatly to the field and community effort.

However, as the project enters the reintroduction phase of the long-term conservation effort, it has become

increasingly important to provide funds for a permanent support infrastructure located in the region of Brazil where the species occurs. This includes financial support for locally-based field research, and a means to permanently acquire the land on which the species, the reintroduction facility, and the research base are all located. A locally-based program with community involvement is the key to the viability of the program for the long term.

### The Need For ARA Brasil Institute

The Ara Brasil Institute was formed to provide the stable infrastructure needed to acquire ownership of the habitat and maintain research and management programs for the long-term, insulating them from potential political changes and governmental instability. The formation of a single organization that can work with the Brazilian recovery committees will facilitate the implementation of the conservation priorities and objectives for these species. The Institute will be able to negotiate contracts and agreements for collaboration with other (national and international) organizations and NGOs, purchase land, receive grants, and directly solicit funds for its programs. The Ara Brasil Institute

can own and manage the land for the long-term. The field research and program for the Spix's (and Illiger's) Macaws will continue under the oversight of the Field Coordinator Yara Barros, who is also serving in a dual position as Field Coordinator for the Spix's Macaw Program and Executive Director of the Ara Brasil Institute.

### AFA Projects

At the AFA National Convention in Los Angeles, President Gallaway and Natasha Schischakin, Coordinator of the Captive Breeding Working Group for the Spix's Macaw, will give a presentation on the Spix's Macaw conservation campaign in the House of Delegates. This will include a preview of a video presentation and slide show that has been prepared for use by AFA's Regional Directors as formal presentations at club meetings within their regions plus the announcement and unveiling of other aspects of this project.


The House of Delegates presentation will "kick-off" AFA's Campaign for the Spix's Macaw for fall 2000 and spring 2001. Watch for details of how you as an individual aviculturist can actively participate in this exciting and dramatic effort to save one of the world's most critically endangered species from the brink of extinction. 

Photo by Natasha Schischakin



*A group photo of the students of the rural schoolhouse and visiting Spix's Macaw Committee members.*