

Brazilian Blues

Text and Photos by Tad Foringer, Hampton, Virginia

A dream comes true. The title does not refer to music or depression, but rather to the magnificent, endangered Hyacinth and Lear's Macaws of Brazil. Ever since the first organized Kaytee trip in 1997, my wife, Rita, and I had this adventure high on our dream list. However, time and cost had prevented us from going. Then Dr. Charles Munn, formerly a senior conservation zoologist for the Wildlife Conservation Society and presently Chairman of the Board of a non-profit conservation group called "Tropical Nature" (www.tropicalnature.org), sent us a photo of the Lear's Macaw and an invitation to visit not only the Hyacinth site but also the more recently opened Lear's site. Tropical Nature is an international conservation organization that works closely with various partners to achieve conservation through ecotourism. To facilitate this nature-based ecotourism, Tropical Nature owns Tropical Nature Travel (TNT), a full-service travel agency (www.tropicalnaturetravel.com). We were to be hosted, with a reduction in the cost of the adventure, by the BioBrasil Foundation (www.biobrasil.org), one of Tropical Nature's partners, which is dedicated to the conservation of threatened fauna and flora throughout Brazil. Charlie also suggested that we plan our travel dates to take advantage of an existing charter flight to the Hyacinth site. Offers we could not refuse. So, we called TNT (877-888-1770) to make the arrangements.

Getting there. I've got to tell you up front that this is not an easy trip. It started out poorly when our originating flight in the U.S. was cancelled due to weather and then other delays caused us to miss our international flight. We had lost a valuable day! I was able to contact TNT's Elizabeth Sanders and she linked up to the folks in Brazil to advise them of the delay. Cid Simoes and Ms. Paola Segura, of BioBrasil, reacted with well-thought-out revised arrangements. They met us at the Salvador airport, took us to the very nice

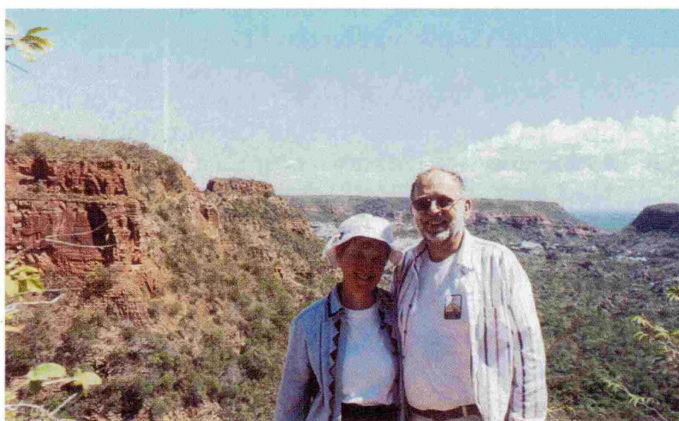
Posada Eckerlina where we could refresh and eat, and then transferred us to the bus station where we connected with an overnight sleeping bus or "leito" to Barreiras. The 11-hour ride was not too bad as we were on a full size, air-conditioned bus with only 23 seats, each of which folded out into a bed. We were met at the bus station by a small truck and driver for the 180 mile (roads were pretty bad at times), 6-hour drive to the hamlet of Sao Goncalo de Gurgeia, in the state of Piaui, and on to the Hyacinth site. Our guide for this portion of the trip, Marie-Helene Burle from France, accompanied us. Marie turned out to be one of the most serious and knowledgeable ornithologists that we have ever encountered.

HYACINTH SITE

Hyacinth Valley Camp

We actually visited three sites within this cerrado (hot, dry and scrubby) area of Brazil. Our first stop, and main base of operations, was the Hyacinth Valley Camp. It consisted of seven separate, double-occupancy cement and tile-roofed cabins or bungalows, each with private shower and bath. There was also a covered social and dining area as well as the owner's home.

The owner "Lourival" owns 2,500 acres of the surrounding acres and keeps a few cattle and horses. From the 1970s through 1994, Lourival was a master animal dealer and trapper. He made an excellent living dealing in wild parrots and other animals until he met Charlie Munn in 1995, who convinced him to become a protector and to show off wildlife rather than trade in the black market. Thus, in return for the promise of income from tourists and other incentives, Lourival no longer poaches wildlife. He makes less money than he did as a trapper but is happy that he no longer has to worry about being arrested and jailed or to risk his life climbing the cliffs where the



Author, Tad Foringer, and his wife, Rita keep and breed parrots and hold a great interest in all birds and wildlife. They have visited Latin America on ten occasions to study parrots and other critters in the wild.



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Hyacinths nest. He knows of several men who have been seriously injured in falls and has learned from a cohort how nasty a Brazilian jail can be.

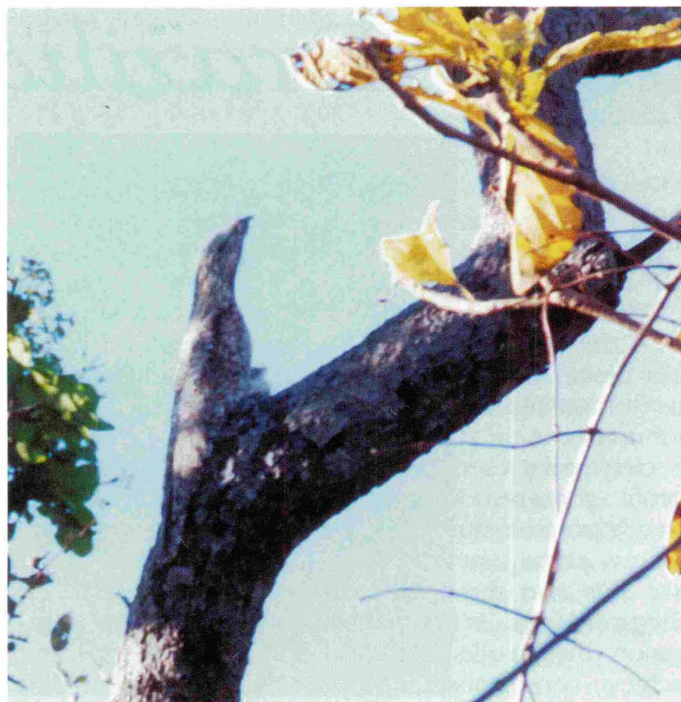
Finally, Lourival genuinely enjoys watching the birds fly free and earning money by showing off the wildlife on his property. For the next 5 days, Lourival was our constant companion in driving our safari-type truck and spotting birds and other wildlife that even Marie missed. He knew the territory!

After a late, but typical, Brazilian lunch we headed straight to the Hyacinth blind about a mile from the camp. In seven trips to Peru to study parrots in the wild I have been in many blinds, but have never seen one like this! After passing through a 500-foot-long, thatch-enclosed tunnel we entered a large concrete building with coverable portholes from which to observe the Hyacinths from a distance of about 30 feet. This large blind (approx. 12x25 feet) even had carpet!

An area 20 to 30 feet in front of the blind is regularly "baited" with palm nuts, a favorite food. Thus the Hyacinths visit every day, March through mid-August, tourists or not. This regular supply of food not only guarantees certain sightings but also keeps the birds healthier, promotes second chick survival due to food abundance, and reduces their need to make dangerous food-seeking flights to remote, unprotected areas where they would be at risk from "sport" hunters during the non-nesting season.

The afternoon "show" was great with upwards of 40 Hyacinths making an appearance. The blind was well positioned so that we could observe the Hyacinths feeding, close-up, at ground level. Just above, they preened and played in the trees, making raucous sounds. The photo opportunities were outstanding and I took far more pictures than I ever imagined – but how often does one see this many magnificent creatures at one time? I realized, at this point, that the rigorous journey was already well worth the effort.

On the walk back to the camp, and on other outings nearby, we were treated to sightings of a myriad of



Finally I saw a vertical figure, about a foot high, resembling a bird with an eye slit and having the same texture and color as the tree. The great "patoo" was actually the Great Potoo. Can you find him in the photo? See the baby?

birds. We saw the Peach-fronted Conure, Blue-fronted Amazon, Blue-fronted Conure, Blue-winged Parrotlet, Red-shouldered Macaw, Swallow-tailed Hummingbird, Fork-tailed Palm-swift, Parauque, Common Potoo, Tropical Screech-owl, Rusty-margined Guan, Tanagers (Sacaya, Hepatic, Hooded, and Guira), Green-barred and Lineated Woodpeckers, Blue-crowned Trogon and Motmot, Rufous Hornero, and the Brown-crested and Boat-billed Flycatchers. The Swallow-tail Kites, Helmeted Manakins, Red-legged Seriema, and Curl-crested Jays were also seen among many others that we enjoyed.

Hyacinth Cliffs Camp

The next day, we drove the 15 miles to this camp, which is configured similar to the Hyacinth Valley Camp, less an owner's house. Along the way, Lourival took us on several detours to see the traditional nest sites for the Blue and Gold Macaw and Jandaya Conure. It was a fun ride as we left the path to make new paths through the savannah in our bouncing truck. During one of these side trips, we saw a family of four Greater Rheas and a pair of Blue and Gold Macaws near their nest site.

After dark, we placed some leftover meat scraps and bananas near one of the vacant bungalows and sat inside to see if the Maned Wolf would make an appearance. Other tourists have waited until midnight or later for this beautiful, globally endangered wolf that sometimes doesn't even appear. We lucked out because he came at 9:00 P.M. and we got to see him and still get a full night's rest! Once the wolf arrived and began to eat the bait, we were able to put a flashlight beam on him and get some good photos. The wolf is the size of a large German shepherd and is rust



Lear's Macaws in feeding in the trees.

colored with a black mane above the shoulders. He stayed on site for about five minutes, a good show. While on the subject of mammals, we saw several others in various places: Black Howler Monkey, Crab-Eating Fox, Brown Capuchin Monkey and the endearing Tufted-eared Marmoset.

The next morning was one of our favorites. Lourival drove us to an area that even Marie had not seen yet. It was a grassy valley at the foot of the cliffs where the Hyacinths and Green-winged Macaws nest. We saw the Toco Toucan, Red-shouldered Macaw, Jandaya Conure, Yellow-faced Amazon, Black-chested Buzzard-eagle, Black-collared Hawk, Crane Hawk and Laughing Falcon. We also observed the Coal-crested Finch, White-naped Jay, White-rumped Monjita, and the Yellow-headed Caracara. After this great morning, we headed back to the Hyacinth Valley Camp for a late lunch before heading to the next site.

Greenwing Valley

Also referred to as Boa Vista or Mauro's Place, this site was a two-hour drive and near more cliffs favored by the Green-winged Macaws. Mauro is also a former trapper who, until 1999, used to capture about 70 macaws and 50 amazons per year. Since 2000, Charlie and the Gabriel Foundation have teamed up to pay Mauro and his brother to be protectors instead of trappers. Mauro now spends his time patrolling the valley against trappers or hunters and taking care of his livestock. He has also "developed" a unique monkey show that I will discuss later. Our accommodations were somewhat more austere – we slept in a tent.

Since we were short a day due to our delayed arrival to Brazil, we crammed two days of activity into one. We began by visiting a lagoon that was little more than a big puddle due to the dry season. Here we saw the Masked Water Tyrant, Great Kiskadee, Buff-necked Ibis, Muscovy Duck, Wattled Jacana, Southern Lapwing, Green Kingfisher, and the very special Horned Screamer. During this day, Marie, Mauro, and Lourival began to tease us about something called the great "patoo" that we would see later in the day. Rita and I had the feeling that they were promoting something unusual or special by building our anticipation.

Our next outing was to drive to the base of a high butte, or plateau, where the Green-winged Macaws nest. When we arrived, the hillside looked awfully steep and tall, like a cliff. Marie told us that one of the Kaytee group, using GPS, measured it as 1,248 feet tall. It looked higher than that and, during the long and hot climb up a zigzag rocky trail, I began to think we were climbing Everest! But with some pulling and pushing at times by our guides, WE MADE IT. Hikers in very good shape can make the climb in 20 minutes or so. From the top, we had glorious views in all directions and the wind cooled us. We walked to points above the macaw nest holes and from above we watched transfixed as a breeding pair and a fledged chick soared above, in front of, and below us for nearly ten minutes. Super show – again I used up a bunch of film.

We returned to our tent site for a late lunch during which our guides kept talking about our upcoming adventure to see the great "pahtoo." Finally, after lunch and a rest to rejuvenate our sore bodies from the arduous cliff climb, we were told it was time to see this "pawtwo" or whatever. So, with excitement building, we went for a short hike, culminating in a walk down the perfectly pampered "puttu" path to a clearing with a 20-foot tree in the center. We were told to find this thing and had no idea whether to look for – a protuberance that resembled our idea of a "phutoo," or a bird or a flower.

Finally I saw a vertical figure, about a foot high, resembling a bird with an eye slit and having the same texture and color as the tree. The great "patoo" was actually the Great Potoo and the extra special surprise was that a four-day-old chick, in the same rigid posture as the parent, was nestled at the parents' feet! These night hunters roost during the day in the same spot on their favorite tree and seem frozen in an upright position. When we made some noise, the bird opened one enormous brown eye but did not feel threatened enough to move. Fantastic.

Our last adventure of the day was to visit another blind to see the tool-using Brown Capuchin Monkeys. Mauro had arranged a playground of sorts with water bowls, limbs for climbing, and large flat rocks. The area was baited with the monkey's favorite nuts that were as large as lemons. There were also grapefruit and football sized rocks scattered around. About ten monkeys came to eat the nut treats. However, the nuts have a very hard shell. To solve that problem, a monkey would place the nut on one of the big flat rocks and proceed to slam the nut with a rock until the shell cracked. Then the monkey would eat the coconut-like meat out of the shell. I had heard about primates using tools and it was a special event to see this first hand.

By the time we finally left Greenwing Valley to return to the Hyacinth Valley Camp it was getting dark. We had had another great day and traveling by night atop our safari truck, we were treated to the dazzling stars of the Southern Hemisphere. We saw a number of shooting stars and the distant constellations looked like glittering clouds. It doesn't get much better than that.

Goodbye to the Hyacinth site. The next morning saw us headed back to catch the morning show at the Hyacinth blind. The turnout was somewhat smaller at about two-dozen birds but the quality was excellent with more playing and preening than we observed several days earlier. In any event, seeing this many Hyacinths in one place will give goose bumps to any parrot fanatic.

After lunch, Lourival and Marie accompanied us to the village to link up with our car and driver for the trip back to Barreiras and the night bus. Since Marie was remaining on site, we were alone with a Portuguese driver who spoke no English while we had no Portuguese. That made for an interesting trip but somehow we got to Barreiras, had dinner and got on the correct bus to Salvador. Since we were still pressed

for time, we were met in Salvador by our guide for the Lear's site, given breakfast, and loaded into another truck for the nine-hour drive to the site. All told, it was about 28 hours travel time between the Hyacinth and Lear's sites! But, again, it was well worth the effort.

This is a good place to write a few words about travel modes and options. The Hyacinth site is west-northwest of Salvador and the Lear's site is due north. There is not a viable land option to go directly from one site to another so economy travelers go through Salvador. If using land transportation only, the travel hours add up quickly. A better option is to put together a group of four to seven people and then use charter air. There are good landing strips within an hour or so of each site and, although more expensive, much time and energy can be saved.

LEAR'S SITE

Lear's Ranch

BioBrasil leases a ranch house for use by visiting tourists. A local family comes out at those times to cook and do housekeeping. The ranch is located about 300 miles from Salvador and the last two hours out of Canudos involve bumpy and dusty roads. Our guide for this leg of our adventure was Sam Williams from the United Kingdom. Sam has been assisting the BioBrasil Foundation and the Brazilian Government's Avian Research Center (CMAVE) by observing Lear's nesting behavior and developing a photo ID catalog by using unique bill markings to differentiate, like we would use fingerprints. Sam came to the Lear's site through the World Parrot Trust and helps out in a variety of ways, such as guiding and building blinds. Sam has a deep parrot passion, dating from his early teens, and was extremely knowledgeable about the Lear's Macaw and other parrots.

The Lear's Macaw Blinds

Yes, plural, because there are separate blinds for mornings and afternoons so that the birds can be studied and photographed in the best light. Our first morning visit was outstanding with a count of 21 birds. Considering that the latest

government (IBAMA) census estimated a total of 280 Lear's Macaws, a goodly percentage of the world's wild population was seen in less than an hour! Again, the viewing area was baited – this time with the nuts from the licuri palm. BioBrasil employs five local men, two of whom are ex-trappers, to gather nuts, camp at the cliffs to prevent poaching, maintain the blinds, and other related duties.

This baiting, again, continues every day and provides ample food for the birds year round. Sam estimates the successful fledging of 30 chicks this year, several from multiple clutches that probably would not have survived without food abundance. We observed several chicks in the tree in front of us begging for food from their parents. The Lear's is somewhat smaller than the Hyacinth, has a higher pitched call, and has a greenish cast to the head feathers. We also observed more dominant behavior at the feeding site by several of the birds as they chased others away. It was also interesting to see a bird grab a string of licuri nuts and fly to another tree to eat. The bird would perch with the same foot holding the food and use the other foot to eat. We noted some consistent left-foot right-foot preferences among various individuals.

The Cliffs

We made two separate trips with our driver, Augusto, and his truck. The cliffs were about 45 minutes away but still on property rented to BioBrasil for Lear's conservation. As we stood at the foot of one cliff system, Sam informed us that 20% of all known active Lear's nests were in those particular tall, yellowish cliffs. As we looked further down the valley surrounded by other cliffs, the statistic went to 72%. That equates to 60% of all known active nests in the world.

As we explored this area, we were struck by stark beauty with huge cactus and palms side by side, towering rock formations (one referred to the finger of God and another called the ship's bow), and the cliffs themselves. Parrots were everywhere! Dozens of Blue-fronted Amazons and Blue-crowned

Conures soared overhead and perched in nest cavities in the cliff face or in the trees overhead. Of course, many Lear's Macaws shouted their presence as well and I got some great photos of a pair in their nest. We were treated to a dozen Illiger's Macaws flying above us and studied a pair, through a spotting scope, preening and socializing. The show lasted over ten minutes.

On the rides to and from the cliffs, we discovered that the area, referred to as Raso de Catarina, has excellent birding opportunities. I will try not to repeat species that we saw on the first leg of our trip. Seen were the Scaled and Picui-ground Doves, Blue-winged Parrotlet, Smooth-billed Ani, Guira Cuckoo, Scarlet-throated Tanager, Red-cowled Cardinal, Vultures (Turkey, Black, and King), Roadside and Harris's Hawks, White-browed Guan, Tropical Kingbird, Crimson-crested Woodpecker, Cactus Conure, and the Cliff Flycatcher among many others.

All too soon, our two days and three nights at the Lear's site were over. We reluctantly piled into Augusto's truck for our return to Salvador. Once again, our guide remained at the site to continue his volunteer work for CEMAVE and BioBrasil. Augusto did not have much English, but, hey, we were becoming veterans of the pantomime and basic Portuguese and thoroughly enjoyed the trip.

BOTTOM LINE

Our visit to the Hyacinth and Lear's Macaw sites was an amazing adventure and even a life experience. Not only parrot fanatics but also serious birders or monkey/wolf lovers should add this trip to their dream lists. And then – make it happen! ♦

Author, Tad Foringer, a parrot breeder and aviculturist, lives in Hampton, Virginia. He has visited Latin America on ten occasions to study parrots and other critters in the wild. He welcomes comments and questions:

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