

From Kerema to Port Moresby:

The Journey of Five Poached Parrots

Alfredo P Hernandez, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

[Editor's Note: Some of you may not have traveled much in the remote areas of the world where many of our favorite birds come from. The people of the forests, hills, and jungles in much of the tropical world do not share the "warm and fuzzy" attitude many of us hold toward birds. We love our birds. They eat their birds – or trap and sell them to buy food. This article has some sad aspects combined with the writer's real love for his birds. Here you'll get a glimpse of how it is "out there." SLD, ed.]

Scouting

As in a flash, the bird darted northward some 50 feet above the three nest poachers, squeaking in monotonous tones as it went. The chatter came from a cluster of giant trees whose dark shadows still veiled the thick and wild undergrowth below. For a moment, the three young men couldn't contain their excitement.

The past four days the men – Takale Konia, Bako Yakham and Kensi Bai – observed the same parrot, or so they thought, taking the same path in flight as it left that ancient-looking tree on its way to the open fields as far as their eyes can see, and back. By the look of the tree, they thought that it would take six men with their arms stretched out and joined together to go around its base.

They finally concluded with certainty, as they had been doing the last three years, that something big was going on inside that overwhelming canopy of foliage. They could only guess the exact spot where the nest was located.

Konia, the 28-year-old leader of the group, looked eastward and marked the time when the bird passed overhead: more or less 5:30 A.M., as hinted by the streak of upward, faint yellow rays breaking through the clouds that hovered atop a nearby mountain.

Shortly after that, they decided to have a closer look the next morning, about the same time. As they begun the trek back to the low lying fields on their way to their mountain side village, the whole place gradually awoke to the gleeful explosion of birdcalls and cacophony of the cicada morning song.

Check the Nest

The next morning, with the bird gone for five minutes, Konia started to work his way up the giant tree. He had guessed that it shot 200 feet towards the sky, just like the rest of the towering trees nearby, as if conspiring to shut out the sun from reaching the flurry of undergrowth below.

Slung around his shoulder was a bilum (a hand-woven multi-coloured thread bag) containing several six-inch nails, a hammer, a loop of rope, and a flash light. He could also use the bilum to carry the birds down, if such birds existed in that canopy. As he pulled himself up, he hammered six-inch nails deep into the slippery trunk, distancing them a meter above each other.

The spikes served as his foot and handholds to reach the first branch the size of his body ten feet above. From there, he would launch himself again for the next branch,

which is a little higher this time. This was no easy job but he had done this many times before in the quest for nests. The coming and going of that singular bird in clearly showed that a nest was somewhere above him. If they were lucky, this tree should have a colony on it.

The hunter found a hole that led to a cavity inside the trunk. A nest lies a mere foot away from the entrance. The rustling he caused while he parted away the crisp round leaves of the crawling vines camouflaging the nest entrance triggered a chorus of tiny squeaks from some creatures inside.

He fished out the flashlight and trained the beam of light towards the nest. There, he saw two black birds, crouching as lumps, screaming and squirming, their heads bobbing up and down. Expectant huge mouths opened wide and stretched out towards the source of the beam. The man guessed that they were just a few days old, and was not surprised that the hen was not with them.

The shells from which they were freed still appeared fresh as well as the carcasses of unconsumed worms that the mother, or the father parrot could have brought home a day before. He did not touch the chicks, but instead, reported to the two younger men patiently waiting below what he had discovered.

They decided to come back after four weeks. By that time, the birds would grow full feathers. At just five weeks old, the two could endure the stress of a whole-day travel from Kerema, an outback coastal township close to the rainforests of Gulf province in the southern side of Papua New Guinea. This is where the nest was found, and from there, they would have to transport the babies to the small city of Port Moresby. Buyers for the two birds and others that they may poach later from the same tree could be found there. And so it is that one day in Port Moresby, they found me.

Port Moresby

I have been here seven years.

Port Moresby is the principal city and capital of Papua New Guinea. It's overall landscape is highlighted by rolling terrain and clusters of grassy hills stretching farther out of the city proper towards the suburbs of Boroko, Gerehu, and Hohola. These three areas make up the industrial and commercial hubs of the city.

By its name alone, it is a small port city named by Captain John Moresby who discovered the harbor in 1873. Carved out of the hilly terrain that overlooked a natural harbor, the port is on the southern coast of the country and surrounds part of Fairfax Harbour.

The city's few commercial and corporate buildings do not rise beyond six floors to make an impressive sight on the skyline, except for the fact that they dotted the hillsides that rise on the northern side of the city. Likewise, you can find residential houses, which are mostly occupied by expatriates on the hillsides. At night its burning lights are like shimmering jewels from afar.

The locals, mostly poor, are relegated to grass-and-wood houses in settlements or squatter areas and hillside villages at the outskirts of the city. Many families also live in a colony of stilt houses of timber and galvanized iron roofing materials rising above the seawater on the fringes of the bay not far from the city itself.

But Port Moresby, with a population nearing 300,000, is rather an odd place because it is a blend of the old and the new. Here you can find antiquity clashing with modernity. Although the city enjoys the benefits from computer technology brought in by foreign companies, we still see the living remnants from the tribal age.

Occasionally you will see men in shopping centers walking around in their traditional attire, complete with their bows and arrows. Highlanders who came down to the city for the first time were seen walking barefooted, delighting on

the scenes from Asian-owned shops which they are perhaps seeing for the first time in their lives.

On weekends, the city is virtually a graveyard. Shops closed down from noon on Saturday, and open only for the next business day on Monday. Hence, only very few people would be seen walking around or vehicles rolling by, except for those motorists going to the hotel to attend to some business or to have meals or coffee.

After all these years, I came to like the place in unique ways. To put it simply, I would say I have already adjusted myself to the way life is to be worked out here. I can get to the farthest place that I had wanted to go to in just 15 minutes, as there is not much traffic to deal with unlike crowded cities like Manila, Hong Kong, or Singapore. In short, there is no sense of immediacy as far as day to day life here is concerned.

The city airspace is still clear to this day, being unharmed by excessive fumes and exhausts from vehicles, which however, are now growing in alarming number every year. Never mind if there are no movie houses, international standard shopping malls, or exciting nightlife here – things that are usually a landmark in most Asian cities. This I can do without as for now.

Just like other Filipinos who looked for better opportunities overseas, I found myself setting foot in this strange country in December of 1993. Although I heard much about Paupua New Guinea (PNG) from my parents, who lived and worked in this country for quite sometime towards the end of the 70s, I was not prepared for what I was to see on the early morning that I stepped out of the Air Niugini aircraft at Jackson's Airport.

Call it a culture shock.


Walking towards the building terminal which was some 200 meters from the parked aircraft, I was struck by the sight of curly-haired, barefooted, betel nut chewing, dark-skinned locals clinging to the wire security

fence that separated them from the rest of us. In that same manner, a number of the local people who came near the aircraft to meet their newly arrived friends or relatives walked barefooted, although they wore business suits and everyday casual wear. It struck me odd, because amidst the display of some modernity all over the place, there were people who still lived in the tribal age, or so I thought.

The first rule, or sort of warning that my Filipino colleague explained: Never go out of the housing compound alone. Or to be more precise, don't go out unless you're in a vehicle.

About this time, as I discovered, the law and order situation of the city has deteriorated due to widespread poverty in the country. Although PNG is rich in timber, oil, and gold, not to mention its fisheries resources – all are commercially exploited by foreign companies – the government continues to suffer financially. The people blame it on

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corruption, which is widespread in all levels of the government, and to the head of the government's penchant for revamping his Cabinet once in a while, thus eroding confidence from foreign investors.

On a day to day basis, life had been a little difficult for most because of the presence of criminal elements notoriously known as raskols (rascals) who have committed hold-ups, robbery-break-ins, kidnapping, pack rape, and car stealing with impunity. With expatriate residents being mostly the helpless victims, the city police seemed at a loss on how to deal with the culprits. This is was one reason why expatriates – Australians, Asians, Africans, or Europeans here have dreaded leaving the safety of their homes, unless they were to go to work or do some errands at the supermarket.

Having a night out wasn't safe for many of them, including me. And no one would dare going to the public market for fresh seafood and vegetables. In fact, there was some sort of discreet advisory from consulates and embassies to their respective nationals to stay away from places like public markets or driving out of the city proper, so as to avoid the chances of encountering the criminals. Another good reason why overseas tour operators have by-passed the country (despite its many unique things to offer to visitors) in favor of safer tourism destinations in Asia and the Pacific.

On the first weekend I arrived, boredom immediately overwhelmed me, having been used to the frenzy of life back in Manila. I was like a prisoner in the compound, just looking out to the street and trying to digest what on earth I was doing here.

Then, out of sheer curiosity I ventured out of the compound to head straight towards the corner of the main road just some 30 meters away from our gate. I just wanted to have a look of the surroundings, which are adorned with giant acacia trees. Women that were selling betel nuts by the roadside near our compound came up to me with a stern

warning that I should not leave my compound, since it was not safe to be walking around.

"Raskols will get you!" the woman said, prompting me to dash back to our compound. During my seven years of living here, I was attacked by raskols three times. The last two incidents were somewhat violent.

You might be wondering why there is such a rush in criminality in the city. The answer to this is that few jobs are available to the local people simply because most of them are poor and illiterate. They had no skills that would qualify them to work in either foreign-owned private companies or government offices. In most cases, those who found employment were assigned to do menial jobs.

This cannot be helped. Employers would prefer hiring workers from overseas because they have the education, training, and experience, and, most especially, a proper work attitude. Life became much harder when the country's currency, the kina, lost its value against the US dollars. When I first came here, it used to be one US dollar to a kina. Now, the currency is just worth 30 US cents.

Although a recent government report on human development claimed an adult literacy rate of 45 percent, it is commonly held that of the country's over 5 million people, only 10 per cent are literate, and of this, a small per cent have acquired college education. The rest, especially those who lived in the highlands, simply cannot read nor write.

Most of those involved in criminal activity here came from the tribal villages in the highlands and decided to stay here for good. Since they were not equipped with skills to work in modern day workplaces such as small factories, repair shops, or retail stores, they went hungry, thus forcing them to resort to crime for survival.

But as far as the native people of Port Moresby (commonly referred to as Papuans) are concerned, they

earn their keep fishing, raising vegetables and other crops that they sell in the local markets. Others make a living selling betel nuts in shopping centers and roadsides. Betel nut chewing has been such a part of the PNG culture that even children the age of five have acquired the habit.

Papuans who have education and skill are employed in some trading firms, shops, and government offices on starvation wages. There are also enterprising people, (mostly farmers from far-flung villages) with access to public transport that come to the city to sell their produce in the local public markets. Others, like village hunters, bring in meat of deer, cassowary, tree kangaroo, wild pig, and crocodile, among others.

Occasionally, some travel long distances to come to the city to sell wild animals (birds for instance) just like those the three nest poachers from Kerema do for livelihood. That's how I came to own the five Eclectus parrots that I love calling, "The Gang of 4 and a Babiest."

Poached Birds Arrive

In early November of 2000, a guy from some far-flung village, which I later learned was Kerema, happened by our company compound. The man, who turned out to be Takale Konia, was carrying two young birds in his bilum. The two tiny creatures looked awful at their very young age, very black and very fragile. Obviously, the birds had travelled a long distance by truck-bus known here as PMV in a very stressful condition.

The highway from Kerema to Port Moresby is best described as non-existent for lack of maintenance, thus, making the daylong trip an agonizing ritual for everybody. How much more stressful for these two babies?

Seeing these two birds, I was immediately upset and was revolted. I had to decide whether or not to get them. If I didn't, there's no chance they would be any better off in somebody else's hand; or they could die while on their journey to the

next potential buyer. I paid for them right there and then (an amount less than five US dollars). At home, I deposited them in a bathroom that I seldom used. A computer box I found inside a cabinet served as their first home.

A week later, Konia, this time with two companions – Bako Yakham and Kensi Abai – came back with three very young female Eclectus. A hunter himself, Konia said the birds were from different nests. This revelation struck a cord deep inside me, although I managed to contain the burst of outrage seething inside of me. I knew that the sacred nests of those innocent creatures had been violated again by this man, who obviously finds it just natural for him to do what he had done.

The local hunters had totally opposite perception about wild birds, or wild birds as pets and companions. He and others did this to make a living for families in the outback.

I was in a dilemma: If I didn't buy these fragile birds, their lives might be in great peril. If I did, another problem in my hands is magnified, since I am not experienced to handle pets parrots. I agonised over my dilemma, but in the end, I

decided to get them. Now I was stuck with five orphans, and I did not know how to deal with them.

(Earlier, the eldest of the five whom I named Del Torro grew a complete set of wing feathers. One day, he managed to get out of his cage and flew away for good. I have never recovered him.)

On a third occasion, the three nest poachers came back with two, two-week old birds. Their coming surprised me. Nevertheless I didn't ask any questions, but told them that these two babies would be the last, stressing to them that they won't have any buyer next time – if ever they bring anymore. I paid them for the two birds and took them home.


A week later, a close friend of mine heard of my young babies. He and his wife came to my home to let me know that they would like to have one of the babies for their young daughter Joan, a pre-grade-school kid. They must have been encouraged to keep one as a pet as they have been seeing my flock every time they came to our compound for weekend swimming at our pool. I told them of the complications of keeping one as a pet, but they promised to do their best to

raise it and be a part of the family. One of these two babies is Paulo, now about nine weeks old.

The Gang is of Red-sided New Guinea Eclectus subspecies, composed of Freddie (about nine months); Ally, Xena, and Britney (about eight months); and Paulo a.k.a. PauPau (nine weeks, as of May 20, 2001). Interestingly, Paulo is the last one that I got from the poachers. He is of the Australian Eclectus, *Eclectus roratus macgillivrayi*, subspecies and has grown bigger than the rest of the gang. Paulo's flock is found in Australia on the Cape York Peninsula, which is two hours by plane from Port Moresby.

At first, I kept my first four parrots in a small cage 1.5m x 1m in size. After clipping their wings, I have allowed them out of their cage so they exercise their wing muscles and claws by playing in the bush and climbing the palm and acacia trees just in front of my house. In the afternoon they would come down from their favorite perches to go back to the cage.

Raising five Eclectus is quite a challenge. They're like kids that never grow up, which means you have to look after them forever. It




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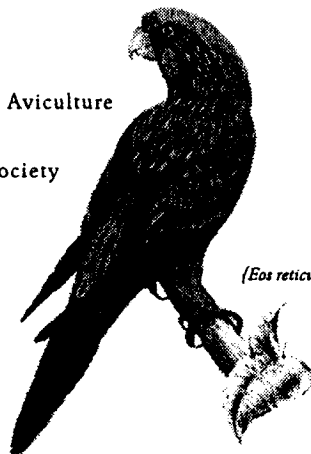
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was also worrisome since there is no avian doctor in Port Moresby who can look after my flock in case one of them is ill. Likewise, I always had problems on how to make them eat the food I serve them. They would rather pick on sunflower seeds than eat the food that I have cooked for them. But thanks to an Internet community of Eclectus lovers - The Eclectus Connection (TEC), I was getting the guidance I badly needed on how to care for my birds.

In any case, I have allowed them complete freedom by encouraging each one to climb the trees and stay on their perch for as long as they like during the day. At first, I decided to keep them indoors - that is, in my bedroom - for most of the week and only let them enjoy life fully by nipping leaves and chewing twigs atop their favorite palm and acacia trees or bushes on weekends. In my bedroom, I installed a huge branch I cut from a mango tree in my compound. Along with this, I assembled a sort of playground made of toys that I ordered from Australia. I called this "dangling funplace" because of the colorful ropes and rings and other paraphernalia that hanged from the ceiling. Here, my birds really loved to climb and play.

Lately, I have noticed my babies rarely stayed long in the dangling funplace. Instead, they spent most of their time perched on my bedroom's window jalousies and curtain bar hanger while looking out to the trees outside whose leaves invitingly brushed against a portion of my window. And chewing on the plastic hooks of my window drapes. I had pondered on this scene for days. Then one day, I decided that they should really stay outdoors.

Once I completed this, I felt that I made just the right decision. They are much happier now as they screamed and played among the branches and leaves of the palm and acacia trees, just like when they would have been in the rainforests had they not been snatched from their natural home.

Just before nightfall, my birds

would climb to the food station on my porch to eat the meal that I prepared before going to work at noon. Having finished with it, they would march to the bush just in front of the house to roost for the night.

Working overseas, you know, I haven't had much of a chance to look after my only child Juan Paulo, who is now a man of 22. So when my five birds came, I have treated them as if they were my children. When they were out there in the bush, I would drop what I was doing from time to time to call out their names, as in a classroom roll call, to make sure that no one was missing. Having heard their names, my babies would simply respond back with a faint "hmmmm" and go about with their birdie business. Hearing this, I felt better.

Occasionally, just before noon, I would give them a nice ala-rainforest shower from the garden hose while they were up in the bush and watch them flap their wings and ruffle their feathers as they went aga-ga over the cool bath. It was cool to watch them in their wild-like character! And just like a real dad, I blew my top not a few times when not one of them touched the food I cooked for lunch or dinner. Or when they wouldn't come down from the treetop when it was getting dark despite my desperate pleas, thus forcing me to climb up the tree to collect them.

Paulo, the youngest of the flock (nearing 10 weeks at this writing) has rapidly grown into a young adult Eclectus. He used to stay in the cage for most of the time since he was just a baby, although I have allowed him to walk the grassy lawn to get some sun once in a while. One early evening after taking dinner, he got out of his cage, made a soft, impressive tumble on the floor, and glided down the porch's stairs. From the bottom step, he sprang himself and landed on the grassy lawn, and trotted straight to the foot of a low-lying bush. Then he clawed on the small trunk of the leafy bush and pulled himself up until he

reached the branch where the other birds were roosting for the night. This was his first time to roost overnight with the older birds under the blue Papuan skies. From then on, he has been sleeping with the Gang of Four every night and there seemed to be no problem at all.

On nights when I was relaxed and free, I would collect my babies from their perches and bring them to my room. There, I hummed to each some melodies while enclosed in my arms. As I have noticed, Paulo has related much more to the tune he was hearing than the rest. As he sat on my chest, he would half-shut his eyes in concentration as the stream of the lullaby flowed on. At the same time I would stroke the back of his head lovingly till he drowsed. Then we called it a night.

More Than One Way to Think About Birds

It is a shame because parrots, particularly the Eclectus species, are not popular in PNG unlike the Bird of Paradise. When the locals speak of Papua New Guinea birds, they always refer to the Bird of Paradise, which had been the target during the early 1970s by hunters for their beautiful exotic plumage.

This is sad and appalling. It means that such a beautiful bird was preferred dead and stuffed rather than alive, just because of their unique feathers. I remember my father, who had worked in PNG during the early 70s, returning to Manila on a holiday with his most precious souvenir: a complete feather of a huge Bird of Paradise which cost him not a small amount. Even to these days, the plumage is preserved and displayed on a huge frame at my parents' home back in Manila.

Shortly after I first came here in 1993, I attended a cultural festival in Sogere, a fruit-and-garden plateau that nestled atop a foggy mountain some 30 miles west of Port Moresby. From here, one can see the deep blue waters of the Coral Sea that spans the divide between Papua New Guinea and Australia. To see the show, for-



R to L: Ally, Freddie, and highlander, Karo, February 2000.

eign tourists came in convoys of several air-conditioned buses, with police escorts to discourage raskol attack along the highway.

It was there that I saw stuffed birds being sold to the visitors. I took pity on these birds as I had imagined the ordeal they suffered in the hands of the culprits. After killing them, each was gutted and impaled from the butt to the neck with a thin bamboo stick. A longer portion of the stick protruded out the butt to serve as handle while the other end stiffened and stretched the bird's neck.

Then each bird was pressed between two plywood boards weighed down with a rock or heavy object and left for a few days to dry. The result is a flattened body of a bird, which the vendors peddled as "stuffed parrot on a stick." This scene suddenly flooded back inside my head when my birds were growing and showing the red-cobalt blue feathers, the very same colors the impaled birds had carried to their gruesome death.

Some 15 years ago, the government banned the hunting and export

of birds, specially the Bird of Paradise, thus allowing the bird population to flourish even more in their natural habitat.

It is quite amazing because birdlife in this part of the world is prolific, what with over 700 bird species fluttering across the island nation's dense blanket of rainforests – of which 80 percent remain intact even up to these days, but there is a continued threat from loggers.

Of the Bird of Paradise, 38 of the 43 known species of this exotic bird are in PNG. They are truly outstanding because of the brilliant colors and their bizarre ritualistic and mating dances unknown in other bird species. These


birds have highly specialized forms of courtship behavior and plumage display. Easily, the variety in plumage is certainly unique in avifauna.

PNG also prides itself with the numerous other birds of distinction found in its rainforest. For instance, the cassowary which stands at 1.8 meters high and can weigh up to 59kg, and the Crowned Pigeon, the size of a turkey, the Blue-Streaked Lory, Blue-Eyed Cockatoo, New Guinea Pitta and the lesser known Eclectus Parrot.

But how long will this wonder from nature last? As of now, foreign-owned commercial logging operations continue to encroach into the virgin forests, including those near the sleepy township of Kerema, thus threatening the existence of flora and fauna.

Quoting one wildlife conservation group monitoring PNG's rainforest, "PNG happens to be one of only a handful of places on the planet where there is still an opportunity to conserve large areas of wilderness, especially large areas of primary tropical rainforest. The next few decades will reveal whether this exciting opportunity is seized."

With this, a question, one of the many that may come later, crops up: while Papua New Guineans wrestle with poverty, how many more Konias, Yakhams and Abais would emerge from the outback of Papua New Guinea in search of birds' nests to eke out a living to feed their hungry family?

The three nest poachers from Kerema might have the answer. 



Freddie and Ally with Daddy Freddie. Ally looks as if she were molting. April 2000.