PAUL BUTLER: PARROT MAN OF THE CARIBBEAN

Scientists can only do so much to save a species... the rest may be up to super salesmen with heart. *By Chris Wille*

THE CHOISEUL PRIMARY SCHOOL AT the southern end of St. Lucia island is about to burst from the pent-up energy of 300 delighted children. Most of the kids have been corralled in one large, open-air room. The concrete walls vibrate with excitement. They have visitors!

Forestry Officer Alleyne Regis steps to the front of the class and receives a powerful chorus of "Good morning, SUH!" A veteran teacher, Regis moves immediately into his act. What, he asks, is the national bird of St. Lucia?

Without hesitation, the students scream in unison: "Amazona versicolor!"

Paul Butler, the architect of the awareness program that I am here to observe, grins at me in triumph. "Y'see," he says. Butler, the "parrot man of the Caribbean" claims this unanimous response proves the value of a 10-year campaign to teach St. Lucians about their rare, endemic parrot. The forestry department has not presented a parrot program in the schools since the campaign's inception, yet, "Look!" this new generation knows the bird.

Whoa! I thought to myself. I didn't just fall off the cabbage truck. I'm a journalist, trained to see set-ups as easily as a jeweler spots cut glass. How many third graders in the United States could name their national bird? And how many could respond with "Haliaeetus leucocephalus" *instead of Bald Eagle? These island kids must have been primed.*

Regis now slides into a patter about the island's birds. He has the students call out for "Jacquot," which is the Patois name for the St. Lucia Parrot. Responding to her cue, Forestry Officer Christina Pierre bounds into the room in a full-length parrot costume. The kids go wild.

Butler joins Regis in a synoptic duet that bounces through wildlife-protection laws, pollination, the chicken hawk's bad rep, watershed

CHRIS WILLE

Obsessed with saving *Amazona versicolor*, Butler moved from England to St. Lucia. The parrot population has nearly doubled since he took up the cause. Photograph/Chris Wille.

management, the evils of slingshots, and the rewards of reforestation. Punctuated by jokes, their performance is also full of questions. "Jacquot" hands out parrot badges to pupils with the right answers.

Then it's time for the grand finale. With the help of a boombox, the forestry team leads the student body through four rousing verses with this chorus:

> Amazona versicolor,
> de national bird of Saint Lucia,
> Amazona versicolor,
> a Jacquot found only in Saint Lucia

His thin, pageboy locks flying, Butler, a happily maniacal cheerleader half a beat ahead of the music, leaps about the front of the classroom. The childrens' eyes jump from Regis, who is pointing out the words to the song on the blackboard; to Pierre, swaying in her parrot regalia; to this strange, wild, arrhythmic, and energetic white man.

Though supposedly just learning the tune, they belted it out with the easy familiarity of the Rolling Stones singing "Satisfaction." This is rocking good, I thought, but clearly rehearsed

Anita James, head of the Environmental Education Office in St. Lucia (left), and Forestry Officer Alleyne Regis are two of the main reasons why "Jacquot" has become a national celebrity on St. Lucia. Photograph/ Chris Wille

Forestry Officer Christina Pierre, dazzling as "Jacquot," leads St. Lucian school children in singing *Amazona versicolor*. Butler, "a happily maniacal cheerleader," assists. Photograph/© Robert Rattner 1989.

Butler playfully "checks" T-shirts sold on the beach to ensure vendors display the local parrot and not some non-native glamour species. Photograph/ Chris Wille.

Still humming Amazo-NA de da dee dee, we leave the school and pile into a forestry department truck, once again to test our luck at full velocity on St. Lucia's rutted and narrow switchbacks. There is a moment's confusion at our next stop, the River Doree school. A mix-up: no one has warned them we were coming. Butler turns the full force of his considerable charm on the principal: "It'll just be an hour, darlin'. We'll be dressing up like parrots, singing songs. We'll have fun!"

In minutes, the math test forgotten, a room full of students is focused on Regis. "What," he asks, "is the national bird of St. Lucia?"

Aha, I thought. These kids were not prepped. Let's see how many of them *have heard of the St. Lucia Parrot.*

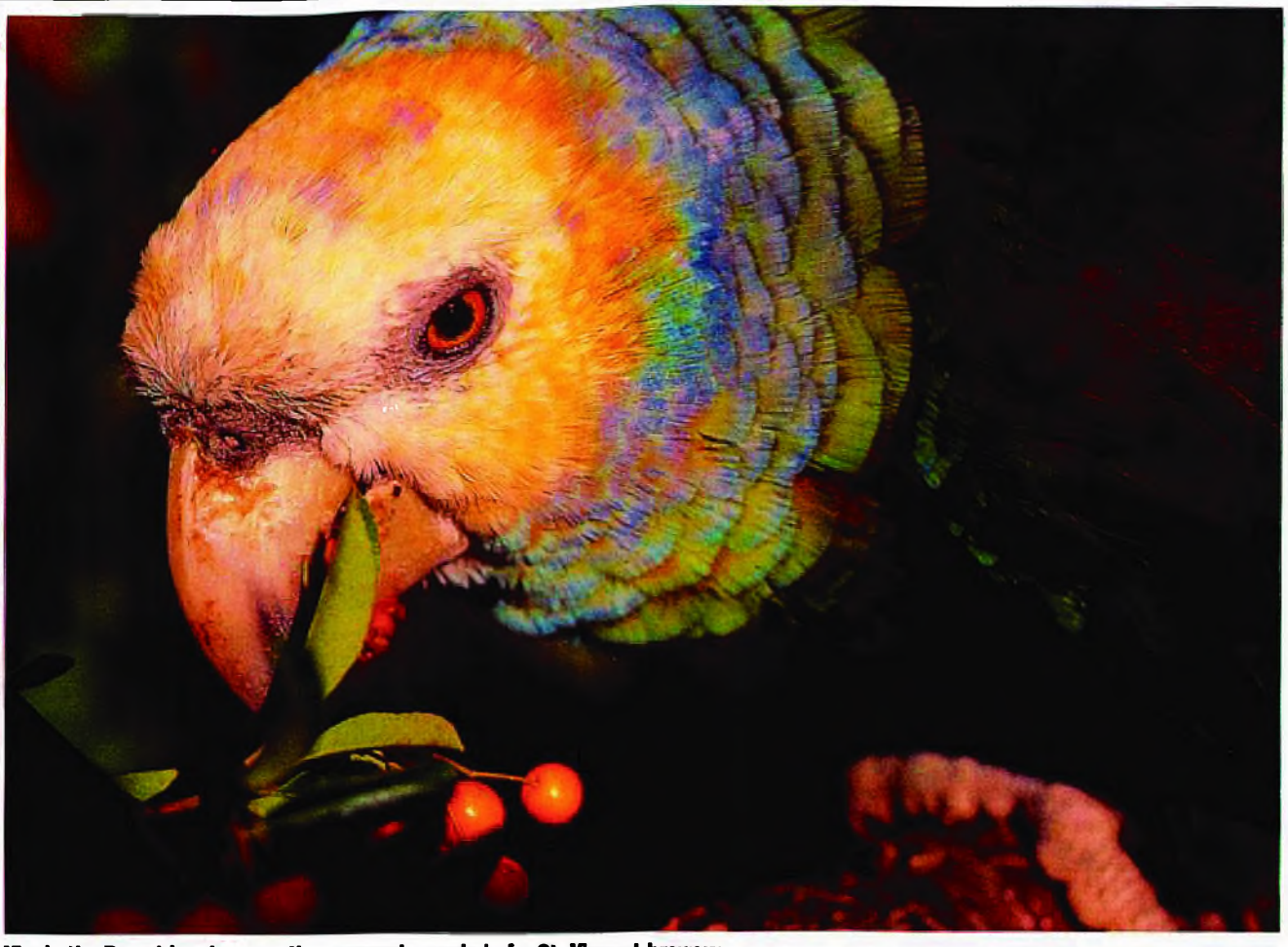
DEVELOPING PARROT POWER

Not that it matters. The "Promoting Protection Through Pride" program has already proven itself. By following Butler's carefully plotted publicity recipe, conservation agencies have raised public awareness of environmental issues in parts of the Lesser Antilles to such levels that policy-makers cannot ignore them.

On this island, which is on the easternmost arc of the Antilles, near Barbados, the designated poster bird is the spectacular indigenous parrot, a species that had almost slipped away before St. Lucians realized its value, its rarity. The population was down to 150 birds in the late 1970s. Now, it may be twice that. "The proof," Butler says, "is in the pudding."

The other measure of the program's success—and the factor that ensures the parrot's future—is that everybody on the island knows about Jacquot, is proud of Jacquot, and will rush to Jacquot's defense.

Here at the River Doree school, 200 children from the ages of five to about 12 have just been asked to name their island's emblematic bird. There is no hesitation· "Amazona



Vincie the Parrot has become the corporate symbol of a St. Vincent brewery. Photograph/© Robert Rattner 1984.

versicolor!" The Latin rattles the blackboard.

It's not a setup. The bird has entered St. Lucia's national consciousness.

In 1977, Paul Butler, an Englishman fresh out of North East London Polytechnic, led a group of biology students from that school to St. Lucia to study the island's rare parrot. They found few birds, a rapidly disappearing forest habitat, and widespread apathy about wildlife and the environment. Doves were shot for the stewpot. Songbirds were regarded as nothing more than targets. And parrots for the pet-trade were captured by shooting them, then hoping for their recovery.

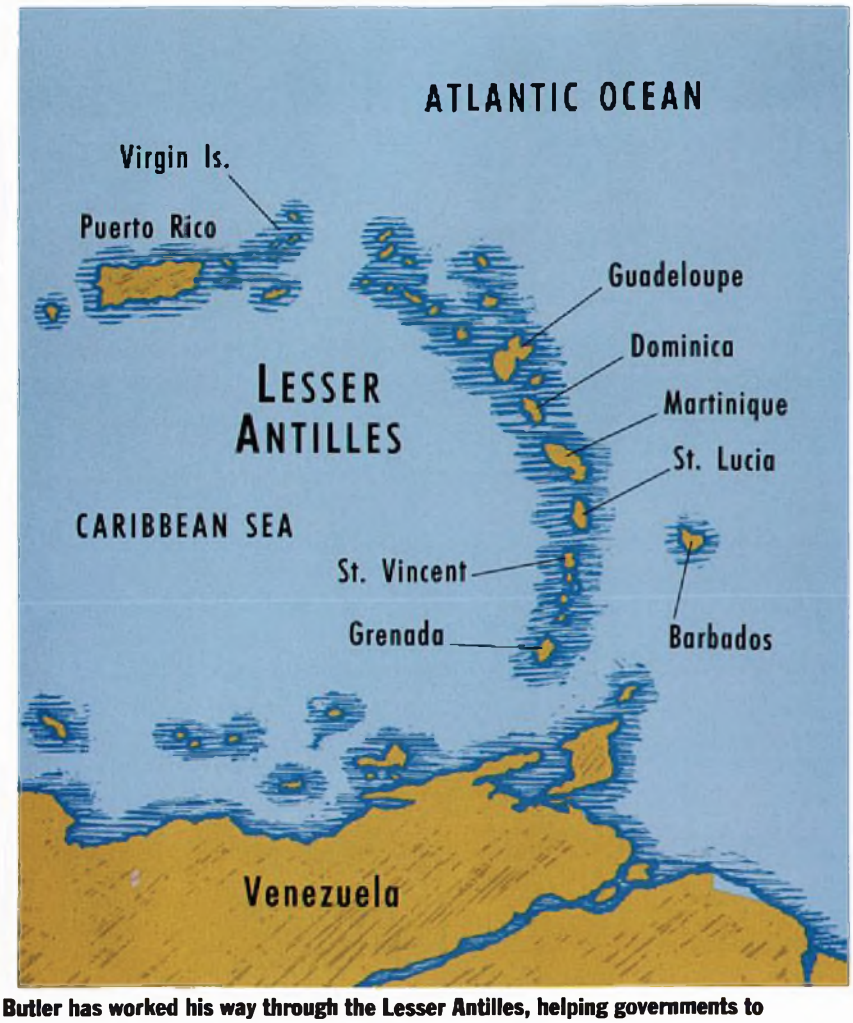
Butler became obsessed with the parrot. He moved to St. Lucia and went to work for the Forest and Lands Department, where he found an ally in Chief Forestry Officer Gabriel Charles. Together they embarked on a campaign to guarantee that *Amazona versicolor* would not go quietly into the night of extinction.

They began making St. Lucians aware of their rare amazon. They visited schools, community groups, farmers in the fields, churches, politicians, and business leaders. Then, in 1979, St. Lucia became an independent nation within the British Commonwealth and named the St. Lucia Parrot its national bird. The islanders began to talk about "our parrot." A forest reserve was created, putting 12 percent of the tiny island under management. With the help of the Canadian government, the forestry department grew from one cramped room to a fully-staffed modern complex of offices.

Butler is the Lee Iacocca of Caribbean conservation; he never stops selling.

Now, under the direction of Brian James, forestry has moved from a political backburner to a prominent place on the official agenda. The government signed CITES, the international treaty governing trade in rare wildlife. People stopped taking parrots for pets. Poachers found other lines of work. Little boys gave up their slingshots.

The birds achieved a kind of hero status. The Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust in England had surveyed St. Lucia's avifauna in the 1970s and collected two of the endangered parrots for captive breeding. Eventually, they were successful, and the first-



Butler has worked his way through the Lesser Antilles, helping governments to save indigenous birds. Map/Jerry Jankowski, *Zoo Life*.

The Imperial Parrot found a symbolic home on the flag of Dominica. Photograph/© Robert Rattner 1988.

ever cage-born St. Lucia Parrots were offered back to the island.

In the fall of 1989, Butler and Gabriel Charles accompanied St. Lucia's Prime Minister John Compton on a trip to the United Kingdom for the purpose of escorting home the English-born parrots. Their return was a triumph. The two birds were welcomed in St. Lucia's capital with an official motorcade, flag-waving children, and, Butler says, "several hours of speeches."

Like most biologists, Butler views captive breeding as unfortunate but necessary, a "safety net against extinction." Ever the educator, he saw to it that the English-born birds were treated as celebrities and kept in a public aviary so that St. Lucians—many of whom had never seen their national bird alive—could enjoy a long look.

SALVATION THROUGH SALESMANSHIP

It's fortunate that at an early age Butler, now 34, fell for birds and not, say, for automobiles. In the predatory world of commerce, he would have emerged at the top of the food chain. It's easy to picture him as the head of an advertising agency or an auto dealership—a captain of industry.

With boundless energy and irrepressible good humor, Butler is a salesman nonpareil. As a fan recently wrote him, "You could convince me to put an oil well in my living room. What a showman."

From the beginning he saw that science alone wouldn't help the St. Lucia Parrot. Why, he asked, produce another report showing that the bird was going extinct?

"Too many conservation programs are run by scientists," Butler says, adding that this makes no more sense than an auto manufacturer sending its engineers out to sell cars. So, forsaking a promising career as an ornithologist, he became a marketer: a pitchman for parrots.

As Butler sees it, you can sell anything with a clever marketing strategy. Pointing to the success of cigarette companies, he notes that they manage to sell billions of dollars worth of their products despite the fact that "it says right there on the packet that the bloody things will kill you!"

He believes that salesmanship can save species: "Instead of using a sexy chick to sell cigarettes, we're using a sexy bird to sell conservation."

Butler is the Lee Iacocca of Caribbean conservation; he never stops selling. Though his warm, aristocratically German wife Magda sometimes drags him to the beach, the kind of beach you see in cigarette ads, he doesn't spend the time basking in the sun. Rather he bounces from one souvenir kiosk to another, making sure that vendors are selling memorabilia with images of Jacquot, not such non-native glamour species as the macaw.

One woman proudly holds up her "Pride of St. Lucia" T-shirts as Butler gallops into range. Another tries to hide a toucan shirt.

"You're hopeless, honey, just hopeless," he teases, grabbing the offending shirt and holding it at arm's length like dirty laundry The

vendors giggle and another small point is scored.

RARE OPPORTUNITIES

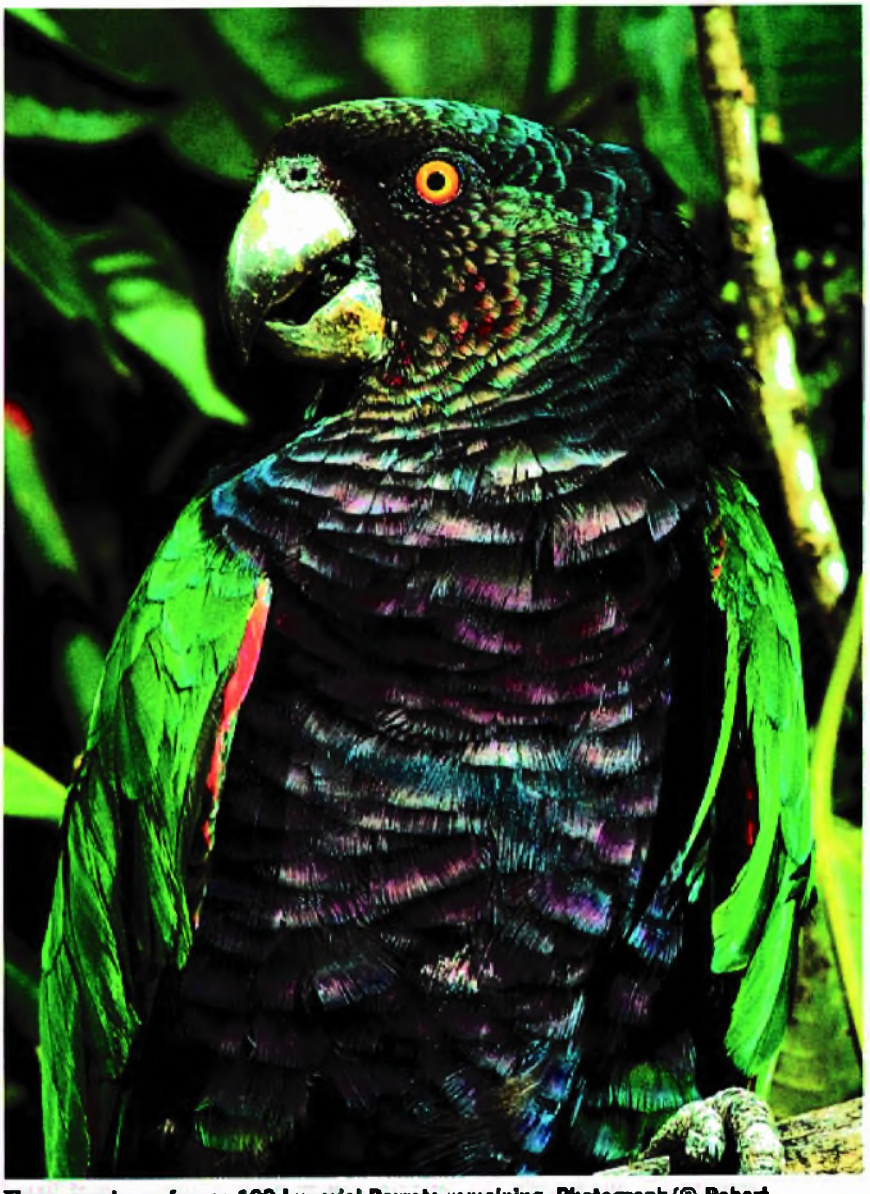
In 1988, the RARE Center, a conservation organization based in Philadelphia hired Butler to initiate a parrot propaganda program in St. Vincent, another small Lesser Antillean island, just south of St. Lucia. Here, he joined forces with Calvin Nicholls, a senior forest assistant, who since has been succeeded by Brian Johnson. The target species

These parrots... appear to have been colored by a child with a passion for bright colors and an inability to stay within the lines.

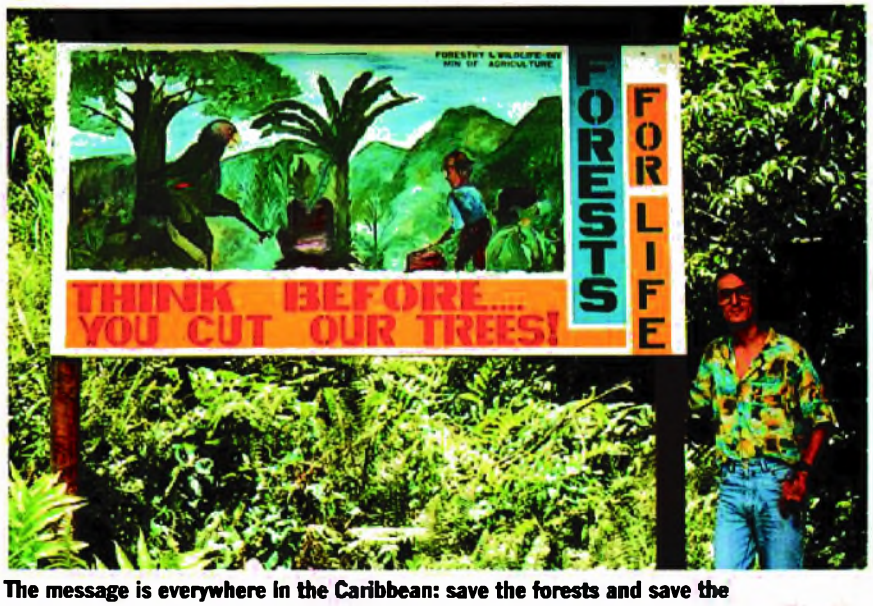
was another rare endemic, the St. Vincent Parrot (*Amazona guildingii*) whose population is stable at about 450 birds.

With Butler serving as coach and head cheerleader, the St. Vincent forestry team staged an information blitz. They gave parrot programs to 18,000 schoolchildren, distributed 15,000 bumper stickers and 3,000 posters, placed four billboards, and sweetened the airwaves with "Leave de National bird in de Wild," a jump-up calypso tune written by forest officer C. "Fraggo" Wyllie.

The St. Vincent Brewery was the first sponsor. It backed *Vincie's Nature Notes*, a monthly newspaper written by and for children. The brewery adopted Vincie, a St. Vincent Parrot caricature, as its corporate symbol, and soon there were bumper stickers suggesting "One Love, One Bird, One Beer," T-shirts proclaiming "If Parrots were People, They'd Drink Hairoun," as well as a



There may be as few as 100 Imperial Parrots remaining. Photograph/© Robert Rattner 1988.



The message is everywhere in the Caribbean: save the forests and save the birds. Photograph/© Robert Rattner 1989.

RARE
A FOCUS ON TROPICAL BIRDS

The Rare Center for Tropical Bird Conservation is a small, focused, highly-regarded, nonprofit, membership organization favored by birders. It was founded in 1973, and for a time, was known as the Rare Animal Relief Effort—making RARE one of the few truly catchy acronyms.

During the 1970s, it provided financial and technical assistance to the Costa Rican government in its initiative to establish the Corcovado and Tortuguero national parks. With a history of environmental education activities in the Caribbean and Latin America and a governing board weighted toward ornithologists (including Bill Belton, Frank B. Gill, Charles A. Munn, J. P. Myers, Roger Pasquier, George V. N. Powell, Robert S. Ridgely, and John Terborgh), the organization decided in 1986 to concentrate its efforts on saving tropical birds and their habitats.

One of its current projects is directed by George V. N. Powell, a founder of the famous Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve in Costa Rica. He is directing a research program that is proving that the reserve he helped create may not be large enough to protect its most famous resident, the Resplendent Quetzal. The gloriously emerald and ruby quetzals are altitudinal migrants, moving up and down the mountain slopes—probably in response to the ripening of wild avocados. Using radio telemetry, Powell and his team have found the birds migrating through unprotected habitat (and in Costa Rica, as in most of Latin America, any forest outside protected areas is doomed).

Powell, an ornithologist with the National Audubon Society and RARE Center trustee, has a particular interest in the quetzal, but his research results will be applied to helping biologists and governments design refuges—especially montane parks—to accommodate other altitudinal migrants.

RARE's other major project is protecting the rare Resplendent Quetzal in Costa Rica. Photo courtesy RARE. Painting by Tracy D. Pedersen.

Paul Butler's Caribbean program is RARE's other major effort. It is a departure from RARE's traditional methods of pursuing conservation, but then Butler's commercial-style marketing strategy would stick out in any environmental group's portfolio.

Admitting that "Promoting Protection Through Pride" is an unusual way to go about saving birds, RARE's Executive Director John Guarnaccia says he's excited about being in the lead of a promising new approach to the old challenge of saving habitats. "We were eager to put our money on Paul in the Lesser Antilles. For a modest investment, we were able to prove—on St. Vincent—that this is a hot program."

Like most people who come in contact with Paul Butler, Guarnaccia is a convert. "Paul sees the problem so clearly, and he's so convincing. He makes you realize that we have to change people's attitudes. In this country or the Third World, the key is making people understand that protecting habitats is in their best interests."

Can the program work without Butler? "Every movement has its key individual, and Paul is the charismatic axis of the program. It requires a high level of commitment from the governments involved and excellent local project directors. Fortunately, we've been able to find highly motivated counterparts for Paul on each island. With the aid of the training manual and Paul's advice, the in-country counterparts ensure the program's success."

For more information, or to become a member of the RARE Center, write: RARE Center, 1529 Walnut Street, Philadel-phia, PA, 19102; telephone 215-568-0420.

calendar with a painting of Vincie opening a soft drink bottle.

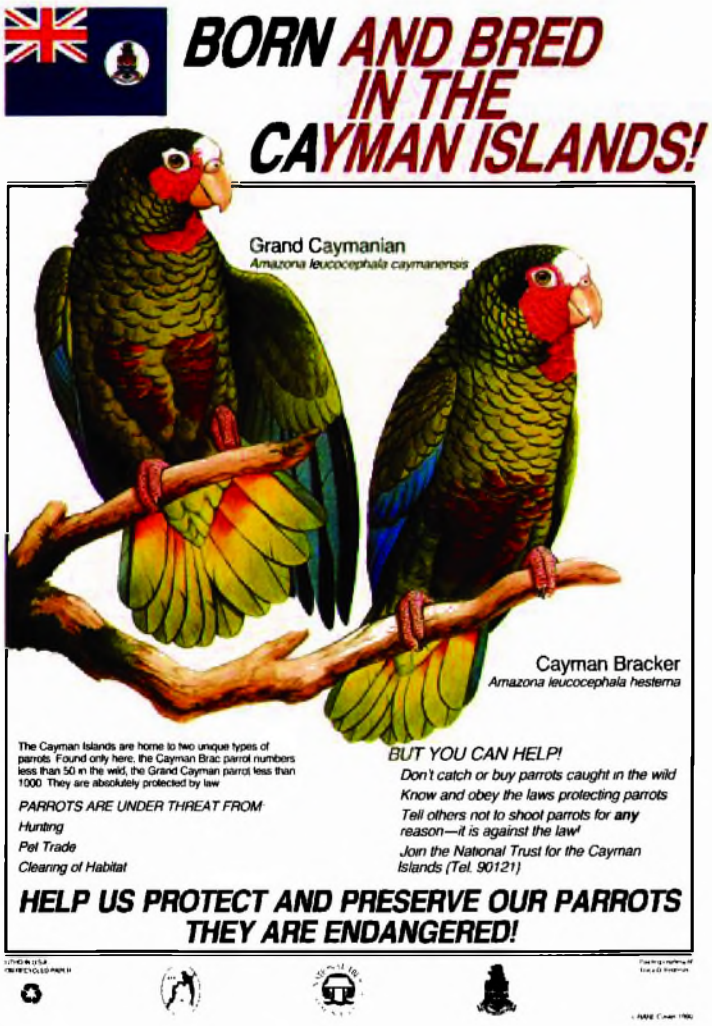
There are about 107,000 people in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. It's safe to conclude that every one of them now knows something about Vincie, the endangered national symbol. As a result, the island's government added parrot habitat to its reserve system, strengthened laws protecting the parrot, and ratified CITES.

The campaign on St. Vincent was so successful that in early 1989 the RARE Center asked Butler to replicate it on Dominica, where the endemic Imperial and Red-necked parrots were in perilous straits.

The Imperial (*Amazona imperialis*), known locally as the "Sisserou," is the largest and most endangered Amazon parrot; there may be only 100 individuals remaining. Its wings and back are a typical parrot-green; while the dark purplish color of its belly flows up into a royal ruff around its neck. The Red-necked (*A. arausiaca*), also endangered, is mostly green and has a splotch of crimson on the breast—not a neat bib like a meadowlark, but a smear of red like a little girl's attempt to put on lipstick. In fact, these parrots, like all the Psittacidae, appear to have been colored by a child with a passion for bright crayons and an inability to stay within the lines.

Like a wandering preacher, Butler set up his tent on Dominica, where he was joined by Felix Gregoire, director of the Forestry Department, and Forester Ronald Charles, who would lead the local effort. They roped in some sponsors and began unrolling the now familiar components, including school visits, posters, a newsletter caricature, bumper stickers, songs—the works. The Dominicans added puppet shows and a commercially successful ten-song musical.

Celia the Sisserou, a forestry officer in parrot guise, was so popular



Pride and awareness are the keys to getting people involved, says Butler. Photograph courtesy RARE. Painting by Tracy D. Pedersen.

that children sent her fan mail. A local oil company produced bumper stickers: "West Indies Oil and the Sisserou, Second to None."

The bird's last stronghold was rescued from logging when RARE, joined by the International Council for Bird Preservation and the Government of Dominica, purchased it. Thousands of school children contributed to the refuge by donating dimes (if they could) or by signing a petition. The St. Vincent Brewery introduced a new beer to Dominica—Sisserou Lager—and for each case sold, donated 40 cents to the habitat-protection initiative.

PUTTING IT ON PAPER

When the RARE Center asked him to move again, this time to Montserrat, Butler decided to put his strategy down on paper so that he didn't have to be everywhere at once. St. Vincent and Dominica had been proving grounds for the innovations that Butler and the St. Lucia Forestry Department had developed over a decade. By compressing the strategies into an annum, Butler had the experience of directing an intense publicity campaign. Now that he knew it could work, he wrote a 150-page guidebook. The *Promoting Protection Through Pride* manual is a step-by-step guide to raising a national consciousness.

The program begins with a questionnaire, sampling the population's knowledge of the target species and local conservation issues. The next step is meetings with the commu-

REMAKING MONTSERRAT

It's just a speck, but Christopher Columbus managed to find Montserrat in 1493. Unfortunately, on September 17, 1989, Hurricane Hugo also discovered this tiny Leeward island and in ten hours, destroyed almost everything. Then, in April 1990, RARE began an environmental awareness program that makes Montserrat the fourth beneficiary of Paul Butler's full-tilt bird-saving boogie—and the first whose program is being implemented according to the guidelines of the new "Protection Through Pride" training manual.

RARE hired Rose Willock, an outgoing and capable educator and radio producer as the program's local administrator. The endemic Montserrat Oriole (*Icterus oberi)* was selected as the target species; already threatened, the oriole, like the people of Montserrat, was left homeless by Hugo.

Since the islanders, struggling to rebuild after the hurricane, could not afford the program, RARE raised $50,000 to initiate it. With the money, the center provided a jeep, a salary for Willock, start-up educational materials, and funds to underwrite supervisory visits by Butler.

The Montserrat Oriole was left homeless after Hurricane Hugo. Painting by Tracy D. Pedersen.

Willock's initial survey showed that less than half of the island's 12,000 people knew that the bright oriole was their national bird and that only ten percent were aware of its endangered status or the reason for its decline. When, at the conclusion of the year-long program, the Montserratians are again polled, they will be fluent in the language of bird conservation. Based on RARE's experience on other islands, they will also be fiercely proud of their oriole and determined not to let it slip away.

To achieve this result, the program manual will have guided Willock through its 60 assignments, each of which builds on those before it. One early task, for example, was to produce and distribute a news release. The manual provides a model—just fill in the blanks. While a media-savvy administrator like Willock didn't really need help with a news release, she will welcome the manual's detailed instructions when, later on, it's time to coordinate a scientifically valid bird census.

Early on, Willock created a puppet show to liven up her school programs, erected billboards, and won the support of a popular calypso singer. Businesses pitched in, and the oriole began appearing in advertisements and on bumper stickers, T-shirts, and wall hangings.

Like program directors on the other islands, Willock has gone beyond the guidebook. For example, she organized an oriole kite festival, contests on the radio, and lively panel discussions.

While Willock first believed that starting the program with Montserrat still reeling from Hurricane Hugo was bad timing, she since has changed her mind. "It was a good opportunity—while we were rebuilding and getting our lives back in shape—to also focus on the very important issue of the environment."

nity groups. Then it's on to school songs, posters, newsletters, costumes, badges, bumper stickers, art/essay competitions, songs for radio, sermons (various denominations), billboards, stamps, videos, legislation, and follow-up.

The philosophy of the program is this: wildlife protection through legislation and establishment of reserves is not sufficient if the laws are not effective, enforced, and well understood by the local people. "In conservation," Butler says, "everything is secondary to education and awareness."

The other pillar of Butler's philosophy is that there must be a large measure of local support and involvement. "Involving and training local personnel in every aspect of the project promotes greater local commitment that lasts long after foreign agency involvement ceases."

The manual has samples, patterns, models and instructions for everything. It's a cookbook. "We're always testing, always looking for ways to improve," Butler says.

SCANNING NEW HORIZONS

Last spring, RARE launched the program on Montserrat (see sidebar). Rose Willock, an educator and radio producer, was chosen to direct the campaign, and the Montserrat Oriole (*Icterus oberi)* was selected as the target species.

In November 1990 Butler opened another new front, on the Caymans —25,000 people on three islands. There, his counterpart is Pat Scharr, the education officer for the Cayman Islands National Trust. The Cayman Island Parrot is the focal point. This year, RARE plans to roll out the program in the Bahamas—five islands and 200,000 people—tossing a lifeline to the endangered Bahama Parrot. As word of its success ripples across the Caribbean, the RARE Center has many requests for the program, and if funding can be secured, may ride to the

rescue of rare birds in Jamaica, Grenada, Belize, and other islands or small countries.

Butler adamantly emphasizes that the programs running in the islands are not his, not RARE's, but belong to the local people. "If the ingredients are there—and a willing cook—we just provide the recipe," he says.

On each of the islands, he has found willing cooks who add spice to the recipes in the training manual. The program is flexible enough to let each counterpart play to his or her strengths.

The bounciest parts of the campaigns are the songs, which are especially effective on these islands where music is always in the air (and, as I found out, where children can learn a song in five minutes). With musicians contributing their time and talent, each country has produced a winning bird song. Radio stations even get requests for them. There are songs in every island style: reggae, calypso, cadence, reggae-rap, blues, and even gospel. Some of the islands are now producing music videos.

What makes RARE's program different from other conservation efforts that also utilize the media and schools, is the level of saturation. The campaigns are designed to reach everybody—in the classrooms, fields, factories, discos, and boardrooms. Through experience, Butler has constructed the program so that every new piece builds on what has gone before. The elements resonate off each other like atoms in an organic molecule.

Each campaign begins with the local business community and educational decision-makers—their support is essential, and they don't like to be surprised. With their backing, the school program is launched, involving a visit to every school on the island. Such audiences as farmers are approached later on. As these groups are difficult to reach and sometimes resistent to the environmental message, Butler's strategy is to soften them up by making children into environmental emissaries. By the time a counterpart meets with a group of farmers, they have seen the posters and heard their children singing popular parrot songs.

Butler is eager to test his design against larger communities and different cultures. He wonders if his low-tech, high-personal-input model would stand up in a sophisticated and jaded continental culture. But for now, "There are islands with endangered wildlife all around the world; we won't run out of venues anytime soon."

Islands deserve the attention, Butler maintains, because resource conflicts and extinction rates are so intense on these bits of land moored in the world's seas.

By day, St. Lucia is a banquet of visual delights: sharp-edged hills draped in tropical greenery, smiling children, sugar beaches bent around voluptuous coves. But at night the feast is aural. Kicking back in one of the small guest houses, I hear the beep and twitter of countless frogs—an amphibian Mardi Gras. The primal ringing of steel drums drifts up from the tourist hotels on the beach. Seeping through the window is the smooth rattle of Patois—a language that sounds so natural and free, it seems like I could be quickly fluent in it if I could...you know man...loosen up.

But the sound I hear clearest in the St. Lucian night comes from within. I can't shake it even as I drift off to sleep: *Amazona versicolor, de national bird of St. Lucia. Amazona versicolor...* ■

FILMING "THE PARROT MAN OF THE CARIBBEAN"

In March 1991, an Audubon Productions film crew traveled to St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Dominica, and Montserrat for three weeks to follow Englishman and conservationist Paul Butler and his Caribbean counterparts as they work to preserve and protect the endemic parrots for the Caribbean. Joining Paul and his film crew for part of the time was actor and concerned citizen Lou Gossett, Jr., who has traveled to the islands, met many of the film's characters, and discussed with Paul the work being done to save parrots and their habitat. Mr. Gossett is the host of the film.

The Caribbean film project is produced and directed by David Clark, one of two senior producers of the Audubon TV series and a highly accomplished and talented filmmaker. He has previously produced *Galapagos: My Fragile World, Grizzly and Man: Uneasy Truce,* and, most recently, *Danger At The Beach,* with actor Ted Danson. This will be the first Audubon Special to look at the Caribbean area.

Much of the soul of the Caribbean peoples is reflected through their music and Paul and his associates have tapped this powerful resource to further the parrots' cause. On each island they enlist several local reggae and other music groups to write and perform conservation songs and music videos which appear on local TV and radio. Children perform parrot plays in schools and ultimately, no one escapes the message of the birds.

In a colorful, music-filled and upbeat story, we hope that by following Paul and his island collaborators we will show how proud self-determination in the Caribbean is helping save precious bird species and habitat in an example we can all learn from.

–Christopher Palmer
Executive Producer
President, National Audubon Society Productions