

# ICBP in the Neotropics

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**T**HE INCREDIBLE DIN OF UNCOUNTABLE Red-spectacled Parrots screeching as they wheeled over the araucaria grove where Joe Forshaw and I had just arrived is my most vivid memory of a train of events that led to my first contact with ICBP's Pan American Section. Joe was visiting Brazil to see the maximum number of parrot species in the wild as he prepared his monumental "Parrots of the World." I had been searching for this particular species, *Amazona pretrei*, as part of my survey of the birds of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil's southernmost state. As we gussed at how many birds were circling above us at dusk on this evening in May 1971, we diverged widely, from 10,000 (WB) to 30,000 (JF), but agreed solidly on the magnificence of the spectacle and the importance of protecting it.

Local residents assured us the flocking and pre-roosting flights were a daily event at this particular grove in the Municipality of Esmeralda during two to three months of the southern hemisphere autumn each year. The birds appeared at this season to feed on araucaria nuts, dispersing widely in small groups during the day and assembling for communal roosting at night. Araucaria, Brazil's primary source of softwood lumber, was becoming scarce and prices were tempting to woodland owners. The danger to this key piece of habitat was obvious. Stories of cagebird hunters firing into trees full of roosting birds to capture the surviving wounded made it equally obvious that the birds themselves, already on the Brazilian list of endangered species, were in peril. To the best of our uncertain knowledge this roost contained the world's entire population of Red-spectacled Parrots.

A year later I took Helmut Sick, now dean of Brazilian ornithologists, to see the show. A portion of the roosting grove had been cut down, and the number of parrots was sharply dimin-



ished. Action was called for. A letter-writing campaign ensued. In 1973 ICBP's Pan American Section provided me with a \$1000. grant to be spent on protecting the species. More important, in 1974 Brazil's new Special Secretary for the Environment, Paulo Nogueira Neto, chose the grove as the site of one of the earliest of the many Ecological Stations that now protect key examples of Brazil's widely diverse habitats and animal populations. The ICBP grant enabled me to collaborate with Brazilian authorities in the initial location and later surveys of what is now the Esmeralda-Aracuri Ecological Station. After a continuing decline that resulted in no parrot flocks in the grove for a couple of years, more recently they have returned in substantial numbers. Other rare bird species have also been reported from the Station. The massive, stately, inside-out-umbrella-shaped araucarias are safe.

In this journal's last issue, Warren King, Chairman of ICBP's United States Section, provided an overview of the International Council for Bird Preservation's history and current activity, mentioning the importance of national sections and the role of our relatively new professional staff and secretariat in Cambridge, England, under the leadership of Christoph Imboden, Director. I now want to discuss the function of an intermediate level of the organization, its continental sections, with special emphasis on the Pan American Section. There is also a European and

an Asian Section. Each of the three operates quite differently, in harmony with the special circumstances of its area. The European Section, with representation from a number of relatively prosperous countries in close proximity to one another, tackles regional bird conservation problems on a regular basis with active participation of member national sections. The activities of the recently established Asian Continental Section still center principally around periodic meetings of representatives of member national sections where mutual problems are discussed and recommendations to governments are formulated.

The Pan American Section puts its emphasis on strengthening and reinforcing the growing conservation movement in countries south of the United States, with special attention to birds and habitat. Thanks to a bequest received some 30 years ago from the estate of Louise Ayer Hatheway, the Section now has a small investment income of approximately \$25,000. per year, supplemented modestly by individual donations. These funds are used to support research on endangered or potentially endangered species and to encourage protection of such species and their habitats. We interpret the latter role broadly, and so we encourage public education programs on the theory that without public awareness of birds and their beauties and benefits, public support for their conservation will be lacking.

The Section's Board of Directors includes, *ex officio*, the chairmen of National Sections throughout the hemisphere, plus a group of elected directors with Neotropical ornithological or conservation experience who are able to attend semi-annual Board meetings, in Washington, without expense to the organization. Our limited finances unfortunately preclude covering the costs that

regular meetings anywhere in Latin America would involve. However, we make every effort to hold special meetings whenever a reasonable number of *ex officio* Board members might be able to attend and to include Latin American residents of the United States among our elected directors. To further enhance our hemispheric approach we persuaded the Cambridge headquarters to open a Buenos Aires office at the end of last year and are contributing to the support of its incumbent, Dr. Montserrat Carbonell.

In making project grants we prefer those that originate with residents of countries south of the United States border. When grants for Neotropical research are made to researchers based outside the Neotropics, we insist that local ornithologists or biology students be incorporated into the project. We occasionally support a project with less direct conservation content than we would like because it provides rare field experience for a group of students or strengthens a newly formed conservation organization within the area. We are convinced that long-range conservation in Middle and South America depends on involving those who live there.

The grant I received to help protect the Red-spectacled Parrot was not entirely typical in that the bird had already been found. The money was to encourage necessary conservation measures. In a somewhat similar situation, as I write this, we have just granted funds for an effort to convince Mexican authorities to establish nature reserves on two Mexican islands in the Pacific Ocean. A recent avifaunal survey showed that newly-settled penal colonies are endangering the island habitat, which contains endemic birds found nowhere else. Usually such projects start with a search for the rare bird, as when Pedro Scherer of Curitiba, Brazil, told us he had information that might lead to the rediscovery of the Red-tailed Parrot (*Amazona brasiliensis*), a species occasionally seen as a cage bird but not lately known in the wild. Two years and \$1500. later he had located a roosting site on a bay island of the Paraná coast, now known occasionally to harbor up to 800 individuals, and we had obtained the agreement of Brazilian authorities to protect it. Currently we are sponsoring a search in northeastern Brazil for the Little Blue Macaw (*Cyanopsitta*

*splixii*), another severely endangered species that shows up in the cagebird trade from an area whose precise location is not yet known to conservationists.

SOME PEOPLE DO NOT YET VIEW CONSERVATION in far off corners of the globe as having relevance for us in the United States. They should study the evidence. "Our" migratory nesting birds spend most of each year in the Neotropics, and they are suffering from habitat loss on their wintering grounds. While tropical rain forest disappearance receives much publicity and *is* a major problem, the situation of migratory shorebirds—plovers and sandpipers—could rapidly become even more precarious. The millions that travel from the Arctic to southern South America and back each year are highly dependent on a few limited wetlands as staging and "refueling" areas during transit. As everywhere, these areas are coming under various types of pressure from human incursion. They must be saved if the birds are to survive.

The Pan American Section is active on this front. Either alone or in collaboration with other conservation groups, it is currently supporting study of four areas: the northern Venezuelan coast; Buenaventura Bay, Colombia; Chilean beaches; and Lagoa do Peixe, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Each of these areas is known to be significant to shorebirds. The studies are to obtain sufficiently precise information to justify, if appropriate, the establishment of protected reserves. In addition, we have participated, along with others, in successful letter-writing efforts to save suitable shorebird habitat in Grays Harbor, Washington, and Delaware Bay, New Jersey.

To arouse public interest in birds, we are helping to finance a small book in Portuguese on the common birds of the Brasília area of Brazil, while Chile's first field guide will appear this year, in Spanish, under our sponsorship. We are drawing up plans for more vigorous initiatives of this kind and hope within the near future to sponsor a series of books on common birds of various countries or regions, each in the language of the area. A special endeavor requires mention here. Through the generosity of William Brown, one of the authors of the recently published "Birds of Colombia" (Hilty and Brown), we

have contracted with the Universidad del Valle of Cali, Colombia, to publish a Spanish language version of this monumental work. Color plates for the Spanish edition have already been produced and translation of the text, by Humberto Alvarez López, is well under way.

The list of other projects we support is too long to be repeated here. It ranges geographically from searches for the Cuban Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis bairdi*) to protecting the newly-discovered and rare Hooded Grebe (*Podiceps gallardoi*) in Patagonia. Substantively it has been diverse enough to cover banding of North American migrant birds in Panama, printing posters advocating protection of endangered species in Peru, and providing binoculars and field guides for bird observation workshops in Honduras.

Ever since National Audubon's President, Gilbert Pearson, founded ICBP in 1922, the National Audubon Society has been a staunch member. It currently provides important financial support as well as vital collaboration through its International Affairs Officer, Frances Spivy-Weber. Recently, arrangements have been perfected to enable individual Audubon chapters to participate directly in the urgent task of Neotropical conservation. Through Mrs. Spivy-Weber at the National Audubon Society's Washington office, 645 Pennsylvania Avenue S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003, interested chapters can support specific projects recommended by the Pan American Section. This provides chapters an opportunity to enlarge their own horizons and demonstrate their acceptance of the fact that conservation is a global problem where losses in the most remote regions contribute to our own impoverishment.

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**Note:** ICBP publications listed at the end of the ICBP article in the Spring 1986 issue of *American Birds* are now available at U S dollar prices from Buteo Books, P.O. Box 481, Vermillion, SD 57069. In addition to those books, the Pan American Section has published a reprint of Meyer de Schauensee's "Guide to the Birds of South America," available from most sellers of bird books or direct from the Publications Secretary, University of Kansas Natural History Museum, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-3454 for \$27.50 postpaid.