

**BEHIND THE HEADLINE:**

# Parrot Chicks rescued from Traffickers

**Rosemary Low**

Throughout the tropics, an increasing number of dedicated people are doing amazing things to help the survival of parrot species and individual birds. The number of projects and people involved has increased enormously during the past decade in many countries, from Indonesia and Africa to South America and the Caribbean islands. On the one hand it demonstrates awareness of the problems faced by these charismatic birds and on the other, the resources, human and financial that are needed. Never enough.



I often write about what is happening in Brazil because I have valuable contacts there. This story is first-hand and not gleaned from published articles. Because of this close cooperation I would like to focus on several remarkable people and their colleagues who, especially during the past few months (and for years previously), have demonstrated their passion to saving some of the most threatened parrots in Brazil.

This story mainly concerns the rare Red-browed Parrot (*Amazona rhodocorytha*). At 36cm, the Red-browed is the second largest of the mainland Brazilian Amazons, after the Mealy (*A. farinosa*), and has the solid build of that species. Its head coloration is especially beautiful. The forehead and forepart of the crown are scarlet and the lores are yellow. The area below, extending under the eye and below the throat, is a soft blue. The beak is dark grey with the upper part of the upper mandible pink.

It occurs only in fragmented areas of the Atlantic Forest of Brazil. Sadly, this is one of the most threatened and deforested habitats in that great country. As a result, many of the parrots there are vulnerable to extinction.

According to BirdLife International (2022) the healthiest populations of the Red-browed Parrot are found in Espírito Santo state, where the largest lowland forest blocks have survived. It also occurs in a few sites in south-east Bahia, Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro. A disjunct



Luis Fabio Silveira and Alexandre Resende rescuing the birds from a breeder in Rio de Janeiro  
Photos: Maria Fernanda Gonzim

population occurred at São Miguel dos Campos, Alagoas, but it is unknown whether it has survived. Field work will soon reveal this.

In the September 2022 issue of *Parrots*, David Waugh reported on field research on populations of the Red-browed Parrot which gave a rather optimistic view of the situation (Waugh, 2022). More recent data is needed.



Two of the Red-browed Parrots chicks reared by Beto Polezel and his team, aged 8 to 12 days  
Photo: Maria Fernanda Gonzim

## Combined pressures: habitat loss and illegal trade

Its IUCN status is 'Vulnerable' but more logically under Brazilian law it is recognised as 'endangered'. Once abundant, this parrot has suffered a significant decline, due to habitat loss and illegal capture. This trade in live birds for pets was primarily local, especially in Rio de Janeiro, Espírito Santo and Bahia.

This parrot has always been rare in aviculture outside Brazil. During the 1980s some illegally exported birds reached Europe and the USA. Thefts from nests are difficult to control. Even eggs have been taken. Here are two examples. In May 2013 a Portuguese man was caught at an airport in northern Brazil with 36 eggs

which he planned to smuggle into Portugal. In the 1998-1999 breeding season, 174 nestlings were poached, mostly from reserves, for the national and international bird trade (Brown and Brown, 1992).

In recent months (from 2021) the authorities have apprehended traffickers. IBAMA is the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources. In mid-October 2021 its environmental officers and the Federal Police caught a smuggler with many parrots in the Linhares area in the state of Espírito Santo. They included 24 chicks of the Red-browed Parrot, aged seven to 30 days. Sadly, two were very young and did not survive.

## Actions to save the chicks

Realising the importance of this group of nestlings, IBAMA contacted Prof. Luis Fabio Silveira, Curator of Birds and Vice-director of the Zoological Museum of the University of São Paulo. So much more than a scientist, his lifelong passion for parrots, conservation, aviculture and zoos, has provided him with all the necessary contacts. The conservation potential of these parrots was enormous. At once a plan was forming in his mind – the first ever reintroduction of the Red-browed Amazon. They could form a precious population in the state of Alagoas where they were either extinct or on the verge of extinction. This was a very exciting prospect!

Meanwhile, where could these chicks go? A careful decision had to be made – and quickly. The chicks were not yet feathered, and needed to be in expert care. Prof. Silveira recommended Beto Polezel, a skilled aviculturist





Fernanda feeding the chicks on the journey to the Lymington Foundation  
Photo: Maria Fernanda Gonzim



Fernanda and Beto at Beto's breeding centre, with the newly arrived chicks  
Photo: Maria Fernanda Gonzim

in the state of São Paulo. In the meantime it was vitally important that they received the best nutrition available. Rearing food was donated by the company Nutropica, to be sent to the IBAMA rescue centre and to Polezel's breeding centre (Criadouro de Aves Sérgio Polezel).

It took nearly three weeks to acquire the paperwork to move the chicks. The next problem was how to get them to São Paulo. Air travel was out of the question. For Prof. Silveira there was only one solution – he would drive them.

Departing from his home in São Paulo on November 13, he was accompanied by Dr Maria Fernanda Gonzim, a very dedicated veterinarian from Zooparque Itatiba, near São Paulo. Leaving at 8pm on a 15-hour drive on very busy roads, they travelled about 1,000km (620 miles) to Espírito Santo and collected the chicks from the rehabilitation centre.

The return journey will forever live in their memory. They can still hear the sounds of the tiny chicks in the brooder, begging to be fed. This necessitated stopping every three hours to feed them. The attention of the caring zoo vet Maria Fernanda, who had generously donated her time to the rescue effort, was of crucial importance.

At 11am next morning they arrived at the property of Beto Polezel where the chicks were carefully examined. On November 2nd Prof Silveira reported to me: "Babies super fine! Growing and eating 500g of high energy food every day." Beto was the third person in this story to devote so much time and effort to ensuring their survival. Imagine suddenly having to cope with more than 20 unfeathered Amazon chicks! I was fortunate to visit his breeding centre in 2019 and to meet this very dedicated and knowledgeable young man.

## Bill Wittkoff and the Lymington Foundation

This is only the first chapter of the story. Sad to report, on April 8 IBAMA reported to Prof Silveira that 40 more Red-browed Parrots had been confiscated from various sources. On April 10th they informed him that these birds would be sent by air to São Paulo on April 12. So soon! Then followed two days of frenzied activity while he tried to find a place for these precious parrots!

Fortunately, he has a long working relationship with Bill Wittkoff of the Lymington Foundation in the state of São Paulo, 120km (75 miles) from the airport. This Foundation is very important for parrot conservation and specialises in breeding Golden Conures for release (another of Prof Silveira's projects) and in rehabilitating confiscated parrots. When I was there in 2016 I saw a large flock of confiscated Vinaceous Parrots (*Amazona vinacea*) being prepared for release. Bill Wittkoff and his late wife Linda have done an enormous amount for parrot conservation in Brazil, too much to describe here.

On April 14 the Red-browed Parrots were boxed at 8am by IBAMA staff. On arrival at the airport the IBAMA people were told that the parrots could not travel on the specified flight as the cargo terminal was too hot to leave the birds there. They would have to travel on a later flight, departing at 7.30pm. Unfortunately, nobody had thought to inform Prof Silveira that the birds would now be arriving at 10pm. He had an anxious 12-hour wait at São Paulo airport.

On their arrival he had to get two big boxes, each weighing 75kg, into his car. When this feat had been achieved, he drove home, arriving at 11.50pm, went to bed, got up at 3am and drove the parrots

to the Lymington Foundation. On opening the boxes veterinarian Dr Maria Fernanda Gonzim examined the birds (condition excellent to poor), which were released into a large aviary.

This was a big conservation story in Brazil, with footage on the TV news and extensive media coverage.

## Back to their home state

Now comes part three of the saga. All the birds had to be flown to Alagoas together in the near future. Winter was coming and these parrots from the hotter climate further north would be very stressed by low temperatures. On June 2nd permits were issued to move them. What followed



Red-browed Parrots in their pre-release aviary, feeding on the palm fruits they will encounter when released  
Photo: Maria Fernanda Gonzim

next was like a human endurance test. Prof Silveira bought the tickets for their flight for June 8th. He booked space for two large boxes (70 x 60 x 70cm each, with a total weight of 100kg). On June 7th and 8th there was no news.

A message from him on June 9th read: "Three days without sleep and eating! I am alive, but also extremely exhausted, and the birds are OK! I need to go home and sleep."

On June 10th I got the full story: "Last Tuesday, June 7th, I opened my eyes at 1am and I only slept again yesterday. Issuing the permits (health and interstate) was a drama, and without them, we could not book the flight and reserve cargo space. Then came the cold and the rain. On Tuesday afternoon I rented a van and drove straight to the Lymington Foundation to catch up the parrots (in the rain).

"Then I went to Beto Polezel's place to get the other 20 young (ex-babies). I arrived there about 7pm in heavy rain and cold (13 degrees). We caught and boxed the parrots. Another two hours and I arrived at the cargo terminal. It was 1am on Wednesday, and the flight was due to depart at 7:45am but they did not accept

the birds until 3am. Then, at about 6am, I boarded the plane.

"Three hours later I was in Maceió. It was sunny, very hot and humid. More than 60 people, TV, newspapers, police, environmental agents, etc. were there to meet me." This 2.30 minute video clip tells the story," (<https://tinyurl.com/5n7t2w9k>).

"A true nightmare!!!

I was tense because I had no idea about the parrots' condition and all the media were waiting for me to open each box. I saw all the little warriors, very well, but tired like me. All very tired and hungry. At 1 pm I had a sequence of short meetings with a lot of people. Then I went to the hotel and had a shower, ate a sandwich and went to the airport. I landed in São Paulo at 6am, drove to the museum and started work." Remarkable stamina and dedication!



Alexandre Resende from Blue Stone Metals and Luis Fabio Silveira in the cargo department, waiting for the parrots to be checked in



Luis Fabio Silveira releasing the Red-browed Parrots in their aviary in Alagoas  
Photo: Maria Fernanda Gonzim

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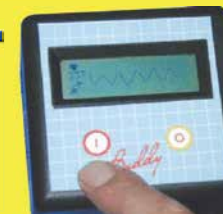
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The parrots are being prepared for release in IPMA's large aviaries

Taking care of the birds is the Centro de Educação Ambiental Pedro Nardelli, owned by Instituto de Preservação da Mata Atlântica (IPMA). This organisation is dedicated to the breeding and reintroduction of birds of the Atlantic Forest. A large aviary will be built in the forest fragment selected for the reintroduction, and the birds will be sent there in October, when they will be fitted with radio transmitters. They were quickly introduced to the foods, such as palm fruits, which they will find in the wild. Meanwhile they are enjoying the climate of their natural habitat, temperatures up to 40 degrees and two heavy rain showers every day. Their plumage is superb.

## Yet another rescue mission

But was this the end of the mercy dashes which Prof Silveira and Dr Maria Fernanda have made in recent weeks? Oh, no! On

September 1st, Prof Silveira received a phone call from the environmental agency in Rio de Janeiro. Unfortunately, two wealthy people (one of 101 years) had decided to stop breeding parrots. They owned more than one thousand birds. One of them had more than 40 species of Brazilian parrots. These included 80 Blue and Yellow Macaws – yes, eight zero. These birds were kept in poor conditions in suspended cages. We have seen this happen in various countries, including the UK. This is irresponsible and excessive breeding in such numbers that the



breeders can no longer cope or face their responsibilities.

The environmental agency was asking Prof Silveira to place the Hyacinth Macaws, and several Red-browed and Vinaceous (Vinous-breasted) Amazons. The poor birds were being fed only peanuts and corn and, once again, the situation required urgent action. That was on the Thursday. Fernanda, Alexandre from Blue Stone Metals and Luis left São Paulo at 9pm on the Friday, drove all through the night and reached the house of the breeder at 8am. They caught up the birds, and with Luis driving, they left the breeder at 10am and reached the Lymington Foundation at about 5pm. Once again, Bill Wittkoff had generously agreed to take the parrots as a temporary measure. Luis drove Fernanda back to the Zooparque Itatiba, by this time with a lot of leg pain due to almost non-stop driving, and fell into bed at 1am.

A huge new zoo has been built in Cotia, a suburb of São Paulo, and the rescued birds mentioned above went there on September 9th. A few days later they were joined by more than 40 additional, birds, including curassows, parrots and flamingos. It was very fortunate that this facility was available.

## Truly remarkable people

All this happened with the important collaboration with Prof Silveira of the federal police and environmental authorities, and

inspirational individuals such as Maria Fernanda Gondim, Beto Polezel, Bill Wittkoff and the Lymington Foundation, Alexandre Resende of Blue Stone Metals (sponsors of Lymington), Zooparque Itatiba, Nutropica, IBAMA, NGOs, and all who gave so freely of their time and valuable experience.

I would like to pay tribute to everyone involved in giving all these parrots a new life. Luis and Fernanda both have very demanding full-time jobs. A stress-free weekend is eagerly anticipated, but seldom achieved. Everyone who loves parrots can be thankful that there are such people, who always put the birds first. They do not seek praise, they act out of a deep sense of commitment.

Many people involved in bird rescue or in finding homes for neglected birds are paid employees of charities or governmental organisations. They too are caring and dedicated people, but they usually work prescribed hours. Those for whom there is no financial reward and no petrol allowance, have my enormous admiration. Their actions are led solely out of compassion for creatures used and abused by humans. Their reward is the satisfaction of giving the birds or animals a new start in life.

## Video

Please refer to this excellent 11-minute video for some enlightening sequences and most of the people who played such an important role in this story: <https://globoplay.globo.com/v/10763989/>

The beauty of the Red-browed Amazon, unknown to many parrot keepers, is also seen. The final frame of a wild bird, high in a tree, excitedly vocalising, gives hope that this will be the life of the parrot chicks rescued from traffickers, the story behind the headline. ■



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