

RESERVE STATUS

parrot colony aims for legal protection

By Dr. Juan F. Masello, Biol. Mauricio Failla, Pablo Giovine and Dr. Petra Quillfeldt



Photo: © Mauricio Failla

We still recall our first trip to El Cóndor. In October 1998, around 3am, we stopped for refueling in a petrol station along National Route 3, the internationally famous road crossing Patagonia from North to South. One member of the petrol station staff was visibly bored and looking for a bit of conversation. He asked for the purpose of our trip and we started talking about our research plans on the Burrowing Parrots. He was very surprised and said something like "Why do you want to study them? They are useless... They don't even talk!" This was a common attitude held by people we met during our first two field seasons in northeastern Patagonia. Nobody was concerned about the parrots. Nobody was aware of the problems that affected the colony at El Cóndor. Nobody imagined its immense value. Not even us.



Photo: © Mauricio Failla

In northwestern Patagonia, Argentina the largest parrot colony in the world is home to over 35,000 active Burrowing Parrot nests.

During our first two years not many people were aware of the Burrowing Parrot Project (BPP, or Proyecto Loro Barranquero in Spanish) - our research and conservation project on the Burrowing Parrots (*Cyanoliseus patagonus*) of northeastern Patagonia, Argentina. However, from the start we began to realize that this wasn't just another parrot colony - this was something special. The Burrowing Parrot colony of El Cóndor is the largest known parrot colony of the world, with an average of 35,000 active nests and spreading along 12.5 km (7.75 mi) of cliffs facing the South Atlantic Ocean.

We started to tell the bird's story to some local people and colleagues. Local television and newspaper coverage began to build followed by CNN news. In 2003 we started to work with the World Parrot Trust. An urgent priority was to find ways of reaching as many local people as possible. We started the educational campaign of the BPP and developed a series of lectures for children between the ages of 8 and 12 at schools of Viedma, El Cóndor and San Javier (a city and two villages close to the parrot colony) during 2004. Nearly 700 children were reached

in that opportunity and more than 200 children came to the colony for guided visits. The experiences they had proved to be so strong and vivid that we decided to continue the lectures in the region. These lectures mobilized the local children to a poster campaign focusing on the tourists visiting the region.

Also during 2004 and early 2005 - with funding from the World Parrot Trust (the main contributor), Fundación Patagonia Natural (FPN), and the Wild Fauna Division of Río Negro - road signs advertising the parrot colony were set up at the major roads of El Cóndor. Two of the signs guide the public to the colony and the other two provide information regarding the breeding biology of the species and the main features of the colony. These road signs, which have attracted local, regional and even national attention, are now a kind of landmark to which people refer when they give directions to places in El Cóndor! Although other road signs have been victims of graffiti and vandalism, the parrot road signs have not. We like to interpret this as the message having reached deep into the local people.

Although we wanted to extend the lectures to other schools, a series of problems in the schools and the community have sidelined this effort. As an alternative we started to look for ways of reaching the children through informal channels. We discussed several possible alternatives and decided to produce a leaflet about the El Cóndor colony. If the children were not going to be allowed to learn about the parrot colony and the nature around it at school then

¿Do you know?

we would try to teach them from the bakery, the pharmacy, the supermarket, the post office, and the petrol station. Working with the same designers who had previously designed the road signs, we kept the style simple and familiar - mimicking the road signs so people would associate both media with one message. The leaflets contain basic aspects of the breeding biology of burrowing parrots, remarkable aspects of the colony at El Cóndor, its threats, and ways of cooperating with our conservation efforts. The leaflet proved to be a great success! We distributed over 10,000 in nearby cities and at



Photo: © Juan Masello



Photo: © Pablo Giovine



Photo: © Mauricio Failla



Photo: © Mauricio Failla

Spreading awareness and knowledge about the colony through leaflets, posters and site visits, a new generation is taught to protect this unique natural wonder.

important local and regional ecotourism destinations. We think that ecotourism can be a complementary effective way of adding even more value to the colony and getting support from some still sceptical local representatives for the creation of the Nature Reserve at El Cóndor.

The leaflets were designed so they could also be used as posters. An additional 1,000 leaflets were used as posters and displayed at the university

supporter, inspired us. During our 2006-2007 field seasons, a total of 8,000 leaflets and 3,000 posters were distributed again in Viedma, El Cóndor, Carmen de Patagones, Puerto Madryn and Buenos Aires. But this time we extended the campaign into the upper valley of the Río Negro river, where the economic centre and the largest cities of the region are found: Roca, Cipolletti and Neuquén.

Even by the end of 2003 attitudes were changing.

the regional press. In November 2006, the most influential newspaper in the region published an article concerning the necessity of protection of the colony and the importance of the approval of our Act Proposal - a very promising sign.

What will the year 2007 bring? Will this be the year in which the colony is declared a Nature Reserve? We still need to work hard in order to gain agreement regarding our Act Proposal among

most local representatives. It is not going to be easy: this is an

electoral year in Argentina and politicians are focused on other subjects. But in any case, the educational campaign should continue. Now that most local news media are starting to understand our message we are trying to intensify our presence in newspapers, radios, TV, Internet, etc. This work is on its way.

Keep informed about the BPP through *PsittaScene*, parrots.org or our web page at: <http://orn.mpg.de/masello>
Your feedback and support is very much needed!



! We have the largest parrot colony in the world !

campus in Viedma and in the show-windows of 300 shops, 8 hotels, and 10 Internet cafés of Viedma, El Cóndor and Carmen de Patagones. For a small city like Viedma this meant almost everywhere!

With the experience gained in our 2005-2006 fieldwork and the feedback received from colleagues and the public, we prepared an improved second version of the leaflet during 2006. Thanks to additional funds from the WPT-Spain it was also possible to produce a specially designed poster. A brilliant picture from Bill Conway, a key BPP

A taxi driver of Viedma, a city 30 km (18.5 mi) away from the parrot colony, asked us "Do you know? We have here the largest parrot colony in the world!" And by now many realise the value of this colony, the dangers that threaten it and the necessity of an effective legal protection.

In December 2004, through some local representatives, we presented an Act Proposal that, once approved, will declare the colony at El Cóndor a Nature Reserve of the province of Río Negro, in Patagonia, Argentina. Support for our proposal has been growing, even from the part of