

# News from El Cóndor, Patagonia, Argentina

By Dr. JUAN F. MASELLO and Dr. PETRA QUILLFELDT.

Photos by DON PREISLER and JAMIE GILARDI

Since 1998, we have been conducting a study of the breeding biology of Burrowing Parrots (*Cyanoliseus patagonus*) at the largest and most important colony of this species (see *PsittaScene Vol 15 No 4: 12-13*). The colony is located west of the village El Cóndor, 30km southeast from Viedma, in the province of Río Negro, Patagonia, Argentina. Remarkably, after an extensive literature review on parrots breeding biology, this population appears to be the largest known colony of parrots in the world.

In February 2003 we wrote desperately to James Gilardi at the World Parrot Trust about poachers taking, during our absence, about 1,200 nestlings from the Burrowing Parrot colony at El Cóndor. Unfortunately, our study was interrupted at the end of 2002 because of the lack of funding. As a consequence we could not work at the colony during the breeding season 2002-2003 and the poachers took advantage. Until now, our field work was the only protection this colony has against illegal poachers and irrational local management. Neighbours of the close village of El Cóndor who have been helping us during all these years told us about hundreds of

Burrowing Parrot chicks taken from the nests before fledging and put in cages for the pet trade. They also told us about many of them left dead on the beach down the cliff where the parrots breed. Fortunately, and thanks to the unconditional help of James Gilardi and the financial support of Rosemary Low and the World Parrot Trust, we could return to the fieldwork during the breeding season 2003-2004. And it was one of our most fruitful seasons both from a conservation and scientific point of view!

At the very beginning of our fieldwork we participated, thanks to a generous invitation of Aves Argentinas (who has backed the project since last year), in the 4th

Workshop on identification of 'Important Bird Areas' (IBA) for conservation in Patagonia. This workshop was organised at the end of November 2003 by Aves Argentinas and *BirdLife International* in Puerto Madryn, Patagonia. As a result of that and with the complete help and agreement of all the scientists at the workshop the Burrowing Parrot colony at El Cóndor was declared a priority 'Important Bird Area' (IBA) for Patagonia under the programme organised all over the world by *BirdLife International*. Great news! This adds to the good news brought recently to us by Claudio Chehébar and his team at the National Park Administration

Photo: Jamie Gilardi

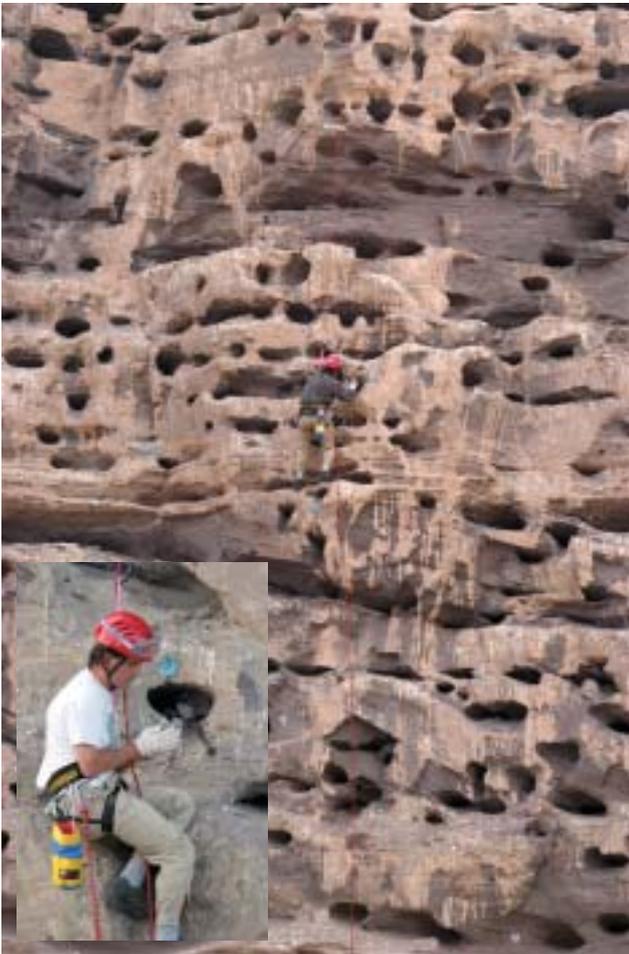


Photo: Don Preisler



Juan Masello (second from left) presides over the workshop.

Photo: Don Preisler



Climb cliff face to each nest and check nestling.

Photo: Don Preisler



Record various measurements and details.

(APN) of Argentina. The parrot colony area is now also considered a candidate for the new National Park in the Arid Patagonian Steppes of Argentina.

Another very important event from our recent season was the meeting we had in El Cóndor with local and international NGOs in order to co-ordinate a joint conservation programme for this, the largest known parrot colony in the world. Graham Harris from Fundación Patagonia Natural (FPN), Bill Conway from Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and James Gilardi from the World Parrot Trust participated in this meeting. Lots of ideas arose for the concrete protection of the colony, an educational campaign between the local people, especially the young people, and the impulse of ecotourism in the region. This year 2004 will find all of us working in all these aspects of parrot conservation. Rosemary Low and Krystyna Szulecka, both members of the WPT, also joined us at El Cóndor bringing help and a lot of enthusiasm. Rosemary and Krystyna together with one of our students, María Luján Pagnossin, are now working on the organisation of 'Friends of the Burrowing Parrot' which will raise funds for the protection of the colony at El Cóndor and for educational campaigns.



Photo: Jamie Gilardi

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Photo: Don Preisler

Each stage of a chick's development is recorded. Inset, chick waiting to be fed.

Indigenous Mapuche people of the Patagonian Andes, in the Argentinean province of Neuquén, celebrate the fledging of Burrowing Parrot chicks every year with a festival. The idea of Rosemary, Luján and Krystyna is initiating this tradition in El Cóndor in order to promote pride about the wonders of this magnificent parrot colony in the local people. The local Fundación Uñopatun has been working in the same direction during 2003, through a photographic competition (<http://www.avesdelcondor.s5.com>) and an educational campaign they organised. We were very surprised when, as a result of this educational campaign, a taxi driver in the nearby city of Viedma told us very proudly 'Do you know? We have here the biggest parrot colony in the world!' We think that the tragedy of the poaching in December 2002 made some of the locals realise the necessity of protection of their natural heritage, the parrot colony at El Cóndor.



Photo: Don Preisler

Photo: Don Preisler



See how close the visitors at the beach are to the nests!

From a scientific point of view, the season was also a complete success. We finished counting the nests in the colony. We are now working on a detailed description of the colony and we hope to publish it soon. This year, for the first time, we caught breeding parrots which we ringed as chicks 4 years ago. And they were breeding only a few metres from the nests where they grew up! During this season we monitored the development of 145 chicks and studied the immunocompetence of some of them, we caught, measured and ringed 52 breeding adults, carried out a census of non-breeders, studied the load of ectoparasites, investigated the presence of hemoparasites and took feather samples for the study of parrot coloration using spectrometry in the lab. A lot of work with data and in the lab is waiting for us now!

We hope to meet some of you in El Cóndor during the next breeding season!



Photo: Don Preisler

