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Return of a Giant

After an almost two hundred-year disappearance, the first Red-and-green Macaws have been released in Esteros del Ibera, Corrientes, Argentina.

By Igor Berkunsky

HUMANS HAVE HISTORICALLY PERSECUTED MACAWS for their colourful plumage. In the province of Corrientes in northeastern Argentina, there were at least two macaw species: the Glaucous Macaw (*Anodorhynchus glaucus*), which became globally extinct, and the Red-and-green Macaw (*Ara chloropterus*), which also disappeared from the region. These macaws inhabited forest islands between wetlands, and palm and gallery forests along the rivers.

Today, the nearest Red-and-green Macaw population is 300 kilometers north of Corrientes, in Brazil and northern Paraguay. Although the Red-and-green Macaw is globally listed in the IUCN Red List as a species of “Least Concern” the species is declining in some regions. In Argentina, there are no recent records and ornithologists agree that the species is extinct in the country, so it is classified as a “Critically Endangered” species at a country level.

The opportunity to recover a giant of the parrot world

A rewilding project was begun, aimed at recovering the Red-and-green Macaw in Corrientes. The Ibera Natural Reserve protects a large area of forest islands to harbour a stable population of birds, offering a unique opportunity to save this species.

Additionally, Ibera has many institutions and experts with experience in working with the restoration of extinct and endangered populations as diverse as the giant anteater, the pampas deer and the collared peccary. Another positive development is the growth of ecotourism in Ibera, where the presence of these birds will attract tourists, contributing to the development of local communities. The cultural value of Corrientes still present in artistic expressions and historical accounts has also been preserved for this reason.

From captivity to freedom in Ibera

The project focuses on using captive Red-and-green Macaws, originating from several zoos and rescue centers in the country. Selected birds arrive at “Aguará”, a state rescue facility in Corrientes Province, where groups of individuals are consolidated and all health checks are performed to rule out diseases that may be spread in the wild following the release.

Before their release, the birds spent several weeks in an acclimation aviary in Cambyretá, the northern access of Ibera. In this aviary, the macaws learn to feed on native fruits and develop other skills for their reintegration into the wild. The birds are equipped with small radio transmitters that allow the tracking of each individual in the field. After their release and as they expand their range, the macaws are monitored by project staff to check their adaptation to the natural environment, reproduction and long-term survival.



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The return of the Red-and-green Macaw is a collaboration of multiple institutions:

The Conservation Land Trust is financing most of the project thanks to a donation from a European philanthropist, and bringing its previous experience in wildlife reintroduction projects in Ibera. **Conservation scientists from the National Research Council (CONICET)** contribute their knowledge on the ecology of these birds and the reintroduction process. The state of Corrientes, through the

Natural Resources Agency, provides the Aguará facilities, where the macaws are kept before being transferred to Ibera Reserve, where the Parks and Reserves Agency authorizes and supervises the implementation of the project on the ground. Several ecological parks, wildlife rescue centers and zoos across the country provide the macaws to be released. Conservation organisations such as **Aves Argentinas** and the **World Parrot Trust** have supported the project from its beginnings, contributing their skills and

experience in the conservation of endangered species. Finally, **several groups of volunteers including scouts, schools and birders' clubs** assist in several stages of the project such as collecting wild fruits, building nest boxes and monitoring macaws in the field. Through this initiative, Argentina regains its first extinct species from the ex-situ management of wild bird specimens, and will continue working on their recovery through intensive management. 



About the Author

Igor Berkunsky, PhD is a conservation biologist interested in parrot conservation and rewilding. He graduated from the Universidad Nacional de La Plata in La Plata, Argentina, Faculty of Natural Sciences, with a PhD in Ecology and has published a number of articles on his work. Igor studied Blue-fronted Amazons in the Argentinean Chaco for a decade, and led WPT's Blue-throated Macaw Project. Beginning in 2014, he initiated a rewilding project aimed at restoring macaw populations in northern Argentina.

Volunteers Needed for Macaw Project in Argentina

The Rewilding Initiative in Argentina is on the lookout for volunteer field assistants for reintroduction work for the Red-and-green Macaw (*Ara chloropterus*) at Iberá, Corrientes, Argentina. The faint of heart need not apply: applicants must be disciplined, dedicated, diligent and tough.

FULL DETAILS ONLINE: <http://tinyurl.com/ararewild>