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## CONTENTS

Blue-throated Macaws	.....2-3
Adelaide Zoo	.....4-5
Ecotourism	.....6-7
Biting	.....8-9
Wild and Captive parrots	.....10-11
Red-throated Lorikeet	.....12
Kakapo	.....13
Cape Parrot	.....14
Review of WPT	.....15
PsittaNews	.....16-17
Info / Trade Ban Petition	..18
WPT Admin Page	.....19
Parrots in the Wild	.....20



## Cover Picture

Blue-throated Macaws (*Ara glaucogularis*) on a nest palm.

Photo: Bent Pedersen

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# Observations at an active nest of Blue-throated Macaws in the Beni Department of Bolivia

(*Ara glaucogularis*)

Text and Photos By BENT AND BIRTHE PEDERSEN

We had just left Santa Cruz in central Bolivia after having spent some time observing Red-fronted Macaws (*Ara rubrogenys*). The wonderful sight of hundreds of these magnificent birds were still fresh in our minds when we landed at the town of Trinidad, capital of the Department of Beni and situated in the northern part of Bolivia.

It was October 11, 2001, the time 1pm and the weather warm and humid when Mr Fellman Bogarth greeted us upon arrival. Mr Bogarth is associated with "Green Bolivia" and with his in-depth knowledge of the area and wildlife north of Trinidad he was the perfect guide for our observations of the Blue-throated Macaws.

## Savannah, wildlife and cattle ranches

From Trinidad we headed north towards the ranch San Miguel that was our base during our observations of the Blue-throated Macaws. A reliable 4x4 pick up truck is essential for driving on the clay like "roads", which quickly turn to a sea of mud when rain arrives.

The distance to the ranch is 120 km and usually takes around 3 hours of non-stop driving. However, due to the impressive abundance of wildlife en route we took much longer in order to observe and photograph rheas, storks, parakeets, capybaras, caimans and many other species.

The Blue-throated Macaw is endemic to this area, the "Llanos de Mojos" which is a seasonally-flooded savannah with larger and smaller forest like "islands" of different palm species and mixed vegetation, rivers, streams and ponds. Huge ranches partly fence the areas and run extensive cattle farming.

Generally in this area cattle farming and wildlife go well together. However, a major ecological problem during the dry season

(August - October) is the burning of grass to improve the quality of grazing when the rainy season starts around December.

## The nestsite

Each morning we left the ranch at dawn (5.30 a.m.) taking 50 minutes to make our way along a gravel road and through the savannah to a "palm island", where a pair of Blue-throated Macaw were raising two chicks in a nest prepared in a motacú palm (*Attalea phalerata*).

The "Isla Paraba" (macaw island) measured around 300 x 250 m and was dominated by *Attalea phalerata* palms.

The nest palm stood 25 m from the periphery of the island and was free-standing but for the tips of leaves from neighbouring palms. From here the macaws only needed a few strokes of their wings to reach the nest palm. The top two metres of the nest palm were hollow, with two entrances positioned one metre down facing east and west. We estimated a diameter of 55 cm at the nest chamber level.

## Observations of the Blue-throated Macaws

Blue-throated Macaws breed during the last half of the dry season (September - November) and since our observations took place during mid October the chicks were already "big". We clearly heard two larger chicks when fed by the female.

From our blind, 20 m from the nest palm (to the east) and 6 m above the forest floor, we had excellent views of the birds while they moved around in the area near the nest and at the nest itself. The greatest problem for the photography was



Blue-throat Macaws (*Ara glaucogularis*) on a nest palm.



Blue-throat Macaws (*Ara glaucogularis*) beside the nest palm.

the number and variety of hyper-aggressive insects that converted the few uncovered areas of our bodies into countless itching spots.

The pair spent a lot of time sitting together either in a tall "observation tree" around 50 m from the nest overlooking the area, or in palm leaves adjacent to the nest palm. They were often preening but always alert and responded to all unusual sights or noises by leaving the palm and circling the area while their typical scream penetrated the forest.

When leaving the nest area for foraging they usually left with a great deal of noise and stayed away for 2 hours at a time. Upon their return they arrived quietly to the "observation tree" and later proceeded either directly to the nest palm or to the palm leaves above the nest. They always rested there for a while before the female started to

crawl down to the eastward entrance, while the male in most cases remained in the palm leaves above the nest.

Before entering the nest she pre-regurgitated a number of times and then spent around 20 - 30 minutes feeding and staying with the chicks. After feeding she left via the westward hole and flew away with the male. The chicks were fed every 3 - 4 hours during the day.

### 'Attack' by a pair of Blue and Gold Macaw

One morning a pair of the larger and more powerful Blue and Gold Macaw (*Ara ararauna*) suddenly arrived on the nest palm while the Blue-throated Macaws were sitting in the "observation tree".

The Blue and Gold Macaws spent around 5 minutes crawling up and



Red-fronted Macaws (*Ara rubrogenys*) perching in trees.

down the nest palm. They looked down to the chicks and chewed some palm material at the top of the nest. Then both parents flew to the nest and chased the intruders away when landing.

The parents were sitting quietly side by side on the nest palm while the Blue and Gold Macaws were sitting in a tree close by, screaming for 20 minutes before both pairs took off "in full noise" circling around the area. Subsequently the Blue and Gold Macaws disappeared while the breeding pair flew to the "observation tree".

After this successful defence the Blue and Gold Macaws were no longer seen at the site.

### Return to Trinidad

In addition to the pressure on the nest site from the Blue and Gold

Macaws we also experienced wood cutting in a palm island and grass burning, both of which seem obvious possible threats to long term successful breeding of the Blue-throated Macaws.

Other macaw species observed included Green-winged Macaw (*Ara chloroptera*) and a large number of Chestnut-fronted (*Ara severa*) and Yellow-collared Macaws (*Propyrrhura auricollis*). Fortunately, we were able to watch Chestnut-fronted Macaws at a couple of nest sites.

After an exciting period of observations and photography at the Blue-throated Macaw nest site, plus a great deal of birding we returned to Trinidad where we enjoyed sights of several active nests of White-eyed (*Aratinga leucophthalmus*) and Dusky-headed Parakeets (*Aratinga weddellii*) just outside the town.



Local girl holding a Yellow-collared Macaw (*Propyrrhura auricollis*).



Blue and Gold Macaws (*Ara ararauna*) attacking at the nest of the Blue-throated Macaws.