

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release September 22, 1975

McGarvey 202/343-5634

NATURE'S HARSHNESS SEEN IN PUERTO RICAN PARROT'S FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL

The survival of America's most critically endangered bird, the Puerto Rican parrot, may depend upon a new program to renovate and protect its nesting sites, the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said today announcing the appointment of a recovery team to expand efforts already begun to save the bird from extinction.

The members of the team, all recognized authorities on the habits of this parrot and the ecology of Puerto Rico, are Dr. Noel Snyder, team leader, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Leonard A. Lindquist, U.S. Forest Service; Frank H. Wadsworth, U.S. Forest Service; and James Wiley, Department of Natural Resources, Puerto Rico.

Less than 20 of the emerald green, foot-long parrots are hanging on in a wet, windy sanctuary in the Luquillo Mountains of eastern Puerto Rico, a fragment of their former range. Here, they found refuge from the shooting, taking of young birds from their nests for pets, and relentless clearing of forests for agriculture which squeezed them out of the lowlands of the island. But a critical shortage of nesting sites in hollow trees, combined with fierce competition from the exploding population of another bird, the pearly-eyed thrasher, continues to push the parrots towards extinction.

Last year, a research team led by Dr. Snyder counted only 13 birds, an all time low. Over the winter, in an attempt to increase the breeding success of the birds, a program was initiated to locate every suitable nesting hole, decayed cavities in aging Palo Colorado trees. Then, where necessary, they constructed bark rain shelters and shored up the floors of the cavities to provide the parrots dry places to lay eggs and raise their young, safe from the ever present dampness of the rainy forest. The nests were watched closely, and if thrashers attempted to take them over, they were driven away.

The preliminary results of their work--six young birds fledged this summer, potentially bringing the parrot population up to 19 if all survive--exceeded their most optimistic goals. Only after an accurate census this fall will the increase be confirmed. But Dr. Snyder is hopeful that this new program, to be expanded this winter, holds the best answer yet for a long term reversal of the parrots' decline.

(more)

The 19 birds live only in the Luquillo Forest of eastern Puerto Rico where everything seems to be stacked against them. They nest amidst natural predatory enemies, compete fiercely for nest space with a more adaptable bird, and are threatened by disease. One hurricane could wipe them out, and illegal hunting and nest robbing still pose a threat. Man's previous lumber clearing activities robbed them of breeding locations not only on the lowlands but even in the less suitable mountains where the bird has barely survived man's advance. Modern day jungle warfare training and atomic energy experiments both disrupted the parrot's fragile domain. And, as if the above were not enough, the weather and a lack of nesting sites seem to have prompted a self-defeating and chronic failure to breed.

Vicious competition for nest space with the pearly-eyed thrasher may be responsible for a considerable portion of the parrot's current problems. Thrashers inhabit the forest by the thousands, their population is mushrooming and they prefer nesting cavities in the same trees used by parrots. Surprisingly, parrots don't seem to defend themselves against thrashers. Dr. Noel Snyder believes that the thrasher might be too recent to the forest for the parrots to recognize them as enemies or to have evolved a defense against them.

It was first believed that the thrashers entered parrot nests to eat the eggs or young, but Dr. Snyder now believes that thrashers merely wish to take over the nest cavity.

Several attempts have been made to help this bird. Efforts were made to transplant the Puerto Rican parrot to another area before 1942 but they failed. In 1946 parts of the Luquillo Forest were reserved as a sanctuary. When a study of the parrot was completed in 1956 the entire Luquillo Forest was set aside as a State game refuge.

In 1968, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the World Wildlife Fund joined forces to finance the cost of assigning a Service biologist to work full time on studying ways to increase the parrot's chances for survival. Nesting boxes to provide alternate breeding spots for parrots were tried but they seemed to have encouraged more thrashers to invade the area. An aviary for captive propagation of the species was built in the Luquillo Forest, and this may hold the key to the Puerto Rican parrot's future survival. Today 12 parrots are being held there to form the nucleus of a breeding flock.

The primary objective of the recovery team will be to draw up and coordinate the implementation of a recovery plan to expand efforts begun by the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Forest Service, the Commonwealth, and the World Wildlife Fund. One of the first problems the team will consider is discovering ways to increase the breeding success of the parrots and discourage their chief competitors from nesting sites, the pearly-eyed thrashers.

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