

# The Grey-breasted Parakeet: flagship for a unique forest

The Grey-breasted Parakeet (*Pyrrhura griseipectus*) is a species now found only in a minute geographical area in north-east Brazil. It is now critically endangered due to extensive destruction of habitat, and continuing poaching of wild nests. A project to prevent its extinction was started in 2007 by AQUASIS, a Brazilian NGO, supported by the Loro Parque Fundación, Chester Zoo, Act for Nature and the Zoological Society for the Conservation of Species and Populations (ZGAP). The first phase of the project, to update information on the present distribution of this species, indicated that the Serra de Baturité in Ceará State is the last refuge for the species in the wild. The Baturité Mountains are about 100km south of the coastal capital city of Fortaleza. Surrounded by semi-arid lowlands with caatinga vegetation, they rise up to 1,115m above the lowlands and above 600m present a unique type of moist forest. The Serra de Baturité concentrates the highest area of remaining preserved moist forest in the region, and also the majority of known sites of the Grey-breasted Parakeet. Although the whole area above 600m occurs within a state protected area (State Environmental Protection Area of Serra de Baturité), it is poorly managed by state authorities. The "protected area" is of sustainable use designation, which has been so widely interpreted that apartment buildings, small towns and farms using pesticides can be found within its boundaries. More effective in preserving the moist forest habitat has been a state law that limited the amount of land use in the Baturité Mountains above 600m of altitude. Even so, there is little enforcement of the law, and the vegetation cover is being systematically cleared for development.

The second phase of the project, investigating the reproductive cycle the species and its distribution in Serra de Baturité, revealed that the major threats currently are the lack of suitable nesting habitats (trees big enough for nesting cavities) and the poaching of existing nests to sell the parakeets to the pet market. A series of recommendations were made for a population recovery programme for the species, and these are being implemented by AQUASIS in the present phase of the project. The aim is to increase the availability of nesting habitat, and to make the Grey-breasted Parakeet a symbol for the conservation of the Serra de Baturité, mobilizing stakeholders and involving the local communities in the conservation effort.

One objective is to increase wild population by using nest-boxes, and so far 19 have been installed in carefully selected sites. The nest-boxes have been monitored and, although no nests have yet been occupied, the AQUASIS team has seen pairs of Grey-breasted Parakeet inspecting the artificial nests. Mating behaviour has been observed at about three meters from one of the nest-boxes and several individuals have been observed close to the boxes. The project intends to install 60 nest-boxes, but it is difficult to find safe places to hang them because bird trapping, although illegal, is a socially acceptable activity and it is still widely practiced in the region. Cages with songbirds, parrots and parakeets (mainly *Aratinga cactorum* and *Brotogeris chiriri*) are a very common sight in many



Children help to make nest-boxes

## Jogue limpo com o Cara-suja

### O periquito mais ameaçado do Brasil!

Ele tem o nome feio  
Mas é um cara maneiro  
Sua missão é lhe mostrar  
Que o macho pode acabar

O periquito cara-suja  
Está ameaçado de extinção  
Muita gente está pagando  
Criando e traficando  
O periquito vive nas matas  
Ele é da paz  
Só existe aqui no município de Baturité  
E nenhum lugar jamais

Tem gente que acha ele bonito  
Mas isso gera muitos conflitos  
Por que o cara se macho  
Paga ele o bicho na gaiola

Outros problemas que não acaba  
É vender ele na Parangaba  
O traficante paga ele dormindo  
E leva ele pra longe de sua mata  
A gente está aqui para fazer  
Ele entender  
Que o periquito longe do mata  
Fica até morrer!

Realizado por: **AQUASIS**

Apoiado por: **FECOMÉRCIO BESP-SERVIÇOS**

Patrocinado por: **LORO PARQUE FUNDACIÓN**, **CHESTER ZOO**, **ACT FOR NATURE**, **ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY FOR THE CONSERVATION OF SPECIES AND POPULATIONS (ZGAP)**

Poster: "Play fair with the parakeet"

houses in the Baturité region. In order to reduce the risk of poaching of the nest-boxes, areas have been selected close to natural nests, where the landowner has demonstrated an interest in cooperating with the conservation project and is willing to help monitoring and protecting the nests. When the parakeets start occupying the nest boxes, studies of the reproductive biology will be conducted.

One unexpected obstacle encountered with the nest-box initiative has been the resistance of some landowners to let the field team place artificial nests on their properties. The more the value of the land increases in the Baturité Mountains it seems the more people tend to avoid strangers in their lands. The social profile of the Serra de Baturité is gradually shifting from rural communities, who were very hospitable and keen to meet outsider, to a vacation and leisure destination for urban elites who are used to tighter security methods to protect their property. Most owners today can only be found during the weekends in their second houses in the Serra de Baturité. Thus the field team has had to evolve the appropriate approach to communicate successfully with every type of landowner. The best results are obtained when the owners that are keen to contribute with the project contact their neighbours and explain to them that they are already helping put the nest-boxes on their lands, and that they too should help in order to achieve more effective conservation results, i.e., the peer-to-peer approach.

Another principal objective is to promote the Grey-breasted Parakeet as flagship species, and two local organizations have already agreed to join the partnership to conduct long-term action to protect the species and its habitat. One is a local ecotourism business called Parque das Trilhas (Trails Park), and the other is a local NGO called AGUA (Friends of Guaramiranga Association). Parque das Trilhas is an important ecotourism enterprise in the Baturité region, located close to the main town of Guaramiranga where they operate an inn, and conduct various guided activities in the region. It attracts a lot of people during weekends and holidays, and AQUASIS is exploring with Parque das Trilhas ways to integrate the awareness campaign with the ecotourism activities. There is also interest to create a private protected area. AGUA is probably the most active and influential NGO in the region, and is also based at Guaramiranga municipality. Its main focus is the education of young people, mainly through art and music, and by providing them with access to digital technologies and tools. Having learned from AQUASIS about the Grey-breasted Parakeet and its critical situation of the species, AGUA wishes to be part of the long-term conservation of the species and its habitat. As an important community group, AGUA has been extremely helpful in introducing the project to some key stakeholders in the local society, including teachers and directors of local schools, municipal authorities involved with education and environmental issues, and people involved in the tourism business.

A further objective is to build capacity for bird-watching, and in the process develop awareness and create alternative livelihoods. To begin to fulfil this objective, AQUASIS has established an important partnership with the best hotel in the Baturité region, the Hotel Escola



A Grey-breasted Parakeet checks a PVC box



Installing a wooden box

## PROJECTS UP-DATE

SENAC Guaramiranga. This is not a large hotel (about 20 rooms) but it operates as a training facility for SENAC (Brazilian Trade Federation's National Training Service). AQUASIS will begin to hold the bird-watching courses proposed in the Hotel's auditorium, as well as other related activities such as training potential bird guides and giving presentations to the community. With the involvement of local partners and stakeholders, and enriched with project results, experiences learned, and the consolidation of local partnerships, AQUASIS expects to initiate a regular event, the Guaramiranga Bird Festival. With these actions, and using the Grey-breasted Parakeet. As a flagship species, AQUASIS is helping to fulfil a fundamental part of its mission, to avoid biodiversity loss in Ceará State.

[Photos: AQUASIS]



Natural nest with two young parakeets in the entrance