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Cachañas

The Austral Conure of Patagonia

By Soledad Díaz & Valeria Ojeda

We wake early to the smell of wet ground. Vegetation surrounds us at our mountain base camp. Our breath shows in the light of our headlamps - made visible by the cold morning air as we prepare our equipment for the day. We split up - one person hiking to a distant Austral Parakeet nest to monitor parental behaviour all day - others visiting the remaining nests to measure adults and chicks.

Hours after our 4am wake-up call, the magical atmosphere changes as the sun starts to appear through the canopy. It is a new day in Patagonia. Between the branches, birds start to wake up. It is a good day to watch parakeets! Not all days are so cooperative. Cold, humidity, late snows and wind can slow or stop our fieldwork for a few hours or days. A sunny day can turn cold in a few hours.

At night, we reunite near the shelter fire, happy but exhausted, talking about details and anecdotes of the day. Night falls and the moon shows itself through the trees. We hear the first night birds - a new journey starts for them. New adventures await when we emerge from our sleeping bags again.



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LEFT Austral Conures are known for being very noisy in flocks. Local people used to say "When Cachañas fly down from the forest to town, a storm is coming." In reality this is true. When a snow storm starts on the high Andes, parrots and other birds seek refuge in town.

LOWER LEFT Conures create a soft nest with little pieces of wood extracted from the nest walls. Clutch size is 6-9 eggs, depending on the nest and the year but one nest was documented with 11 eggs!

LOWER RIGHT Once chicks fledge they spend a lot of time socializing and playing in the branches and on the ground.

Starting in 1998, we began a series of studies on the foraging ecology and reproductive biology of Austral Conures or Parakeets (*Enicognathus ferrugineus*) along with Dr. Ana Trejo from our university. Though it is a common bird in Patagonian forests, very little is known about this species. This lack of information is a big concern because we can't measure the effects of deforestation and trade without basic knowledge of the species. Most of the references to Austral Conures in the literature consist of anecdotal

reports on circumstantial encounters or observations made over short periods. Very little information had been published on foraging or breeding biology by the time we had begun our research.

A mid-size parakeet (28-36 cm, 11-14 in), the Austral Conure is the most southerly distributed psittacids in the world. They are called Cachañas in the native language and are typical of the Andean Patagonian forests of southern Argentina and Chile, from sea level to 2000 meters. They inhabit many different forest types, from Araucaria (*Araucaria araucana*) in its northern reaches to Southern Beech (*Nothofagus spp.*) extending to the southernmost tip of South America.

Outside the breeding season (April-November) this species is highly gregarious. Large flocks explore food sources both inside and outside forests and in adjacent semi-open areas including ranchland and, at times, cultivations and urbanized sites. As breeding season approaches, flocks start to diminish in size, and from December to March, the conures remain in forested habitats, in pairs or small flocks.

Nesting individually in tree cavities the Austral Conure has one brood per season. In the study area, nest initiation is typically very synchronized among pairs, possibly as

a result of an even exploitation of the local food resources. Cavity enlargement or preparation starts in October and egg-laying takes place in December. Tree cavities for nesting and roosting can be natural (produced by rot) or excavated by the Magellanic Woodpecker (*Campyphilus magellanicus*). Most of the nests we recorded were in live trees that contained noticeable heart rot that allowed enlargement of the cavities by the conures. Nesting cavities were normally reused in consecutive years, and we are suspicious that communal roosting holes are used during the winter, but this needs confirmation.



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RIGHT Chicks are weighed and measurements are taken of the tarsus, wing, and head regularly until fledging. Feather development is also carefully tracked. These data helps researchers understand how the wild chicks develop.

LOWER LEFT Newly hatched nestlings are very small and featherless. When trying to take measurements its hard to get over how delicate they seem!

LOWER RIGHT Fieldwork can be fun and interesting but it is not glamorous. While monitoring parental behaviour and breeding biology, researchers spend long hours recording all observations at a nest.



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Conservation Issues

The Austral Conure is currently included in Appendix II of CITES and is considered of low concern in Chile and Argentina, in both cases with a zero extraction value (trade not allowed). But due in part to the lack of studies on this species, its conservation status is uncertain. The notion that it is "abundant" because large noisy flocks are observed during austral winters around urbanized sites may be misleading, since the actual status of most populations is unknown.

Until now, this species was only known to be affected by habitat loss (forest loss and fragmentation), while the live bird trade was considered of minor impact. However, over the course of our studies we found a growing interest in this species as a pet, both at a local and at a distribution-wide scale.



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Causes for concern

Austral Conure are potentially vulnerable during the reproductive season. They require very large trees to accommodate nesting cavities and depend on food sources close to their nesting sites. This leads us to propose that Austral Conures are dependent on rather continuous mature native forests for breeding purposes. As with other regions of the world, forestry operations are rapidly expanding towards the southern temperate forests, with logging projects extending throughout Chile and Argentina at an increased rate.

Moreover, this species is now being persecuted and hunted during winter, when large flocks gather around villages and urbanized sites. We have witnessed people (mostly children) hunting the conures with slings when they perch and forage in small groups of trees. As a result, many birds are injured or killed and others are caught and sold at a very low price (about US \$3). Once we were aware of this problem, we contacted the authorities. Surprisingly, we found a total lack of enforcement. This may be an emerging problem that was not part of the agenda of the official wildlife management agencies in the past. Unfortunately, we found that owls and other wildlife faced the same problem in urban areas. In this respect, both supervision of human activities and education programs seem fundamental to stop this negative attitude against wildlife from spreading. We suggest it is time to initiate conservation programs directed at the Austral Conure before they become more popular in the live bird trade

culture, which, along with habitat loss, may result in the species becoming endangered within the next 10 years.

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Parrots in the Wild

