



PEOPLE HELPING PARROTS

No. 4 George Olah

by Rosemary Low

It was in September 2018, at the International Parrot Convention in Tenerife, that I met George Olah. A conservation geneticist, he presented a paper at the meeting, giving an overview on the possible origin and speciation of the parrots and presenting the most recent evolutionary history. He talked about the current status of parrots worldwide and the specific threats they are facing, specifically in the Neotropics, Australia and Oceania.

George explained the use of different genetic tools for parrot conservation and the development of these techniques in the new genomic era. He described examples in different projects he has been involved with, such as the Tambopata Macaw Project in Peru or the work of The Australian National University saving the Swift Parrot. He

wide audience with their important investigations. We raise money to make video abstracts about nature conservation studies that contribute to solving conservation issues." They target and tailor their messages to specific audiences, be it local communities, students, NGOs, or decision makers.

In 2016 he released his award-winning film *The Macaw Project* (www.macawmovie.com) which has been broadcast in five languages worldwide and is also available online.

Last year he produced another award-winning movie *The Macaw Kingdom*. It won the section for Scientific Documentaries at the International Nature Film Festival in Hungary in 2018 and received an Honourable Recognition at the Wildlife Conservation Film Festival in New York. Let's hope



George Olah with Scarlet Macaw at Tambopata Research Centre

Macaws at the Tambopata clay licks by collecting their feathers and discovering if they are a separate population from that in the Candamo River basin. George needed access to this area, which he

described as, "The Holy Grail of parrot researchers". The Candamo Basin has apparently never been inhabited by humans. Surrounded by the foothills of the Andes, this is one of the very few uninhabited rainforests on earth. The problem was to get permission from the Peruvian Government to enter this area. It took George years to gain this permission.

However, in February 2016 the nine members of an international scientific expedition finally got on board a motorised canoe. It took them four days to reach Candamo. After setting up their base camp in the rainforest, they climbed giant trees, investigated nest

hollows, captured and tagged young Macaws and collected blood samples and feathers for genetic analysis. This was not easy! Reaching the nests and handling the young Macaws was challenging enough, but wasp attacks and bites from parasites added to the problems. Despite all the challenges,



George takes details of a macaw chick which is part of the research programme

emphasised the importance of science communication in conservation and has set up his own non-profit organisation, *Wildlife Messengers*, to make scientific videos and documentaries with conservation messages.

George said, "Many researchers lack financial resources to reach a

this inspirational film will soon be shown on television. The link to this film is <https://wildlifemessengers.org/macaw-kingdom>.

Population genetics of Scarlet Macaws in the Peruvian Amazon was an important part of his research. Part of the project involves sampling the DNA of

George Olah at the 2018 Parrots International Symposium in Tenerife, with two other speakers: Rosemary Low and Pepe Tella



the team returned to the laboratory with the invaluable samples that could help them to unlock the secrets of this isolated parrot population. Filming this research expedition provided the basis for the new movie *The Macaw Kingdom*.

George is based at the Fenner School of Environment and Society and the Research School of Biology, at The Australian National University. In conjunction with this department, he has made a short film entitled *Population Genetics of the Swift Parrot*. We have read much about the catastrophic decline of this little parrot in the pages of *Parrots* magazine. The work of George and his colleagues proved that there is only one population, which moves between Tasmania and the Australian mainland. Genetic modelling at the university has shown how this species is plummeting towards extinction.

A highly practical step taken by researchers was to invent a nest-box which excludes its main predator, the sugar glider, which had been killing females at the rate of 50 per cent per annum. I would urge readers to view the short video about this on George's website www.wildlifemessengers.org/science.

Another video extract not to be missed is the fascinating *Tool assisted rhythmic drumming in Palm Cockatoos*. Researchers spent many days in the field, in Cape York, the northern tip of Australia, eventually recording 60 drumming events. They discovered that the drumming of the Palm Cockatoo shares key elements of human instrumental music, also that each male has his own drumming style.

George is the lead author in various scientific publications, including one describing a new technique for the extraction of bot fly larvae in free living Scarlet Macaw nestlings, a very important paper on factors affecting extinction in parrots (Olah *et al*, 2016), and a most recent review about the parrots of Oceania (Olah *et al*, 2018).

He is currently participating in the

production of two blue-chip wildlife series of the BBC Natural History Unit by organising the filming of wild Macaws. The Amazonas episode of *Earth's Great Rivers* was premiered this January on BBC Two, while the new *One Planet – Seven Worlds* series (narrated by David Attenborough) will be aired at the end of this year.

This passionate young man is enormously advancing our knowledge of parrot population genetics and, with his appealing films, he is reaching audiences that would not otherwise be exposed to conservation issues. I feel sure that he will go on to make many more important contributions to parrot survival. ■

References

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