

# Guyana: The Sun Parakeet Project

A One Earth Conservation & Foster Parrots, Ltd. Collaborative  
By Danika Oriol-Morway



In single file we make our way across the meticulously planted rows of farmed cassava with slender, twisted trunks stretching towards the sun. The small, leafy tops offer little in the way of shade or cover as we sneak quietly across the dusty fields. I look nervously between the sky and my feet, still fearful of stepping on an unsuspecting snake or scorpion, but also not wanting to miss my chance to see the rare sun parakeets. We are speaking in whispers as we follow our guide to the back of the farm, and just as we hit the tree line we hear a faint call, “skree-skree-skree-skree-skree”. One of our ranger trainees turns back to me and points to the sky with a big smile on his face and says in a low but excited voice, “Ke’sse”, or as we know it “Sun parakeet”. We all look to the sky as a rush of orange, yellows, greens and blues come screaming out of the trees just a few meters above our heads. I revel in this chance to witness these beautiful birds, free and totally unaware they are, in fact, the last of their kind.

Once wide-spread throughout Brazil, Venezuela, Southern Guyana, Surinam and French Guiana, sun parakeets have all but vanished throughout their range. They are classified as Endangered on the IUCN Red List, and could further be upgraded to Critically Endangered as further surveys are conducted. As we wind our way through the rugged terrain, up the Ireng river and through the dense primary forests of the Pakaraima mountains, it is hard not to feel as though these birds have gone into hiding, tucking their families far away from human reach in a final attempt to save the last of their species. The demand for the sun parakeet as pets has continued to fuel their decline in the wild, despite the thousands of captive-bred sun parakeets already persisting in cages around the world. The problem surrounding the sun parakeet, however, is not just about extracting birds from the wild. It is also about what happens to the communities, cultures and environments when people have limited economic choices, and the external pressures and market demands that commodify the natural resources of a region.



*Wild sun parakeet in Guyana - Photo by Kester Clark*

In January 2019, working in our target village of Karasabai, we hosted a six-day workshop that involved 20 participants from 3 different villages. We trained team members to conduct fixed transect counts to assess the minimum number of individual birds in a given area. Alarmingly, our January population survey documented only 137 distinct, individual sun parakeets.

Continuing to research village attitudes and interest in parrot conservation efforts in Guyana, we visited the villages of Rewa, Surama, Annai, and the conservation research center at Iwokrama. Much of our work focused on community engagement, working directly with local youth wildlife clubs within each village, offering population censusing and parrot identification training, and spending time listening to people as they relayed the history of Home and their relationships with their native parrots. As of January 2019, we have officially established two parrot monitoring projects, one in Karasabai and the other in Rewa village, hiring wildlife guides, local parrot conservationists and ex-trappers. We will continue to build these relationships in Guyana so that we can begin to piece together a full understanding of the health and distribution of parrots across the country.

The art of conservation comes not from the proselytizing of westernized ideologies of human animal interaction, but instead is about learning from the communities we want to work with. Our work in Guyana is rooted in the fundamental belief that what we offer are simply tools and methodologies to support the work and expertise of the indigenous communities who know their land and animals better than anyone else. Conservation must be in-situ, managed by the indigenous communities or else we are in danger of perpetuating modernized colonialist archetypes under the guise of conservation.



*Dr. LoraKim Joyner leads a workshop in Karasabai  
Photo by Danika Oriol-Morway*



*Left: Danika with Next Generation Conservationists Right: The beauty of the savanna - Photos by Danika Oriol-Morway*