

The last days of the blue macaw

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Bright blue-green in colour, it was one of the most beautiful macaws. It was large and inhabited Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina. Its last sighting occurred in 1950 and it is currently considered extinct.

“An extensive palm grove covers the plain, slightly undulating, near the large River Uruguay. The orange fruits of the yatay palms hang in generous clusters to attract one of the most spectacular birds on the planet: the blue macaw. A small group of these colossal parrots flies quickly with a hectic and nervous flap of wings, causing a turquoise flash, which contrasts with the white clouds that interrupt the blue of the sky. The birds stop to perch on top of the palm trees. There they savour their wild dates, while calling loudly with powerful, hoarse, repeated and brief screams. A little later, they will fly as they came, with an uncertain course, until they are lost on the horizon.”

That may well be the story of one of the many sightings that the blue or violet macaw had during the eighteenth century, when it was still common in the Southern Cone of America. But those bluish images of fast flights will never be repeated. We could be pensive, but I invite you to learn more about the natural history of this protagonist.

It was one of the most beautiful parrots ever known, thanks to its bright blue-green colour. It was large, as it could reach a length of about 75 cm. We have more doubts than certainties about its biology, with unanswered questions and not a few contradictory or unknown data. Yes, we know that its territories stretched through southern Brazil, eastern Bolivia and Paraguay, northern Uruguay and north-eastern Argentina, where it was recorded as far south as Entre Ríos.

Almost certainly, the first white man to pay attention to it was the Spanish Jesuit José Sánchez Labrador, who, in the words of his contemporary counterpart Martín Dobrizhoffer, "was a meticulous researcher of the natural sciences". Like many of the Jesuits, he dealt with both evangelising actions and the study of nature. Shortly after the order was expelled in 1767, many of his works began to come to light - the only ones at the time that revealed the geography, ethnography, history and nature of the New World. Many were

destroyed or lost in the archives of Europe, but the following testimony of Sánchez Labrador was saved: "There are many of these birds in the forests of the eastern bank of the Uruguay River, in the forests of the Paraguay River they occur rarely. They tame greatly and do some surprising things. In the town of La Concepción de Nuestra Señora, occupied by Guaraní Indians, there was a group of these very tame blues." Its reference to abundance is of unprecedented value (it says "muchísimas" (many)) and especially when we are sure that it is not confused with other macaws, given that it was a frequent mascot in the missions. But these observations end with the decree of the King of Spain, Carlos III, who orders the expulsion of all Jesuits. The moment for the deprivation and destruction of many of the notes of scientific and historical value arrived. Those that Sánchez Labrador managed to save, were taken from him in Buenos Aires. After returning to the papal states, he turns to his only source of documentation that was safe: his colossal memory. Thus, he rescues the knowledge that he transcribes in more than a dozen works, some of which do not reach our days either, such as the four volumes on the "Cultivated Paraguay" or the "Names of animals and plants. Degrees of kinship." Hence the value of the testimony cited. But let's move on.

The Guaraní called it gua'á hovy or arapachá. Both "gua'á" and "ara" are onomatopoeic: they reproduce their powerful cry. Despite the reference works referred to, the existence of this bird was not yet known among zoologists. His discovery had to wait. First, to the military and naturalist Félix de Azara, who lamented how the clergy versus the civil power successor of the Jesuits "ruined and destroyed" those efforts to build knowledge. In 1807 he described the macaw in detail, but as he refused to follow the classification system devised by Carl von Linnæus, it had to be his French colleague Louis Jean Pierre Vieillot who named it for science: *Anodorhynchus glaucus*. This, nine years later and based on the same descriptions of Azara, who - in this regard - called him simply "The Blue". As he said, "all the rest, without exception, are celestial above and the same below, although less bright, but opposed to light changes into green sea." Hence the choice of the word glaucus, which recalls this colouration. Almost two centuries later, ornithologist Tony Pittman concluded an exhaustive museological and bibliographic review of the species (1992). One of his discoveries was that it is the only species of the genus whose plumage changes colour according to the incidence of light. Hence, with a lot of luminosity, it looked blue or violet, and with dim lights greenish or turquoise. It is assumed that this quality allowed it to blend in among the leaves of the yatay

palms (*Butia yatay*) to go unnoticed before the sharp eyes of the large eagles, its potential predators.

Habitat

Apparently, this psittacid lived in savannas with woodland islands, surrounded by estuaries, and in palm groves near rivers with steep ravines. The fruits of the yatay palm would be one of its favourite foods, according to Martín de Moussy there, by 1860. Azara notes that its diet "is limited to fruits, seeds and dates...". Today, an important yatay palm grove is protected in the El Palmar National Park (province of Entre Ríos), but it certainly no longer has these large parrots.

A key witness of the days of the blue macaw was the famous French naturalist Alcides D'Orbigny, who toured the territory of the large parrot in 1827 and 1828, between estuaries, palm groves, fields, towns and coasts of the Paraná River. Impressed by the vast palm groves of yatay along the rivers, he sadly predicted their destruction in the face of the relentless advance of agriculture. In 1827 he sighted, in the province of Corrientes, what seem to be the last specimens captured in Argentina. The hunt to get to taste the meat of some specimens of "this beautiful species of blue macaw that the Guaranies name araracá". But its flavour does not seem to have been worthy of its reputation, as it was "so leathery that I couldn't eat it." One of those birds collected would be the one preserved in the Natural History Museum of Paris

On December 20, 1827, being in the northwest of Corrientes, on the banks of the Paraná River and near the rivers and estuaries of Itaibaté and Santa Lucía (not far from the current Mburucuyá National Park), he points out: "Throughout the length of the canyon were scattered pairs of glaucous green macaws, whose high-pitched screams repeated endlessly the echo of the forest. Each one showed itself before the huge holes it digs in the ravine, to spawn, or perched on the hanging branches of the trees that crown the banks. To those high-pitched screams was mixed the no less unpleasant cry of the mountain turkeys, which only ceased when we moved away from their nests." Azara, once again, tells us that "... it breeds not only in tree trunk hollows, but rather and with greater frequency in those holes that it creates in the vertical ravines of the Paraná and Uruguáiy rivers ...", where it deposited – probably - no more than two eggs.

The last sighting

Commander Luis Jorge Fontana was another actor in this Chaco scenario. After his military campaign to conquer the Argentine Chaco, he published his book "El Gran Chaco" (1881), where he mentioned the presence of our parrot, like *Ara glauca*, in what he considered a garden: "If paradise existed in America, it was here in my opinion without a doubt". It is worth clarifying that the Province of Chaco at that time did not exist and the territory explored was part of the current Province of Formosa. Let us recall the text of the telegram he sent to the then Minister of War and Navy, General Julio A. Roca. Near the border with Salta and the Formosan coast of the Bermejo River, he wrote in the winter of 1880: "I am in Rivadavia. The Chaco is recognized. I have lost my left arm in a fight with the Indians, but I have the other to sign the map of the Chaco that I have completed on this excursion." Fontana belonged to the so-called generation of the 1880s and exhibited a great vocation as a naturalist. In fact, it was formed under the direction of the Prussian sage German Burmeister, who directed the now called Argentine Museum of Natural Sciences "Bernardino Rivadavia".

By the mid-nineteenth century, the blue macaw was already uncommon, and by 1895, a "very rare" bird, according to Eduardo Ladislao Holmberg, the first director of the Buenos Aires Zoological Garden and one of our brilliant naturalists. Thus, little by little, sightings begin to be erased from the map. The unmistakable symptoms of that rarity that precedes extinction - as Darwin would say - did not alarm the scientific community, which, in honour of the truth, little noticed or informed was of that fate so bleak and near. Professor Julio R. Contreras' rescued data that could be considered those of the last free birds observed in Argentina (see Note 1).

In Uruguay, Prof. Raúl Vaz-Ferreyra - one of the greatest figures of South American zoology - was the protagonist of what we consider the last sighting of specimens of the species (see Note 2). It was in 1950, when he travelled by car from the town of Artigas to Bella Union, more exactly about eight kilometres south of the last town in the northwest of his country. Although he returned to that place in two subsequent periods (between 1952 and 1955, and between 1972 and 1989), he never saw them again and no one else has cited them again. Tracking the area where he had seen it, he noticed that even the road had been changed by another. Those young trees already made it difficult to see and, in

particular, to recognise the exact place of the find. Anyway, it was most likely already late. The days of gua'á hovy were over.

If we analyse the possible causes of its disappearance, we would have to think about the colonisation of its habitat, which was accentuated from the end of the nineteenth century; increased navigation; the clearing of river bank forests; disturbances when transporting logs down the river using the wooden log raft ("jangada") system); and their eventual hunting or commercial capture to supply the collector's pet market. It would not be necessary to rule out some epizootic, as happened with the extinct Carolina parrot (*Conuropsis carolinensis*), from the United States, or genetic problems (in-breeding) in its fragmented populations.

Vulnerable species

Ornithologist Carlos Yamashita believes that it was a bird with too specialised a diet, because of the five species of palm trees in the region, everything seems to indicate that it fed on just one: the yatay. Not only that, but it was also very selective in choosing its dates. Naturally, this "exquisite" dependence made it vulnerable to the violent disappearance of the palm trees to make room for agriculture and livestock.

But, continuing in this field of hypothesis, we could consider a fact that, until now, seems to have gone unnoticed: the Paraguayan War or the Triple Alliance, which confronted Paraguay with Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina between 1865 and 1870. For starters, the scenario of the bloody conflict overlapped with the geographical distribution of the macaw. If we look at the photographic records or daguerreotypes of the confrontation - immortalized in the paintings of Cándido Lopez -, it will not be difficult to perceive the environmental damage that artillery, naval manoeuvres and the movement of troops in combat produced on the riverside ravines and the other environments occupied by these birds. Although this was not the most important cause (something we do not know), it undoubtedly must have contributed negatively to its disappearance. Interestingly, the only specimen that remains in the country, more precisely, in the Argentine Museum of Natural Sciences "Bernardino Rivadavia", has as its only collection data "Paraguay". In addition to that study skin that remains in our country, there are about 20 specimens in a handful of museums, such as the British, Paris, New York and Washington.

It is curious, but there were many specimens that came to be exhibited in the zoos of London, Amsterdam, Berlin and Paris. It has been said that the last captive individual of Argentina lived more than 20 years in the Buenos Aires Zoo, until it died, in 1938. But that specimen (presumably, of Brazilian origin), if it is the one that corresponds to the photo published in the prestigious ornithology magazine "El Hornero", in 1936, belonged to another species: the indigo macaw (*Anodorhynchus leari*), according to specialist Tony Pittman. Ours was very similar to this one, and there are ornithologists who maintain that both made up a single "super-species". If so, the possibility of reintroducing these birds in our country could be analysed, a possibility that is worth considering.

To close the case, the concrete and certain thing is that in the lists or "red books", the species already appears in the category of "extinct". Until a couple of decades ago, there were still expectations: "If you still survive, your numbers must be extremely low." By then, all the articles ended with the hope of finding it again, although other ornithologists, such as Manuel Nores and Dario Yzurieta, already feared the worst: "Probably extinct, even though it was abundant in other times. Only three records in the twentieth century. There is a remote possibility that it still subsists in marginal jungles of non-navigable rivers." But that hope today is lost, like that turquoise flight that vanished in a horizon of palm groves and banks, along a route where the return is no longer possible.

Note 1

by Prof. Julio. R. Contreras (Argentine Museum of Natural Sciences ("Bernardino Rivadavia"))

Not-so-distant memories

"Talking to elderly residents of Las Lomas, they still remembered seeing one in the outskirts of the city of Corrientes around the 1910s and 1920s, even until about 1930. I owe to my uncle, Don Félix Contreras Gonzalez, a man of great culture and excellent observer of nature, who died at the age of 95 in 1985, references to the presence of some specimen in the forests and palm groves of the Riachuelo, south of that city, for the years 1915-1919. This data coincides with that of a Correntino neighbour, Don Floro Ramirez, who observed a couple nesting in an old pacara earpod (*Enterolobium contortisiliquum*) tree eight kilometres northeast of the city of Corrientes, around 1930."

Note 2

by Prof. Raúl Vaz-Ferreyra of the National University of Montevideo, Oriental Republic of Uruguay.

The last sighting

"I saw a blue parrot, a little greenish, similar to blue macaws, but smaller; obviously smaller. He was perching on a barbed wire pole; next to a eucalyptus. I thought it was a captive and escaped bird. I walked up to him and he flew away. He left the place where I was to fly to a group of eucalyptus trees that was nearby.

At that time it was admitted that *Anodorhynchus glaucus* was in Uruguay (it had been cited in the list of Tremoleras, which was the list we managed then), with which, at first, I had no hesitation in attributing it to this species. When attention was drawn to the rarity of the species, I compared the memory of that specimen to other macaws or blue macaws. Well, it was obviously different. It was smaller and what I thought, at least, was that it was greener, less blue than the known blue macaw."