

## The ones that are disappearing. Argentine species in danger - violet or blue macaw

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Violet or blue macaw

Scientific name: *Anodorhynchus glaucus* (Vieillot, 1816)

Class: Birds

Order: Psittaciformes

Family: Psittacidae

International Status: Endangered (Presumed Extinct)

National Status: Endangered (Presumed Extinct)

C.I.P.A.: Threatened

Cites: I

Other common names: "Guambá-hovíg" or "guaá-hoví (guarani), celestial macaw, blue ara; " arará", "arapachá" or "araracá" (guaraní), arará celeste, arará azul, small blue macaw

### Characteristics

This psittacid constitutes the southernmost representative of the genus *Anodorhynchus*. It was originally composed of 4 other species: *Anodorhynchus purpurascens* and *A. coeruleus* (already extinct species that would have inhabited the Guadeloupe Islands and Jamaica in the Antilles), *A. leari* (restricted to Raso da Catarina in north-eastern Brazil) and *A. hyacinthinus* (widely distributed in central South America).

Our species is characterised by its smaller size (680 to 740 mm. overall length) and differences in shades in the colouration of the plumage that was predominantly blue-green with a greyish hue on the head and neck and a somewhat brownish tint on the face, throat and upper chest. According to some authors the colouration of the throat tends to blackish, the abdomen is greenish and the inner ridges of the wing are black. Well contrasting is the bare periorcular area and the pale chrome-yellow patch at the base of the jaw, like a narrow girdle that borders it. The beak is very large and robust from 65 to 70 mm. of black colour, just like the iris, tarsus and eyelids. It would be in its appearance very similar to *Anodorhynchus leari* but somewhat clearer. Despite

their striking resemblance, it tends lately to be considered that both macaws constitute a super-species. The tail for some authors would reach 400 or 430 mm. long, with central rectrices of up to 39.5 mm

### Habitat

As for the habitat of the species, grassy areas have been indicated with rocky islets, surrounded by grasslands and estuaries or areas with palm groves near rivers with steep ravines. According to Olrog (1984) it would be typical of the savannahs and forests of paraná pine (*Araucaria angustifolia*), but we do not know on what records it was based to make such a claim.

### Distribution

Its original distribution area covered, according to the little existing information, eastern Paraguay, southern Brazil (states of Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul), northeastern Argentina (south of Misiones, north and centre of Corrientes to the Batel estuaries and, probably, east of the Chaco, according to a single quotation only nominal and vague of Commander Fontan, and northern Uruguay (Artigas Department).

### Ethoecological traits

According to Azara (1805) the species would excavate hollows in the ravines of rivers or in dry tree trunks where it would deposit 2 eggs. Very little that is known about their habits. De Moussy (1860) found it very associated with the yatay palms, where they also fed. Orfila (1936) considers it in captivity "not very sociable without being unsociable" and emphasises that they irritate immediately, attack with pecks when fed, are silent and rested usually for a long time in the same place without moving. On the contrary, Sánchez Labrador (1767) considers it a very meek and intelligent species when domesticated, and relates the incredible almost human abilities of a specimen that lived some time in the reduction of "La Concepción de Nuestra Señora (The Conception of Our Lady)". This species was also famous for its appetite and it is believed that its Guaraní name is "arapachá" which would mean "the one who is feeding all day" (from "ara", day, time and "pachi" feeding).

## Situation

The species was baptised in science in 1816 by Vieillot based on the description made of it Azara (1805) who calls it "The blue" clarifying that "all the rest without exception is celestial above and the same below, although less bright, but changes into green sea in the opposition of the light " hence Vieillot called it *glaucus* remembering that colouration. According to the famous Azara, he had observed this macaw in pairs between 27 and 30° south latitude and never again to the north, but clarifies that it had due references in the south it reached up to 33.5° L.S. (south of Entre Ríos). Due to this the typical locality of the species was fixed years later in the surroundings of the city of Corrientes. The French traveller and naturalist Alcides D'Orbigny (1835) repeatedly points out this species when visiting the province of Corrientes and recognizes it by the Guarani name of "Araracá" . The southernmost town where it is found seems to be the Rincón de Batel (San Roque and Concepción Departments) in the centre-west of the coastal province in 1827. He also observed it in the surroundings of the city of Corrientes and in the vicinity of Itá-Ibaté, going up the Paraná River (in the latter locality in the company of *Ara chloroptera*). In Corrientes D'Orbigny even has the opportunity to taste the meat of the species: "so leathery that you cannot eat it" De Moussy (1860) found it in Corrientes where he pointed it out feeding on the yatay (*Butia yatay*) in the middle of the last century.

Prior to the mentions of these naturalists, the Jesuit Father Sánchez Labrador (1767) refers to it saying: "there are many of these birds in the forests of the eastern bank of the Uruguay River; in the jungles of the Paraguay River they are rare".

Fontana (1881) points out the *Ara glauca* for the Chaco without giving concrete data. In Paraguay its existence is known not only by the data of Azara and Sánchez Labrador, but also by the specimens of the British Museum of Natural History from this country: two from the Museum of Natural History of New York that arrived from Paraguay to the London Zoo in 1886 and 1898 respectively. In the Museum of Natural History of Paris there is a single specimen from Corrientes (and probably collected by D'Orbigny) and two from

Paraguay, which Orfila (1936) could consult in the Argentine Museum of Natural Sciences. Already in 1895 Holmberg considered it in Argentina a very rare species. In Brazil, Sick (1985) could not find records of the species in the area of the Paraná River belonging to that country and the only records he points out are those of Sellow, who states that between December and January 1823 and 1824 a "blue arará" nested on the walls of the port of Caçapava (Rio Grande do Sul) and that of Saint Hilaire, who pointed out a small "arará" of bluish plumage in Santa Catarina in 1820 and that could refer to this species. According to Orfila (1936) the specimen existing at that time in the Buenos Aires Zoo and which he came to photograph could have come from Brazil. Recently Andres Contreras referring to the species in Corrientes said: "Talking to elderly inhabitants of Las Lomas, they still remembered seeing one at the beginning of the century. I owe Don Félix Contreras González references to the presence of a specimen in the forests of the Riachuelo between 1900 and 1910".

Zotta (1937) pointed it out for Paraná in Brazil and the Artigas department in Uruguay, a country in which Orfila doubted its existence. In the north of that country Raúl Vaz-Ferreira would have made the last visual record of the species in the wild in 1950 (Nores and Yzurieta, in print).

Having passed more than 30 years without news of the species, both Sick (1985), Nores and Yzurieta (in print) and Olrog (1984) consider that the macaw could be virtually extinct. The reasons for its decline are even more enigmatic, as they occur at a time when environmental modifications were not yet of importance (late nineteenth century).

It is believed that the increase in navigation and the settlement of the banks of the Paraná where the cities of Resistencia, Corrientes and Posadas rise among others and those of upper Uruguay would have deprived it of quiet areas suitable for nesting. Also hunting must have had a significant impact due to its imposing appearance and size. We even see in the aforementioned notes of D'Orbigny that it was captured as a protein resource although its meat was not the most tasty. The extraction of chicks to breed them as pets has old dates and we already have evidence at the time of the Jesuit reductions Sánchez Labrador in the eighteenth century and was continued until the late nineteenth century, with the shipment to European zoos of some specimens.

This is proven by the aforementioned violet macaws that arrived at the London Zoo in 1886 and 1898 (the latter died in 1912, that is, after 14 years in captivity). The Amsterdam Zoo traditionally owned it and there are records of one who died in 1862, another acquired in 1863 and died in 1867 and a third who was incorporated in 1868. The Berlin Zoo possessed in 1892 a macaw of this species. The last known specimens in captivity were the one observed by Jean Delacour between 1895 and 1905 in the "Jardin D'acclimatation" in Paris and the one that Orfila studied and photographed in the 30s at the Buenos Aires Zoo. There are no recent records of captive animals although Sick (1985) suspects that in some small circles of bird collectors there could be specimens probably confused with other living species of *Anodorhynchus*. It should be clarified that the traffickers of wild animals in Asunción could not acquire it since the 40s. Sick learned of a rumour about a specimen that appeared in commercial circles in 1979, but could not confirm it.

We must remember that its relative the blue macaw or hyacinth (*Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*) is actively marketed as a pet. It is estimated that in 1978-79 100 to 300 specimens per month would have entered the USA. In October 1987, the Chaco authorities confiscated 19 macaws of this species, that were returned to Brazil.

The possibility that its decline was caused by some epizootic (Ridgely, 1980) in the same way that would have occurred with the Carolina parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*) or by genetic problems in an already diminished population (Sick, 1985) is not ruled out. In Brazil it is on the official list of threatened species as probably extinct. Although Nores and Yzurieta (in print) and other ornithologists, who recently visited the Argentine northeast have not been able to find indications of their presence, we must not give up in the search for any relict population, less after the recent rediscovery in the wild of its close relative the indigo or yellow-faced macaw (*Anodorhynchus leari*) classified in 1856 by Bonaparte based on a captive bird that arrived in Europe and a few commercialised specimens that later arrived in the same continent and some markets in Brazil; only in the 70s Sick and Texeira (1983) managed to find their "typical habitat" in the Raso de Catarina in the northeast of the Brazilian state of Bahia. There the birds nested in rocky ravines and lived in flocks feeding especially on the fruits of the palm tree "licuri" (*Syagrus*

*coronata*) in an area of clearly xerophilous vegetation. According to these authors, the morphological closeness of *Anodorhynchus leari* and *A. glaucus* would force them to be considered a super'species, both species constituting distinct relictual populations. distanced from each other by several kilometres where there would be its somewhat more different congener *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*.

Cases like this force us to continue searching carefully into our rivers and marginal jungles in search of this magnificent exponent of Argentine avifauna.

Finally, we will completely transcribe the summary of the situation of this species made by Nores and Yzurieta (op. cit.): "Probably extinct, although it was abundant in other times. Only 3 records in the twentieth century. There is a remote possibility that it still subsists in marginal jungles of non-navigable rivers."

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