
Sun Conures Rising

By Toa Kyle

One by one, each member of the large Sun Conure (*Aratinga solstitialis*) flock descends and enters the tree cavity.

It's near dusk, but their brilliant yellow bodies still stand out in the ebbing sunlight. Finally, only one individual remains perched on the upper branches of the roost tree, vigilantly scanning the surrounding hills. After a few minutes, this bird, too, descends into the tree cavity to join the rest of the flock for the night. I smile as I realise I am the first biologist to witness this tree cavity roosting behaviour for the species in the wild. Like many parrot species that are popular as cage birds, little is known of the natural history of Sun Conures.

CONSERVATIONISTS HAVE BECOME more concerned with wild Sun Conures due to the recent split of the species from the Sulphur-breasted Parakeet (*Aratinga pintoii*). Previously, the Sun Conure's range extended from southern Guyana to the northern bank of the Amazon River, a distance of over 400 km/250 miles. The split into two distinct species, however, drastically decreased the known range of this species. Coupled with intensive trapping in the 1970s and '80s, wild Sun Conures may now number in the hundreds of individuals. While the "discovery" of a new species is usually a cause for celebration, in this case, it also signifies the preciousness of another and provides 'strong motivation to study and protect those birds that still persist in nature,

With this sense of urgency, I arrived in the village of Karasabai in Southern Guyana as a follow-up to the work initiated by WPT director Jamie Gilardi, in May 2008 (see PicottaScene 21.1, Feb 2009). The safest bet for observing wild Sun Conures is Karasabai. Elders in the village explained how in the 1980s locals would trap large numbers of Sun Conures and sell them to dealers who would visit periodically from the capital, Georgetown. On one such transaction in the late 80's, a dealer pulled a gun on villagers from Karasabai to avoid paying for a bird shipment. Although no one was hurt in the incident, the community-made a collective decision to stop the trapping and sale of birds in the area immediately. Although locals made this decision to protect themselves, their action protected what was possibly the last flock of Sun Conure Guyana. Over the next 20 years, populations of birds in other parts of the country were wiped out completely.

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THAT FLOCK OF SUN CONURE roosts in tree cavities year-round is the most important find of my trip to Guyana. In fact, their roosting behaviour may help explain how they were almost trapped to extinction before anyone noticed. Trappers can capture an entire flock at once by placing nets over the entrance of roosting cavities at night. Two of the three roosting trees I located were in open settings. Given conspicuous neon yellow birds roosting with accessible access roost cavity, one can begin to understand how the species decline was swift and sudden. Although Sun Conures have evolved their roosting tendencies over the millennia (presumably as a defence from nocturnal predators), in the face of modern trapping techniques, this behaviour almost caused their complete disappearance from the wild in less than 30 years.

