



Puerto Rican Parrot Release

The Issue

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will conduct the second release of captive-reared parrots into the wild between the second and third weeks of May 2001. This historical event marks 33 years of cooperative work with the U.S. Forest Service and Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources to recover the endangered Puerto Rican parrot from the brink of extinction. The Puerto Rican parrot is one of the ten most endangered birds in the world!



Where

The parrots will be released in the Caribbean National Forest, also known as “El Yunque.” This is the only place in the world that still supports a wild Puerto Rican parrot population, but by no means is it optimal habitat for the species. The Caribbean National Forest is located in northeastern Puerto Rico approximately 45 minutes from the capitol San Juan.

History of the Puerto Rican Parrot

- The Taino Indians of Puerto Rico named the Puerto Rican parrot iguaca because of the squawk-like sounds it makes during take-offs and flight. Unfortunately, knowledge of the iguaca’s original distribution disappeared with the Taino Indians and the early European settlers. It has been said that the Puerto Rican parrot was abundant, distributed island wide with an estimated population of over one million individuals.
- Parrots were widespread and abundant over large areas in the main island. They were also present on the islands of Vieques, Mona and Culebra. They may also have lived on the island of Desecheo. A smaller subspecies, *A. vittata gracilipes*, exists on Culebra Island.
- 1836: “Great” flocks of parrots were reported by German naturalist C. Moritz.
- 1864: U.S. naturalist, E.C. Taylor, described the Puerto Rican parrot as abundant in the eastern lowlands of Puerto Rico.
- 1876: Spain proclaims El Yunque Caribbean National Forest a forest reserve, making it one of the oldest reserves in Western Hemisphere.
- February of 1899: Culebra subspecies still common.
- 1899, 1928, 1932: Hurricanes San Ciriaco, San Felipe and San Ciprián hit Puerto Rico. The combined destruction of these hurricanes drastically reduces,

and in some cases eliminates, parrot populations on the islands. In some areas like Río Abajo in Utuado the remaining parrots are totally wiped-out in the wild.



- 1912: Culebra subspecies disappears due to hunting pressures; it was considered a pest because it fed on bananas and other crops.
- 1912: Alexander Wetmore finds small parrot populations remaining in the mountains of western Puerto Rico, in lowland areas near the Mameyes River; and in the Luquillo mountains.
- 1930’s: Estimated parrot population approximately 2000.
- 1953-1956: The Puerto Rican agronomist, Don Antonio Rodríguez-Vidal, working for Puerto Rico Department of Commerce, did the first study of the Puerto Rican parrot. Published in 1959, the study estimated the population at 200.
- 1963: Estimated population in the wild; 130 parrots and 3 in captivity (2 in the Mayagüez Zoo).
- 1966: Wild population continues to decline to 70 individuals.
- March 11, 1967: The Puerto Rican parrot is listed in the Federal Register as an endangered species throughout its range.

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- 1968: UFWS-Patuxent Wildlife Research Center; USDA Forest Service and the World Wildlife Fund begin formal research and recovery efforts with 24 individuals.
- 1972: Captive propagation efforts begin.
- 1975: Lowest number of parrots recorded in the wild—13 individuals.
- 1985: Recovery efforts slowly increase numbers in the captive and wild populations. A wild population of 35 to 37 individuals and 29 in captivity.
- September 18, 1989: Hurricane Hugo devastates the Caribbean National Forest. A wild population estimated at 47 birds before the hurricane (the highest in 22 years) is reduced to only 20-22 parrots. A reduction of more than 50% of the wild flock. Only three breeding pairs were known to have survived. None of the 53 birds in the Luquillo aviary were lost.
- 1990: Breeding activity low. Three pairs nest but only one pair successfully fledges a chick.
- 1991: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Rio Grande Field Office established. This office leads recovery efforts in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service and the Puerto Rico Natural and Environmental Resources Department (DNER).
- 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994: The wild flock of Puerto Rican parrots produced a record of six successful nests each year, the highest number since the 1960's. By 1994 the population was 91% of the pre-hurricane Hugo level.
- April 30, 1993: First transfer of captive parrots from the Luquillo Aviary to the José Luis Vivaldi Aviary in the Rio Abajo Forest managed by DNER.
- January-February, 1995: For the first time in the history of the Puerto Rican Parrot Recovery Program, seven nest cavities are active during a breeding season.
- January 1995: Low altitude flights over parrot breeding areas in Caribbean National Forest cause two breeding pairs to abandon their nesting cavities. Since then, parrots no longer use the area. The loss represents 20% of the breeding population.
- 1996-1998: Pilot release study is conducted with captive-reared Hispaniolan parrots (*Amazona ventralis*) in Parque Nacional del Este, Dominican Republic. The study proves captive-reared parrots can be released back into the wild. Population numbers, knowledge and experience are now available to allow for the release of captive-reared Puerto Rican parrots.
- 1998: Hurricane George hits Puerto Rico. Damages are extensive on the eastern side of the Caribbean National Forest. The western side sustains minimal damage. Wild population is reduced from 40 to 36 birds.
- 2000: Between the two aviaries and the wild population, 152 parrots exist.
- February 2000: Release area selected in compliance with all U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and NEPA regulations. The appropriate structures are built at the release site.
- March 2, 2000: Nine parrot candidates for release are transferred from Rio Abajo aviary to the Luquillo Aviary pre-release training cage.
- March 23, 2000: Luquillo aviary transfers eleven candidate parrots to the pre-release training cage.
- May 30, 2000: First group of 10 parrots are transferred from the pre-release cage at the Luquillo Aviary to the release cage at South Fork area.
- June 27, 2000: First release of 10 captive-reared PRP's into the wild.
- July 7, 2000: Placement of 6 Puerto Rican parrots in the release cage for the 2nd release.
- August 10, 2000: Second release of captive-reared Puerto Rican parrots into the wild.
- Present: Of the 10 parrots released on June 27, 2000, five are known dead, three have lost their radio transmitters and their conditions are unknown, and two parrots are confirmed still alive.

For more information, please contact:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Rio Grande Field Office
Puerto Rican Parrot Recovery Program
P.O. Box 1600
Rio Grande, Puerto Rico 00745
787/887 8769