

The Long
Road to

freedom

Text by KAREN E. LANGE ✦ photos by KATHY MILANI

Desperate poachers are robbing Nicaragua's forests of their diversity. A rescue center supported by Humane Society International is helping animals return to the wild where they belong.



The man with the plastic mesh bag is looking for a sale. Hanging out in the well-worn dirt strip on the edge of one of Managua's main intersections, he eyes each vehicle, searching for customers—or police. He's surrounded by other vendors, shirts hung with multiple pairs of cheap sunglasses, wrists with plastic bags full of remotes, windshield wipers, and phone chargers. Several hold sticks on which perch little *chocoyos*—parakeets—with clipped wings. Whenever a driver or passenger shows a flicker of interest, the sellers move casually out into traffic—private vehicles for the wealthy few and exuberantly decorated public buses, many of them castoff yellow school buses from the United States. Now the man with the bag spots a possibility. The passengers in an SUV have been asking to see a *lapa*, or scarlet macaw, one of the biggest and brightest of the birds in Nicaragua's forests, but also among the rarest and most protected—far too valuable to display by the roadside. He hustles to the car and tells the driver to go through the intersection and pull over just past a gas station.

A white-fronted parrot spray-painted to look like a more valuable yellow-naped parrot is offered for sale in Nicaragua on a highway leading from the beach. If he survives, he'll end up as someone's pet.



For every bird who appears live for sale, an estimated three have died—from dehydration, suffocation, hypothermia, starvation, injury, or stress.

Leaning in through the front passenger window of the parked SUV, he offers the people inside a *lapa*. “I can get it for you tomorrow.” But they want to see something now. So he returns with the bag. From inside he draws a red-lored Amazon: a green parrot with a band of crimson above the nose. More common and less expensive than a scarlet macaw, it still belongs to a species scientists are considering listing as threatened. The bird blinks in the sudden mid-afternoon light and flaps its wings. The man keeps a tight grip, though it’s a baby, with feathers still growing in. Born about six months earlier in the forest, in the cavity of a tree trunk, the bird was taken from the nest by a poacher who climbed or cut the tree. Then it was dosed with rum or Valium, placed in the bottom of a bag or basket, and kept quiet beneath a damp towel for the trip to Managua.

Down in the dark of the bag the man has brought over, two more pairs of eyes look up. The people in the SUV want to see these birds too. Reluctantly (they won’t bring as much money), the man brings them out. These are orange-chinned parakeets, smaller, around 4 months old. Feeling his way toward a sale, the man makes up a story. “They’re a family. These are the babies. You can have them all for \$130.”

The people in the SUV are still undecided, so the man tries once more. “I can get you as many as you need,” he says, which is true—all he has to do is go to a holding center in the capital where birds from rural areas are kept as inventory. “Just tell me what you want.”

So goes the slow, steady depletion of wildlife from Nicaragua’s forests, and from those in the rest of Central America—especially the raucous, vibrantly plumed, highly intelligent parrots. Nicaragua is the poorest nation in Central America and the second poorest in the Western Hemisphere, with limited funds for law enforcement and limited economic opportunities to draw people away from the wildlife trade. And there’s a long tradition here of taking animals from the forests to keep as pets. Around Managua, furtively but persistently, vendors sell the country’s wild birds and other animals. Along the highways too, in roadside markets the government despairs of stopping, parrots and parakeets and the occasional monkey are offered as pets; bunches of iguanas, hung upside down by their tails with their mouths sewn shut so they can’t bite, are sold

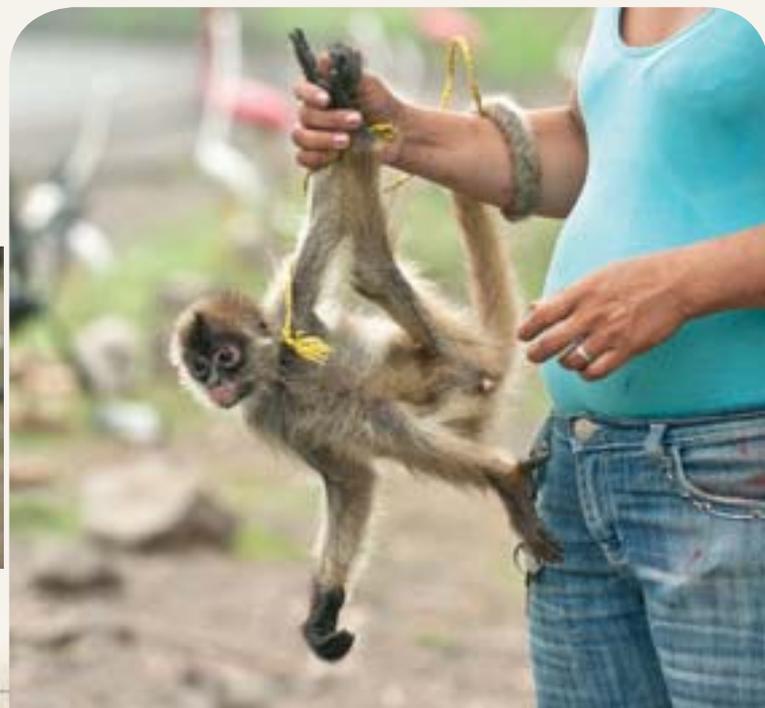
for meat. Traders who travel to the farming frontier, at the forest’s edge, exchange food and other goods for wildlife, then smuggle the animals to roadside sellers or back to the capital. For every bird who appears live for sale, an estimated three have died—from dehydration, suffocation, hypothermia, starvation, injury, or stress.

“I’m overwhelmed by a growing frustration and helplessness,” says Martin Lezama-López, an ornithologist whose work on parrot populations helped get tougher laws passed in Nicaragua. “Each day it becomes clearer that there is a demand for these birds. This demand hasn’t changed in decades, despite many environmental campaigns in support of nature.”

Largely invisible within Nicaragua, a wider international trade also drains wildlife from forests such as the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve in the north and the Indio Maiz Biological Reserve in the southeast. Animals are smuggled out of the country despite restrictions on wild bird imports imposed by the United States in 1992 and a European Union ban enacted in 2007, and after Nicaragua in 2005 eliminated quotas that for decades had allowed the export of limited numbers of less threatened birds, reptiles, and amphibians—up to 10,000 parrots and parakeets a year.

An untold number of animals illegally depart the country on flights, hidden in false-bottomed suitcases or lengths of PVC pipe taped to passengers’ bodies like drugs. Others trickle across Nicaragua’s borders via the Pan-American Highway into Honduras or Costa Rica. Often they end up in El Salvador, which has few forests and little wildlife left but serves as a major transshipment point for traffickers. From there, animals are sent to the United States, Europe, and Japan, where the most sought-after parrots can each bring \$1,000, \$2,000, or more. Andrés Gómez Palacios, deputy commissioner of the Nicaraguan police’s Division of Economic

Black spiny-tailed iguanas, mouths sewn shut, are sold for meat on Managua’s outskirts. A spider monkey dangles from a seller’s arm along the Pan-American Highway.





Approaching an SUV at a gas station, a man tries to sell a red-lored parrot from a bag near a busy intersection in the capital of Managua. New bans on capturing wild animals and better enforcement of environmental laws are driving sellers from some markets, but thousands of poached animals are still sold as pets.

Investigations, says people from outside the country place orders and the animals are delivered to them through networks that reach the most remote communities.

“It is not only one person,” he says. “It is groups. It is many, many people.”

WAY STATION FOR WILDLIFE

On the outskirts of Nicaragua’s capital, Humane Society International is doing its part to help the animal victims of the web of trafficking. With a grant from the U.S. State Department, HSI is supporting the country’s only officially sanctioned rescue center as it takes in animals confiscated from the illegal trade, rehabilitates them, and releases them back into the wild. At the same time, HSI is running public education campaigns and training customs officers, police, and soldiers to enforce anti-poaching laws, including a 2005 statute that imposed tougher penalties for environmental crimes. Participants also learn to identify protected species and humanely handle confiscated animals. (HSI runs similar programs in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.)

The rescue center is located next to the national zoo in Managua, which was saved from financial ruin by Friends of the Nicaraguan Zoo Foundation director Marina Argüello and her husband, veterinarian Eduardo Sacasa. In 1996, following Nicaragua’s years of civil war between the left-leaning Sandinistas and the U.S.-backed

Contras, the couple returned from exile in California and Miami. They found the zoo in trouble and took it over. “I love my country, and I love my animals,” says Argüello, who despite neck surgery and back pain has kept the enterprise going, using her own money and funding she manages to raise from the government and others.

Last year, \$35,000 in State Department money, provided through HSI, paid for the construction of a new set of buildings for the rescue center so it could be moved from the zoo grounds and run separately. There’s a receiving area, a clinic, and a room for baby animals. HSI gave another \$7,000 for a two-story mesh enclosure in which monkeys and birds can get ready to return to the forest. Almost instantly, the new rescue center was at its capacity of around 500 animals. Nearly 2,000 would pass through it during its first year of operation.

In late May, babies born during the first months of 2012 look out from their cages. They were taken from the wild just days or weeks into their lives and, through confiscations or rescues, ended up here. There are fuzzy little howler monkeys, and ferruginous pygmy owls with fledgling feathers, and juvenile yellow-naped parrots who were fed by syringe when they arrived three months earlier, after police had confiscated them on Nicaragua’s Atlantic coast. (These parrots, popular for their friendly personalities and ability to talk, are listed as vulnerable on the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List.) There’s a pink-nosed two-toed baby sloth climbing slowly, slowly across the mesh of his cage to examine visitors with unhurried intensity.

Beyond the baby room, cages lining the walls of the buildings and spilling out into a big grassy clearing hold a cross section of the

animals who make up Nicaragua's ecosystems, which contain 7 percent of the world's biodiversity. Some, like the juvenile yellow-naped parrots, were diverted here from the wildlife trade. Others are pets given up by their owners: two round-eyed kinkajous, nocturnal relatives of raccoons, who every night broke out of their home and into the neighbors'; a pair of white-faced capuchins, one of whom got aggressive and bit people; two gray foxes who ended up in people's houses, one kept like a dog from a very young age; and a margay whom a man bought for his son thinking it was just an unusually colored domesticated cat, though it's actually a species of wild cat that may soon not survive outside the Amazon Basin. Still other animals were brought in hurt or sick or after being trapped as nuisances in neighborhoods.

There is an assortment of brilliantly colored parrots, squawking, chirping, and screeching. Eight are the *lapas* prized in the pet trade—scarlet macaws listed as deserving of the highest degree of protection under international trade agreements. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service this year proposed listing the subspecies that lives in Nicaragua as endangered. Eduardo Sacasa says he doesn't dare release these birds anywhere but Nicaragua's Ometepe Island, accessible only by ferry or boat. Ecotourism there has won residents over to the cause of protecting wildlife.

There's a troop of 4- to 5-month-old spider monkeys cavorting in the mesh enclosure, moving easily through the branches with their arms and legs and prehensile tails. A tapir wanders the floor. As part of the rehabilitation process, the big animal is supposed to keep the monkeys up in the branches, which is where they have to stay if they want to survive in the forest.

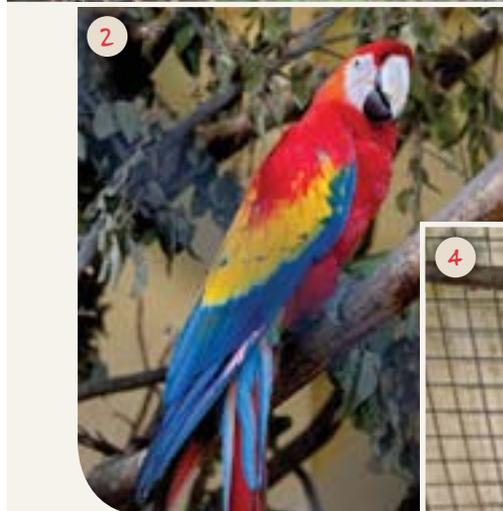
On the verge of freedom, the two white-faced capuchins share a

cage with another of their species who's not ready for release. He spends a lot of time on the concrete floor, retreating from this more dominant pair while they are up in the branches, confident. The older of the two arrived wild enough that he could teach the younger how to hunt and defend himself. He grunts to let people know not to approach any closer, then reaches through the bars to search through pieces of cucumber, carrot, watermelon, papaya, and cabbage until he finds his favorite—banana.

Also on the eve of release are a bunch of *chocoyos* and two yellow-naped parrots, all of whom came to the center in 2010 as babies. Confiscated in a raid of a Managua holding center, they arrived as hatchlings, naked, starving, and dehydrated. "They didn't even have any feathers on them. They [were] in baskets, and they were freezing," says Tatiana Terán, a young veterinarian with a gentle manner who assists Sacasa at the center. Terán and other staff warmed the baby birds and gave them fluids and small amounts of food using syringes. After three and a half months, the birds were able to eat for themselves and their feathers had grown in. The staff patiently taught them how to use their wings. After more than a year, they were able to truly fly.

TAKING BACK THE FORESTS

The rescue center provides a way of replenishing some of the species that have been diminished by the traffic in animals. In part because of its relatively large size, Nicaragua has a large amount of wildlife left compared to some of its neighbors, but the clearing of trees for farms—between 1990 and 2010, Nicaragua lost nearly a third of its forests—and the capture of animals for the pet trade have reduced its wildlife populations. Lezama's study on parrots and parakeets showed a drop of 30 percent between 1999 and 2004, during a period when more than 22,000 wild birds were legally exported from Nicaragua and the country was the largest wildlife exporter in



At the rescue center: White-faced capuchin monkeys (1) live for now in a cage but are on their way to release. Rarely seen in Nicaragua's forests these days, a scarlet macaw (2) is so sought after by poachers that just one place in the country is safe for its release: an island with no bridges to the mainland. Mealy parrots (3) are more common, but their populations are also in decline. A juvenile two-toed sloth (4) was among the baby animals who poured into the center in early 2012. Perched in a gloved hand, a barn owl (5) readies for a flight that will test whether he is prepared to return to the wild.

Perched on a ledge to avoid muck on the bottom of his rain-soaked cage, a puma (right) at an illegal zoo in Sébaco awaits rescue by an HSI-supported team. A margay (left) was bought by a man as a pet for his child, then turned over to the rescue center when he realized the cat was wild.



Central America. Such data are often hard to come by, and scientists have only the vaguest idea of how many birds are left in Nicaragua and the region as a whole. Parrots also tend to be slow to reproduce; they reach sexual maturity relatively late and have small numbers of young. By the time experts get the figures to support arguments for more protection, it's verging on too late.

Yet hopeful signs are emerging that the wildlife trade can no longer be conducted so openly and perhaps is even being reduced. Once it was mainly officials from MARENA, the Nicaragua Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources, who tried to stop the trade. In Managua's Mercado Oriental, the country's biggest market, the wildlife sellers drove them off with machetes. Since 2003, though, MARENA has been joined by the army and police and Nicaragua's Environmental Court, says Fátima Vanegas, who started out in the 1990s as a MARENA technician and now works as regional coordinator for the U.S. Department of the Interior. Today, it's the traffickers who are retreating.

"You can see a marked difference," says Vanegas.

In 2009, police raided a holding center in Managua, confiscating 80 animals. A video shows officers dressed like a U.S. SWAT team swooping down on the warehouse, where they found two scarlet macaws in a bag, a cage full of green parrots and parakeets, and another holding white-faced capuchins. The dealers spent three months in jail, a first in a country where traffickers had previously operated with impunity. Vanegas remembers the public debate: Some people, she says, talked about how Nicaragua was a poor country and the two women had no economic alternative. They said that the government should have gone after bigger fish. Others felt the women got what they deserved (unfortunately it didn't make them quit; one was arrested again earlier this year).

In 2011, raids finally drove out most of the illegal bird sellers from the Mercado Oriental. Those who have returned are few in number and far less bold. During a recent visit, a lone seller whisked a cage with what appeared to be a yellow-naped parrot out of sight. Further on, in the dark, covered section where animals are sold—pigeons, rabbits, and captive-bred parakeets for \$5 each—another vendor quickly grabbed two of the same type out of a bunch of birds on display in a cage, pulling them to his chest, hiding the parrots. Everything else offered for sale was legal. Empty wooden tables marked the place that was once the center of the country's illegal trade.

"It's been years of work," says René Castellón, the MARENA official who's in charge of enforcing international trade pacts. Public education has been as important as law enforcement, he says, because for most Nicaraguans a wild bird in their house is a generations-old custom, not a threat to the environment. "*Tu casa no es mi casa* (Your house is not my home)," says an HSI-funded government campaign to change people's behavior.

Confiscations of illegally traded wildlife have jumped, to more than 1,200 animals a year on average, though police are constantly short of money for motorcycles, gasoline, per diems, and other expenses. In 2009, a banner year, funding from the U.S. Department of the Interior helped police confiscate nearly 2,000 animals. Most of the wildlife seized goes to the HSI-supported rescue center in Managua.

ROADSIDE DESPERATION

Just before the capuchins, the *chocoyos*, and other animals at the rescue center are to be returned to the forest, the staff head out of the capital to answer another call for help. They drive past flat rich brown land cleared for cultivation and cattle in feedlots that supply the U.S. hamburger market, plus sugar cane plantations and coffee



SOURCE: 2009 report by the Nicaraguan government/MARENA and CITES



co-ops. Little clusters of modest houses hug the pavement. Compact cemeteries with off-kilter wooden crosses mark the edges of towns.

The owners of a resort in Sébaco, several hours north of the capital, have offered to give up the wildlife in their “zoo”: a grim warren of makeshift cages up a hill from an algae-filled pool and a restaurant that features a bar and discotheque (admission \$1). It’s gotten to be too much to feed the animals or clean the cages. After a rain, the pumas, so skinny their ribs are sticking out, perch on concrete ledges because their enclosures are covered with water and feces. A white-faced capuchin tears into a piece of raw chicken brought from the rescue center—food he’d only be driven to eat by extreme hunger. A group of spider monkeys is dangerously habituated, no longer afraid of humans but far from friendly. They reach through the bars to grab at passersby. One nearly bit off the thumb of a caretaker. The air smells of disinfectant. Dogs in chain-link kennels bark and bark.

Randy Castillo Soza, co-owner and manager of La Perla (The Pearl), “an oasis of peace and healthy diversion for the whole family,” is relaxed and unapologetic while his animals are confiscated. He’s wearing cowboy boots, a cowboy hat, and a suede jacket and has a toothpick perched in the corner of his mouth. Soza explains he took in the animals because they were for sale by the side of the road and he wanted to give them “a better life.” But he says he wouldn’t do it again. Anyway, he’s focused now on the resort’s new attractions: go-karts and motocross.

On the way back from The Pearl, loaded with crates of animals stacked three high—crocodiles and capybaras and raccoon-like coatis and birds

of prey called caracaras—the rescue center truck passes through Las Playitas, so named because it’s at the junction of a road to the beach. Tourists passing through support roadside animal sellers. Around every bend of the two-lane highway are men and boys with birds on sticks and bunches of iguanas. A woman displays a spider monkey secured with a cord around his neck. He dangles from her arm by one limb and his tail.

Here and at five other places around the country, the national government—having given up arresting poor vendors only to have them reappear again selling more animals—is working with local municipalities to develop alternative means for people to earn a living. “We have to have the right social conditions; we have to have the right economic conditions,” says Carlos Mejia of MARENA, who has come along for the rescue. He bristles at the idea of people from wealthier countries passing judgment on Nicaragua’s efforts to protect its wildlife. Mejia places one hand on his stomach—people need to eat. “You can’t come in and confiscate animals and have that be the solution.”

So far the government hasn’t been able to launch any income-generating projects. Officials were hoping to get wildlife sellers to start raising captive-bred iguanas, Castellón explains, but the State Department refused to underwrite that project. From HSI’s point of view that’s just as well; the organization favors ecotourism as a way to spur economic development and give people other ways to earn a living. With money from the State Department, HSI has trained guides and bought education materials for two community cooperatives that host tourists visiting southwest Nicaragua’s



Chacocente Wildlife Refuge, where sea turtles lay their eggs.

Las Playitas isn't blessed with that kind of wildlife, so finding economic alternatives will be more challenging. Whole families there depend on selling animals. Maritza del Carmen Suarez sits in a plastic chair by the highway's edge with her six children. One of her sons, 7, holds out a stick with a green parrot spray-painted to look yellow-naped. He's asking \$17. "It's for the babies," says Suarez—her own infant and a grandchild. "I have no other way of getting money. ... I need milk." Nearby stands the family's small zinc-roofed cement house. Pigs root in the front yard.

Down the Pacific coast almost to the Costa Rica border, a non-profit called Paso Pacifico, using money from the Loro Parque Foundation and Parrots International, pays landowners to protect parrot nests from poachers, who are usually unemployed trespassers well-known in local communities for breaking the law. Lezama, the ornithologist, has recruited two former poachers to locate nests. Participants get \$10 per nest protected and \$40 for each fledgling who is hatched—about the same amount a baby yellow-naped parrot would bring in the wildlife trade. It's important income for rural residents: One woman used it to pay off her tab at the local store and set up an emergency medical fund for a daughter who has epilepsy. Across the six sites where the program is being tried out, poaching rates have dropped to 30 percent from around 90 percent.

INTO THE TREES

On the morning of the rehabilitated animals' release back into the wild, Tatiana Terán is excited but a little sad: "I should not get attached," says the veterinarian. "But it's hard when animals come in as babies."

To ensure the animals returning to the wild don't end up right back in the trade, they will be trucked to a cattle ranch that is heavily guarded against rustlers, one of five carefully selected private properties where the rescue center releases animals because Nicaragua's "protected" areas are overrun with poachers. "We look for places that have safety above all," says Sacasa.

Their journey ends in a wetland drained for cattle pasture, not far from the Honduras border. Across a water-filled ditch stands a patch of forest, part of a wildlife corridor. By the time the rescue center truck arrives, it's midday and hot, but the trees offer shade and relative cool. After so many months of preparation, animals are released in rapid succession.

A just-released kinkajou (opposite, top) climbs onto a low branch after reluctantly leaving the crate in which he was transported. He joined another kinkajou (background) who had called and called for him to come up into the canopy. A toucan known as a collared aracari (opposite, bottom) alights in a nearby tree, one of dozens of other animals released in late May by the rescue center. Moments from freedom, crimson- and orange-fronted parakeets (right) are carried toward the forest after a truck ride from Managua. Soon they will soar into the sky.

The *chocoyos* immediately fly into the trees and begin to call to each other, chattering in a noisy group, already at home in the wild. The white-faced capuchins rush out of their cage as soon as the door is opened and run off, like athletes taking the field. Several armadillos taught at the rescue center to root out worms leave their crates and within a few steps are sniffing the dirt for food, digging into the soil with their feet.

Other animals are slower. The two yellow-naped parrots also confiscated in the 2010 raid and two toucans seized by police at an intersection barely make it into the trees. These birds are active in the early morning, not the middle of the day, and one parrot spends about an hour maybe 10 feet off the ground, unmoving even when Sacasa shakes the branches. Sleepy owls complain angrily and must be persuaded from their cages. Several caracaras rescued from roadside sellers stand dazed until Sacasa stamps his boots and they take flight. One of the two kinkajous stubbornly refuses to exit his crate, despite the calls of a second, who has climbed slowly but steadily up a tree. "*Campañero, compañero* (partner, buddy)," Sacasa says, waving his hat to encourage the reluctant kinkajou to make his move. The animal sniffs at some leaves. Finally, he moves out and up and into the wild.

It isn't ideal, but logistics—the distance from the capital, the cost of each trip—have dictated the nature of the release. And it works, for most all the animals. The hope is that there will come a day when mass releases are no longer necessary, when Nicaragua's animals won't be taken from the wild in the first place.

The *chocoyos* alight in a raucous flock and fly into some palms, giddy, exuberant in their just-restored freedom. The air thickens with humidity. The sky grows a deeper and deeper blue, a gray blue. Lightning flashes and rain pours down, cooling the forest, refreshing the just-released animals, running off the now empty cages. ■

□ ON THE iPad: Watch rescued wildlife return to freedom.

