BioOne COMPLETE

The Last Flight of the Scarlet Macaw: One Woman's Fight to Save the World's Most Beautiful Bird

Author: Niemi, Gerald J.

Source: The Auk, 126(1) : 232-233

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: https://doi.org/10.1525/auk.2009.4109.4

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/The-Auk on 29 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use

The Auk 126(1):229–230, 2009
© The American Ornithologists' Union, 2009.
Printed in USA.

The Last Flight of the Scarlet Macaw: One Woman's Fight to Save the World's Most Beautiful Bird.—Bruce Barcott. 2008. Random House, New York. 313 pp. ISBN 978-1-40000-6293-5. Cloth, $26.00.—A John Grisham-type novel set in the country of Belize? The book has dirty politics, corporate greed, a naïve public, environmental degradation, a charismatic species—the Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao*)—and a setting in a pristine environment. All fodder for a good novel, but this, unfortunately, is a true story.

Bruce Barcott, a writer for *Outside* magazine, has done a masterful job of telling the story of energy development in the small country of Belize. The story revolves around Sharon Matola, the founder and owner of the Belize Zoo, and her fight to save what appears to be the last major breeding area of Scarlet Macaws in Belize. The area is threatened by the development of the Challilo Dam and resultant flooding of the surrounding forests. The real story, however, is the intrigue surrounding the dam's development: questionable geological investigations, suppressed information, under-the-table deals, international power development, the role of environmental groups, and the British system of justice.

I am not an expert on Belize. I have been there three times for a total of six weeks. It is a beautiful country with a small human population and has a relatively pristine environment. It would appear to be a country poised for solar energy development, especially when many parts of the world are realizing the flaws of hydroelectric power projects. Belize is a country poised for further economic development. The pathway it has chosen, however, appears to be very precarious, economically unstable, and socially disruptive.

Ornithologically, this book raises serious conservation questions and interesting as well as important science questions about bird distribution and abundance in Central and South America. Sharon Matola and others argued that the dam should not be built because the area to be flooded would eliminate the last major breeding area for Scarlet Macaws in the country. The loss of this breeding population could also be negative for the already vulnerable Scarlet Macaw population in Central America. This concern, however, is unrecognized by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, which classifies the species, on their Red List, as one of the species of "least concern." Hence, a well-grounded legal argument is unavailable to stop development of the dam.

Common sense suggests that Scarlet Macaws are likely not thriving anywhere, being subject to habitat loss, habitat degradation, and illegal trapping and trade. This is another classic case of cumulative impact and potential species extinction. The Scarlet Macaw's earthly population is slowly being reduced, but a single event, such as the loss of the Macal River population in Belize, is not serious enough to stop either the extinction process or the Challilo Dam. Who knows how serious the loss of this population or of other subpopulations may be for the Scarlet Macaw? This type of problem is clearly a major challenge for ornithologists. The gut feelings of Sharon Matola that the species is in danger are probably right, but how to prove it? The cumulative impact of bit-by-bit reductions in metapopulations leading ultimately to extinction of a species is an extremely serious issue confronting ornithologists.

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/The-Auk on 29 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use

This is an easy-to-read, well-edited book, and it was a page-turner for me. I recommend it to anyone interested in birds and, especially, anyone interested in Central America, energy development, politics, corruption, or environmental activism. It could be used in a beginning or advanced seminar course in conservation biology or as supplementary reading for courses in ornithology, biology, economics, or political science. I came away confident that Sharon Matola is a heroine, but frustrated by our lack of knowledge on the global population of the Scarlet Macaw or on the biodiversity of the Macal River. I am also dismayed by our lack of leadership or publicity in the United States on this issue; however, I am proud of the Natural Resources Defense Council and very skeptical of the Belize Audubon Society. I also wished this were not a true story, but I thank Bruce Barcott for taking the time to tell it.—Gerald J. Niemi, *Department of Biology and the Natural Resources Research Institute, University of Minnesota, Duluth, Minnesota 55811, USA. E-mail: gniemi@d.umn.edu*

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/The-Auk on 29 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use