

# Notes on the Great Green Macaw (*Ara ambigua*) in Honduras

Mickey J. Marcus\*

The occurrence of a green macaw in Honduras was until recently (Ridgely, 1981, Marcus, 1983) an ornithological mystery. The Great Green Macaw (*Ara ambigua*) has long been familiar to some residents of the Departments of Olancho and Gracias a Dios, yet its positive identification uncertain. Monroe (1968) quotes William V. Wells who in 1857 wrote "... towards the coast (Atlantic?) the beautiful green species is said to exist, much more elegant than his rainbow cousin"; and in the early 1950's Archie F. Carr Jr reported green macaws in Olancho along the (presently deforested) road from Juticalpa to Catacamas "12 to 14 miles northeast of Juticalpa". Meanwhile, the Ministry of Natural Resources, in an effort to protect a scarce resource, mistakenly declared full protection to the Military Macaw (*Ara militaris*). Based on geographical and ecological grounds Monroe (1968), Ridgely (1976) and others assumed this macaw to be *A. ambigua* which had a known range from Ecuador to Nicaragua rather than *A. militaris* whose nearest known population is in central Mexico. At close range *A. ambigua* can be distinguished from the similar *A. militaris* by the presence of black rather than red facial feathers. Ridgely (1981) reports a specimen of *A. ambigua* from Honduras, a record based on a specimen presented to M. Udvardy by a Miskito Amerindian (Ridgely pers. comm.). Marcus (1983) confirms the presence of *A. ambigua* in the Honduran Mosquitia. This paper reports ecological notes of a population of *A. ambigua* along the Platano River in northeast Honduras.

From October 1980 to March 1981 *A. ambigua* was encountered daily while I conducted wildlife investigations as

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\* Departamento de Vida Silvestre y Recursos Ambientales, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, (and) Department of Zoology, University of Maine, Orono, Maine 04469 U.S.A. Present address: Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, Apartado 2072, Balboa, Republic of Panama.

a Peace Corps volunteer assigned to work for the Ministerio de Recursos Naturales Renovables, Departamento de Vida Silvestre (RENARE) in the Platano River Biosphere Reserve (Reserva de la Biósfera Río Plátano). The reserve is located in the Department of Gracias a Dios and encompasses approximately 350,000 ha of lowland wet evergreen forest of the Platano River watershed.

On 30 October a solitary female *A. ambigua* was collected while perched in the canopy of a 30 m *Symphonia* tree located in an overgrown rice field surrounded by old second-growth forest 3 km N of Bulebar (15° 25', 84° 45'; 35 m). The specimen has been deposited in the Louisiana State University Museum of Zoology (LSUMZ 99936). The crop was found to contain numerous seeds and fleshy orange arils of a 14 cm. diameter fruit identified by R. Foster as *Sloanea* sp., a common understory tree. This fruit is well known by the inhabitants of the Platano River region to be a favorite food of *A. ambigua*; indeed, the local Miskito name for *Sloanea* is "Apupata", literally, "macaw food."

Inhabitants along the Platano River know both *A. ambigua* and the scarlet macaw (*A. macao*) well, since both are considered potable (Marcus, 1981). In the Miskito dialect *A. ambigua* is known as "Apawsa" and *A. macao*, "Apu". These residents believe *A. ambigua* to have a preference for mountainous terrain and to be seen uncommonly along the Platano River, while *A. macao* is thought to be most abundant along the Platano River. Counts of both species from 15 October to 15 November 1980 along a 5 km transect of the Platano River between Bulebar and Las Marias indicate that *A. ambigua* is the more common macaw species during this time of the year with an average sighting of 2/day as compared to 1.5/day of *A. macao*. On a ten day exploration of primary wet evergreen forest along the Tuskruhuas River ca. 25 km SE of Las Marias (ca. 15° 25', 84° 45'; 35 m) an average of 18 *A. ambigua* were seen daily as compared to a total of four *A. macao* for the entire ten day period. These observations indicate that *A. ambigua* is probably more numerous throughout the forested parts of the Honduran Mosquitia than formerly suspected. This population (as of 1980) extends into the Department of Olancho in the mountainous area east of Dulce Nombre de Culmi, and in the south to the headwaters of the Putuca River in the vicinity of the settlement of Nueva Cholteca (pers. obs.). The Nicaraguan Mosquitia is

currently thought to contain the largest population of *A. ambigua* (Ridgely, 1981); it is likely that the populations in Honduras are contiguous.

The Miskito and Paya Amerindian residents along the Platano River report a dry season nesting season of *A. ambigua*, beginning in February or March with the young fledged by May or June. Nestlings are occasionally taken by local inhabitants within the Biosphere Reserve and the young birds raised and sold to the pet trade. Although this practice is presently illegal, the relatively high prices paid for these birds and the lack of strong law enforcement make this a tempting business. Although no quantitative population estimates are available during the breeding season, Harry L. Bell, an ornithologist visiting Las Marias in June 1980 saw no *A. ambigua*, although he did encounter *A. macao* (pers. comm.). His lack of *A. ambigua* sightings suggests that this species may be restricted to the interior forests, foothills, or more isolated regions during the breeding season. The Scarlet Macaw on the other hand appears to be more common in vega woodlands, pine forests, and more open habitats.

The global rarity of *A. ambigua* lends exceptional interest to observations of natural history. In the Platano River Biosphere Reserve the Great Green Macaw generally fly low over the forest canopy in pairs or in flocks with as many as six individuals. Peak periods of flight activity are shortly after sunrise and before sunset. The far carrying call, a deep guttural *aaahhhhh*, is given in flight. While perched or feeding they are generally silent except for occasional low guttural croaks or whines. In addition to feeding on *Sloanea* sp. (Elaeocarpaceae), *A. ambigua* was observed to eat the fruits of *Dialium guianense* (Leguminosae), *Ficus* spp. (Moraceae), *Cecropia* spp. (Moraceae), and the flowers of *Symphonia globilifera* (Guttiferae).

Both macaw species within the Platano River Biosphere Reserve are occasionally hunted for food by the Miskito and Paya Amerindians; however, there is presently a sufficient supply of more highly esteemed mammalian and avian game in this region (Marcus, 1981) so that macaw populations are not seriously affected by this practice. As the now wary and threatened Great Curassow (*Crax rubra*) and Crested Guan (*Penelope purpuracens*) continue to be hunted close to villages, the macaws may be more frequently hunted since they are

relatively abundant, tame, and provide additional meat for the cook-pot. It is hoped that the local government authorities and park wardens can enforce the hunting prohibition on macaws and perhaps encourage the hunting of alternative avian species such as the Gray-headed Chachalaca (*Ortalis cinereiceps*) which is abundant in the region (Marcus, 1983) and is not a threatened species. In addition, by enforcing a closed hunting season on *Crax* and *Penelope* during the breeding season (May-September) a stable population of these preferred game species would be ensured.

There are few sights as spectacular as flocks of colorful macaws flying overhead. It is hoped that in isolated regions such as the Platano River Biosphere Reserve they will be a common sight for many years to come and will be given the full governmental protection that they deserve. If given a chance perhaps the Great Green Macaw can expand its presently shrinking range in Honduras.

#### SUMMARY

Ecological and natural history notes of a population of Great Green Macaw (*Ara ambigua*) in the Platano River Biosphere Reserve of northeast Honduras are reported. During the rainy season months of October and November 1980 *A. ambigua* was found to be the most abundant macaw species along the Platano River and vicinity. These observations indicate that the Great Green Macaw is probably more numerous throughout the forested parts of the Honduran Mosquitia than formerly suspected.

#### RESUMEN

Se reportan las observaciones sobre la ecología y la historia natural de una población de la Guara Verde (*Ara ambigua*) en la Reserva de la Biósfera Río Plátano en el nordeste de Honduras. Durante los meses lluviosos de octubre y noviembre de 1980 se encontró que *A. ambigua* es la especie de guara más común en la vecindad del Río Plátano. Estas observaciones son una indicación de que la Guara Verde es más común en los bosques de La Mosquitia Hondureña de lo que se había sospechado.

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