



Birds of Copán

HONDURAN BIRD RESERVE IS A LABOR OF LOVE **STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOHN MITCHELL**

Tall and lanky with a pronounced Tennessee drawl, Lloyd Davidson looks and sounds out of place in the Honduran jungle. Talk to him about tropical birds, though, and his passion makes it clear that his roots are firmly planted in this small but biologically diverse Central American country. Davidson, a 61-year-old businessman and biologist, is part owner of the Macaw Mountain Bird Park and Nature Reserve located on the outskirts of the town of Copán Ruinas in western Honduras, not far from the famous Mayan ruins of Copán. The forested reserve is home to free-roaming wildlife plus 110 exotic Honduran birds in semi-captivity, including macaws, other parrots, and toucans that have been donated by or rescued from former owners.

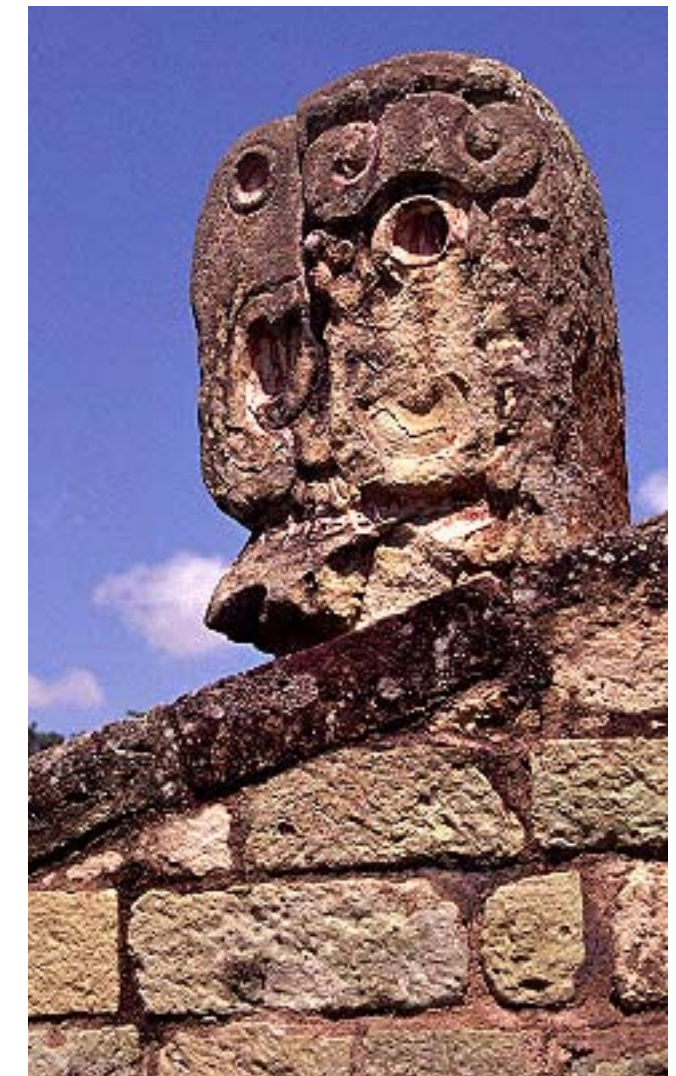
Over lunch in the park's outdoor restaurant above a rushing mountain stream, Davidson explains that in 1986

he started a commercial fishing venture on Roatan, an island off Honduras's Caribbean coast popular among scuba divers. His wife at the time, a conservationist and bird lover, began accepting unwanted or injured tropical birds from expatriates who had not considered that parrots can live up to 60 years and macaws more than 100 years. When Davidson and his spouse split up in 1994, he inherited her ballooning avian collection and unwittingly became the "bird man of Roatan."

Davidson operated a bird park on Roatan for more than four years before tiring of island life and purchasing a ten-acre patch of old-growth forest near Copán Ruinas. The land sits in a meandering river canyon that harbors a variety of tropical trees: mahogany, sapodilla, Spanish cedar, and figs, among many others. After two and a half years of plan-



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ning and building the new bird park near Copán, Davidson and his business partner, Pat Merritt, moved the birds there by chartered plane in 2003.

Our small tour group sets out to explore the park with Davidson in the lead. A network of winding trails takes us past roomy aviaries with ample space for the brilliantly colored birds to fly around in. Davidson knows many of his feathered friends by name and is well acquainted with their personalities. He introduces us to some of them and tells us about their idiosyncrasies and surprisingly complicated love lives. He assures us that it's a myth that parrots always mate for life.

We pause on specially designed viewing decks to scan the treetops for some of the more than 330 species of wild birds that have been identified in the area. At one point, a noisy flock of TK parakeets flies overhead and swoops into the forest canopy like a squadron of dive-bombers. Eventually we come to one of the park's open encounter areas, where we have the opportunity to interact one-on-one with uncaged birds. We are greeted by the raucous squawks of scarlet macaws, blue-and-gold macaws, and Amazon parrots. After the curious birds settle down, they peer at us from their perches, cocking their heads from side to side as they size each of us up. It is impossible not to be touched by the

birds' exquisite beauty and intelligence as well as by their fragility, given that their natural habitats continue to be deforested at an alarming rate.

Davidson explains that in addition to providing a good life for orphaned parrots and toucans, the park seeks to educate people about tropical birds, their environment, and their continued existence in the wild. Groups of Honduran schoolchildren from the cities of San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa often visit the bird park, and the finishing touches are being put on a permanent exhibit highlighting the relationship between the ancient Maya of Copán and its bird life.

Realizing that the nearby Copán archaeological park had a wealth of bird imagery decorating its sculptures, Davidson commissioned Jennifer Ahfeldt, an assistant professor of pre-Columbian art and architecture at the University of New Mexico, to research the importance of birds to the Maya. The result will be a display consisting of six panels

describing the Maya's use of birds and their significance in Mayan art, religion, and mythology. Carved reproductions of macaw heads from the Copán ruins and Guatemalan archaeological sites will complete the exhibit.

Continuing our tour, we pass an aviary with nest boxes. These, Davidson tells us, contain two baby scarlet macaws, the fifth and the sixth to be born in the park. Although breeding is not a main priority, Davidson wants to begin a breeding program for the great green macaw, also known as Buffon's macaw, which is threatened by extinction in Honduras's isolated Mosquitia region and throughout their range in Central America. The park has one pair of these increasingly rare birds and hopes to receive others on loan from Honduran owners.

Part of the nature reserve was once a coffee plantation, and Davidson stops to show us a hillside where coffee plants flourish in the shade of towering tropical trees. We

also visit an historic coffee roasting house that was painstakingly moved from Finca Miramundo, a highland coffee farm operated by Davidson and his business partner. The farm encompasses an entire mountain peak and mingles areas of bird friendly shade-grown coffee with tracts of undisturbed forest, prime habitats for local and migratory birds.

Before leaving the park, we browse through its cozy gift shop, which carries books, t-shirts, toys, carved wooden birds, and other souvenirs. Also for sale are bags of Café Miramundo. These estate coffee beans from Davidson's fin-

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ca are roasted and packaged on site. Proceeds from the shop go toward the park's upkeep. Macaw Mountain is maintained as a business rather than a charity because Davidson and his partner believe that, in a developing country such as Honduras, this is the most realistic way to provide long-term care for tropical birds.

Davidson hopes that visitors will leave the bird park with "a greater appreciation of the lushness of Honduran natural areas and the beauty of its avian inhabitants." He goes on to say that an encounter with these gorgeous and intelligent creatures "is a strong and personal argument for their preservation." Certainly, after witnessing all the time and effort this dedicated conservationist has put into his labor of love, we counted ourselves among the converted.

John Mitchell is a writer and photographer based in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

TIME AND PLACE

Much of western Honduras is mountainous and still covered in pine forest. This region has a more temperate climate than does the country's Caribbean coast. The dry season, which usually lasts from October through April, is the most comfortable time to visit.

The Macaw Mountain Bird Park and Nature Reserve is located about two miles north of Copán Ruinas, and can easily be reached by taxi from the town's main square. An attractive town, Copán Ruinas is adjacent to the famous Mayan ruins of Copán and is one of Honduras' main tourist centers. It has hotels in all price ranges, restaurants, banks, ATMs, and Internet Cafés.

Macaw Mountain is open daily from 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. Admission is U.S. \$10, which includes a tour with an English-speaking guide. The entrance ticket is good for three days. In addition to the bird park's planned pathways, there is a nature trail that runs the full length of the reserve. Most of the park is wheelchair-accessible. Telephone/fax: 504-651-4245. Web site: www.macawmountain.com.

The Honduran Institute of Tourism's official Web site offers general information about Honduras: www.letsgohonduras.com. Telephone: 1-800-410-9608.

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