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THE DISCOVERY OF THE HOME OF THE INDIGO MACAW

Anodorhynchus leari BONAPARTE, 1856 *

HELMUT SICK and DANTE MARTINS TEIXEIRA **

There were few ornithological riddles which, after years and years of research, remained as insoluble as the *A. leari* problem.

This species, described in 1856 by Bonaparte, based on a captive bird in Europe, was known, up to day, more than a century later, only by pet birds, defying all tentatives made to find it in its habitat. However, sporadically, new specimens appeared in the pet trade, sold in Brazil, the United States of America and Europe.

This real mystery, plus the fact that *A. leari* can be considered intermediate, in size and color, between *A. hyacinthinus* (Latham, 1790) and *A. glaucus* (Vieillot, 1816), gave rise to several theories. Some believed, for example, that *A. leari* was extinct or nearly so, others supposed that *A. leari* would be a hybrid between *A. hyacinthinus* and *A. glaucus*. Such hypothesis couldn't stand in view of our preliminary studies, which, however, showed a ponderable relationship between *A. leari* and *A. glaucus*.

In 1964 we started the search of the Indigo Macaw in the field, but only in 1974 we began systematic explorations, with the financial support of Academia Brasileira de Ciências (A.B.C.), Conselho Nacional de Pesquisas (C.N.Pq.) and International Council for Bird Preservation (I.C.B.P.). At last, after five years of intensive prospecting, we met (on December 31, 1978) the first specimens of the Indigo Macaw in their habitat.

Anodorhynchus leari is an endemic bird of northeastern Brazil. Its range is situated in the "Raso da Catarina", northeastern Bahia (Fig. 1). The "Raso" is a sandstone-plateau located in a very hot and dry climate, crossed by the Vasa Barris River whose temporary affluents form canyons. These canyons have their walls extremely eroded, sculpturing a fantastic landscape. Dense low vegetation ("caatinga") covers the sandy soil, water is very scarce.

In the canyons, *A. leari* has its principal refuge (Fig. 2). The hollows on the walls are used for roosting and nesting. The macaws make long forays in search of food; its main diet is the nut of the "Licuri" Palm, *Syagrus coronata* (Martius). The birds leave their roosting places in the early morning and come back at dusk. We saw flocks of up to 21 individuals. There isn't another macaw in the area.

Our studies concluded that *A. leari* is the geographical representative of *A. glaucus*

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** Museu Nacional, C.N.Pq., Quinta Boa Vista, Rio de Janeiro (R.J.) Brasil. CEP 20940.

of the Paraná and Paraguay River drainage. Both may be considered allospecies composing a superspecies; they are, nowadays, relicts, being separated by *A. hyacinthinus*, of a probably more recent evolution, which occupies the large region of Central Brazil.

It is a fortunate coincidence that the Secretaria Especial do Meio Ambiente (S.E.M.A.) has created, a few years ago, the "Estação Ecológica do Raso de Catarina", which includes a fraction of the Indigo Macaw range. We are, together with SEMA, working on a relimitation of the "Raso"- Reserve, in order to protect more of the range of the macaw. The population of the Indigo Macaw is very small; we estimate it at a few hundreds individuals. The species is therefore much threatened in the near future.

RESUMEN:

Aunque el Arará o Ara Cara Amarilla (*Anodorhynchus leari*) fue descrito por Bonaparte en 1856 en base a un ave cautiva, y que por más de un siglo han aparecido otros especímenes en cautividad, nada se sabía sobre su distribución, habitat y status; incluso se pensó que podría ser un híbrido entre *A. hyacinthinus* y *A. glaucus*; de hecho está bastante relacionado con este último.


En 1974 descubrimos una población natural en el Raso de Catarina, Bahía. Se localiza en una meseta de arenisca cortada por cañadones del río Vasa Barris, en un paisaje árido de caatinga. El Arará utiliza huecos en las barrancas de los cañadones para dormir y nidificar; de día vuelan a considerable distancia para alimentarse, principalmente de frutos de la palmera *Syagrus coronata*. Se vieron bandadas de hasta 21 individuos. Es el único psitácido de la localidad.

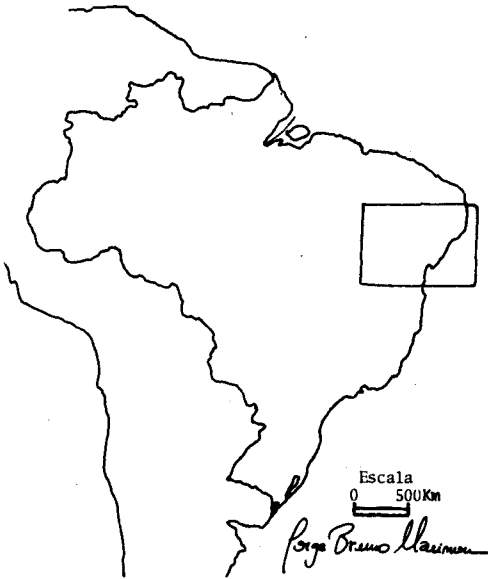
Concluimos que el Arará representa una población disyunta y relictual de *A. glaucus* de la cuenca del Paraná y Paraguay; ambas podrían considerarse aloespecies. La más reciente evolución de *A. hyacinthinus* en Brasil central separó la distribución original.

La Secretaría Especial do Meio Ambiente (S.E.M.A.) ha creado una reserva y estación biológica en el lugar, cuya delimitación se estudia, a fin de proteger los pocos centenares de Arará que aún sobreviven.

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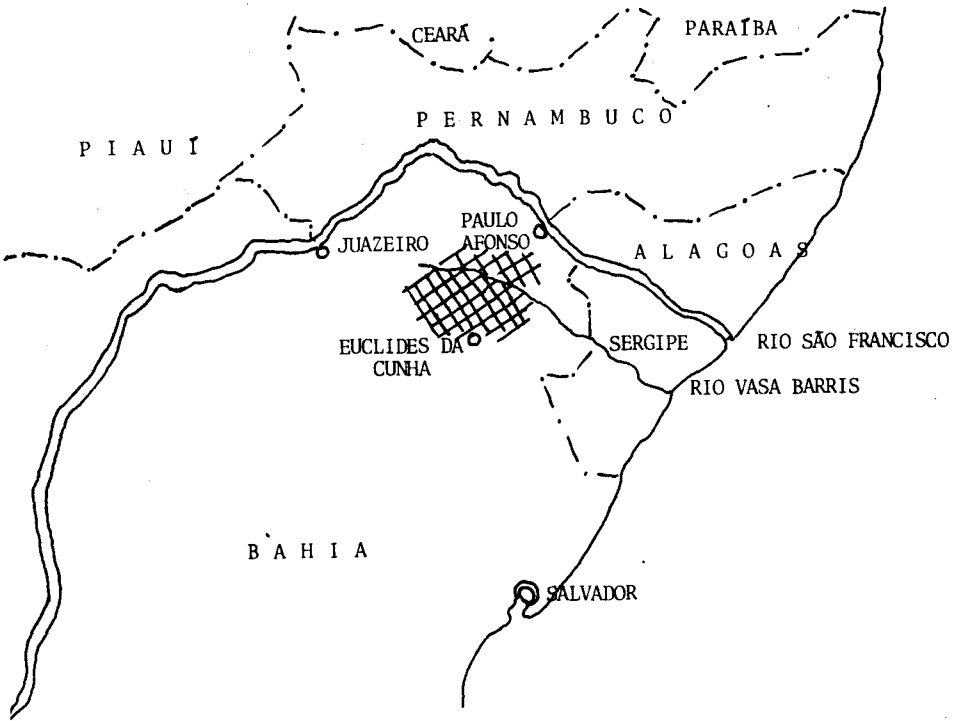


Fig. 1: Distribution of *Anodorhynchus leari*.

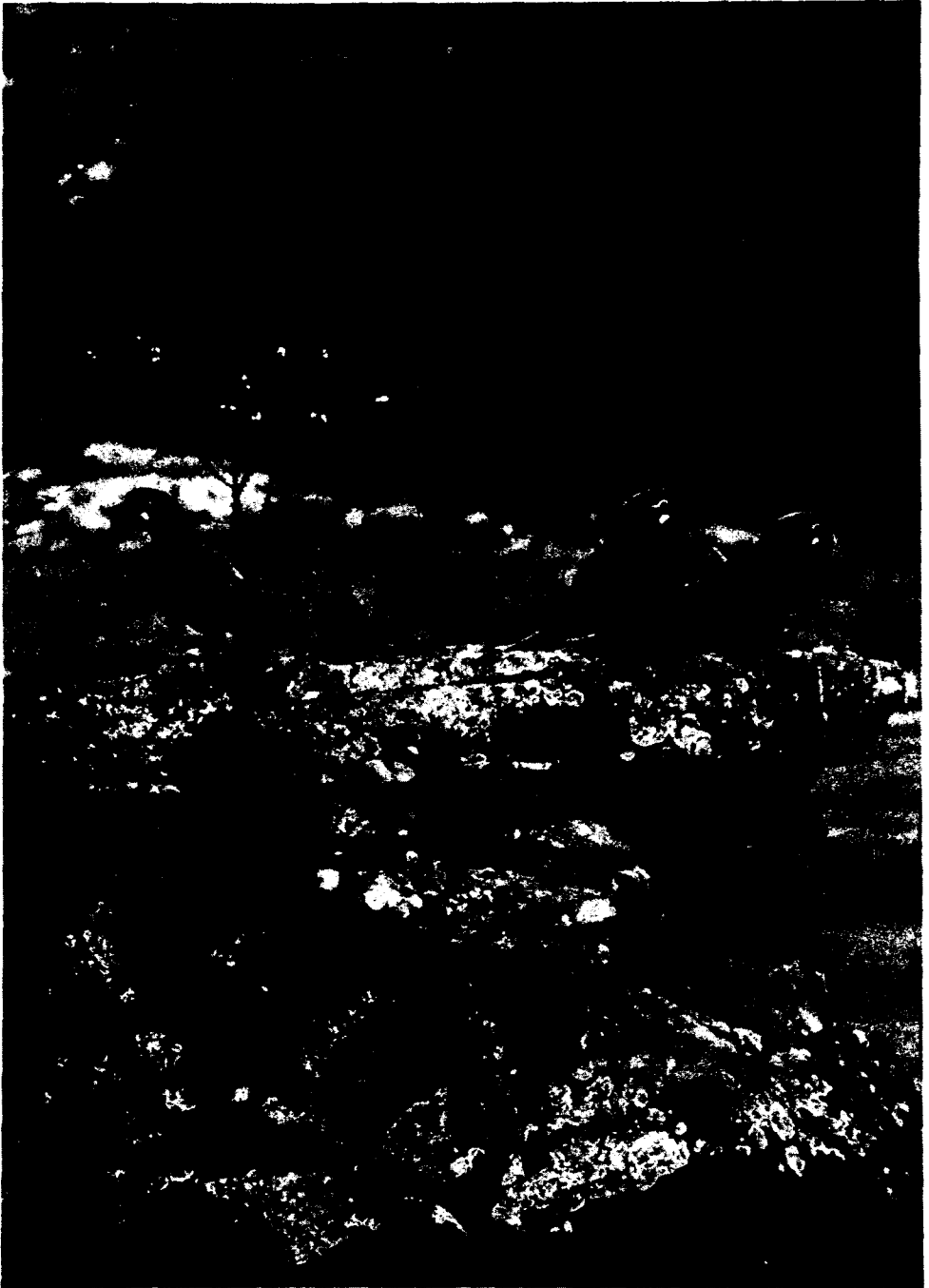


Fig. 2: *Anodorhynchus leari* resting on the cliffs
(Foto: Dante Martins Teixeira).