

A Third of Parrot Species Face Extinction

Scientists find that the colorful birds are the most threatened avian species.

SHARE



Australia's orange-bellied parrot, which scientists fear will go extinct in this decade. (Photo: JJ Harrison)

FEB 25, 2016 · 1 MIN READ



John R. Platt covers the environment, wildlife, and technology and for TakePart, *Scientific American*, *Audubon*, and other publications.

Bio



Polly wants a crack at avoiding extinction!

A new report reveals something that conservationists have suspected for some time: Parrots are the world's most threatened group of [bird species](#).

Of the 398 parrot species, 56 percent face declining populations. Some 111 species—28 percent of the total—are classified as threatened with extinction. An additional 60 species are considered near threatened, meaning they could become threatened if their situation does not improve.

The threat is hardly theoretical. Sixteen parrot species, mostly those living on islands, have been declared extinct since the 17th century.

The reasons for the declines are varied, but two threats stand out. “Parrots are hit by the double whammy of habitat loss and capture for the cage bird trade,” said Stuart Butchart, head of science for [BirdLife International](#) and a coauthor of a [new paper](#) published in the journal *Biological Conservation* that defines the scope of the problem.

Habitat loss is particularly problematic, Butchart said, because many parrot species are dependent on forests and “rely on natural cavities for nesting so they are vulnerable to the loss of the largest and oldest trees.”

Hunting and trapping for the mostly [illegal pet trade](#), meanwhile, takes a rapid toll on wild parrot species because many of the birds are long-lived and are relatively slow to reproduce.

RELATED: [Why We Have to Save Wildlife to Save Ourselves](#)

The loss of these species hastens the decline of their native ecosystems. “Parrots are key frugivores in most of the ecosystems in which they occur and play an important role in dispersing seeds of the plants and trees they feed upon,” Butchart said. “Larger species can travel great distances on a daily basis and therefore are particularly important for long-distance seed dispersal.”

That helps keep forests and broader ecosystems healthy, which in turn helps maintain the habitat that the parrots—and many other species—need for survival.

The study identified 10 nations it said must be considered priorities for parrot conservation. Indonesia led the list.

“Indonesia has over 100 parrot species, and more than 40 are threatened or near threatened,” Butchart said. Another country was Australia, home to the orange-bellied parrot, one of the most threatened species on the planet with extinction predicted in the wild this decade. Other countries identified were Brazil, Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, Papua New Guinea, Venezuela, and Mexico.

Despite the threats, all hope is not lost. Conservation efforts have helped some parrot species to recover and could do so again. Butchart pointed to the [echo parakeet](#) of Mauritius, which was down to its last 10 individuals in the mid-1980s after most of its habitat was destroyed. Today there are more than 500. Butchart said that was because of “intensive conservation action, including captive breeding and release, habitat management, supplementary feeding, predator control, control of competitors, and clutch manipulation.”

In other words, it's not easy, but it can be done if we want to avoid more parrot extinctions in the near future.

RELATED



Why 70 Percent of the World's Seabirds Have Disappeared

About Us

TakePart is the digital news and lifestyle magazine from [Participant Media](#), the company behind such acclaimed documentaries as *CITIZENFOUR*, *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Food, Inc.* and feature films including *Lincoln* and *Spotlight*.