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Conservation: Flying battle

The Spix's Macaw is the most valuable parrot in the world. A German breeder with a dubious reputation wants to bring it back in the wild. Can he be trusted?

By Jan Stremmel

Two things are especially important to him. No names. And no people. Whoever gives names to animals, says Martin Guth, sees them as pets. "These birds" pointing to the cage near him, "are called neither John nor Peter, nor do they come on to my hand. And here " he makes a movement of his arm over the perfectly mowed lawn near the cage, "there's no bench nor visitors. And that is what they need. That's known as nature".

In the aviary as big as a double garage a flock of pale blue birds fly around and screech – without name, but numbered. *Cyanopsitta spixii*, called Spix's Macaw, are the rarest of rare parrots. Connoisseurs speak of the "Rembrandts and Picassos" of the bird world. Entwined in myth. Long extinct in the wild. And priceless. Protector of this treasure behind security gates and steel fencing, guarded by cameras and shielded by thick hedges is a large brawny man with a bald head and East Berlin accent – Martin Guth.

In an inconspicuous house with a pointed gable and huge grounds an hour from Berlin Guth runs something that could dramatically be called a type of "Jurassic Park". Instead of dinosaurs the organisation founded by him, the Association for the Conservation of Threatened Parrots (ACTP), keeps and breeds extinct in the wild and seriously endangered parrots. The blue Spix's Macaw is so to speak its Tyrannosaurus Rex. That it exists here has created excitement in the world of parrot lovers for years. Enthusiasm but also anger.

It's about corruption, greed and organised crime. And a famous rapper

The story of the Spix's Macaw was told, slightly modified, in two children's films "Rio" and "Rio 2". The real story would be good subject matter for a thriller. The protagonist is a bird discovered exactly 200 years ago in Brazil by the Bavarian scholar Johann Baptist von Spix. Then exterminated by greedy European bird collectors. And now nursed in the state of Brandenburg – by a man said to have many years of association with criminal gangs. It's all about organised crime and colonialism, megalomania and corruption. And yes, the rapper Buschido is also involved.

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The dispute is essentially about a question: Should endangered animal species be bred far from their home in the wild? And also: how important is it where the money comes from for it?

The question has split the conservationists. One side believes that Martin Guth is frivolous and sabotages conservation to make money with rare birds. Some do not want to be named here as they fear Guth and his contacts. The other side admits that the man from Berlin is a questionable guy. But one must also admit he achieves things nobody else does. The birds, which perch in the aviary – 25 females and 25 males – will be re-introduced to the wild this autumn. Returning an extinct parrot species to the wild has never happened before.

Guth sits down in the meeting room, the living room of the gabled house with a bird calendar on the wall. His partner, a Munich real estate agent called Jürgen Dienst, sits down near him. He wears a suit and chooses his words. As soon as Guth is too slow, he interrupts him. “No, come on Jürgen, leave me”. He answers some questions by yelling up the stairs to his employee. “Katrin, bring the import documentation for 2010!”.

To understand the importance of this association one needs to know that no effort has ever been made for any bird like this for the Spix. The British conservationist Tony Juniper wrote a book about it and it reads like a eco-thriller. He describes how the parrots became a fetish for collectors. They are one of the few parrots with blue feathers. And among those by far the rarest. Spix’s macaws occur on the banks of a single river in northern Brazil. After their discovery in 1819 it took 84 years until a single specimen was again sighted. A sheikh allegedly offered up to \$300,000 for a pair in the 1990s. The Spix has been a phantom from the beginning.

When Guth outlines his passion for birds, he does not need many words. “I came out of the East. Parrots were beautifully colourful”. While his friends went to the discos “I stood by the bird cage”. He broke off an apprenticeship as an animal keeper and fled in 1988 via Hungary to the West. He looked after the parrots at a zoo dealer’s in Hamburg. “really interesting”.

Martin Guth does not talk about his life in the nineties. From the zoo dealer in Hamburg he apparently moved into the half-world of Berlin. He ran, according to newspaper reports, a night club and collected debts. In 1996 he was sentenced to five years in jail. “I was a youngster”, says Guth and his actions had nothing to do with his parrot association. In fact, he was 26 at the time. His certificate of good conduct is meanwhile clean again. He was regarded as re-socialised and his past deeds should not play any further role. But since this episode became known it has been used as ammunition by his opponents.

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Biologists sighted the last Spix's macaw in the wild in the year 2000. Then it was presumed caught and sold. Brazil in the meantime created a committee to at least increase the remaining 60 birds in captivity. In the negotiations seriously rich bird collectors sat down with owners of private zoos and representatives of the government. However the owners refused to return or exchange the birds for breeding purposes. At some point Brazil gave up. Envy and colonial thinking run deep.

Shortly afterwards Martin Guth, back to freedom, saw his first Spix's macaw. It was while on holiday in Tenerife at "Loro Parque" the zoo with the largest parrot collection in the world. He was searching then for new life content. And found it in the myth entwined blue bird, which half the world was arguing over. He set up ACTP, joining force with his partner from Munich. And he bought three Spix's macaws from a businessman in Switzerland. He says for 15,000 euros. "Keeping the birds" had become too much for the Swiss keeper.

What he does not mention is that the man in Switzerland had business contacts with Bushido and the Abou-Chaker clan, a mafia gang from Berlin against which the state prosecutor has taken repeated action for blackmailing, drug trading and robberies. A photo shows Guth together with Arafat Abou-Chaker on the street. Is the purchase of birds from a business partner of the clan really coincidental? Guth says he did not know Abou-Chaker or Bushido at the time.

When asked what had excited him about the Spix's macaws, he says "the challenge". Regarding the disputed collector he said to himself, "I'll see if I can do better". Today Guth keeps 166 Spix's in his facility. So much for the challenge.

He walks along now with sunglasses between his cared for aviaries and rattles on with his parrot knowledge. How does he explain his breeding success? "I think just like a bird" he says and points at a palm cockatoo. "If he sits there and does not go back into his cage, I can say exactly why. For example, because the perch has been changed." The birds do well here. He enjoys the role of a talented outsider.

Others doubt that. One of his severest critics is the American biologist Paul Reillo, head of the Rare Species Conservatory Foundation (RSCF). He remembers "a few unpleasant meetings" with Guth. He was dominating and intimidating with "no understanding at all of conservation standards". His association has "no financial transparency or scientific references".

It is self explanatory why seriously endangered birds should not be sent to a "convicted criminal in Germany".

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ACTP actually publishes no details about its finances. That is allowed by German law, but is atypical for an association supported by donations. By comparison the Munich conservation association ZGAP shows on-line even interest income amounts of 79 cents. Why the secrecy?

Several members of international conservation organisations with whom the newspaper has spoken assume Guth uses the association to trade secretly in rare parrots. There is no proof of this. “All birds are logged in or out with the state environmental office” says Guth. “That includes the ones bred here as well”. Experts regard the sale of valuable Spix’s Macaw as difficult and highly risky. Other parrot species, which Guth imports and breeds, can be sold legally according to animal protection law.

But the criticism does not cease. At the end of last year the *Guardian* published an alleged revelation article about Guth. His association was referred to as a zoo although it had no opening hours. In addition imported parrots were illegally offered for sale on the net. The state prosecutor in Frankfurt on the Oder investigated, but came, however, to the conclusion that all the rules were being complied with. Even the zoo reproach was held to be groundless. According to the federal nature conservation act a zoo in Germany has to receive visitors on “at least 7 days in a year”. Guth kept to the law in that he occasionally took school classes around the aviaries

Some allegations of the opponents who allow no opportunity to pass to point out Guth’s lack of scientific education and long ago served prison sentence may perhaps speak more for something that seems to be common in the scene as well – envy and arrogance.

The breeding of larger parrot species is actually difficult. Spix’s macaws are selective as far as partners are concerned. They only lay two to five eggs a year. Yet Guth achieved a sensation soon after buying the Spix’s - chicks hatched. First one, then four, then two, then again four. Brazil started a new Spix’s macaw programme, this time exclusively with his association. An insider said “ That was an affront for many”.

Then an event helped Guth in 2014. Suddenly the owner of the most Spix’s worldwide, Sheikh Saoud bin Mohammed Al-Thani of Qatar, an eccentric billionaire and collector of art, meteorites and rare animal species, died. Guth persuaded the heirs to lend him some 120 birds for breeding purposes.

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Guth now holds almost every specimen of the most valuable bird in the world. As a symbol of goodwill in 2015 he gave a pair of captive bred Spix's to Brazil. They flew with Iberia to São Paulo in the passenger cabin on the middle seat. Environmental minister Barbara Hendricks allowed herself to be photographed with the macaws before the flight. Guth had secured at last his image as conservationist.

Other governments have also long offered their parrots to the German wonder breeder for reproduction. In March last year it came to a scandal. Guth brought twelve strictly protected Imperial Amazons and Red-necked Amazons, of which only a few dozen exist, to Berlin from the Caribbean island of Dominica. A hurricane had destroyed wide areas of the island. Guth was supposed to look after the birds and breed a security population. Only: the aid organisations which had been active for many years there were not informed. This included the RSCF of Paul Reillo. In a peppery protest note he and thirty experts accused the German association of "secretly" flying the birds out – with the support of corrupt local officials and the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation, which permitted the import. The letter read like an official report of a kidnapping.

If Guth is asked he trudges off in his aviaries, passing bird keepers filling bowls of sunflower seeds to the sound of heavy metal music. He stops behind a laboratory door and points at a glass case. There are two young birds sitting in it. "Look at this. Red-necked Amazons. Officially not to be bred". The open letter, the article in the Guardian: character assassination as far as Guth is concerned. Started by people like Paul Reillo. Because they worried about their donations because of his success. "We have shot their cash cows, that's what's happened."

And the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation? It says a state secretary of the Caribbean island had officially requested "urgent assistance" because of the "emergency situation". All the birds were possessions of Dominica and could "be returned at any time". In his reply letter to the critics Guth ranted in unpolished English about a "turf war" in the Caribbean. He added a private photo of Reillo with an Imperial Amazon. He alleged he kept it as a "pet", which Reillo denies.

The dispute has long been a mud fight. Is Guth really only interested in conservation? Or does he use it, as his critics say, as a pretext to build up a private bird collection?

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It is actually noticeable that Guth's association is only active in countries from which he in turn acquires birds. In 2011 ACTP donated three SUVs to the island of St Vincent and acquired 15 St Vincent Amazons. This year the association built a wildlife centre for more than 800,000 euros on the neighbouring island of St. Lucia. For this it acquired chicks of the rare St. Lucia Amazon to bring to Germany. A scandal for many experts. For Guth "necessary to strengthen breeding stock". Who is right?

Roland Wirth, an internationally recognised conservationist and founder of the ZGAP, is relaxed about the Guth case. He knows, apparently, how to prevail. "That's why he acquires birds that the parrot breeding scene can only dream of. " A small clientele donates a lot of money for this purpose, such as private zoos or collectors. That is not illegitimate. The money ends up in conservation. And the birds may be sold in the second or third generation. Basically, that's no more reprehensible than dog breeding".

After the strange donation the clan man visits the macaws with his family. So what?

The company Constantin Film is a donor, who has given a lot of money. It happened ten years ago. Bernd Eichinger had just filmed Bushido's life for the cinema. Moritz Bleibtreu played his manager Arafat Abou-Chaker in "Times change you". Abou-Chaker thereupon demanded money for his personality rights later from Eichinger - 200,000 euros. Buschido told Stern magazine after his separation from the clan last autumn, "The money was somehow declared as a donation to a parrot association or so." An indication as critics will suppose that the association is financed by Abou-Chaker? Martin Guth confirmed the donation by Constantin Film, but denies any connection to the clan. Buschido and Abou-Chaker just visited with their families. "We gave the children colourful feathers. That was all".

Is the case as the conservationists insinuate: once criminal, always criminal? Is lack of transparency synonymous with dubious machinations? Or is it as Roland Wirth says: "There are also funders and givers in conservation. For some it is only important, what the right people are doing for the right reasons". The others, and he counts himself in this, agree with Helmut Kohl: what matters is what comes out the back.

And what comes out the back? In São Paulo Ugo Vercillo, the responsible man with the Brazilian environmental agency, answers the phone. He starts to enthuse immediately. Guth's association has bought some 3,000 hectares of land together with donors for the Spix and fenced it in. The state has put another 100,000 hectares under protection. The facility for the macaws and bird keepers is being built. .

In November the first 50 birds will arrive, more than any Brazilian has ever seen. There will be a celebration and the environmental minister will attend. The past of the bald-headed German, who enabled this moment, will then not interest anyone any more.

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