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Bird breeder finds satisfaction in her calling



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Albert King, a macaw hangs from his perch clutching the cage with one leg displaying his colorful plumage. Laney Rickman has dedicated her life to parent rearing macaws to ensure their long term survival in captivity.

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by Dianna WrayOriginally published January 12, 2011 at 6:24 p.m., updated January 12, 2011 at 11:10 p.m.

CUERO - Laney Rickman peered into a cavernous cage where a family of Blue-throated Macaws sat swinging steadily on a perch.

"Come on Joplin. Show off your feathers," Rickman said, smiling as she called up to the mama-bird. "They get a little shy around visitors," Rickman said, explaining as the birds watched closely, turning cautious heads to examine the world through sharp, gold colored eyes.

Rickman is a petite woman, with short pixieish hair and a lively expression that makes her delicate features sparkle as she calls up to the birds.

The brilliant colored turquoise-and-gold feathered birds look identical to the untrained eye, but Rickman knows them. Blue-throated Macaws are her life.

Caring for these birds and running the Bird Endowment, a nonprofit to benefit the birds, is her life's great work.

More than 20 years ago, Rickman, 58, was working in advertising. It was a business devoted to success and the bottom line, so she made a point of finding ways to bring passion into her life. She raised orchids. She travelled to South America whenever she could.

She was always on the lookout for it - her sense of purpose, the thing she was supposed to do in life.

She got her first bird, a miniature conure from a friend at work. But it was the moment that she saw her first Blue-throated Macaws that changed her life. That was when she knew.



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The brilliant blue-and-gold feathered birds are found in a small area of north-central Bolivia known as Los Llanos de Moxos.

For years, the birds were believed nearly extinct in the wild. They are also notoriously difficult to breed in captivity, so their numbers are small, Rickman said.

In 1992, scientists discovered some of the birds still in the wild, but there numbers were small as deforestation has created competition for places to live and breed with larger birds in the habitat.

This was the same year that Rickman and her husband Jack Rickman got their first pair of macaws. Rickman fell in love with the birds, Ira and Eureka.

The pair had been in captivity for years, but no one had ever been able to get them to nest.

Rickman decided to try. She paid attention to the two and tried to think about what might get them in the mood to nest and have some babies.

"My gut feeling was that they just weren't happy the way they were set up.

Jack built them a makeshift nest out of plywood. Laney tried to create a calm, quiet atmosphere. Then they waited.

After years of failure, the birds nested, hatched two chicks and set up housekeeping.

Rickman named the babies Ecstasy and Euphoria.

"It was the scariest thing I'd ever done in my whole life. It was also the most exciting.

Suddenly, she knew what her mission was.

"All of a sudden, it was just like I knew this was my calling. I don't know why, but this is what I'm supposed to do," Rickman said.

She decided to start breeding the birds, creating comfortable environments for them and allowing them to raise their young for as long as possible.

Soon she had cages of birds in their Houston house.

The couple decided to move to a small farm in Cuero, expanding the program.

Jack built nests and cages for the birds, and members of the Houston Zoo helped the Rickmans transport 13 Blue-throated Macaws their new home, a small piece of land nestled down a wild and winding road a few miles outside of Cuero.

That was in 1993. In 1998, Rickman came to a fork in the road when Ira, her first Blue-throated Macaw got sick.

He wasted away, and the best veterinarians in the state couldn't do anything for him. The day he died, she walked out to his cage, where Eureka and the chicks were housed in tears.

"I said I didn't know if I could do this anymore, bear this kind of loss. Then I looked at them," Rickman said.

She kept raising the birds, and there are more than 23 macaws on her property now. Birds she raised are in zoos and other flocks across the country.

Rickman and her husband have even set up an organization in Bolivia to help Blue-throated Macaws to nest in the wild.

It's a lot of work - feeding and caring for the birds takes up most of the day - but Rickman says it's worth it.

"I just don't want to see this species go extinct. I'm good at working with them. I don't know why, but we're successful. That makes it all worthwhile," Rickman said



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MORE InfoThe Rickmans also run a separate organization, Niedo Adoptivo. Niedo Adoptivo members build and install wooden boxes the birds use as nests on a reserve in Bolivia. The organization offers supporters the chance to sponsor a nest, paying \$250 ...

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