

Feature Story

E3

BREEDING AND REINTRODUCTION OF THE CURASSOW: HOPE AGAINST EXTINCTION

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The endangered curassows birds are very attractive to hunters because of their tasty meat. These turkey-like birds are also slow in flight. This makes them easy prey, and placed them up high on the Brazilian endangered species list.

They should only remain on the list for a short while.

At least, that is what some curassow breeders and environmentalists involved in pioneer curassow nursery programs in the Southeastern Brazilian states of São Paulo, Minas Gerais, and Northeastern Pernambuco claim.

Last May, the first 30 pairs of red-billed curassows (*Crax blumenbachii*) were introduced in a 1,500-hectare wood in Caratinga, in the state of Minas Gerais. The species is endemic of Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, Espírito Santo and Bahia states.

The wood lies within Macedônia, a farm belonging to a woodpulp company, Celulos Nipo-Brasileira, Cenibra. The company, associated to the Crax Society for Research of Wild Fauna, invested \$120,000 dollars so far in the project.

Raised at Crax, in the metropolitan region of Belo Horizonte, the state capital, the red-billed curassow, returned to a region once densely populated by the species. Duly nested, their development will be controlled until they have been able to readapt to their niche, and live on their own.

Another 30 year-old pairs are confined in a 3,000 cubic-meter aviary in the same farm, from which they will be freed.

Feature Story

E3

At least ten curassow species occur in Brazil. Slightly smaller than domestic turkeys, these beautiful creatures have black feathers, some variation of black and white in the stomach area, and a colorful red or yellow crest.

The red-billed curassow measures 80 centimeters on average, and can weigh up to four kilos. It spends most of its 30 odd years on the ground, but is capable of low flight, and takes shelter, sleeps and nests in low tree branches, five meters from the ground at the most.

The males of the species are the nest builders, for which they utilize branches and trees of the support tree. The females lay two eggs at a time. They are not noisy, and emit a very sad single-noted chirp.

The curassows also pair for life, and are territorial. This means they do not allow other couples of their same species within their established space.

Omnivorous, they feed on fruit, leaves, seeds, small insects and rodents.

Parallel to the reintroduction program, specialists from Biodiversitas, linked to the Washington-based Conservation International, and the Federal University of Viçosa, both in Minas Gerais, have been involved in the assessment of the farm's native fauna species.

Coordinated by forestry engineer Francisco de Assis Moraes, 56, Cenibra also has a working environmental awareness program with local human communities. The aim of this program is to prepare people to live peacefully with the "new" local inhabitants, without posing a threat to it.

Like its cousins in the Northeastern and Southeastern regions, the red-billed curassow faced accelerated deforestation and the chaotic occupation of its territory.

According to wildlife preservation entities, only about 200 members of this species still live in the wild. They are isolated within reserves and private properties in northern Espírito Santo and southern Bahia.

In Minas Gerais, once its main niche, there was no recent record of this curassow species in its natural state.

The birds introduced in Caratinga are third and fourth generation offspring of four captured *Crax* pairs. These were originally trapped in 1978 and 1980, in Teixeira de Freitas, a remote and intensely deforested area in southern Bahia.

Feature Story

E3

The president of Crax, a 42-year-old business administrator, is one of the few specialists in the controlled reproduction of wild bird species area. He became interested in curassows and other threatened species like the macuco (*Tinamus solitarius*) when he was still a boy on his father's farm.

Azevedo founded Crax in 1975. In recent years, he dedicated an enormous amount of time to the search for Crax pairs within reminiscent stretches of the Atlantic rain forest.

Today, his nursery holds more than 500 specimens of curassows destined to future reintroduction in the wild.

Crax has a scientific exchange agreement with the world-renowned Crecid Breeding Conservation Center, CBCC, in Belgium, a center for the protection and management of wild bird species.

Three Crax couples from Brazil are in Belgium, guarded by CBCC, as recommended by endangered species conservation manuals. This is an added security, in case some kind of epidemic or other fatal problem reaches the Brazilian specimens.

Besides Roberto Azevedo, other businesspersons developed similar projects in Brazil. In the Ribeira valley, in São Paulo state, and in Northeastern Pernambuco, Maurício dos Santos, 48, the owner of several transportation companies, raises his own curassows.

Dos Santos plans to reintroduce the species in a farm in the Central-south state of Goiás. The first on his list is the *Crax fasciolata fasciolata*.

The businessman owns the Chaparral farm, an Ibama registered scientific nursery, in aldea, 35 kilometers from Recife, in Pernambuco, and some 8,000 kilometers from São Paulo.

Of the ten Brazilian species, Chaparral holds nine different curassows, including the rare "Horse-curassow" (*Mitu mitu mitu*), endemic of Northeastern Alagoas state.

Santos is proud of owning the only nursery to cross the *Crax fasciolata pinima*. Eight young birds were born of the crossing last year. In 1990, he said, "199 endangered species were born at the Chaparral".