

# Living the Scientific Life

"THE UNIVERSE IS FULL OF MAGICAL THINGS, PATIENTLY WAITING FOR OUR WITS TO GROW SHARPER." — EDEN PHILLPOTTS.

FRIDAY, MARCH 04, 2005

## Birds in the News #1

Why should we care about birds? Birds are important for many reasons. First, birds have an innate value that we, as humans, should respect and celebrate. We owe it to them to increase our knowledge of their kind. Additionally, as companion travelers on this little blue planet, we certainly owe it to them to protect them from extinction, if this is at all possible. But why care? Because birds not only make our lives worth living but because they also have much to teach us, lessons that clarify our understanding of our biology as well as help us to understand what makes us human, for example. Below, I have collected some stories about birds that have featured prominently in the news this past week. I hope you enjoy reading them.



A new species of parrot has been formally described by LuÃ-s FÃbio Silveira and his colleagues as they report in the latest issue of the *Auk* (122:292â€“305, 2005). This parrot, found in the Amazon River basin, is called the Sulfur-breasted Parakeet (or Conure; KON yur), *Aratinga pintoi*. *A. pintoi* is a close relative to the Sun Parakeet, *A. solstitialis*, and Jenday parakeet, *A. jendaya*, with which it had been previously confused. In fact, due to misunderstandings of *A. pintoi*â€™s natural history, this species had been living under a mistaken identity for more than 100 years.

Five captive-bred California condors were released in Vermillion Cliffs National Monument in Utah on 2 March. The condor recovery project removed the last remaining wild birds (22) to a captive breeding program that was administered by several zoos — a happy event where science, zoos and modern aviculture successfully collaborated to recover a species that was teetering on the brink of extinction. As a result of this work, there are currently 240 condors alive today — including 4 wild-born chicks. Having seen some of the original condors when I visited the LA Zoo several years ago, I can tell you that being in

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ABOUT ME



HEDWIG\_THE\_OWL THE BIG APPLE, NEW YORK, UNITED STATES

Blogging is my attempt to make sense of this crazy world. I am a postdoctoral fellow who has been living in New York City since September 2002, working in my "dream job", researching the evolution of parrots from the south Pacific Ocean. But my research funds end on the last day of September 2004. Even though I began my job search on 1 August 2003, I have found nothing whatsoever. Currently, I moonlight as an independent cat sitter, public speaker and college/university tutor while I scramble to find a job doing mostly anything (also without luck), although I strongly wish to remain on my chosen

(Iâ€™ve never seen a photograph that has done justice to a condor) was incredibly moving.



As a result of a collaboration between RARE and Conservation International, the Katala Foundation, to design and implement a local pride campaign, an endangered Philippine cockatoo finds its lowland forest home protected from destruction, at long last. By protecting this one bird species, many other rare and endangered animal species that share its home are also being protected. This is the first protected area on the island of Palawan.

Is personality genetic? Scientists have found evidence that a group of genes might influence basic personality in birds; shyness versus boldness. At least one of these genes, DRD4, is known to be shared with humans where it seems to influence similar personality features, too. This research showed that after several years, birds with intermediate personalities appear to be more successful at raising young, which might explain why neither avian (nor human) populations have evolved towards being completely extroverted nor introverted.



Last but not least, a research project that I donated feathers to from my own research birds, the lorries, the fig parrots and hanging parrots, reports that parrots produce a unique set of five pigments, the psittacofulvins, that they use to color their feathers red. In this article, Parrot feather colors, Kevin McGraw notes that "The fact that there is a single set of molecules unique to and widespread among parrots, suggests that it is a pretty important evolutionary novelty, and one we should carefully consider when we think about why parrots are so strikingly colorful."



Academic job interviews: 1 -- my first face-to-face interview for an academic position.

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