

Blue and Gold Macaw

Class: Aves. **Order:** Psittaciformes. **Family:** Psittacidae.

Other names: Blue and Yellow, Band Yellow



Physical Description: Macaws are considered to be the most intelligent of all birds and are called by many biologists the “flying primate”. The Blue and Gold Macaw is a large bird. The back of their head, wings and back are covered with blue feathers; the top of their head is covered in emerald green feathers, and the front of the body up to the eye has yellow plumage. The face has a whitish skin mask adorned with a line of single black feathers in a stitchery like pattern and there is a patch of black under the chin. The beak is massive, powerful, and strongly hooked. Their tongue is all black. They possess zygodactylous feet, 2 toes point forward and 2 toes point backward. The tail is long, blue on the top and gold underneath. All macaws are characterized by strong beaks, long pointed tails, loud voices, and a facial area of bare skin called the cheek patch. Both sexes appear alike, although the female may have a slimmer head. Adults range from 32-35 inches in length with a wing span of 41-45 inches. They weigh 2-2.5lbs.

Diet in the Wild: These birds are completely dependent on trees for their food. Because, in the tropics, trees are on different cycles, there is always food available. Their diet includes: fruits, seeds, berries, nuts, vegetable matter, leaves and bark. They also eat clay on exposed riverbank clay licks as a mineral supplement; known as "macaw licks".

Diet at the Zoo: Green beans, papayas, pears, grapes, apples, carrots, bananas, parrot seed, various nuts

Habitat & Range: South America, from Panama south to Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay. They can live in swampy forests, open marshlands and woodlands, rainforest, and other areas with large trees.

Life Span: 40-60 years on average, up to 80 years in captivity

Perils in the wild: harpy eagle, hawks, falcons, boa constrictor, anaconda. Humans capture them for the pet trade. Whole trees may be chopped down in order to reach nests and capture the babies; often killing adult birds. The biggest peril comes from habitat loss as forests are clear cut to make room for farming.

Physical Adaptations:

- Macaws use their powerful and large beak to crack open nuts and food and also climbing and hanging on trees. Their beak can bite down with 300 pounds of pressure. They are one of very few rainforest animals that can crack open Brazil nuts (also the agouti).
- For very hard nuts, the bird uses the lower part of the beak to file down the nut's shell before cracking it open. The thick, fleshy tongue moves the food around as the macaw works on it.
- Countershading allows Blue and Gold macaws to be camouflaged during flight. When viewed from above their blue back sides will blend in with the darker colors below. When viewed from below, their yellow underside will blend in with the brightness of the sun.
- They signal anger or unease by blushing.
- Blue and gold macaws use their beaks as a "third foot" to help them climb.

Behavioral Adaptations:

- Diurnal
- They are usually seen in pairs, family groups, or flocks of about 20 birds. Occasionally one might see gatherings of Blue and Golds, which can number into the hundreds.
- Each morning, they fly from roosting sites to feeding grounds and return just before sunset, flying high above the forest canopy. They do not migrate.
- Extremely wary; at the slightest sign of danger, they rise into the air, screeching loudly.

Reproduction and Development:

- All macaws are devoted family birds, mating for life and looking after their young even after they are grown.
- After reaching sexual maturity at 3-6 years, pairs nest high above the ground in cavities of large, dead trees. May reuse woodpecker tree cavities.
- The female lays 1-3 eggs in two-day intervals. The female does all the incubation, although the male helps guard the nest and brings food to her. Incubation takes around 25 days.
- The babies are blind and featherless at hatching (altricial). They do not get their full plumage until about 10 weeks of age. They remain with their parents for several months after fledging.
- The young are vigorous even when young. The little macaws beg for food by flinging their wings and giving loud cries. The parent responds by grasping baby's beak at an angle; the young bird pumps away, taking regurgitate partially digested food from the parent's crop into its own.
- The most disturbing discovery made about macaws is their low reproductive capacity in the wild. There may be as few as 15 to 25 young born each year to a group of 100 breeding pairs.
- They do not breed annually.
- Molting begins after the breeding season and lasts several months

Additional Information:

- The macaw flock may fly as far as 15 miles each day in search of a meal since trees bear fruit at different times of the year
- In the course of daily feeding, macaws allow plenty of seeds (while eating, and in droppings) to fall to the forest floor, thus generating much of the forest growth as natural seed dispersers.
- Macaws are able to reach speeds of up to 35 miles per hour.

Conservation Status: Least Concern**Conservation Efforts:**

- Blue and gold macaws are globally threatened from poaching for the pet trade and habitat loss. The species was extirpated from Trinidad in the early 1960s. CREW scientists have helped to reintroduce the species to its former range by linking scientific field work with community involvement and conservation education. Through CREW's research efforts a small population of blue and gold macaws has been successfully reintroduced to its former range in Trinidad. Thirty-one wild caught blue and gold macaws were translocated from Guyana to Trinidad between 1999 and 2003.

- Post release survival and nesting success have been high. Local villagers from communities bordering the reintroduction site were trained to monitor and protect the released birds. Poaching has been mitigated through community involvement, conservation education and national public awareness campaigns. Local government, private sector, corporate and international support helps to sustain the project initiated by the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden.
- Schools in the area adopted the blue and gold macaw as the flagship species for wildlife conservation and protection of the island's threatened wetlands.

Sources:

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