PORTFOLIO

The Blue of Barba Azul



Photographer Humberto Tan travelled to Bolivia for a macaw that lives nowhere else

BOLIVIA · BENI · BARBA AZUL



A muddy track winds through the savanna grassland.

BOLIVIA · BENI

The Blue of Barba Azul

On the savanna of Bolivia's Beni region lives a macaw found nowhere else on Earth. Ten years ago, only about 455 remained. A journey to an extraordinary nature reserve, a rescue plan that worked – and a friendship that grew faster than anyone expected.

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY HUMBERTO TAN

It was still early, but we had already walked some 8,000 steps since six that morning. Over breakfast – a fried egg and *frittas*, a kind of flat Dutch doughnut – Maribelle, the cook, asked us a casual question: how long have you two actually known each other?

Tjalle answered in fluent Spanish, and she was astonished. "We met in May this year, over lunch in Amsterdam. It's October now, so not even six months. This is only the second time we've seen each other." Maribelle clapped a hand over her mouth. She had assumed we had been friends for years.

What she probably saw is that two people don't need long to find common ground when they were already standing on it before they met. In our case, that ground was a love of nature.

"Two people don't need long to find common ground when they were already standing on it before they met."

On a Whim

Tjalle Boorsma studied Forest and Nature Conservation at Wageningen University. After graduating, he set off for Bolivia on a whim. He wanted to do real work as a conservationist. He was turned away in several places, but at Armonía, a Bolivian bird and nature conservation organization, he got his chance. He could start for four months – though he had to find the money for his own salary.

Eleven years later, he is still there. Tjalle is now Armonía's Development Director and fully at home in Bolivia. He has lost his heart to a country 26 times the size of the Netherlands.



Tjalle Boorsma and Humberto Tan on the savanna.



Tjalle scans with his binoculars while Humberto shoots.

A Bird I Didn't Know

That lunch in Amsterdam came about after a WhatsApp message from my birding friend Arjan Dwarshuis, the Netherlands' 'bird king'. For years, Arjan had a popular weekly bird segment every Friday on my radio show on NPO Radio 1.

"Do you know the blue-throated macaw?" Tjalle asked. At first I thought he meant the blue-and-yellow macaw. That one I knew well: I had seen and photographed it countless times in Kabalebo, Suriname. But no – the blue-throated macaw I did not know.

Tjalle told me about a successful conservation programme in Beni, in northeastern Bolivia, home to the Barba Azul nature reserve. The blue-throated macaw (*Ara glaucogularis*) lives only in this region. Ten years ago, there were about 455 left in the wild. Tjalle and his colleagues at Armonía started a programme to protect them. Now, ten years on, there are nearly 800. A real success. Would I like to see the project with my own eyes, and perhaps photograph it?

And so, a few months later, we sat at the table like 'best friends', in one of the most remarkable wild places I have ever been.

455
blue-throated macaws in the wild ten years ago

~800
blue-throated macaws today

180+
blue-throated macaws fledged from nest boxes

Three Interventions

It is impressive to see how much work Tjalle and his colleagues have put into bringing the blue-throated macaw population back up. With support from several funds, some of them international, they took three key measures.

1 Nest boxes
Natural nesting cavities were scarce, so Armonía installed specially designed nest boxes. Through this programme, more than 180 chicks have now fledged successfully into the wild.

2 Land
Armonía bought up critical habitat to protect the macaws from habitat destruction and fire. This led to the creation of the Barba Azul Nature Reserve, where the birds forage, and the Laney Rickman Reserve, their most important breeding ground.

3 Feathers made of palm leaves
To stop poaching for the pet trade and hunting for traditional feather dances, Armonía launched awareness campaigns. It introduced artificial feathers made from palm leaves for Indigenous headdresses, which brought the hunting almost to a halt: 90 percent of headdresses are now made with this alternative.



Two blue-throated macaws (*Ara glaucogularis*) in a treetop. The species lives only in Beni.



A pair of blue-throated macaws at the top of a tree.



A group of blue-throated macaws, half hidden in the foliage.



A maned wolf (*Chrysocyon brachyurus*) crosses the grassland.

Goosebumps by the Airstrip

In just under a week, Tjalle and I saw more than 168 bird species and 14 mammal species, including the illustrious maned wolf (*Chrysocyon brachyurus*). With goosebumps on our arms, we watched one walking close to the airstrip, eating the ripe fruit of *Alibertia edulis*, a plant bearing a kind of guava. Fruit makes up almost half of the maned wolf's diet.

For more than half an hour we were able to follow, watch and photograph the animal. Undisturbed, it kept eating, its extremely slender body and long legs carrying it unerringly through the tall grass and over the waterlogged ground.



Two toco toucans (*Ramphastos toco*).



A black howler monkey (*Alouatta caraya*).



A hoatzin (*Opisthocomus hoazin*).



A southern lapwing (*Vanellus chilensis*).



A chestnut-fronted macaw (*Ara severus*) spreads its wings.



A campo flicker (*Colaptes campestris*) on a palm trunk.



Two campo flickers at the cavities in a palm trunk.

Counting at Sunset

Once a month, conservationists in Barba Azul count how many blue-throated macaws fly to one of the many forest islands on the savanna. The only way to get there is on horseback or by tractor. So there we sat, an hour and a half on a tractor.

One glorious sunset and 38 blue-throated macaws later, we rode back in the dark, a crab-eating fox (*Cerdocyon thous*) racing ahead of us – *zorro*, as it is called in Spanish.



Macaws in flight over the savanna.



The sun sinks over the savanna.



The last light disappears behind a forest island.

The Work Behind the Romance

Nature conservation sounds beautiful and romantic, and the results with the blue-throated macaw show that it works. But in the field you see how hard the work is. Again and again, Tjalle has to write to funders: for fuel for the tractor, for staff salaries, for building and installing nest boxes. And for keeping the vegetation low in certain areas, so that a fire has less chance to spread. Such fires can be started by lightning, or by landowners who manage their land with fire – which sometimes goes wrong, with all the consequences that brings.

It takes careful thought and good planning to achieve the results I saw. There has been no fire for years. As a result, the birds – not only the macaws – can breed well and keep the land healthy by dispersing the seeds of what they eat. The same goes for the maned wolf.

Home Again

I travelled to a place I knew nothing about. Bolivia, Beni, the blue-throated macaw, Barba Azul: none of them meant anything to me. I come home with a wealth of indelible memories, with photographs, and with a new friendship on the other side of the world.

¡Gracias, Tjalle! Or, as we say in the Netherlands: *zet 'm op* – keep going!

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY: HUMBERTO TAN



A cocoi heron (*Ardea cocoi*) in mirror-still water.



A wooden jetty reflected in still water.