



## EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

# Learning from the animals

By Sheila Collis

**Scientific Director of The Loro Parque Foundation sounds a bit like a dry and dusty lab and desk job, but that couldn't be further from the truth, as we found out when we spoke to the latest holder of that position, Rafael Zamora Padrón.**

He was still bearing the scratches, bumps and bruises that resulted from a flying visit with Foundation President Christoph Kiessling to some of the Foundation's projects in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Panamá. Some of the places they had to get to were so remote, it meant hard uphill hiking at altitudes or long hours on horseback - an experience that he described as, "tough, but very rewarding".

Chicharrero by birth (Santa Cruz capital), Rafa's family came from El Hierro, but his

grandfather was born in Cuba and he has family all over the globe from France to Venezuela and Bolivia. This young biologist married another biologist and according to the interests of the eldest of his two children, it looks as if the family tradition will be carried on. He bred his first bird when he was 10 and has always been, "nuts for animals" since he was very young "it didn't matter if they were birds, dogs, cats, frogs..." So, his choice of career as a biologist was totally clear from early days, as was his specialisation in zoology. Throughout his career, he has worked as ornithologist and curator at The Loro Parque Foundation, as well as advisor for different international breeding projects of endangered species.

Whilst studying at the University of La Laguna, he cre-



↑ A young Rafa with a Spix Macaw

ated his own bird breeding laboratory where he handled more than 500 species, among them also reptiles and small mammals. This experience was critical in the recommendation of the Animal Behaviour Department for his research grant from the University of La Laguna and The Loro Parque Foundation. He studied the behaviour of Spix's



With the Loro Parque Foundation team in Bolivia. President Christoph Kiessling in the lead

Macaws during two years and was offered the opportunity to join the specialist staff of Loro Parque and The Loro Parque Foundation at the end of that period. "I've been here over 20 years now."

Together with Matthias Reinhardt, a previous Director at the Foundation, they watched over the Spix's eggs and chicks as if they were their own children. "We worked it as if we were a married couple. One day he'd take the incubator home and the next day I would. When the first one was born, we sat up until 3am to watch it." It was very complicated but against all the odds and the gainsayers, they were successful. Speaking about his experience with the critically

endangered species, which is believed to be extinct in the wild, Rafa told us, "it was over 20 years ago, but we were able to reproduce the birds here and return them to Brazil, where there is now a project to continue to breed them and restore their natural habitat to one day return the species to the wild. The majority of the birds they now have were born here."

It was definitely a case of being in the right place at the right time and having the enormous luck of having the Loro Parque facility and Foundation on his home island "because otherwise, my future would have been in Germany or England," which is where most of the more advanced breeding centres were at the time.

Studying at a German school helped his career enormously because he spent some time in Germany as well as the UK, but "my knowledge of breeding animals in the main I got from the German breeders. Before I joined Loro Parque I was in touch with them a lot, in those days it was by letter as it was before the Internet existed. It was a great time where we swapped a lot of knowledge, although they knew a great deal more than I. It was another perspective on animal reproduction than we had in Spain at the time." Most of the information he acquired was from German breeders and publications and by the time he got to Loro Parque he already had a strong base and some great contacts who helped him over the years and whose numbers have since grown considerably. He visited many places to see how they cared for the animals, in the south of Holland near the border with Germany, Leipzig, Chemnitz and studied procedures in places like the London Zoological Society and the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust in Jersey. It has long been claimed that animals will only reproduce when they are happy and although today some people

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