

opportunity

IS ALL IT TOOK TO CHANGE A LIFE

A passion for birds and education led Kaitlin Studer to take advantage of DC's McMaster School program

by Kaitlin Studer, Defiance College student

It was about mid freshman year when I decided I wanted to take advantage of the opportunity that the McMaster program offers. After hearing about the work going on in Belize, I decided that was the initiative I wanted to be on.

I started talking to students and faculty that had gone the year before. They mentioned the Programme for Belize ranger Ivan Gillett, who was in charge of the recovery program for the endangered yellow-headed parrot. They started talking about how poaching for the pet trade was a huge problem, especially in the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area, and how Ivan was in need of educational materials in order to reach out to the communities on the periphery.

At that moment I knew what kind of project I wanted. I wrote a proposal to travel to Belize to study the habitat of the yellow-headed parrot and then to create educational materials. I was overjoyed when I got the word that I was accepted.

A week later, I received word that I was accepted for an internship at the Toledo Zoo Aviary. My passion for birds evolved as I worked over the summer in the aviary. When the fall semester hit, I was focused on finding every resource I could about the yellow-headed parrot, the pet trade, and educational outreach programs (with other endangered species).

December came fast, and I was headed to Belize. Before I knew it, I was riding down the bumpiest dirt roads I have ever been on to the pine savannah, the yellow-headed parrot's habitat. There Ivan Gillett showed me potential nesting sites for the bird, the kind of food parrot chicks eat, and he gave me a general overview of its natural history. Then Ivan showed me a tree that had been



photo by Mary Ann Studer

Kaitlin Studer talks to children in San Carlos about her book on the yellow-headed parrot.

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poached! This was an experience I would never have gotten from a book or a journal article. This showed me how real poaching is a major problem. Seeing first-hand the large holes that were made by machetes that destroyed the nesting cavity was something I will never forget.

While in Belize I collected more information, and I was trying to figure out exactly what kind of educational materials would be most effective. It wasn't until the second to last day when Ivan took me to the savannah again and showed me another poached tree. This tree was completely cut down! Ivan explained that sometimes people will bring kids to help them get the chicks out of the nests because they have smaller limbs, and they are better tree climbers. It was at this exact moment that I knew I needed to write a children's book.

Poaching is a very lucrative business today. The yellow-headed parrot population began to decline in the 1970's. By 1994 more than 90 percent of the population was gone. This was due to the fact that the birds are very popular in the pet trade because they can mimic human voices very quickly.

What is devastating is that poaching is not the only problem that is negatively impacting the bird's population. The parrot in some areas of Belize is being killed because local people consider it a pest. Yellow-headed parrots eat the fruit from cashew trees and thus negatively impact a source of income for many Belizeans.

The parrot population is also threatened by habitat destruction as a result of frequent fires. People will set fire to the savannah to burn the old grasses leaving all of the new growth and sprouts of the grass exposed. This attracts animals into the savannah to feed on the new plants which makes for easy, although illegal, hunting. Pine savannah ecosystems benefit from being burnt naturally which happens every once in a while, not however from frequent human-induced fires. This constant burning damages some Caribbean pine trees and also destroys many yellow-headed parrot nests. This past year the Pine Savannah in the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area in Belize was set on fire and over 15 parrots' nests were destroyed. My journey in Belize was ending quickly but the adventure that stemmed from the trip was just beginning.

Writing a book can be just as overwhelming as trying to "advance humanity," but what I have learned through this process is that one of the keys to success is having a support system. With the help



Poached Caribbean Pine

of several people on the Defiance College campus and beyond, I was able to publish a children's book entitled *Leaving Wild: A Case to Save the Yellow-headed Parrot*.

People that helped me on campus were very patient and extremely supportive. My main editor, Dr. Margaret Noble Mikula, spent many hours going over drafts. Professor Cathy Rayburn-Trobaugh, because of her Latin American background, helped me write a book that would not offend. Professor Dean Flightner was another key supporter in the process reading and rereading drafts I produced. I also had off-campus support from the Toledo Zoo. Curator of birds Robert Webster was very gracious in making sure all of my "bird terms" were correct and well-defined. Last, but certainly not least my mom, Professor Mary Ann Studer, was a major supporter. When I said I was thinking about writing a children's book, she gave me

her full support with no hesitation. She too read through numerous drafts and listened to my thoughts on how the book should be organized and styled.

While the book started moving through the editing and translation process, I had time to think about what else I could do to help educate the people of Belize about the yellow-headed parrot. I knew that just one book was not going to dramatically change the view of the people, especially people who are killing the parrot because it eats the cashew fruit. I finally realized that getting people engaged in their environment through birding might help to reduce poaching in the area where it's most prominent.

I decided that the proceeds from the sale of my book *Leaving Wild* in the U.S. would fund what I call field packs. These field packs contain binoculars, a field guide to Central American birds, and a waterproof notebook

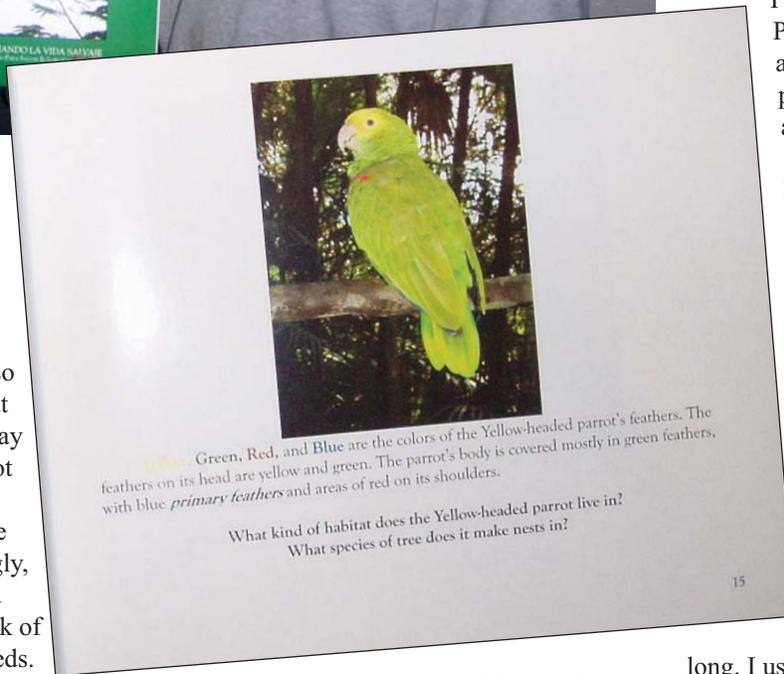


photo by Robin Kratzer

Ivan Gillett and Kaitlin Studer with her book *Leaving Wild*. To right: An inside page view of her book

and would be taken to schools that surround the Rio Bravo. I also created an awareness poster about the yellow-headed parrot to display in areas where the book would not be distributed. I had to develop a field pack budget and price all the items in the field packs accordingly, so that I could price the book and write a business plan to keep track of all the donations and book proceeds. I could not have done this part if it wasn't for the help of Rich Pejeau and the Office of Institutional Advancement.

I wrote a second proposal to the McMaster School to go back to Belize in 2007 so that I could distribute my book and the field packs. In addition I wanted to conduct research to estimate biodiversity in different land use areas to try and help the rangers of the Rio Bravo convince the people on the periphery to reduce the practice of slash and burn. This project is directly linked to my parrot project because habitat destruction is another major cause of the decrease in its population. I was thrilled that this proposal was accepted and I was a member of the 2007-2008 McMaster Belize team.



I was able to sell enough books to fund 10 field packs. I returned to Belize in December 2007 with children's books, awareness posters, field packs and my equipment to collect data for my biodiversity project. The best part of this trip was passing out the children's books and talking to people about the yellow-headed parrot. To hand a child a book that is in all probability the only one they own was very exciting. Ivan was very happy with the book and how well it turned out. Even though he knew I was writing one, he was still surprised when he saw it. We sat and talked for two hours about the recovery program. He told me that I was part of the recovery program, and he wanted my input on a few aspects. This was the most unbelievable experience,

working with Ivan and feeling a part of the recovery program.

This partnership that has developed with Ivan is something I will never forget and it's a truly indescribable experience. In a way it makes my life feel more globalized, because whenever I get that "end of the world" feeling because of a bad test or a stressful week, I remember what I do in Belize and how that means so much more in the big picture.

Ever since my first trip to Belize I have been giving presentations all over the country and talking to everyone and anyone that asks me about Belize. Although they may regret asking after I have talked to them for hours, the point is that the opportunity I took my sophomore year has opened my eyes and has developed a passion in me I never knew I had. This summer I authored an article that was published in the August edition of PsittaScene Magazine, the World Parrot Trust quarterly magazine. I am currently looking for graduate programs in conservation biology and sustainable development.

After my last few projects, Programme for Belize asked me if I could work with farmers on the periphery of the Rio Bravo and their Lepidopteron pests. Programme for Belize was concerned about the populations of butterflies and moths as well as the impact of pesticides that are used by farmers to decrease crop damage. I was compelled to respond to this request so I submitted another scholar proposal. I was accepted in May 2008 and I will return to Belize in December of this year.

But I couldn't wait that long. I used money I earned working at the zoo this summer to fly to Belize in August. I met with the Dean of Muffles Junior College, and as a result I am working with biology professors at the college. These professors want to learn how to do field exercises so they can teach their students techniques that environmentalists, including foresters, should know. I completed a short video on three major field exercises and will be supplying them with the resources they need to conduct these exercises. Hopefully these students at Muffles will develop, through these field labs, more applicable skills as they enter the job market in Belize. And that is what McMaster and the Belize initiative is all about: helping people help people. In Belize I am helping Belizeans to better their future. This is what drives me. ♦