

# The Jewel In the Forest

Carol Mitchell

We have flown high with the killers, the Condor and the Fish Eagle, wandered, earthbound, with the little and the large, the Kiwi and the Emu, admired the glamour of the Peacock, Parrot and Bird of Paradise, soared with the Cahow and envied the serenity of the Swan. In our travels we have visited continents and islands and, in all of the countries we have visited, the national birds are well-regarded by the inhabitants but are not always at the forefront of the national consciousness.

So, we have been around the world but what, according to the song, makes the world go round? Quite simply – money!! But there is no bird called a ‘pound’, a ‘euro’ or a ‘rouble’ or even a ‘yen’. However, there is a feathered delight which is so deeply embedded in a nation’s life that its name is used millions of times a day by its inhabitants. This time we are heading for Central America and the country of Guatemala with its currency of the ‘quetzal’ introduced in 1925.



Latin American History set - Cuba 1987

The Resplendent Quetzal, *Pharomachrus mocinno*, has been intrinsic to the national life since Mayan times. Brilliant word ‘resplendent’ for a brilliant bird. Its cultural and historic importance is probably unparalleled in the world as a national symbol of the country. It was venerated by both the Mayans and the Aztecs whose word *quetzalli* for tail feather is the origin of the name. The god deity, Quetzacoatl, was worshipped by both cultures and was depicted as the head of a snake adorned with quetzal feathers. The Aztecs believed that Quetzacoatl would return in 1519 to rule over them as their god-king. Unfortunately for them, the chap that turned up in Veracruz that year was the Spanish conquistador, Hernan Cortes, and, although they made him the gift of the quetzal headdress, he was there to pirate more tangible wealth which, as we all know, ended very badly for the Aztecs!!

The Quetzal is an important character in the Guatemalan legend of the local hero

Tecún Umán, a prince and warrior of the Quiché Maya during the latter stages of the Spanish conquest, the Quetzal being his *nahual* or spirit guide. Even though grossly outmatched in the weaponry stakes, the Quiché repelled several attacks from the Spanish army. The chronicle relates that, on the day the conquistador, Pedro de Alvarado, fought against Tecún Umán, there was a Quetzal flying overhead. On the first strike Tecún Umán, on foot, managed to disable the conquistador’s horse. Alvarado was then given another horse and on the second attack ran his sword through Tecún Umán’s chest. The Quetzal flew down and landed on Tecún Umán, dipping its chest into the prince’s blood and so acquired its distinctive red chest feathers. So, just like the Aztecs, the Mayans did not have a happy ending either!!



Rare and Endangered Birds of South America - Guyana 1990

The decimation of this beautiful bird began in very ancient times as there appears to have been far greater numbers than currently. Whilst it was a capital offence to kill a Quetzal (death was far from swift and painless), several Aztec provinces with cloud forests were compelled to provide almost three thousand ‘handfuls’ of tail streamers to satisfy religious requirements. The ‘Handbook of Birds of the World’ estimates that each handful comprised between 20 and 50 feathers so the cull would have been around an eye watering ten to thirty thousand birds annually. So, even if the poor birds escaped with their lives, the trauma of trapping and being plucked alive, would have resulted in injury in a large number particularly as the skin of the Quetzal is very thin and easily torn which is why their body plumage has evolved its density to protect the skin.



Birds, El Salvador 1980

More recently, the insatiable demands of Victorian milliners to satisfy their wealthy clients’ demands for fashionable plumage resulted in the export of about a thousand Quetzals annually. Fortunately, the attraction in current times is to look but not touch and these birds are a major benefit to Guatemala in the ecotourism business.



Definitive, Guatemala 1879

Just over twenty years ago, an American acoustic scientist, David Lubman, was working at the Temple of Kukulcan, a formidable step pyramid known locally as El Castillo, at Chichen Itza on Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula. He was fortunate to be working there as ownership debates have raged throughout the years but until 2010 it was in private hands hence the access. It is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and, whilst the site can be visited, the temple itself is off limits to tourists.

However, during his work Lubman clapped his hands to attract the attention of his team. The sound travelled from the open plaza to echo from the temple staircases and the sound generated was the exact sound of a Quetzal chirp. He found that a single clap produced the audible cheep where the staircases had been restored but that multiple clapping was needed to produce echoes from the unrestored ones. The theory is that during a ceremony the High Priest would ask a question of the gods after which he would clap his hands. The sounds of the claps would be transformed into the Quetzal chirps resonating around the temple and these would be interpreted by the audience as a response from the gods which, by association, would reinforce the belief in the powers of the priests.



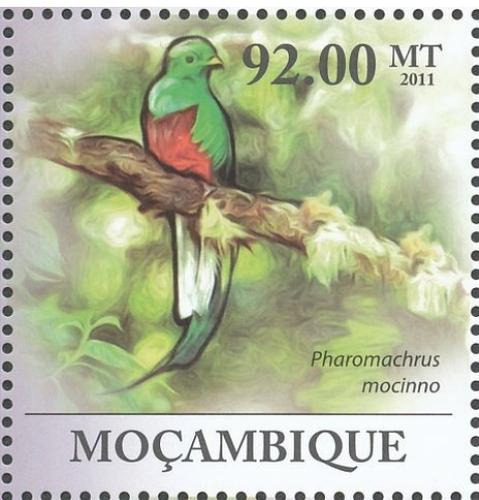
Antigua & Barbuda 2002

# The Jewel In the Forest (2)

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Initially, some archaeologists dismissed this theory as 'an artefact of reconstruction' citing the effect of the restoration work. But Lubman countered by explaining that some experts were dominated visually and ignored evidence of ancient uses of sound. He has been vindicated by more recent and mounting verification which supports the temple's staircases as an intended design feature.

As a major symbol of the importance of the Quetzal to the Guatemalan people, the Order of the Quetzal is the highest honour that the government can bestow both on its own citizens and foreigners. It is awarded in recognition of outstanding humanitarian, civic, artistic and scientific achievements.



International Year of the Forests, Quetzal - Mozambique 2011

The Quetzal's original home of cloud forests have been severely depleted by logging both for lumber and farmland over the years and this is considered to be a factor in the decline of numbers to the point where the IUCN places it in the 'Near Threatened' category. However, the ecotourism industry recognises the Quetzal's value and the government has started to enforce land clearance restrictions more stringently. What it cannot control is the Quetzals' selection of trees in which to build their nests as they favour trees in a state of decomposition and, therefore, susceptible to weather damage. Additionally, because of the lack of timber which has reached the required level of decay due to the logging, the very lack of suitable trees appears to limit the population.

The nests are normally some 200 feet up the favoured post and, whilst they usually live alone when not breeding, they are monogamous seasonal breeders in the spring. Just two pale blue eggs are laid - hardly enough to rejuvenate the population

especially as they are known to have a high rate of nest failure at around 70 per cent. Both parents take turns at incubating for 18 days with the male taking the day shift and both feed their offspring mostly on fruit and berries but supplemented by insects, lizards and small frogs. The young begin flying when they are three weeks old but the male chicks have to wait three long years for those magnificent tail feathers to develop. It is only as recently as 2004 that a successful breeding occurred at a Mexican zoo which had been trying to establish a programme since 1992. Originally it was very difficult even to hold a Quetzal in captivity, let alone breed, as it is noted for killing itself soon after being caged which is why it is seen as a traditional symbol of liberty.

The largest member of the trogon family, it is some 15 inches long plus a further couple of feet for that tail and like other members of that family, the Quetzal has large eyes which adapt easily to the dim light of its forest home. But even with those feathers and keen eyesight, its weak ability in the flight department makes it easy prey for eagles, hawks and owls as adults and the kinkajou (rainforest cousin of the raccoon and coati) as eggs and nestlings.



Protect Mexican Wildlife 24v Sheet, Mexico 1996

We started by appreciating the way the Quetzal is so entrenched in the Guatemalan psyche and nowhere is this more evident than its visual depiction throughout the nation's representations - on its flag, coat of arms, banknotes and, of course, its stamps of which there are, literally, hundreds! But other countries have used this magnificent jewel of a bird to adorn their letters, many in the central and south of the continent (Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador, Guyana, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua and Panama) and even in further flung parts of the planet such as Ghana, the Maldives and, strangely, the United Nations New York headquarters but I suppose that organisation is so accustomed to dealing with doom, gloom and despondency it needed something beautiful to cheer itself up.



WIPA 1981, Nicaragua



Birds of the World - part of a 9v Sheet, Maldives 1997

