

AMAZON

Honeymoon



By Tom Marshall

Barbi and I were married on January 11, 1992. Both of us were employed in Fairfax County Schools (VA), Barbi as a special education teacher and I was a high school administrator. Consequently, we had to wait until the school system's Spring Break in April for any real honeymoon. Barbi was pleased that I had done some research and found the "perfect spot" to celebrate our marriage --- a veritable island paradise!

Barbi is not naïve, but her knowledge of geography is somewhat limited. When I said we are going somewhere in the Lesser Antilles, she knew that it must be located in the Caribbean, but she did not know exactly where that actually was. I said it is located near Venezuela, so called Windward Islands. She pressed me further when we were at Dulles Airport boarding a plane for San Juan, Puerto Rico, which was the first stop on our trip. I said our destination is an all-inclusive resort on Young Island. That seemed to satisfy her.

Young Island is one of the Caribbean's most acclaimed resorts. Young Island is a private tropical island just 20 yards off St. Vincent's spectacular southern shore. Luxurious cottages, all meticulously furnished, are dotted throughout lush foliage, with ocean-view terraces to maximize the views and cooling by ceiling fans and the gentle trade winds. It was a "Dream Come True." In my cottage, I could not see the entrances of other cottages due to the beautiful flowering plants and vegetation. There was a fairly large pool in the center of a small group of cottages, located near us, but only seldom did anyone use the pool other than Barbi and me.

I was relieved that Barbi was 100% satisfied with my honeymoon choice and I was 110% satisfied. Next to the pool, inches from our cottage, was a small aviary with two St. Vincent Amazons (*Amazona guildingii*) gently sparring. I couldn't imagine a better setting for the great

time we anticipated; and which we had. When Barbi saw the parrots, she knew my "research" focused on more than a perfect spot to start our family together. She just smiled and gave me a knowing look.

Getting there did involve some flying, of which I am not very fond. We went from Dulles International Airport to Puerto Rico, then a flight to Barbados and then on a small unknown airline to Kingstown, the capital of St. Vincent. The airline was called LIAT, and of course I asked a fellow passenger; (there were about 8 of us) what did LIAT represent? His reply was "Leave Island Any Time". I guess they had a routine to wait until they could fill up the plane, but fortunately, we were in the air fairly quickly. When we arrived, we were met by a handsome West Indian, dressed in light, pastel clothing with cocktails, just like I remember from the TV Show, "Fantasy Island". His name sounded cool to me, Vidal Brown.

If you were around from 1977-1984, you might have seen this great show starring Ricardo Montalbon as Mr. Roarke and Herve Villechaise as Tatoo. The show would open with the two of them waiting for a flight to land and when Tatoo

saw it coming through the clouds, he would always excitedly yell, "The plane, the plane". Our arrival was reminiscent of Fantasy Island's 154 episodes in the best sense of the meaning, Mr. Brown, upon learning of my fascination with Amazona guildingii, invited me up to see his three noisy St. Vincent Amazons.

Romance, the raison d'être for all honeymoons, started around dinner time with cocktails and went through much of the evening, but in the morning (after we left our cottage) and afternoon was for looking for my favorite Amazons.

Fortunately, the Forestry Division maintains the Vermont Nature Trails in order to explore the St. Vincent Parrot Reserve. The Reserve is a rain forest habitat, and it conserves 10,870 acres. My understanding is there was a population of 450-500 parrots and that has been very stable over the years.

Barbi and I hired a taxi driver/guide, Andrew, to accompany us to and through the Parrot Lookout Trail, which is a 1 3/4 mile loop trail, climbing 500 feet and we were told that it could get wet. Complicating things a bit was the fact that my wife was several months pregnant.



Author Tom Marshall and guide at the St. Vincent Parrot Reserve.



A St. Vincent parrot enjoys a nut while resting on a rock at the St. Vincent Parrot Reserve.

Therefore, when it came to steep inclines, Andrew would pull Barbi and I would push her when her condition prevented her upward progress.

After about an hour, of the two-hour trip, we heard, and then saw, with Andrew's help, a pair of "Vincies" in the trees facing a gorge. Watching them fly across to the other side was breath-taking (for me) and their bright yellow ban was visible as they landed. It left an indelible impression that exists today.

Our trip was memorable on all counts. I still love my wife and I still love the St. Vincent Amazon Parrots. The unique nature of the coloration of St. Vincent Amazons and how different in color they are from the typical green of the mainland Amazons has always been fascinating to me.

I have done some research on parrot coloration and am trying to learn more, especially about the diversity of color on individual parrots that are endemic to this special island paradise.

Most variation in coloration among individual birds within a species is related to differences in sex, age and season. It is also possible that what a bird ingests (pink Flamingos) or possibly the environment in

which they inhabit may also be a factor in coloration.

In looking at Amazons, we know only a few species of Amazons are sexually dichromatic and of those that are, males and female only differ slightly. We do know that some Amazons get more colorful as they age (Double Yellow-heads).

For the most part, Amazons live in tropical areas with less seasonality, molt can occur over a longer portion of the year or even throughout the year. "Such non-seasonal molt can proceed much more slowly than seasonal molt of temperate zone birds. For these reasons, seasonally distinct plumages are typically not observed in birds found in the tropics, especially in wet tropical regions." (Hill)

"Parrots have their own unique pigments, for producing yellow and red, which are known appropriately enough as psittacofulvins. Psittacofulvins can produce vibrant yellow (Golden Conure) and red colors (Red Lory) and, when combined with blue structural coloration, brilliant green (male Eclectus). Psittacofulvins are manufactured within the bodies of parrots. Within a species, psittacofulvins-based pigmentation is less variable in expression among individuals" (St. Vincent) (Hill)

Parrot researchers point out that there are two major color morphs on St. Vincent, which they call the yellow-brown morph, and the green morph, but plumage coloration is variable within each, and virtually no two birds are alike. (Forshaw)

These are geographical variations. Parrots on the eastern (windward) side of St. Vincent are possibly isolated genetically from those on the western (leeward) side: the small population of western birds (possibly 80 birds in 1982) reportedly show a higher portion of "green morph" individuals and have higher-pitched voices. (Juniper

and Parr).

The influence of genes on coloration is easiest to understand when variation is controlled by a single gene with alternate alleles (2) for coloration. (An allele is an alternate gene for a particular location (locus) on a chromosome.) When there is complete dominance, the dominant allele will be the only allele expressed (shown) whenever it is present. (Example: brown eyes dominant vs blue eyes recessive).

When there is incomplete dominance, in contrast, both alleles will be partially expressed (St. Vincent Amazons). Biologists call inheritance of traits that have just a few discrete appearances "Mendelian inheritance, after the father of modern genetics, Gregor Mendel. Any color trait in birds that shows Mendelian inheritance is designated as a morph.

As no two St. Vincent parrots, are alike they display intermediate plumage coloration resulting from incomplete dominance of, most likely, the darker morph. Why intermediate morphs are so variable in color is not completely understood. Very likely other genes interact with the primary gene involved in controlling morph type, modifying the appearance of plumage in the same way a green-eye gene interacts with the blue/brown genes to complicate human eye color. In the case of the green-morph "Vincies", the environment in which feathers are grown might also affect plumage coloration.

Whatever the science behind the unique coloration of this wonderful species of Amazon parrots, it pales in comparison to the bird's threatened status. Aviculturist, conservationist, employees of the local island forestry division and private breeders must do everything in their power to preserve such a great representative of bird life. The Houston Zoo was successful in breeding the St. Vincent Amazons

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in 1972, and two private and well-respected aviculturists, Ramon Noegel and Greg Moss had reared over eight breeding seasons a number of babies from several pairs since 1982. At one time an international consortium had been formed to breed the species with some relative success as well.

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