

# Raiders of the Rain Forest - the Tragedy of Smuggling

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The canopy of the rain forest, usually alive with the sounds of countless species of birds, animals and insects, is often disrupted by the sounds of man's intrusion. If it is not felled in the relentless clearing for pasture and farm use, it is robbed of those plant and animal species for which man has a use or a fascination. The Amazon rain forest may someday be preserved only in memories, pictures, and a few tracts of land of insufficient size to support viable populations of most species. Already, species are vanishing at an astonishing rate. Many are lost before they are even discovered by man, let alone exploited.

The smugglers of rare and endangered species are hastening the process and compounding the tragedy. Ironically, the same dedicated aviculturists and zoologists who endeavor to conserve these species in captive populations, are the smuggler's primary market. The flow will only be stopped when all of us have the knowledge and conscience to strictly avoid smuggled plants, animals, and their products.

The Golden Conure *Aratinga guarouba* presents an attractive target for smugglers. Due to its bright coloration and characteristic call, it may also be an easy mark. High value and relatively light penalties make smuggling very profitable. For the peasants who collect the birds for smugglers, the Golden Conure represents a sum equal to several months pay. When poverty and poor nutrition enter into the equation, they cannot be blamed for taking whatever is available to feed their children. The result is an irreversible loss of precious natural resources, and often the tragic deaths of the captured birds and animals.

Although habitat destruction dwarfs smuggling in its impact to endangered species, smuggling has a number of

deleterious effects. The most obvious is a reduction in the number and genetic diversity of the wild populations. As habitat is destroyed, it becomes increasingly important to protect parrots and other species that have become entrapped in pockets of remaining rain forest. Losses due to smugglers increase the probability of inbreeding and weakening of the flocks. The methods of the smugglers often lead to the loss of breeding pairs or nesting sites.

Smuggling poses additional threats to what may be the last chance for survival of the Golden Conure and other rain forest species — the captive breeding population. Smuggled birds circumvent all quarantines and veterinary screening, and introduce the threat of Exotic Newcastle's Disease and many other infectious diseases. Many large collections of parrots have been decimated by diseases introduced by smuggled birds.

Large numbers of smuggled birds also threaten the economic viability of our do-

mestic breeding operations. Breeders, especially those near traditional ports of entry or the Mexican border, find it difficult to compete with the low prices of smuggled Amazon parrots, macaws, and other species.

Breeders of endangered species, like the Golden Conure, must also live with the cumbersome federal regulations imposed to combat the smuggling problem. It is ironic that only the smugglers can ignore the required paperwork. The regulations on interstate commerce of endangered species make it more difficult to transfer birds among breeders and maintain diversity in the domestic gene pool. The effect of these regulations is often to encourage inbreeding of the limited bloodlines available within each state.

As aviculturists we may be inclined to view smuggling as inevitable or even beneficial. There will always be a temptation to acquire new wild-caught birds to supplement the existing captive population. This must only be done through carefully regulated importation, in strict compliance with the new Wild Bird Conservation Act and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Each time we purchase birds that are illegally imported, we support the smuggler and encourage greater losses in the rain forest. Aviculturists must always keep in mind the great risk involved in purchasing illegal birds, and the tragic impact to the remaining wild populations. ➤

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## Why & How to Avoid the Smuggled Bird

by Kelly Tucker  
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Why not buy a smuggled bird? After all, they are usually a great bargain, aren't they? It's a great way to add to my bird family, isn't it? What's so wrong about smuggling anyway? Here are a few reasons.

**Disease** - Avoid the sorrow you can

feel when a pet that you've worked with and cared for finally succumbs to his poor beginnings and dies.

**Responsibility To Public** - Smuggled birds can start a chain reaction of disease that can spread.

**Responsibility To Other Pets** - If

that bird has certain diseases, like Newcastle's Disease, ALL birds on the premises or that may have been exposed to that bird may be confiscated and killed whether they were legal or not.

**Responsibility To Yourself** - Some bird diseases are contagious to people (but, dogs and cats can carry more zoonotic diseases than birds). The laws against smuggling carry jail sentences and fines.

**Promotes Lawlessness** - If you don't agree with the law, campaign to change it. If we choose to obey some laws and to break others, others can do the same. Is this the way we want to live?

**Protect Your Own Reputation** - If you will buy an illegal bird, what else will you do that is unethical or illegal? Can you be trusted to do the right thing at any time?

**Encourages Smuggling** - As long as there is a market for smuggled birds, there will be smugglers. If you buy a bird to "rescue" it from a horrible existence, you doom another hundred birds to the same horrible fate. By giving the smuggler his profit, you make it possible for him to continue the torture. Allow the bird to die while he has it, not after you get it home. At the very least, he might take better care of the birds in the future; at best, he'll find some other line of work.

**Pets As Privilege, Not As Right** - Animal rights extremists want to outlaw all pets, beginning with birds. When you participate in the smuggled bird trade, you play into their hands by giving them the ammunition they need to promote legislation against keeping all birds.

**Support Legitimate Breeders To Protect Future Availability** - It costs a lot more to house, feed and keep pairs of breeding birds and to do it right. Good breeders cannot compete with cheap, illegally imported birds. If smuggling continues, good breeders will give up and disperse their breeding stock. If smuggling continues long enough, wild populations will die out. Then there won't be any more Scarlet Macaws or Yellow-naped Amazons.

**Avoid Suffering During Capture And Transport** - We have all seen the ads put out by the Animal Rights Activists. While it's true that the "data" is suspect, much of the film is staged and the entire package is slanted to appeal to

anyone with a heart, the fact remains: capture for the pet trade is not nice for the birds.

**Depletes Wild Populations** - In the first two years of a study of Yellow-naped Amazons in Guatemala, not one baby fledged because they were all taken from the nest by poachers. Four nests were heavily guarded by biologists during the third year. All other nests were poached that year also.

**Smuggled Birds Can Be Confiscated** - The U.S. Government can and will confiscate smuggled birds. You don't have to know that the bird was smuggled when you got it — the result is the same: confiscation.

Okay, now that we've (hopefully) convinced you that smuggled birds are not for you, how can you tell the legal birds from the smuggled ones? Fortunately, it's not that hard most of the time. While no single signal guarantees that a bird is smuggled (many babies damage tail feathers learning to climb and fly), if you spot several indicators, beware! Trust your instincts. If the hair stands up on the back of your neck, believe it.

Look at the surroundings, not just at the baby bird. Is this a loving, caring place? Is this the warm, trusting atmosphere that you would choose for your precious baby?

Listen to the seller. If you hear three different stories about the bird in an hour, leave and, please, scrub up before you come to see my birds! Stop and think about the consequences of making a wrong decision. Sleep on it and come back tomorrow. If the seller tries to pressure you into taking the bird right now, for whatever reason, alarms should sound. Here are some other things to check.

**Some Birds Will Show The Effects Of Rough Capture And Handling** - Some of the things to look for are scruffy feathers, missing toes or toenails, cuts, abrasions, bruises on face, scars, missing face feathers.

**Bleached Or Dyed Head Feathers** - Lilac-crowned & Mexican Red-headed Amazons come in masquerading as more expensive Double Yellow-headed Amazons.

**She's A Baby** - If you are looking for a pet; or,

**She's Four Years Old** - If you need a breeder. Learn the difference.

**Commonly Smuggled Species** -

Macaws and Amazons are the most commonly smuggled species today. Australian Cockatoos are often smuggled. With the new Exotic Bird Conservation Act banning the legal importation of birds except under certain conditions, more and more birds will be targeted for smuggling.

**Large Numbers Of Babies Priced Below Market** - No one I know ever has too many Amazon or macaw babies. P.J. and Ivey, one of our pairs of Double Yellow-headed Amazons, produce two babies a year. This is about average for parent birds who are allowed to hatch and raise their own babies.

**Lack Of Parents** - Most breeders will not give a tour of their breeding facilities because disturbed breeding birds don't do well, but you should hear them even if you can't see them.

**Lack Of Records** - Conscientious breeders keep records including hatch dates, pull dates, fledging dates and weights of chicks. Some even keep daily weight records on eggs.

**Lack Of Equipment** - Breeders need incubators, brooders, handfeeding supplies, cages, bowls and feed to care for adults and breeders.

**No Permanent Location** - Breeder birds require space and daily care. Legitimate breeders do not sell their babies from motel rooms, parking lots, door-to-door, or flea markets.

**No Band Or Band Too Big** - The baby will not "grow into it". Baby birds at weaning are almost as big as they will be when they mature.

**No Vet Recommendation** - People who care for their pets and breeding stock, have a veterinarian who knows them. Check it out.

**No References** - If given, call them! (Another reason to come back tomorrow.) Ask if they would buy another bird from this person. Why or why not?

**Pressure Sales** - Good breeders do not want impulse buyers.

**No Provision For Follow-up Care Or Questions** - Good bird people don't stop caring about the birds when your check clears the bank.

**Extreme Fear Shown By The Bird** - Even babies that have been parent raised should be familiar with everyday people noise and actions from the daily care given to their parents and nest box checks. ➔