

# Uncle Sam's & Tio Juan's Parrot

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About 50 Puerto Rican Amazons fly free in the 28,000 acre Caribbean National Forest. El Yunque, as this wet and mountainous forest is known locally, is the sole tropical rain forest in the U.S. national forest system. The bird that the Taino Indians call "Iguaca" has gone from an estimated million individuals with a wide range over the entire island at the time of Columbus to approximately 50 wild parrots located in this refuge in the Luquillo Mountains plus an additional 72 birds held in captive breeding facilities in two Puerto Rican aviaries.

The Puerto Rican Parrot *A. vittata*, the most imperiled of the nine Amazona species still living in the West Indies, is barely 12 inches in length. It is typically Amazon green with touches of red above the nostrils and a white eye ring. In flight, its blue primaries combined with good lighting against the green body feathers gives it a jeweled effect to the few people fortunate enough to see it careening down from its mountain habitat.

The Iguaca has had many enemies. Three hundred years of deforestation reduced the habitat to less than 1% of virgin forest remaining in all of Puerto Rico. Human population has increased steadily to a record 3.5 million people in an area barely twice as big as Delaware. The Red-tailed Hawk will attack adult parrots and the Pearly-eyed Thrasher will kill nestlings and try to take over the limited nest sites available. Insects, such as larval warble flies and honeybee swarms, at times, have overwhelmed

breeding efforts of even previously successful pairs. Hurricanes, such as Hurricane Hugo which battered Puerto Rico hard in 1989, will always threaten the population. In addition to these natural enemies, political pressures have complicated the efforts to save these birds from extinction.

From its inception, late in 1968, all parties involved in the recovery effort have endured criticisms, jealousies, and competition over the project for both resources and control.

Controversy has always characterized this project and many aspersions have been cast.

Even to many ardent conservationists, the amount of tax dollars spent on this project, given the modest results in terms of population increases of the Puerto Rican Amazons, does not justify the inordinate expense.

Aviculturists complained for years about the apparent reluctance of US Fish and Wildlife to initiate any captive breeding efforts as a safeguard against a natural disaster, like the frequent hurricanes that pummel the island. The USFW Luquillo Aviary was eventually built in 1970 utilizing a donation of a single adult pair from the Mayaquez Zoo, located on the western side of the island.

Compounding the difficulty in a concerted effort being mounted on behalf of this critically endangered species, was the jockeying for jurisdictional control between the Puerto Rico Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Iguaca had become closely identified with nationalistic pride of the Puerto Rican people and a *cause celebre* for the bureaucrats in Washington, D.C.

Partly, as recognition of the heightened awareness of the Puerto Rican people to the plight of their national bird and partly as a safety measure against a disease breakout, there is now a second aviary under the tutelage of the Commonwealth's Department of Natural Resources in the Rio Abajo Forest, 70 miles west of El Yunque. This past year two Puerto Rican Parrot chicks fledged at the Rio Abajo Aviary.

It is interesting to note that initially, Puerto Rican Amazons were sent to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in nearby Maryland, off Interstate #495. One summer I visited Helen and Noel Snyder, pioneers in the conservation efforts to save the Puerto Rican Amazon, at Patuxent and saw from a precautionary distance both Puerto Rican and Hispaniolan *A. ventralis* Amazons.

Shortly after the establishment of the aviaries at Patuxent, the outbreak of Asiatic Newcastle disease in Puerto Rico led to rigorous quarantine for any birds entering the United States. This, and the need for extensive movements of parrot eggs and chicks to and from nests for protection and treatment, led to the establishment of the original aviary in the Luquillo Mountain Forest in 1973.

For nearly a decade eggs and young were removed from nests in the wild and brought to the aviary where closely related Hispaniolan Amazon Parrots served as surrogate parents. Captive-bred and wild parrot young are switched back and forth to maintain genetic diversity, and to safeguard against threats to the wild birds. During the breeding season, the proactive biologist and conservationist don't merely observe and record data, but also actively monitor and intervene, 16 hours of each day, up to the time birds are ready to fledge. Although it is still an uphill battle, it would be premature to "write off" Uncle Sam's and Tio Juan's parrot, thanks to the dedication of a few people and *Iguaca's* natural resilience. ➤