

The Red-tailed Amazon

Amazona brasiliensis

by Bob Martins, Houston, TX

The *Amazona brasiliensis*, found only in Brazil, is also called the Red-tailed Amazon, Purple-faced Amazon or Chuã. Among this magnificent parrot's striking features are its purple head and colorful tail feathers which fan into a bright yellow and red display. With the combination of brilliant coloration and outspread feathers, this Amazon presents a picture of unequalled beauty and has its own particular personality. It has the habit of erecting nape and hindneck feathers, just like the Hawk-headed and the *Amazona vinacea*. It does not have any similarity with the *Amazona festiva bodini* or any other Amazon as described by some writers.

In the wild, they are fast, agile high-flyers whose range is below 300m (900 ft). They live in pairs or small flocks and mate for life. Despite the fact that if one of the pair dies or is captured the other will find another mate, their propagation rate in the wild is very poor. The average female weighs 519 grams; the average male weighs 486 grams. They measure 35cm in length with no difference between the male and female. During breeding season both parents become extremely aggressive and noisy to protect their nest site.

The average summer temperature in their natural habitat, which encompasses a wide area in three Brazilian states, is 30 degrees Centigrade (84 degrees Fahrenheit) while the lowest winter temperature is around 14 degrees Centigrade (20 degrees Fahrenheit). Annual rainfall ranges from 1500mm to 2000mm (60 to 80 inches).

They line their nests with tree bark in either live or dead trees. For nesting they prefer the Guanandi tree *Caltophyllum brasilienses*. They also like the Figueira *Ficus enormis* trees as well as several other types of palm trees. The diameter of their nesting



Photo by Bob Martins

The Red-tailed Parrot is very beautiful and quite rare in aviculture. It would benefit the species to have a studbook established to provide an additional tool for serious aviculturists to use.

trees is between 1m and 1.5m (3 ft. - 5 ft.). Thirty-three percent of the nest sites are located in the Guanandi trees. They begin searching for appropriate nest sites in August and will usually lay eggs in September or October although they are capable of breeding from September through February.

Normally only two chicks will hatch from the three to four white eggs measuring 40mm x 22mm and usually only one chick will survive to fledge. The baby chick will reach adult size in 53 days and can be seen flying with both parents shortly thereafter, although its feathers are still rather dull compared to the adult's bright colors.

The nest entrance is always against the wind and is situated from 1m to 10m (3.3 - 33 ft.) above the ground with the average height being 6.4m (21 ft.). In live trees the entrance is of irregular shape; in dead trees the entrance is usually round measuring from 15cm to 20cm (6 - 8 in.) in diameter. The nests range from 0.20m to 1.10m (1 in. - 3½ ft.) in depth. In one particular island community, the six existing nests were situated an average of 79m (260 ft.) apart. Artificial nesting in the wild has been attempted with no success; usually wild bees have taken over the artificial nests.

These parrots are not easy to spot in

the forest, making natural observation very difficult. However, it is known that, depending on the time of year, they leave their resting area between 5:45 A.M. and 7:00 A.M. to feed and return between 5:00 P.M. and 6:30 P.M. During feeding, one of the flock "stands watch" for predators or strange circumstances and sounds an alarm call to signal the rest of the flock to fly away.

Although they will eat flowers and leaves, the *A. brasiliensis* feeds primarily on fruits and prefers the fruit of the Guanandi tree. Since this tree is one of its main nesting sites and also provides the birds' main food source, the Guanandi is an important element in the survival of this species.

Like most rare Amazons, this bird makes a wonderful pet; however, because of its rarity, any *A. brasiliensis* kept as pets should be placed in a qualified, avicultural breeding program immediately. In captivity, it can become a very good talker and likes a varied diet of seed mix, fruits and vegetables and, like most parrots, loves peanuts. In the excitement of feeding time it sounds much like a chicken.

It is impossible to visually differentiate the males from females and only DNA testing or surgical sexing can determine the sex of an individual

bird. I have personally known too many breeders who have guessed the sex of two birds based on observing them feed or preen each other, or have made a decision based on one bird's colors being lighter than the other's. Then, after two birds have been together for several years, it is discovered that both are the same sex.

The *A. brasiliensis* does not flock with and should not be confused with the Red-spectacled Amazon *Amazona pretrei* which lives in the Araucaria Forest mainly in the state of Rio Grande Do Sul but at a higher altitude of between 600m and 1,000m (2000 - 3,300 ft.). Although Rio Grande Do Sul borders the state of Santa Catarina where the *A. brasiliensis* can be found, the last sighting of an *A. brasiliensis* in the state of Rio Grande Do Sul was in the nineteenth century.

The *A. brasiliensis* lives and breeds only in Brazil in the coastal tropical forests, the marshlands and on the islands off the coast of the states of Santa Catarina, Parana and São Paulo.

In the state of Santa Catarina, the species is found on several islands in the Bay of Guaratuba.

The state of Paraná is where the largest concentration of *A. brasiliensis* can be found and is also where the habitat is less disturbed. They live on the islands of Mel, Rasa de Cotinga, which has the smallest population, Rasa, Pepas, which has the largest population, Benito, Gameiras, Laranjeiras, Rabelo, Sapergui, Cohras, Pinheiro, and Pinheirinho.

In the state of São Paulo, they live mainly on the island of Cardoso and in the counties of Peruipe, Itanhaem, Iguapé and Cananeia as well as in the Juréia State Park.

Fully protected by both Brazilian and international laws as well as by many landowners and individual states, the *A. brasiliensis* is also protected in several specially designed state parks. The species is also listed on CITES Appendix I. Punishment for breaking these laws is severe. For example, in Brazil there is no bail for someone caught dealing in endangered birds or other wildlife.

However, an alarming number of adults and chicks are captured each

year for the illegal market. In some areas, capturing birds is as simple as building a "tree ladder" to the nest that makes reaching and stealing the baby chicks each year a very easy task.

In addition to fishermen cutting down nest trees to build boats, the numbers of roads being built and parcels of land being developed are increasing at a rapid rate, particularly in the state of São Paulo. These circumstances will diminish the birds' available habitat and also contribute to its decline. I was recently informed by Mr. Nelson Kawall, owner of an aviary in São Paulo, that too many nesting trees are being cut, killing parents and babies and destroying nesting sites used for many generations.

Much erroneous information has been published about the *A. brasiliensis*. Some authors have mentioned Professor dalla Riva and his collection without adequate verification of sources.

Professor dalla Riva lived in the city of Registro in Brazil close to the parrots natural habitat, and began collecting *A. brasiliensis* in 1966 and died in 1977. dalla Riva acquired most of his birds from trappers and fishermen who live in the region. I have interviewed several individuals who, following dalla Riva's death, visited his facility. They actually purchased most of the *A. brasiliensis* from his maid who had not been given permission to sell the birds after his death.

According to some of the people I interviewed, dalla Riva's facility contained about 20 *A. brasiliensis* and a number of other parrots. Most of the *A. brasiliensis* were housed in a sort of dirt-floor chicken house with other species of Amazons. This was quite surprising to hear since Amazons do not breed well with other Amazons in the same cage and particularly with the *A. brasiliensis* which becomes very aggressive during breeding season. Mr. Paulo Neto, a Brazilian author who personally interviewed dalla Riva, wrote that dalla Riva told him that he used saw dust mixed with wet dirt as nesting material. In general, the environment seemed very hostile for breeding any type of Amazon.

During a recent trip to Brazil, I visit-

ed in São Paulo the aviary of Mr. Nelson Kawall who purchased the last eight dalla Riva birds. I had the opportunity to photograph his entire collection which I consider to be the most impressive collection of mutations I have ever seen. He also has Lear's and Spix's Macaws, but I did not see any *A. brasiliensis* Amazons.

During our conversation, Mr. Kawall confirmed that he had received eight *A. brasiliensis* from dalla Riva's widow and that he had donated all of them to a close friend named Luizinho of São Paulo.

Another misrepresentation of the status of this species is that they are on the brink of extinction. This bird is protected by federal and international laws and by individual landowners and should not be considered severely endangered. Presently, there are at least 2,500 *A. brasiliensis* in the wild and that number could possibly exceed 3,000. Unfortunately, the number of birds in captivity is unknown, creating a definite need for the establishment of a stud book to facilitate valid tracking and breeding procedures.

The *A. brasiliensis* was exported from Brazil in small numbers during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s when it was not a well-known species. During this period all birds were exported from Brazil with legal Brazilian documentation. Since Brazil banned exportation in the 1970s, this parrot is still rare but has maintained itself in the wild at acceptable levels. Many individuals, including Mr. Kawall, Mr. Nardelli and Mr. Machado, have had successful breeding programs in Brazil. In addition, there are also a number of successful breeders outside Brazil's borders which have done an excellent job breeding many types of rare Amazons with a great deal of success.

Dispensing accurate data on rare, endangered birds, both in the wild and in captivity, is of utmost importance to protect natural habitats, facilitate successful captive breeding and ensure the preservation of these creatures for future generations. Several individuals are working hard to make certain that the magnificent *Amazona brasiliensis* is included on the list of survivors. ➔