

The Various Personalities of Amazon Parrots

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Amazon parrots (genus *Amazona*) are one of the most popular varieties of birds to keep as pets. There is good reason for this popularity. Many species of Amazons make excellent mimics and comical acrobats. They are also quite beautiful.

If there is a drawback to owning Amazons, it is probably their loud squawks and aggressive natures. Many birdkeepers stereotype Amazons as talkative, excitable birds that are loud, have unpredictable dispositions and are prone to biting. While there may be some truth to this Amazon stereotype, I believe that such a generalization is unfair to these appealing neotropical parrots. Indeed, the "personalities" of Amazons can vary greatly from species to species. Even individual birds of the same species can be quite different (not surprisingly, hens tend to be less aggressive overall than males).

Sometimes it can be very difficult for aviculturists to recognize the subtle differences between the Amazon species. For many aviculturists – unlike pet owners – the relationship they have with their Amazons is feeding and cleaning, and very little more. A long row of green parrots is what they are used to seeing in their aviaries, and attention to each individual bird is impossible (not only impossible, but undesirable, since breeder birds like to be left to themselves). I know that I have come to know my pet birds (many of them Amazons) on a "personal" level far better than my breeder birds that live in flight cages. Thus, the experiences of individual pet owners can be quite interesting. These people can share insights into bird behavior that many aviculturists cannot. During several years of working in various editorial positions at Bird Talk and Bird Breeder magazines, I have conducted a few different surveys on Amazon parrots. These few surveys generated literally thousands of responses from Amazon owners, who described their birds and shared photographs. While reading through all of these Amazon letters has been tedious (and sometimes boring) as well as fascinating, I also have learned a great deal. As

far as I know, these Bird Talk surveys have generated more feedback from Amazon owners than has occurred ever before. As a true lover of these birds, I have kept several boxes of these survey responses. They are just too interesting to throw away!

In the following paragraphs I will discuss general characteristics of several Amazon species. These species descriptions come from personal observation as well as feedback from the readers of our avicultural magazines.

The most popular and numerous Amazons in captivity are Blue-fronted *Amazona aestiva*, Double-yellow-headed *A. ochrocephala* ssp. and Yellow-naped *A. o. auropalliata*, respectively. Not surprisingly, these birds are also among the most talkative and personable.

The **Blue-fronted** was imported in huge numbers until recent years, which is why these birds are found in such large numbers in the United States. They are also a fairly prolific Amazon in captivity, and captive-bred chicks are becoming more and more available. Of the three most popular Amazon species, the Blue-fronted remains the most gentle. It is also quieter than the Yellow-naped or Double Yellow-headed (although if you live with one you might find this hard to believe!). The talking voice of Blue-fronteds does not have the volume of that of the Yellow-naped or Double Yellow-headed.

Double Yellow-headeds were not imported legally for many years prior to the Wild Bird Conservation Act, yet there are many birds in captivity – either smuggled or captive-bred. This is probably the most recognizable of the Amazons and, arguably, one of the most attractive. For some reason, I hear of more Double Yellow-headed that can sing than any other Amazon species. Opera is a big hit among these parrots. I believe this is because the high trilling sound created by this species as part of its natural vocabulary can easily convert to song. A Double Yellow-headed that I owned would typically trill very high and long and then gradually switch this over into opera singing. It is the

responsibility of Double Yellow-headed owners to recognize the similarity between the natural Double Yellow-headed voice and human singing, and develop that part of their birds' vocabularies. Apparently many Double Yellow-headed owners have done just that; our surveys reveal that three times as many Double Yellow-headed can sing than all other Amazon species combined.

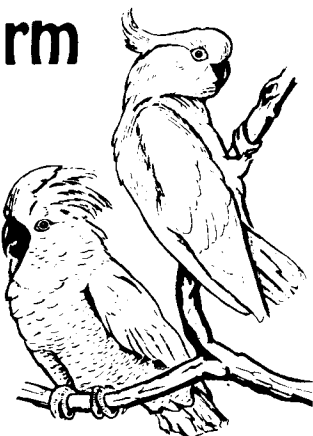
The **Yellow-naped** rules supreme in the talking department. There has always been a great deal of debate as to which species talks the best and, like everyone, I have my own opinion. Fortunately for me, my own personal opinion was reinforced by hundreds of letters from Yellow-naped owners. I received lists of hundreds of words spoken by individual talented Yellow-naped. I have never heard of a hand-fed, pet Yellow-naped over the age of two years that does not talk. This is more than I can say for any other Amazon species. Along with this splendid talking ability is the tendency toward being an unpredictable biter. I have always thought that talking ability among Amazon species and aggressive biting go hand in hand – good talkers are often nippy – yet Yellow-naped remain one of my favorites. In the home of owners who establish rules and are not intimidated by these birds, the Yellow-naped makes a fantastic pet. I have a male Yellow-naped who is 12 years old, and he remains a very tame pet. Many owners whose Yellow-naped develop aggressive behavior problems have benefited from the advice of a bird behaviorist. This is not a bird for everyone, but those of us who love them wouldn't part with them for anything.

Moving away from the "most popular" Amazons is a mixed group of very appealing parrots. Included here is the Red-lore *A. autumnalis* ssp., Mexican Red-headed *A. viridigenalis*, Lilac-crowned *A. finschi* ssp., White-fronted *A. albifrons* ssp., Mealy *A. farinosa* ssp. and Orange-winged *A. amazonica* ssp.

The **Red-lore**d was another very popular import up until the time importation ceased. These birds are known for their gentle nature, but talking ability for a typical Red-lore is only average. The nominate race, *A. autumnalis autumnalis* is the bird owned by most parrot fanciers, but I have received correspondence from owners of Salvin's *A. a. salvini* and Lilacines *A. a. lilacina*, as well. I have only heard of one *diademed* Amazon *A. a. diadema* kept

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as a pet. All owner's descriptions of the various subspecies of Red-loreds were fairly similar. Occasionally there is an outstanding talker in the Red-lored category, but this is not the norm. Many Red-lored owners have complained about the noise levels of their birds.

Mexican Red-headeds and **Lilac-crowned**s are two Mexican species that are widely kept as pets. Although many of these parrots have been smuggled into the United States during years past, captive-breeding of these two species is on the rise. I have owned both pet and breeder Lilac-crowned and find them among the quietest of Amazons. When hand-fed, they are also one of the gentlest, which makes them an ideal candidate for an affectionate pet. Although the talking ability of this species is usually nothing to write home about, some will develop a fair vocabulary. The Mexican Red-headed is a very attractive and appealing species. Pet Red-headed often are gentle and friendly. Talking is usually described as fair to good, and the noise generated by these parrots is moderate.

The **White-fronted Amazon** has been imported regularly and is a fairly common cage bird. While there are some White-fronteds that make good companions, many are loud, standoffish and nippy. Some avicultural writers have gone so far as to say that this species is not suitable pet material and is best kept in an aviary setting. While I think comments like this may be a bit extreme, I understand the point that is being made. Talking ability of White-fronts is usually poor to fair, but I suspect there are some hand-fed individuals with decent vocabularies.

Mealy Amazons are the gentle giants of the genus. To me, and many other owners of these birds, the Mealy is an overlooked gem. All of the various subspecies of Mealy are rather plain in color (with the possible exception of *A.f. guatemalae*) but their charm lies in their sweet disposition and cheerful personality. Most Amazons enjoy water, but Mealies seem to absolutely live for it. Their powdery feathers (mealy means "covered by dust or fine granules") cause water to bead off quickly. Therefore, it takes much more of a misting to saturate the feathers of Mealy Amazons than it does for other members of the genus. Mealies love this misting and have a vocabulary of unique trills and chirps to express their delight. The main drawback of this species is its

extremely loud call. When they are quiet, Mealy are almost silent, but when they're loud, they are almost deafening. Unfortunately, I am only aware of a handful of aviculturists who have successfully bred Mealies. This must change if future generations are to enjoy this species. (Note: Those people who have bred this species successfully seem to use flights that are quite large, which is understandable for this large Amazon. Perhaps too many people expect them to produce in flights that many of the smaller Amazons will breed in.)

The **Orange-winged Amazon** is another bird found in great numbers in the United States, largely because of massive numbers that were imported, but captive-breeding of this species does seem to be on the rise. The Orange-winged is a fairly typical Amazon (fitting, with a species name of *amazonica*). Easily confused with the Blue-fronted by people who are not familiar with the various Amazons (I have received several letters from people who claimed to own Blue-fronteds but enclosed photos of Orange-wingeds), the Orange-winged actually has more subtle coloration than the showier Blue-fronted. When hand-fed, this is a gentle bird that can develop a fair vocabulary. Noise level is usually described as moderate to high. My sister describes her pet Orange-winged as quite loud, and I have a friend in Florida with an Orange-winged that ranks among the loudest parrots I have ever heard (this bird drowns out an aviary full of macaws and other Amazons).

Two *ochrocephala* Amazons that warrant mention, but are not as readily available as those previously discussed, are the **Yellow-crowned** *A. ochrocephala ochrocephala* and the Panama *A. o. panamensis*. Both of these birds make outstanding pets when hand-fed. They seem to lack the aggressive tendencies of most other members of the *ochrocephala* species, and they can talk very well. Both the Yellow-crowned and the Panama are being bred in captivity and limited numbers of chicks are available annually. A great number of military personnel have brought Panamas back to the United States legally after stints stationed in Panama in the armed services. I have received written correspondence from at least a dozen Panama owners who obtained their birds in this way. I even have had phone conversations with a couple of Panama owners who were living in

Panama at the military base at the time of our long-distance conversations. One woman said that there was even a parrot club on the base, and most of the owners had Panama Amazons that they planned to bring back to the U.S. after filing for the paperwork in Panama and paying the necessary fees (with the new importation laws, I doubt this is possible anymore). Panama parrots were sometimes sold at the entrance to the military base. Both Panamas and Yellow-crowned are described as only moderately loud. Considering all their appealing qualities most owners of these birds are very fond of them and recommend them highly as pets.


Tucuman Amazons *A. tucumana* were imported regularly during the 80s, but are now seen less often in the pet trade. The pet-buying public probably didn't go for this species because of its small size and fairly unspectacular (to some) colors. Also, early imported Tucumans were not ideal pet material since they were older wild-caught birds. Hand-fed Tucumans are another story, however. These comical little parrots can make ideal pets, and some learn to talk quite well. I have enjoyed them as both pets and breeders, and I consider them very conure-like in personality. This is not a particularly aggressive bird, but they are extremely loud for their size. A pair of Tucumans I had set up for breeding generated as much continuous noise as any Amazon pair I have seen. It eventually became obvious that they were disturbing the other parrots in their immediate area, so I had to move them. Fortunately, there are a number of people who have successfully bred the Tucuman. Hopefully, more aviculturists will pay attention to this charming little Amazon so future parrot owners can enjoy them.

Another Amazon, uncommon in captivity, is the **Yellow-shouldered** *A. barbadensis*. I have heard more conflicting opinions about this Amazon than any other species. Some people swear they are aggressive and vicious; others maintain that Yellow-shouldered are among the most gentle and appealing of Amazons, an opinion with which I agree. I have a pet yellow-shouldered that is extremely gentle and a good talker (with an increasing vocabulary). This bird knows tricks and makes very little noise other than talking. I know a few other people who describe their Yellow-shouldered in the same way.

Some friends of mine in Florida have a breeding pair of Yellow-shouldered that remain very gentle – even in a breeding setup. These birds can be removed from their flight easily and do not bite. They also laid their first eggs at two years of age, indicating that this could be a rather prolific species of Amazon. A number of aviculturists have produced them.

Like the Yellow-shouldered, there are a number of rare Amazons in cap-

tivity that are sometimes kept as pets. Some of these rare birds have all the pet qualities as some of the common species, others do not.

We must all try to look at the different Amazons as the individual species they are. There are many differences between the various species, and we must recognize these differences rather than lump all Amazons together as a group of green, noisy, aggressive birds that are prone to biting. 

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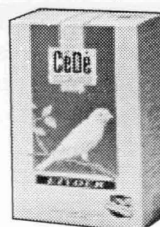
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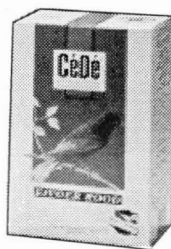
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