

Amazons

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Until recent years the Amazon parrot has been sadly neglected as an aviary subject. This negative attitude was generally adopted because the parrots very abundance prevented it from commanding a high price. Its low monetary worth did not justify apportioning valuable aviary space to a pair of such common birds.

In the seventies a change of attitude came about with the introduction of quarantine restrictions adopted by many importing countries. This, together with new legislation imposed by some Central and South American countries prohibited exportation of their flora and fauna. Suddenly, the Amazon parrot became a much more desirable aviary bird.

The closing of the borders did little to stop illicit trading. If the county of origin for one species closed, then it found its way into a state from which it could be exported. Even the most closely protected of birds are still available to the unprincipled who are prepared to pay exorbitant prices for these vulnerable birds.

Amazons are often referred to as green parrots, signifying just how little the genus is understood outside aviculture. The body color of most is indeed basically green, varying from darkest shades in some species to an almost yellowish green in others.

Intricate patterns of all spectrums of the rainbow identify the different species. These distinguishing splashes of color are carried mostly on the head, breast, wing coverts and flight feathers. The most familiar Amazon parrots kept as pet birds are Blue-fronted *Amazona aestiva*, the Yellow-crowned *Amazona ochrocephala* and the Orange-winged *Amazona, amazonica*. These have been distributed around the world in legionary numbers especially since aviation reduced travel time between continents. This trade does surely raise a question of morality. Traffic reported that over 3.5 million birds were in the inter-

national trade in 1987. The U.S. has allowed the legal import of over 8 million birds between 1980 and 1989.

Should these birds be taken from their natural habitat to accommodate an insatiable pet market? One could argue that the life expectancy of the wild birds is much shorter than that of the well cared for captive birds. But for every wild caught kept bird established above five years, many hundred others have perished along the way, mostly through ignorance, disease and poor management.

Recent changes brought about by the white man in the use of forest-covered land, particularly the rain forest, have presented a significant influence over the Amazon parrot. The destruction of immense areas of habitat in favor of logging, beef farming, maize crops, fossil and mineral extraction has rendered many parrots vulnerable. Hitherto lesser known species have now become accessible to the pet trade. In fact the complete Amazon parrot genus can be found in captivity.

When many thousands of hectares of forest are felled and destroyed over a short space of time, the ecosystem of the whole area is lost. The native man loses his home, his village and his hunting grounds. Bird life once supported there is forced to seek refuge in other areas, putting pressure on the resident bird population in those new areas.

The overall population of parrots occupying an undisturbed habitat will remain more or less constant, outside of natural disasters. In general, flocks in any one area are governed by the number of nesting holes available.

Some flocks of Amazon parrots have extensive feeding areas and can almost be considered nomadic, others are confined to relatively small islands. Historical records show that parrot populations on islands in the Antilles have been greatly reduced, and, on some islands are extinct. Nine species of Amazon are confined to islands in the Caribbean, with two species on Jamaica and Dominica, and one each on Cuba, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, St. Lucia and St. Vincent. Those on the larger islands of Jamaica, Cuba and Hispaniola are not thought to be endangered although after hurricane Gilbert 1988 this may no longer be the case for two species on Jamaica and there is little recent information from Cuba.

On Puerto Rico the wild population

had declined to 13 individuals by 1975. An intensive management program was started centered upon the Luquillo Forest in the eastern mountains, where the small population had settled, due to demands on its natural habitat. The decline of *vittata* is well documented. Snyder 1987 states that the species was originally abundant on the island and indeed extrapolation from 1956 figures yields a conservative figure of 84,000 birds for pre-Columbus times, the true number being perhaps several hundred thousand or even a million. Then another survey in 1963 estimated 1,330 to 2,000 birds – so the decline in numbers gained pace. Over the years severe hurricanes have ravaged the area. In 1972 two birds were trapped from the wild population of 16. The captive breeding brought its rewards and by 1989 there were 53 birds in captivity and a wild population of 47. This was not an easy project to manage, as it rains most days of the year. The downpour is extremely heavy.

The next most endangered is the Imperial Parrot of Dominica at present 50 to 100, 1972, 150 to 200. There was a time in the past when it was believed the inaccessibility of its haunts rendered this species secure but logging, hunting and hurricanes took its toll. Predation of course is also a natural hazard.

Measures have had to be taken to try to prevent the further importation, with incorrect papers, of this noble Amazon, together with the Red-necked into Europe.

The second species of parrot on Dominica is the Red-necked and it estimated at 250-300 individuals centered on Morne Diablotin. A large part of the northern forests come within a reserve.

Whereas Dominica still retains tracts of forest. On St. Lucia and St. Vincent much of the forest had been cleared for agriculture by the middle of the century, and hunting was a major pressure. Numbers of St. Lucia Parrots were estimated to be down to one hundred individuals in 1977 and the situation was made worse by the effects of hurricane Allen in 1980. However, an energetic conservation education program, mounted by the local Forestry Division with the help of Paul Butler, has gone a long way to conserving the species, the remnant forests being protected and hunting much reduced. Now the population numbers somewhere around 200-250 individuals though still confined

to the forests of the central mountains.

The distinctive Amazon on St. Vincent is confined mainly to the central mountain forests in the Buccament, Cumberland and Wellilibou valleys. In 1976 the population was estimated to number 500-550 individuals. A volcanic eruption in 1979 and hurricane Allen in 1980 destroyed important nest sites and food plants and the population declined to 400-500 birds. However there has been a recovery and latest estimates put the total to over 500 individuals. A conservation education program similar to the one on St. Lucia has been successful and so have steps to reduce the illegal trade.

The future for the Caribbean Amazons remains bleak. Despite recent efforts in the Eastern Caribbean to protect the species there, those on the Greater Antillean islands of Cuba and Hispaniola receive little protection and the major threat of forest clearance continues on all the islands.

One feels once Cuba realizes its potential as a holiday island, the nominate race of *leucocephala* will surely be in grave danger. The very great success of the imaginative education program managed by Paul Butler of The Rare Centre involves native people in the importance of their economic resource. It is to be hoped that their efforts will be rewarded by visits from naturalists anxious to seek out and marvel at the beautiful birds in the backcloth of primeval rain forest.

Jersey Wildlife has not only been involved in the field and captive breeding of *versicolour* but have contributed immensely by offering training at their zoo in Jersey to students from around the world. Founded in 1989 by Michael Reynolds, The World Parrot Trust has quickly established itself as the premier organization bringing practical assistance to endangered species. Their ability to raise funds and put them to good use is borne out by their exciting buses fitted out to teach local people about their wonderful parrots. Some £400,000 or \$600,000 has been raised. It has 2,000 members in 43 countries who receive *Psittascene*, a well produced newsletter. Worthy of the accolade of a well informed magazine.

Moving on to the continent of South America, the Yellow-shouldered, *barbadensis* is protected by law in Venezuela although this appears not to be enforced. Some concern is being shown and David Waugh has been invited by the

World Parrot Trust to look into the matter.

The Red-tailed Amazon *brasiliensis*

This charming Amazon is clearly in some trouble as it has a small distribution. In 1991 an education program developed by Miriam Milanelo was directed at the local people. Its habitat being coastal, is being destroyed in favor of holiday accommodation. Its price in the black market was \$1,500 in 1991 down to \$500 today, due to the large numbers of parrots being offered.

International trafficking accounts for the larger share of poached parrots. This has made the Red-tailed Amazon the most endangered Amazon parrot in South America. The World Parrot Trust is awaiting a report from its Management Consultant, so clearly it may well become involved.

Several other Amazons have been listed on Appendix I as evidence of their decline in numbers becomes apparent.

Red-spectacled Amazon *pretrei*

The numbers of this bird have dropped dramatically in recent years. In the winter of 1950 local reliable witnesses,

resident at Vacaria, saw a flock estimated to be a kilometer in width which took 45 minutes to pass overhead. Other people also reported these large flocks.

The Adler Amazon *tucumana*

This parrot has recently been added to Appendix I because of large numbers being taken for the pet trade. Jon Fjeldas and Niels Krabbe became aware of their diminishing numbers when carrying out field work for their book, *Birds of the High Andes*.

Red-browed Amazon *rhodocorytha*, also Appendix I.

This parrot has dwindled in numbers due mainly to forest clearance and latterly it being a desirable captive Amazon because of its ability to talk. It has even been offered for sale outside Monte Pascoal National Park. It has, in spite of its legal protection, been imported into the USA and into Switzerland legally as a subspecies of *A. dufresniana*.

Vinaceous Amazon *vinacea* Appendix I.

This is a truly magnificent colored bird and a prized possession for anyone. Because of this demand smuggling has dramatically reduced the numbers of this



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once abundant bird throughout its range. Sadly, when the money is right, smuggling does not appear difficult, and I was sickened to see piles of wing tips chopped off to prevent escape after capture.

Some aviculturists are breeding Amazons well and an increasing number are accepting their responsibility to maintain genetically diverse self sustaining populations. Only when people become aware of the dangers of in-breeding and concentrate on genetic diversity will real foundations have been laid. The zoological community have become aware, and it is time for the avicultural movement to follow them. The risk of fragile populations being produced is real, in some quarters it has arrived. Record keeping will help give aviculturalists credibility, and a place in Species Survival Programmes.

The progress in veterinary medicine should inspire us all. People have been slow to support avian health research and only now that the import fountain has almost stopped its flow are they inclined to think about it. Believe me it is important.

Parrots should pair by natural selection but seldom is this possible. Most parrots come into collections as single specimens and are paired to the first parrot of the species that becomes available. If the introduction is well handled, the birds having been placed in adjacent aviaries, they, in general, do not start off by being frightened and as a result a hate match has been avoided. When one feels they appear to like each other, introduction can be made by cutting a hole in the wire to enable them to share one enclosure. I feel this is much better than stressing the bird by netting.

A few parrots are incompatible and a search begins for a new mate. There are times that their gender needs to be checked, so mistakes are sometimes made. Where one parrot tends to bully, one could trim the flight feathers of one wing, just to unbalance the aggressor, and give the mate more time to avoid harmful contact.

The run up to the breeding season should see pairs in peak condition. The nest box should be secure and light tight near the bottom, otherwise the hen will continually try to rake the nest litter over the offending place.

Amazons like their nesting place private and enjoy wood that they can whittle, secured inside the nest structure. An inspection door some 5 to 6 in.

from the base, just large enough for the attendant to inspect the eggs or remove any damaged ones is of great importance.

Dry wood chipping 2 to 3 in. depth is a very good nesting material, it is clean and hopefully not dusty. Parrots do like to enlarge the entrance to their nest and it is all part of their courtship ritual.

The nest becomes the focal point once they want to breed, and many copulate on the nest top.

Captivity

Amazon parrots kept as aviary subjects need special care in the management of their environment if they are to be maintained with any degree of success. Their requirements is for good light and ventilation, protection from extremes of temperature, in general a safe refuge, and of course, a suitable diet.

Amazon parrots are not at all over demanding, in fact it is one of the simplest of parrots to house. It will live happily enough as a house pet, be content in a group situation or in a breeding project with a compatible partner.

Within reason, the aviary for these parrots can be any shape or size which allows the occupant space in which to fly. Active young birds will expend much energy climbing about the enclosure, but as is the way of most animals they outgrow the playful stage and as adults they are content to keep to the perch for long periods of time.

To encourage adults to exercise, a perch can be secured at either end of the aviary: the perch should fit the bird's foot. A tree branch with a diameter of 2½ to 3 inches if split down its length and securely fixed will enable the bird's toes to maintain a firm grip. Some variation according to birds size is needed. Unsplit branches make poor perches once the bird has stripped the bark away. The exposed wood becomes smooth and does not give purchase, which is essential when birds are copulating.

Small aviaries are not encouraged. I strongly believe the parrot has the need of space, adequate territory space for breeding pairs, otherwise only the boldest will chance nesting, while others will feel insecure having little room to escape the attention of near neighbors or the over-zealous chivvying of partners.

Double wire paneling between pairs will prevent contact and injury but will not stop eye contact and bullying

between neighbors. Often visual screens are an advantage particularly near the nesting area.

There are two main types of aviary generally favored: the suspended structure and the traditional walk in aviary which allows the keeper to invade the birds' territory. During the breeding season this can be dangerous for the keeper and stressful for the parrots. The walk in aviary is usually set on a base of concrete or paving which can be kept clean of stale food and excrement. Less satisfactory floor coverings are gravel, chippings, peat and sand, since predators can gain entry through these materials. No amount of raking or turning will rid the scree of parasitic worm eggs. The chain of treatment and reinfection of the bird can be continuous.


We favor the suspended cage for several reasons. Firstly, the occupants feel secure in their enclosure, the spoiled food and faeces fall through the wire mesh, so that the parasite re-infestation is eliminated. Amazons, I feel, need a minimum size flight of 8 ft. x 3 ft. x 3 ft., except for the larger birds which surely warrant more space. It would appear our Amazons prefer their perches to be sited so that they can be above the height of the person servicing them. In places where the temperature never falls below freezing point, this parrot can live happily out of doors all year. A shelter should be provided to give protection from strong winds, heavy rain and the heat of the day.

In colder areas heating should be provided in their shelter, alternatively they can be taken into a warm bird room to over-winter. In Europe the controlled unit has much to recommend it.

A non-combustible building with high insulation values set on a concrete base, having floors sloping towards a drain have proved successful. Light to the suspended units is natural through glazed sections in the roof.

A misting system secured above the parrots enable them to bath at the mere turn of a tap, it is such a delight to witness one's charges beating their wings as they hang on the wire bathing.

It is easy to exclude frost and snow and provide an ambient temperature together with regular change of air, so important to maintain good health.

Also we need an intruder alarm to protect our delightful Amazons from theft. This, of course, on such a building is easy to install and maintain. 

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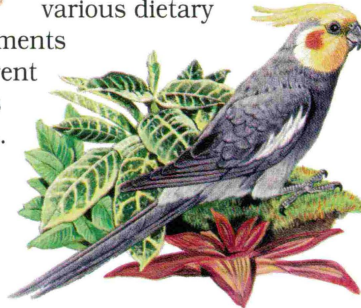


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