

The Cuban Amazon Parrot

Amazona leucocephala leucocephala

An AZA Breeding Consortium

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Studbook Keeper

Introduction

The Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) has developed various breeding programs to address the need to responsibly manage captive populations of a species. The zoological community utilizes computer software developed by an organization called International Species Information System (ISIS), based in the Minnesota Zoological Gardens. One of the essential elements of an AZA breeding program is accurate studbook data of the species in the Single Population Animal Records Keeping System (SPARKS) format. SPARKS is utilized by all studbook keepers and an annual class is taught at the AZA Conservation Academy at Oglebay Park in Wheeling, WV.

Many zoo keepers have entered the zoo business as a result of their expertise in private sector facilities. The inclusion of the experience of reputable private breeders can only add to our ability to save species. It is a desire of the zoological community to work with established private sector breeders on cooperative programs and Breeding Consortia are one of our methods for accomplishing this goal. The Cuban Amazon Consortium is currently the only existing program of its kind. In the past, AZA Species Survival Plans® (SSP) have evolved by starting out as a Breeding Consortium, such as the Palm Cockatoo SSP®.

Cuban Amazon Consortium Formation

The current managed population of Cuban Amazons, *A. l. leucocephala*, began as a group of U. S. Department of Interior seized birds in Miami, Florida, on 4 April 1988. The Cuban Amazon Consortium (CAC) was championed by Ron Johnson, former Bird Curator/Metrozoo. On 8 May 1991, the signature of Robert O. Wagner, former AZA/Executive Director, to the official document known as the AAZPA BREEDING CONSORTIUM AGREEMENT is how the CAC was formed.

The founder group of birds were then turned over to the Miami Metrozoo on 27 May 1988, due the agreement between the AZA and the U. S. D. I./Fish and Wildlife Service. In the summer of 1991, birds were shipped to the selected Participants of the CAC for breeding.

Taxonomy

The description being used for this species, has been that of Joseph M. Forshaw per AZA Parrot Taxon Advisory Group (TAG) protocol. The nominate race is considered to be the one found on mainland Cuba. The AZA Parrot TAG is developing a Regional Collection Plan (currently in progress) and standards for nomenclature are being adopted to standardize records keeping. As is usual, these taxonomic classifications can change due to current definitions. There are five recognized subspecies: *Amazona leucocephala leucocephala* - Mainland Cuba; *A. l. palmarum* - Isle of Youth, *A. l. caymanensis* - Grand Cayman; *A. l. bisterrena* - Cayman Brac, Little Cayman; and *A. l. bahamensis* - Bahamas. The historical studbook will eventually include all five subspecies, but the current studbook only represents the managed population.

Range

The Cuban Amazon is restricted to eastern and central Cuba. According to Juniper and Parr (1998), the main areas of concentrated populations are Zapata and Guanahacabibes peninsulas and in Sierra de Najasa on mainland Cuba. In 1988, the Cuban Amazon population was estimated at 5,000 individuals, there are no current numbers available as of this writing.

They commonly inhabit the woodlands of the mountains and lowlands (Bond, 56) of mainland Cuba. A combination of pines and palms are found in the wooded areas of their habitat.

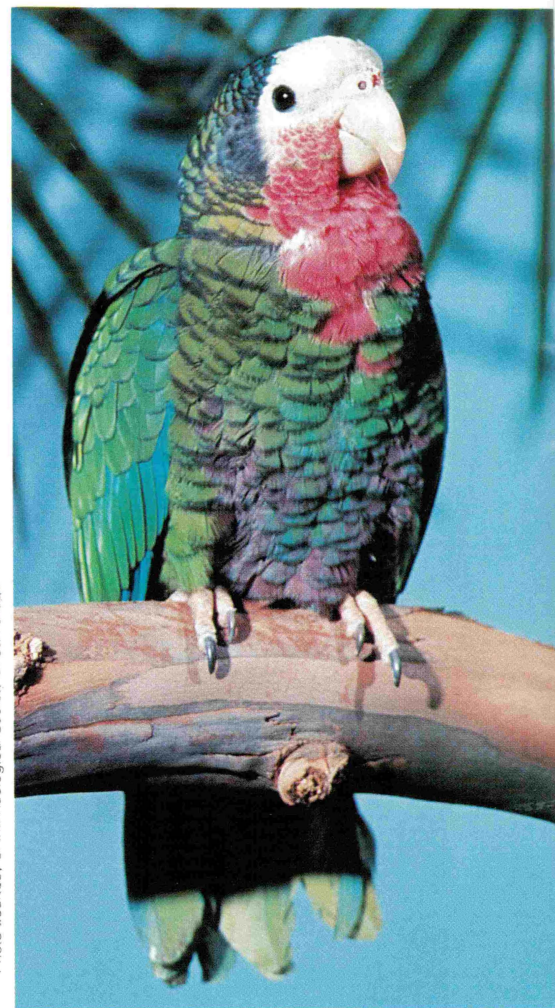


Photo courtesy of the Zoological Society of San Diego

Cuban Amazon Parrot

Wild Diet

Although current information is not available yet from field studies, there are observations of wild Cuban Amazons consuming the following: fruits, seeds, nuts, berries, leaf buds, and blossoms of indigenous plants. They have also been observed eating crops of banana, plantains, papaya, mango, guava, pimienta, and grape fruit. Cones and tender shoots of pine are believed to be part of their diet, but only observations of Caribbean pine species have been noted.

Social Structure

The Cuban Amazon is known to be a gregarious bird, found in flocks as large as 42 individuals in the Zapata region of Cuba (Mitchell and Wells, 97). During the breeding season it is not uncommon to see them in pairs, lone birds, or smaller flocks of individuals (Forshaw, 73). In captivity, the male and female have been observed feed-

ing offspring in the nest during rearing (pers. comm., D. Pledger). They can be very vocal, in fact, researchers doing field studies have noted that this is how they locate Cuban Amazons when observing them.

Conservation Status

The current conservation status of this species (*Amazona leucocephala*) shows it listed on CITES Appendix I (1997) and is considered Near-Threatened with extinction. For the most part, the Cuban Amazon has been smuggled into the United States for the purpose of selling them to the pet trade. There are also reports *in situ* by Mitchell and Wells (1997), that nests are being destroyed by people toppling dead palms to sell chicks as pets.

Despite the efforts of a dedicated group of forest rangers in the Zapata region of Cuba, nest disturbances of this kind are occurring rendering nest sites unusable for the next breeding season. Thus, live chicks and future nesting locations are being lost.

Due to a steady decline in the 1970s, the Cuban government was prompted to enact legislation to limit the exportation of the Cuban Amazon for the pet trade (Galvez et al., 95). In the 1980s, the Empress Nacional para la Proteccion de la Flora y Fauna initiated a program to protect the areas where the Cuban Amazon was found (Galvez et al., 95).

In recent years, it has been reported that the already depressed populations have sustained devastating losses due to the increase of major hurricane activity (Stoodley, 90; Juniper and Parr, 98). This results in loss of habitat and individual specimens found in the areas hit by hurricanes. "Killer hurricanes," as they are now referred to, may be on the rise due to the El Niño and La Niña weather conditions, making it crucial to outline conservation priorities for the Cuban Amazon. Should another hurricane of the magnitude of Andrew (Miami, FL. 92) hit any islands where subspecies of the Cuban Amazon occur, it may be the last remnant of the wild populations to be lost.

Field Conservation Effort

In a collaborative conservation effort between the ProNaturaleza, a non-gov-

ernmental organization, (NGO) and the International Crane Foundation, a successful project resulted that surveyed the wild population of the Cuban Sandhill Crane *Grus canadensis nesiotis* and the Isle of Youth parrot (*A. l. palmarum*) in December 1995. The Isle of Youth parrot is a subspecies of the nominate race found on mainland Cuba.

Through the efforts of ProNaturaleza, the Roger Williams Park Zoo/Rhode Island Zoological Society, and the Havana Zoo in Cuba, an expanded version of the original census is being planned (Galvez et al., 98). In November of 1998, surveys are planned to be conducted in the eight study sites and 98 stations that were originally surveyed in 1995. It is hoped that the devastation from hurricane Georges (September, '98), did not hamper these plans.

Public Education

A component of the conservation effort in Cuba is to include public education of the local communities where the Cuban Amazon and Isle of Youth Amazon Parrots are found. The Havana Zoo Education Department plans to be a player in this organized effort. Plans are being developed to promote the Cuban Parrot as a flagship species for endangered and threatened Cuban wildlife. Among some of the activities planned are; children's competitions, seminars, a five day festival, speakers on wildlife, media coverage heralding the activities and the results of the cooperative conservation effort. The Cuban Amazon Consortium is currently in the developmental stages of planning educational components of the breeding program. Clearly, the *in situ* effort being launched in Cuba has a more immediate priority.

The work being done by the Cuban Amazon Consortium is being funded by the zoological institutions and private sector facilities that participate in this breeding program. As is the norm in a zoo setting, studbook keepers often devote their time to their work "off" the clock. Much like a private individual, their efforts are repaid by the satisfaction of being involved with a worthy project. Conservation of a species takes the work of a "village" and we are all

components of that village.

If you have any questions or concerns about the Cuban Amazon Consortium, you may contact the following people for information:

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Credits

The slides in this article were provided through the generosity of the Zoological Society of San Diego's / Photo Lab. The San Diego Zoo has been the most successful facility in breeding Cuban Amazons, *Amazona leucocephala leucocephala*, in the Cuban Amazon Consortium. Both the San Diego Zoo and San Diego Wild Animal Park have set a high standard for cooperation and support in the philosophies of the Consortium. For this effort we are very appreciative.

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