

# And Now, Will The Real Parvipes

by Sebastian Lousada, Vermont

## Please Stand Up?

I first became obsessed by Parvipes Yellow-naped Parrots (then known as *Amazona ochrocephala parvipes*) in the early nineteen eighties. The more I read the more confused I became and from talking and corresponding to other aviculturists it was clear that I was not alone and the subject could use much clarification both for the scientific and avicultural world. Some 14 years later after research that has taken me from remote jungle beaches to famous museum collections, and in conjunction with the eminent ornithologist Steve Howell, I finally found answers for nearly all my original questions. The scientific clarifications have been published elsewhere (see Literature), what follows here is an attempt to educate aviculturists on the subject in the hope that captive birds will be properly identified, paired and hopefully bred. As you will see, there are actually three subspecies of parrot that have been labeled as *parvipes* in the past. In addition, two of these subspecies are somewhat dimorphic in coloration which has only added further to the confusion.

In 1983, the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) split the Yellow-crowned Parrot, *Amazona ochrocephala*, complex into three separate species rather than just one species with a number of subspecies. As a rule, the amount of yellow on the head of both Atlantic Slope and Pacific Slope adult birds decreases from north and west to south and east. The taxonomic complications are covered in more detail in our previous papers; suffice it to say here that even without the recent questioning of the fundamental concepts of species and subspecies definitions, this is a very complicated subject and it is relatively subjective as to how one divides or lumps this complex.

With the exception of Mosquitia *parvipes*, all the parrots mentioned in detail in this article, are highly threatened with extinction. They are still collected widely for pets and for this reason, in conjunction with very little remaining habitat, the populations

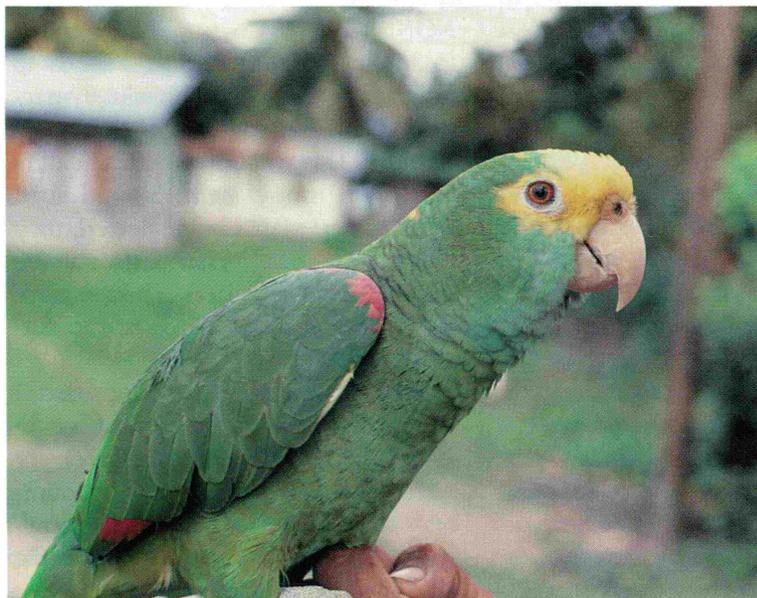


Two immature caribaea (note very black ceres and somewhat long and narrow yellow crown coloration, approx two years old).

Photos by Sebastian Lousada



Mature female hondurensis yellow-naped morph.



Mature "guatemalensis," yellow-crowned morph.

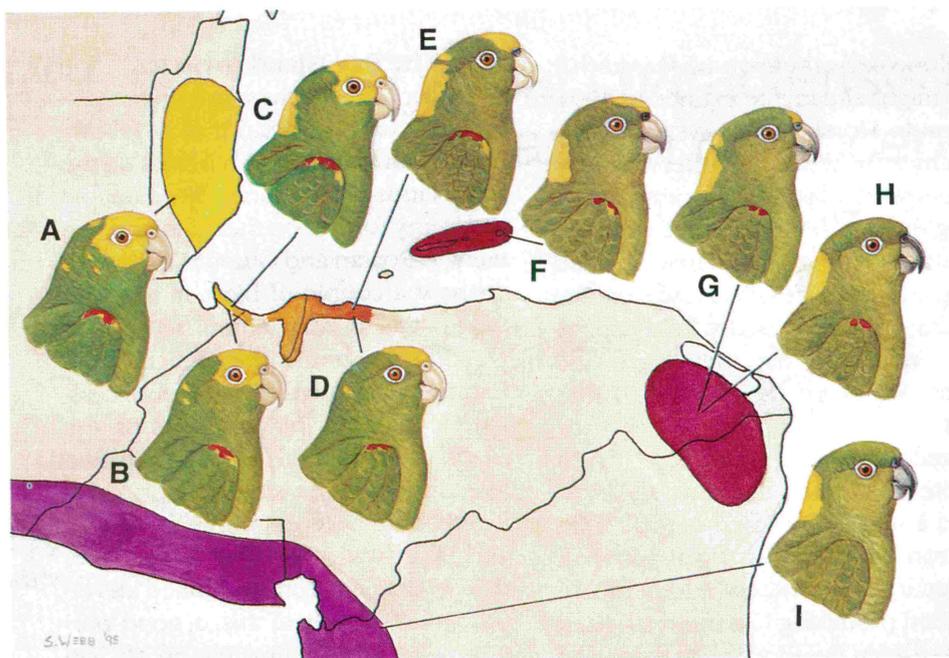


Figure: Distribution of the yellow-headed Parrot complex in northern Central America, and adults of the various forms.

- A) *belizensis* B) Yellow-crowned "guatemalensis" C) Yellow-naped "guatemalensis"  
 D) Yellow-crowned *hondurensis* E) Yellow-naped *hondurensis* F) *caribaea* G) Pale-billed *parvipes*  
 H) Dark-billed *parvipes* I) *auroalliata*

now number in the low hundreds and are tiny remnants of what they once were..

### The *belizensis* Group

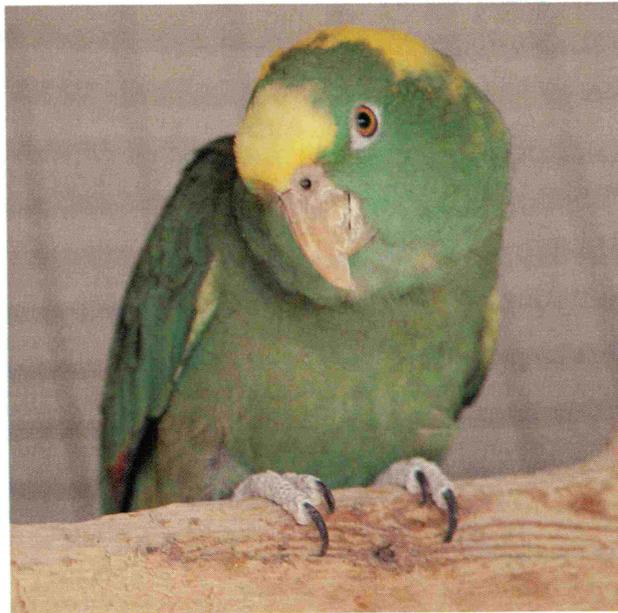
*A. o. belizensis* was, as the name suggests, first described as living in Belize. Many aviculturists will be relatively familiar with it as a Yellow-headed Parrot, *Amazona oratrix*, with the yellow mainly confined to the face area. In Belize it lives in pine savannas and adjacent evergreen forest patches. During my first research trip to Honduras I found that locals in the extreme northwest had *belizensis*-type parrots as pets. I was interested to further note that two birds that I saw, had yellow nape patches in addition to typical yellow faces, but at the time I was hot in pursuit of *parvipes* and so didn't investigate further.

In 1994, at the advice of Steve Howell, I returned at long last to the general area and found myself and a companion, Armando Morales, in a dug-out canoe in Guatemala, traveling across bays and down exquisite pristine rivers to try and take a closer look at these birds. The coastal scrub and mangroves were full of all sorts of wonderful birds and after several hours we arrived at a beach where a small community of people eked out a living fishing. The owner of the storage shed we slept in was a sea turtle refuge warden and he was able to guide us to an area where these parrots usually roosted. The roosting area was a two hour walk down a magnificent wilderness beach. At dusk a flock of around 100 birds came in to roost at a group of mangroves.

Through the spotting scope I was clearly able to see that some of the birds had yellow nape patches like the ones I had seen some seven years earlier. Subsequent studies of locally held captive birds also revealed a tendency of this population to have some darker nails, ceres and eye-rings than *belizensis* (see Table ). Although not formally named, Steve Howell and I have called this population "*guatemalensis*." It is restricted to the Caribbean coast of Guatemala and extreme northwest Honduras and mainly differs from *belizensis* in having slightly more restricted yellow in the face, the above-



Mature "guatemalensis" yellow-naped morph.



Mature female hondurensis yellow-naped morph.

Photos by Sebastian Lousada



Mature *parvipes* (dark-billed male hanging, female perching).

mentioned soft part features and the existence of a yellow-naped morph as a significant portion (about 20%) of the population.

### The Sula Valley *bondurensis*

Much of the confusion about the identity of *parvipes* is traceable to a small shipment of Yellow-naped Parrots arrived in the U.S. in the late seventies. The birds had almost white beaks and yellow crowns. Since these birds were distinctly different than nominate Yellow-naped Parrots, *Amazona auropalliata auropalliata*, they were assumed to be *parvipes* and hence were labeled as such in the photographs of them that soon began to appear in avicultural books and journals.

This formerly unnamed subspecies which we have named *Amazona oratrix hondurensis* has in fact been quite an enigma since the sixties when Burt Monroe and Thomas Howell first mentioned it in their landmark paper that officially named *magna*, *belizensis*, and *parvipes* as new subspecies. At that point there had been a few sightings of unidentified Yellow-crowned Parrots in the Sula Valley of Honduras and also records of Yellow-naped birds. The lack of success in finding any parrots to study in the wild, scarcity of museum specimens, and little knowledge at the time of age-related plumage differences, led Monroe and Howell to guess that the Yellow-crowned birds were an undescribed subspecies and that the Yellow-naped birds were possibly "individuals of *parvipes* that had wandered outside their normal range or were escaped cage birds."

The search for more clues seemed at times to be hopeless, but thanks to experience with birds in my own aviaries, I knew that immature *bondurensis* lacked yellow napes as did some older individuals of this subspecies, so it seemed likely that the historic records were all from one population. I also knew that to fully solve the mystery would mean many days in the field since these birds had not been seen by ornithologists for some years. In 1987 when we were first in Honduras, we were unable to find anyone who had even heard of them

let alone seen them and I feared that they might already be extinct. In 1994, Armando Morales and I systematically searched for them day after day and interviewed countless campesinos along the way. People either were not familiar with them or said that they had vanished years before. However, the sightings of a few locally held captive birds indicated that they were still extant. We were determined to find them.

Finally at dusk one day, on a remote hill top in the Sula Valley, I heard a strange call and saw one large Amazon parrot fly by. It was too dark to identify it but I knew it looked and sounded promising. On our walk back we suddenly heard more of them and realized that we had found a roosting area. But what were they? In the nearby village people had at first said no one had any pet parrots. But as we approached, someone said that they had found a person who did have a *Guarar'a* (the local name for these birds) as a pet.

It was almost pitch dark as I knocked at a door and said in broken Spanish that I really wanted to see their pet parrot. I don't know what they thought but they graciously let me in and pointed up in the rafters; there up high, roosted a parrot. They held up a candle and prodded the bird a little with a broomstick, it pulled its head out from under its wing and in the gloom I could just make out the large yellow crown of the bird I had been seeking for so long. The next day we returned and spent some time studying a flock of about 75 of these birds.

Like "guatemalensis", *bondurensis* are dimorphic, although the majority of birds (about 70%) have yellow nape patches whereas in "guatemalensis" it is the minority. Some individuals never gain yellow nape patches (hence may look like *panamensis*), whereas others have so much yellow that it joins the yellow crown patch, which is present in all birds and is often sizable. The bills are usually very pale like nominate Yellow-headed Parrots, *Amazona oratrix oratrix*. The habitat of these birds is similar to that of "guatemalensis" although it apparently ranges into the foothills at times.

### The Bay Island *caribaea*

In our first searches for *bondurensis* in 1987, we were told that a Yellow-naped Parrot with pale bill lived on the Bay Islands of Honduras. Being unable to get any further on the mainland, we went to Roatan and Guanaja. Although we saw a couple of birds in the wild on Roatan, it wasn't until we got to Guanaja, known as the Venice of the Caribbean, that we had more success. Due to plentiful biting insects on the island itself, the bulk of the population live off the shore of Guanaja on a tiny key that has been expanded by pilings and boardwalks. Guanaja is also very dry so that has further limited development. Because of this, a good portion of the approximately 56 sq. km island is still covered in pine trees.

Here we found a small population of parrots that appeared to be hanging on in a precarious state. Field observations, examination of locally held captive birds and subsequent study of museum skins all indicated yet another subspecies that differed from birds on the mainland. The *caribaea*, as I named them, always have yellow nape patches as adults and their yellow crown patches are relatively long and thin compared to *bondurensis*. If the aviculturist reader is beginning to despair over identifying birds that he/she may have seen, it may help to know that I have never seen a captive *caribaea* outside of Honduras. In 1987, it appeared that the *caribaea* population was an aged one. We only saw one immature in over 200 sightings of these birds. This was almost entirely because virtually every nest was being robbed for the pet trade.

It is not often that there is good news in the environment but in 1994 we revisited Guanaja to repeat the population census that we had conducted previously. There had not been significant forest fires in a while and the pine trees had increased in number. In addition, locals had been warned about fines for robbing nests and our sightings now included many young birds. Overall, the population did not necessarily increase but it was now in a far healthier balance.

Back in 1988, I suggested to Paul Butler of RARE that the Bay Islands would be a very good place to do an

TABLE

# Typical characteristics of adults of the *Amazona ochrocephala* complex found in middle America

	bill	cere/bristles	orbital ring/ eyelid edge	head	bend of wing	carpal edge	thighs	claws
<b>Yellow-headed group</b>								
Mexican birds ( <i>tresmariae</i> , <i>oratrix</i> , <i>magna</i> )	very pale	pale/pale	pale/pale	yellow head, often with green flecks	extensive red, often with some yellow	yellow occas. red or green flecks	green and yellow	pale
<i>belizensis</i>	very pale	pale/pale	pale/pale	extensive yellow face, occas. with some yellow nape feathers	relatively extensive red, often some yellow flecks	green- yellow, often some red	mainly green, some yellow	pale
" <i>guatemalensis</i> "	Very pale, some with dark tips/ streaks	pale/pale or with some dusky	pale/dark	reduced yellow face, some with yellow nape patch	relatively extensive red, often some yellow flecks	green- yellowish green, occas. yellow/red flecks	mainly green, some yellow	dark, some pale
<i>hondurensis</i>	very pale, occas. darker tips/streaks	pale-light grey/pale- dusky	grey/dusky - dark	generally a wide yellow forecrown patch and yellow nape; some birds solely yellow- crowned	red patches, occas. yellow flecks	green- yellowish green, occas. yellow/red flecks	green occas. a little yellow	dark
<b>Yellow-naped and yellow-crowned group</b>								
<i>caribaea</i>	pale, often with dark tips/narrow streaks	dark/dark	grey/dusky -dark	yellow forecrown (narrower than <i>hondurensis</i> ), yellow nape patch	red patches, occas. yellow flecks	green- yellowish green, occas. yellow/red flecks	green occas. a little yellow	dark
<i>parvipes</i>	variable, pale -dark, usually with dark tips /broad streaks	grey-dark/ dark	grey/dusky - dark	yellow nape patch, forecrown green or yellow (less than <i>caribaea</i> )	red patches, rarely yellow flecks	green- yellowish green, occas. red flecks	green occas. a little yellow	dark
<i>auropalliata</i>	dark or heavily streaked, rarely paler	dark/dark	grey/dusky -dark	yellow nape patch, some with yellow forecrown, esp. in N	green, rarely red flecks	green- yellowish green, rarely red flecks	green	dark
<i>panamensis</i>	pale, usually with dark tip/streaks	pale-dusky/ pale	pale/ grey-dark	yellow forecrown sim. to <i>hondurensis</i> . no yellow on nape	red patches rarely yellow flecks	green- yellowish green, often some yellow/ red	green occas. a little yellow	generally pale

education pride program. I am very pleased to report that they have recently completed such a program using *caribaea* as the target species. This will no doubt have a dramatically positive influence on the conservation of these beautiful islands.

### The Mosquito *parvipes*

The final leg of our field work was to travel to the Mosquitia region in order to see the true *parvipes* in the wild. I use the term "true" because it was from this population that the specimens came from that Monroe and Howell referred to when they described the subspecies. In addition, Thomas Howell, in particular, had conducted extensive field work in this area which is what led him to describe this population.

The Mosquitia is still a wild region, which is fortunate for the parrots because, despite significant numbers being illegally harvested for pets both in Honduras and Nicaragua, there are still large numbers in the wild. In fact I believe it to probably outnumber the nominate, *Amazona auropalliata auropalliata*, whose numbers have declined dramatically in recent years. In order to get to the region, one either has to catch a boat or fly, and it is this frontier-like atmosphere that draws an odd selection of visitors to the region—from business entrepreneurs to religious missionaries, alligator hunters, and, of course, the odd parrot watcher. The daily flight arrivals are still surrounded by children anxious to see who and what has arrived.

The parrots here range widely. The immense pine savanna is surrounded by wetter regions and drainages that offer seasonal food items for the birds to add to their diet of pine seeds. As with all the birds previously described, mango season is a time of year when these birds can not resist coming close to human habitation and hence some meet unfortunate ends. Incidentally, mangoes are very high in vitamin A which explains one important source of this nutrient that aviculturists have found to be so important for Amazon parrots, Yellow-naped in particular.

The *parvipes* are also somewhat dimorphic. Some birds (about 20%) have relatively pale bills like *caribaea* whilst others (perhaps 60%) have bills

that are only slightly, if any, paler than the nominate *auropalliata*. The yellow crown is completely absent in some birds and is frequently only present as a small patch. These birds are relatively common in captivity in the U.S. and many people don't differentiate them from a regular Yellow-naped Parrot. The word "parvipes" literally means small feet, and it was this characteristic that prompted Thomas Howell to name them as a new subspecies.

### Subspecies Identification

With all these different subspecies it is understandable that aviculturists might find it daunting to correctly identify captive birds. To this end, and because I believe that it is important to correctly pair birds if at all possible, I have written the following key that in addition to table one and the photographs should be of help. Of course due to the very nature of subspecies, one may run across occasional atypical specimens in captivity, which in the absence of other data can not be accurately ascribed.

### Key to *parvipes* Identification

This key is only valid for mature birds. Immatures are quite variable and can be confusing.

1. Does bird have red at the bend of the wing (it is sometimes necessary to extend the wing to see this)?

If yes, go to 2.

If no, the bird is likely to be an *auropalliata*.

2. Is there more than a feather or two of yellow present on the crown?

If yes, go to 3.

If no bird is *parvipes*.

3. Is yellow on the crown a spot or very thin line? And/or is the bill dark or fairly dark like *auropalliata*?

If yes, bird is probably *parvipes* (*parvipes* may have pale bills).

If yellow is more extensive go to 4.

4. Is crown fairly long and rather rectangular, and is this coupled with a very dark cere, relatively pale bill, and a yellow nape patch?

If yes, bird is probably a *caribaea*. (Essentially non-existent in captivity in the U.S.).

Is yellow crown broadest at cere and/or cere white?

If Yes, go to 5.

5. Is yellow crown rather extensive, usually in a roughly triangular or rounded shape, generally broadest at the cere? Is bill very pale, often nearly as pale as a Double Yellow-headed Parrot, *Amazona oratrix*? Cere may be fairly dark or very pale. If Yes, bird is likely a *hondurensis*.

Note: Yellow nape patches are always present in mature *caribaea*, usually present in *parvipes*, and not present in some *hondurensis* although present in most.

### Conclusion

I hope this article is of some help to further clarifying the identification of *parvipes* and other subspecies from the region. Their populations (with the possible exception of *parvipes*) are all hanging precariously close to extinction. Although it is obviously important not to purchase birds illegally taken from the wild and also to help financially with any conservation initiatives, it also makes sense to at least do all we can to correctly pair up any birds that are in captivity and make every attempt to breed from them.

### Literature

- AOU (American Ornithologists' Union) (1983) Check-list of North American birds. Sixth edition. Washington, D.C.; American Ornithologists' Union.
- Forshaw, J. M. (1973) Parrots of the World. Melbourne, Australia: Landsdowne Press.
- Howell, S.N.G. & Webb, S. (1995) A guide to the birds of Mexico and northern Central America. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lousada, S. (1989) *Amazona auropalliata caribaea*: a new subspecies of parrot from the Bay Islands, northern Honduras. Bull. Brit. Orn. Club 109:232-235.
- Lousada, S. (1997). Neues zur Gelbnacken-Amazonen-Systematik. Papageien 11/97.
- Lousada, S.A. & Howell, S.N.G. (1996). Distribution, variation and conservation of Yellow-headed Parrots in northern Central America. Cotinga 5: 46-53.
- Lousada, S.A. & Howell, S.N.G. (1997). *Amazona oratrix hondurensis*: a new subspecies of parrot from the Sula Valley of northern Honduras. Bull. Brit. Orn. Club 117:205-209.
- Monroe, B.L. & Howell, T.R. (1966) Geographic variation in Middle American parrots of the *Amazona ochrocephala* complex. Occas. Papers. Mus. Zool. Louisiana State Univer. 34. 