Thoughts on Hybridization

by Rick Jordan, Dripping Springs, TX

Standing in front of a cage of seven young Scarlet Macaws, I suddenly began to see nothing but red. The only thing brighter than the luscious scarlet color of the bird's plumage, was the deep shades of anger that was reflected in my face. The breeder and I had just had a heated argument about the dangers of indiscriminate hybridization of birds by American aviculturists. His view was that we had a responsibility to keep all of our captive-bred bloodlines pure, no matter what the cost or sacrifice.

And yet, right before my eyes were seven birds that were as strange to the wild as any Catalina Macaw has ever been.

Although filled with good intentions, the issue of hybridization is as close to a "moot" point as is the concept of a pet bird breeder supplying baby birds to *in situ* release programs. Somewhere along the line, we have managed to oversimplify the reality of the hybridization issue and we have added more emotion to this argument than good common sense.

If, in fact, our original reason for keeping birds and breeding them in a captive environment was so there would be some birds available for release in the future, we definitely screwed it up!

In my opinion, a breeder who crosses a Blue and Gold Macaw with a Scarlet Macaw and bands their baby birds with "hybrid" closed leg-bands is less a threat to the future of aviculture than one who does not bother to pair his or her birds up properly. Who gave whom the idea that breeding a Bolivian Scarlet Macaw to a Panamanian Scarlet Macaw is acceptable while purposeful hybridization is not? This is totally unacceptable and poses more of a risk to "future release" efforts than the breeding of a misfit, strange colored, hybrid ever was.

Back in the 70s and 80s, when large commercial shipments of birds were coming into the United States, breeders didn't pay attention to the areas of the wild where these birds were taken. In those days, a Scarlet Macaw was a Scarlet Macaw (some of the blame is on ornithologists as well for not assigning taxonomic values to the different populations of the same species).

What has resulted is that many of the second and higher generations of captive-bred Scarlet Macaws in this country are worthless from a conservation standpoint. No one paid attention to the differences in the groups of birds that were imported. Some Scarlets had large yellow wing patches with blue dots on the yellow, and some had green dots on the yellow. Some had a darker red plumage and were very large birds, while others were brighter in color, and had smaller bodies. But, aviculture inbred all these different "natural versions" of the Scarlet Macaw, all the while screaming that there was no place for a "Catalina Macaw" in aviculture.

The result is that very few captive-bred Scarlet Macaws are "pure" to their origin. We have created a generic Scarlet Macaw in our aviaries; one that is much like our Catalina Macaw in that it does *not* exist in the wilds of Central or South America.

It is not just the macaws we keep that are no longer "the same" as the wild populations of the world. Take a good hard look at the Blue-fronted Amazons in our aviaries. The nominate race of the Blue-fronted Amazon, although rarely imported into the United States, has little or no yellow on the wing. These avicultural rarities were selectively bred to their subspecific cousins, *Amazona aestiva xanthopteryx*, or Yellow-winged Amazon, in an attempt to get a prettier, more saleable pet bird. The result is that American aviculturists do not have many, if any, pure *A. aestiva aestiva* Blue-fronteds in the aviary.

If you are still stuck on the idea of breeding for conservation or release programs, you will be hard pressed to find a pure Brazilian Blue-fronted Amazon in our U.S. aviaries to begin your recovery program.

Another example of how aviculture has ignored regional variations and subspecific assignment is the Yellow-headed Amazon. Breeders have selectively bred birds with large amounts of yellow on the head, to those with less yellow, to form an intermediate "captive race."

Who paid attention to the different subspecies and the regional variations of this bird when setting up pairs for breeding? In the old days, *A. oratrix* was the Double Yellow-headed Amazon, and *A. belizensis* was the Single Yellow-headed Amazon. Now we have a conglomeration of these two birds, plus the addition of birds from Tres Maria Island and other remote areas of their range. Are these birds any more valuable to *in situ* conservation efforts than would be a cross between a Yellow-headed and a Blue-fronted Amazon? Highly unlikely!

Discriminate and *indiscriminate,* hybridization in our aviaries has taken place for many, many years. As the wild-caught stocks of yesteryear begin to die off, aviculture is left with what it has created. Through attempts to get bigger birds, more colorful birds, healthier birds, or even smaller birds, our selective breeding processes have rendered many of our captive-bred birds useless to re-population efforts and conservation.

This is not to say that captive-breeding is not important, it is, and it can reduce the pressures on the wild populations by supplying the trade with birds. But, we have to begin to recognize our place in this grand scheme and stop hanging on to the ideas that we are "saving the world's rare birds in our aviaries." Except in a few extreme instances, this is simply not true.

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