



# White-fronted Amazons

a Guide to the Three Subspecies

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Cyril Laubscher

## Introduction

**W**hen most bird lovers think of an amazon, a picture comes to mind of a large greenish parrot. Of the 29 species in the genus *Amazona*, most are large greenish parrots, adorned with bright patches of white, yellow, blue, and red.

One of the smaller species, the White-fronted Amazon *Amazona a. albifrons*, and the two subspecies *A. a. nana* and *A. a. saltuensis*, are the subject of this article. At 26 cm (10.4 inches), this diminutive amazon is also known as the Spectacled Amazon, and *A. a. saltuensis* is called the Sonora White-fronted Amazon.

## Ornithological Notes

Originating from Mexico through Guatemala down to western Costa Rica, the White-fronted Amazon is a common species that inhabits arid areas up to an altitude of 1800 meters. Generally, they are quiet and unobtrusive when feeding in the treetops, and are fairly tame when feeding, often allowing close approaches.

As is common among many parrots, they are noisy when flying to and from roosting and feeding sites. Their flight is shallow, with the wings not rising above shoulder level, and they continually veer in flight, similar to *Aratinga* conures.

Their natural food is comprised of seeds, berries, and fruit, nuts, blossoms, and leaf buds. They are known to cause problems in certain crop-growing areas.

Nesting takes place in holes in trees with 2-4 white eggs forming a normal clutch.

## Subspecies

### *Amazona a. albifrons*

This is the nominate race which is distributed mainly along the Pacific coast from Nayarit, central-western Mexico, south to south-western Guatemala. The main picture in the centerspread illustrates both male and female.

### *A. a. nana*

This race differs in that it is smaller than the nominate *albifrons*. In *Parrots of the World*, Forshaw believes *A. a. nana* to be a poorly defined subspecies. It is the smallest of the amazons. The blue on the crown appears not to be as



bright as in the nominate race. A male and female are shown in photograph number 2 in the centerspread

According to Forshaw, this subspecies ranges from extreme south-western Vera Cruz and northeastern Chiapas, southern Mexico, south to northwestern Costa Rica.

# WHITE-FRONTED AMAZONS

## The 3 subspecies

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1 *Amazona a. albifrons*

### ***A. a. saltuensis***

Is confined to Sinaloa, western Durango, and southern Sonora, north-western Mexico. This subspecies is the most northerly of the races, and is similar to *albifrons* but differs in that there is a strong suffusion of blue in the green feathers, particularly on the back of the head down to the nape, and on

the sides of the neck and cheeks.

The blue suffusion can be seen in the four photographs of the female depicted in photographs 3-6 in the centerspread. The pictures were specially chosen to illustrate as much of the suffusion as possible

### **Sexing**

The male and female of *A. a. alb-*

*ifrons* and *A. a. nana* are as illustrated. The main difference in the sexes of all three subspecies is that the female does not have any red in the primary-coverts, or in the alula feathers on the bend of the wing.

Females are not normally as colorful as males, and the white forehead is not as extensive as in the male.

## Avicultural Notes

While not as popular as some of the larger amazons, White-fronted Amazons nevertheless, have a good following, especially with parrot breeders who have kept them. For me personally, their diminutive size has an instant appeal, and I am sure that this applies to a number of parrot-lovers. What they lack in showmanship compared to a Blue-fronted Amazon *A. aestiva*, they make up for in character and charm.

An important aspect is that they are relatively inexpensive, and do not require large aviaries!

White-fronted Amazons are reasonably easy to keep in an aviary measuring 8 feet (2.4 m) long, 3 feet (0.9 m) wide, and either 4 feet (1.2 m) high if the aviary is suspended, or 7 feet (2.1 m) if a conventional aviary is used. An attached frost-proof shelter is necessary to eliminate frostbitten toes, and to offer a secure area where the birds can take refuge if needed.

Harold and Mary Haslam, well-known parrot breeders from Cheshire in England, use the following diet for their *A. a. nana* pairs.

The basic parrot mixture contains sunflower, hemp, mung beans, buckwheat, safflower, canary seed, and Budgie Tonic Seed.

Supplementary feeding consists of small florets of cauliflower, spinach, and dandelion leaves. This provides added interest, and additional vitamin and mineral additives.

They also supply a soaked pulse mixture containing: two parts each of wheat, peanuts, and mung beans mixed with one part each of soya beans, chick peas, black-eyed beans, haricot beans, green peas, split peas,

green lentils, maize, and field beans.

The mixture is soaked in a bucket for 24 hours, strained, and washed for five minutes under a cold running tap. It is then placed in a pot, brought to the boil, allowed to cool, and drain overnight. In the morning, the excess juice is strained off.

Fresh uncooked beetroot, apple, orange, banana, celery, and carrot – in fact, almost any fruit or vegetables in season – are then blended in a blender. The pulse mixture is added, and blended with the fruit and vegetables. The juice from the fruit and vegetables aids in moistening the pulse mixture, which the parrots seem to prefer.

This complete mixture is then refrigerated and stored and fed to the birds daily. It is a good way of ensuring that a variety of fruits and vegetables are eaten. By using as much fresh uncooked ingredients, essential protein, vitamins, and minerals, are available to the parrots.

Harold and Mary sprinkle a tablespoon of SA37 daily over the mixture and blend it in well. Every second day, iodine mineral block is finely ground, and sprinkled on with the SA37.

This mixture not only benefits the White-fronted Amazons, but also is excellent for feeding to almost any parrot-like bird from a macaw to a Cockatiel.

Some parrot breeders prefer to soak, and feed whole pulses, which allow the birds to be more selective, so they can discard what they do not fancy. This is very much a personal choice.

## Breeding

White-fronted Amazons are slightly unpredictable birds to breed. More are being bred these days than in earlier years, however, it is essential to keep the races pure.

A nest box with internal dimensions of 8in (20cm) square, and 18in (45cm) deep, is ideal. The normal clutch of 2-4, occasionally 5, white eggs, is laid in late March or early April and incubated for 28-30 days. Young leave the nest after 60-65 days and are weaned at 77-85 days normally.

Harold Haslam acquired three pairs of *A. a. nana* in 1990. Eight months

later, a pair of the nominate race *A. a. albifrons* was added to the collection, and an immediate difference in size could be seen. Unfortunately, the male *albifrons* died three months later, and Harold decided to sell the *albifrons* female so that he could concentrate on the *nana*.

Harold's experiences in breeding the *nana* subspecies may assist other breeders. In 1991, a clutch of four was parent-reared, but all subsequent nestlings until 1996 were hand-reared, because the adults were constantly breaking the eggs. As the female laid an egg, it was removed and replaced with a dummy egg, until a clutch of four was completed.

As the breeding season approached in 1997 – coinciding with Harold's impending hospitalization for an operation – a decision was made to allow the adults to parent-rear their next clutch. The female incubated without breaking a single one of the five eggs laid. Three eggs hatched, each two days apart, and all appeared to be going well. Harold inspected the nest each morning, and on the day that the fourth egg was pipping, he found three mutilated bodies in the nest. The last two eggs were removed, incubated, and successfully hand-reared.

Fledglings resemble females but have various amounts of white, or cream, on the forehead. The differences in fledglings can be quite marked. Some have only a thin band of white; others have a white or cream wash – veering to yellowish – over the white forehead.

## Photographing the Birds

David Coombes, editor of the Parrot Society magazine in the UK, asked if it would be possible to show the difference between *A. a. albifrons* and *A. a. nana*. He had numerous requests from members to illustrate, and write about these two subspecies. Finding the two subspecies proved to be more difficult than anticipated.

Ideally, by photographing a male of *A. a. albifrons* and *A. a. nana* side by side in the photograph, it should illustrate the difference in size, which is a diagnostic feature of the two subspecies. The *A. a. nana* is certainly

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smaller, but it did prove difficult as some breeders had the nominate race *A. a. albifrons*, and others had *nana*, but not the two together.

In 1995, while trying to locate the two subspecies together, I contacted David Woodbury – a well-known parrot breeder and PS member from Kent – to seek his assistance with the two subspecies. He, unfortunately, could not supply *albifrons* or *nana*, but offered to help with *A. a. saltuensis*.

This, the third subspecies, is a very rare bird in aviculture. David had a female, but he was trying to locate a male with which to pair, and possibly breed. In 1993, David had located the bird in a pet shop where the owner had been looking after it for a customer, and asked if he could buy it. Eventually, he was offered the bird.

A photographic program was planned, and it was not long before a good series of photographs of *A. a. saltuensis* was forthcoming. This was in addition to the pictures of *A. a. albifrons* that had been obtained, and photographed with the assistance of Colin Slade, another PS member from Kent.

David, who is also a committee member of the Amazona Society (UK), had already exhausted all avenues in his search for a male in the UK. He had heard that a parrot breeder in the U.S.A. held a single male of the *saltuensis* subspecies. I was hoping to possibly assist David Woodbury in locating any other *saltuensis* that may be kept in European collections that I have access to. I also tried other contacts, but all proved unsuccessful.

David, in the meantime, had started the ball rolling in the United States. This was a lengthy process, and he made contact with the owner of the male, who offered the male to David. Unfortunately, this did not materialize for a number of reasons. It soon became apparent that David's *A. a. saltuensis* was the only known specimen in Europe, and that there was only the one male available in the U.S.A.

Unfortunately, David lost his female *A. a. saltuensis* in 1996. The age of the bird was unknown. It died of a fatty liver condition, which had probably manifested itself when the previous owner kept it as a pet in a small cage

indoors, and fed it only on sunflower and peanuts – a diet that is likely to kill any parrot, especially if there is no room to exercise and burn off the excess fat.

### Conclusion

As far as is known, this article is the first in which the three subspecies have been featured and illustrated. It has taken a number of years to achieve, but has been a very interesting, and enjoyable, production.

One of the important conclusions to draw from this article – especially because of the problems that David Woodbury experienced with *A. a. saltuensis* – is the fact that where there is a small number of a species or subspecies available, it is imperative that contact is maintained between breeders.

Breeders must also ensure that the available gene pool is carefully monitored and enlarged, through careful breeding programs, and control.

Cooperation between breeders is vital if a species or subspecies is to survive in aviculture. In cases like this, stud books are an important method of control.

As far as *A. a. albifrons* and *A. a. nana* are concerned, the two subspecies seem to be breeding reasonably well in aviculture, and should eventually, become established.

A number of parrot breeders have been involved in supplying quality live specimens for photography, and information for this article. Most importantly, David Woodbury has been greatly influential, as has Harold and Mary Haslam, and much of the information used in this article is attributable to them.

Others who deserve credit, both for informational and inspiration are Dave Hall, who is Chairman of the Amazona Society (UK), Colin Slade from Kent, and, of course, David Coombes for his understanding and inspiration in bringing this all together.

### References

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