

Cuban Amazon

Amazona leucocephala (Linné)

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Photo by Cyril Laubscher

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An unexpected consequence of the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1990 was the opportunity given to aviculturists in western Europe to replenish their depleted captive population of Cuban Amazons. The species was well represented in collections in eastern Europe, a legacy of frequent importations from Cuba, and availability of new stocks certainly boosted breeding prospects elsewhere in Europe. Likewise in the United States, the species was uncommon in captivity, with birds presumed to have been smuggled in at intervals from Cuba, but in May 1991 the Cuban Amazon Consortium was formed to co-ordinate management of a captive population set up with a group of birds seized by the Department of the Interior at Miami, Florida, in April 1988. Co-operative programs involving both institutional and private breeders are being initiated by the Consortium, and for information about this commendable effort I refer readers to the account given by Rachel Rogers in *AFA Watchbird*, 26 (5): 36-37, 1999.

Geographical Variation

Approximately 13ins (32cm) in length, the Cuban Amazon is predominantly rich green, with black margins to the feathers producing a distinctly scalloped appearance. White extends from the forehead and forecrown to around the eyes, and the throat to cheeks and foreneck is rose-red, while the abdomen is dull mauve-red with greenish-black margins to the feathers. Outer webs of the flight feathers are deep blue, and red is present at bases of the lateral tail-feathers. The bill is horn colored, the iris is pale olive and the legs are pink-brown. The sexes are alike, and

young birds differ only in having less pronounced black edging to the body feathers and little mauve-red on the abdomen.

Geographical variation is manifested mainly in size differences and changes to the facial pattern. Most captive birds are *A. l. leucocephala* from eastern to central Cuba or the doubtfully distinct *A. l. palmarum* from western Cuba, including the Isle of Pines. The slightly larger *A. l. caymanensis* from Grand Cayman Island is paler, more yellowish-green with less pronounced black margins to the feathers, and green on sides of the neck extending forward to separate rose-red on the cheeks from that of the throat, while the mauve-red abdominal patch is much reduced. A significantly smaller size, a more yellowish-green general plumage and a more extensive purple-red abdominal patch differentiate *A. l. hesternus* from tiny Cayman Brac Island and possibly nearby Little Cayman Island, the latter presumably being visited only occasionally by birds that have crossed the intervening seven miles expanse of ocean. Formerly more widespread in the Bahamas, but now surviving only on Great Inagua and Abaco Islands, *A. l. bahamensis* is slightly larger than *leucocephala*, has little or no mauve-red on the abdomen, and has white of the forecrown extending below the eyes to the upper cheeks.

Vulnerable on Islands

Of the 18 species or subspecies of parrots that have become extinct since 1600, no fewer than 16 occurred on islands, and this demonstrates forcefully the particular vulnerability of island populations to habitat

loss and hunting or trapping. It is this same combination of being confined to islands and dependence on forests for food or nesting that threatens the Cuban Amazon, especially on the smaller islands. Land clearance for agriculture and damage to forests by hurricanes have brought about serious declines in all parts of the range, but there are emerging hopeful signs of population levels now becoming stabilized or even increasing slightly.

Because of extensive land clearance and intense hunting for food or trapping for the live-bird market, the parrots were extirpated from many regions in Cuba and on the Isle of Pines, but increased protection has arrested the decline, and numbers may be increasing in the few remaining tracts of woodland. Indeed, in some districts, notably on Guanahacabibes Peninsula, westernmost Cuba, it is quite common and locally is more numerous than the Cuban Conure *Aratinga euops*.

Likewise in the Bahamas, where formerly it occurred on all major islands, the species now survives only on Great Inagua and Abaco Islands, but again appears to be responding well to increased protection and habitat preservation. On Abaco, a national park has been established to safeguard the preferred habitat of mixed broad-leaf and *Pinus* woodland, and similarly on Great Inagua extensive tracts of woodland have been protected within a national park. On Grand Cayman, these parrots occur mostly in central and eastern regions, where they frequent mangroves and limestone forest or woodland, but seasonally coming to forage in coastal districts or to visit plantations and gardens when cultivated fruits are available. Of most concern is the status of *A. l. hesternus*, which is dependent on old-growth dry evergreen woodland covering much of the elevated plateau on Cayman Brac, and this diverse habitat is threatened by development accompanying road construction.

Compiled during the 1980s and

1990s, the most recent population estimates are of approximately 5000 birds in Cuba, including the Isle of Pines, about 1200 birds on each of Grand Inagua and Abaco Islands, between 700 and 1200 birds on Grand Cayman Island, and 90 to 130 birds on Cayman Brac.

Field Studies on Abaco

Much of what is known of the habits comes from field studies undertaken on Abaco Island, in the Bahamas, by Rosemarie Gnam between 1985 and 1987. Daily activities commence with the early morning departure of foraging groups from the communal nighttime roost, and as evening approaches flocks reform for return to the roost, with much squawking and loud shrieking accompanying both departure and return flights. Outside the breeding season, pairs or flocks of up to thirty or more may be encountered, but while nesting is taking place flocks are noticeably smaller and single birds often are seen. Their presence in an area usually is betrayed by the raucous call-notes, which may be heard well before the birds come into view.

In proximity to habitation they are timid, presumably because of persistent persecution, but in remote districts feeding birds often will allow a close approach. Though generally very noisy when flying, they may feed or rest silently in the treetops and remain undetected until suddenly taking to the air with loud screeches. Family groups appear to be maintained throughout the year, for even in large flocks there is a tendency for birds to fly in twos or threes.

Feeding is almost exclusively arboreal, with fruits, berries, seeds, leaf buds and blossoms making up

the diet. On Cuba and the Isle of Pines, parrots have been observed feeding mainly on palm nuts, together with seeds and tender leaf buds of pines, but they will attack ripening grain or fruits, especially mangoes. On Abaco, seeds extracted from unripe cones of yellow pines *Pinus caribaea* are a staple food, but the birds feed opportunistically on fruits, seeds, flowers and buds of a variety of native shrubs. Fruits of sea-grape *Coccoloba unifera* are a favored food on Grand Cayman Island, where palm nuts and cultivated fruits also are eaten. On Cayman Brac, a flock was observed feeding on papaya fruits; while hanging from an overhead stem, each parrot would peck a hole in the fruit and then insert its head to scoop out the seeds and most of the pulp. Also on Cayman Brac,

birds were seen to come to the ground to eat seeds from a groundcover plant.

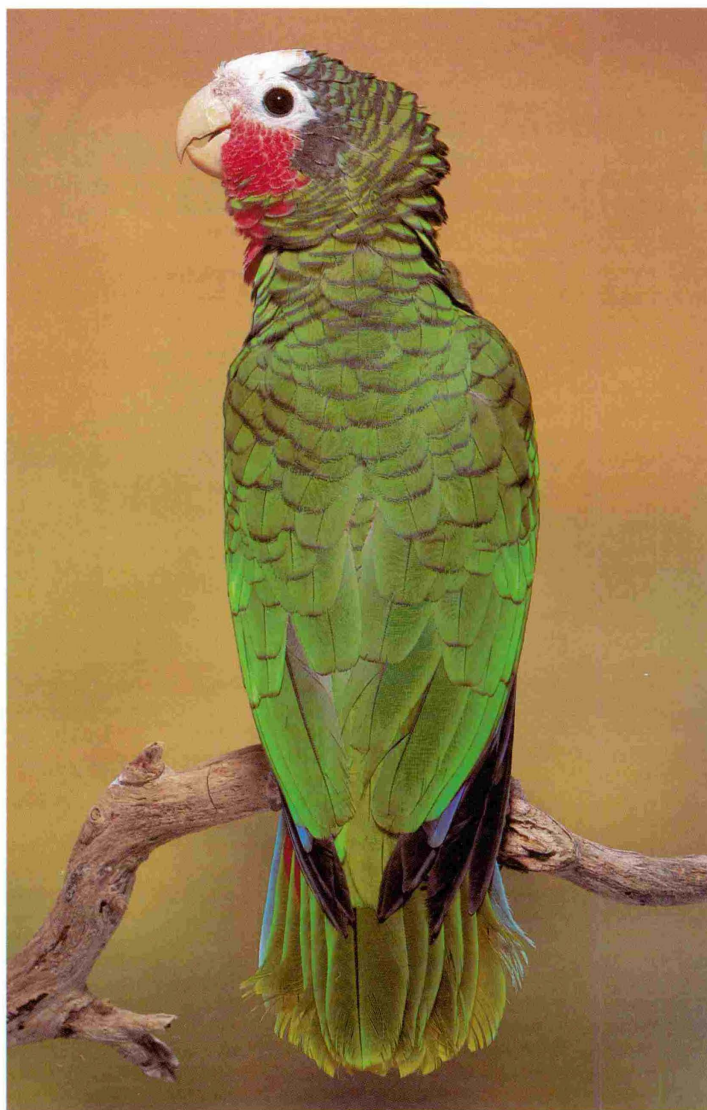
Unusual Subterranean Nesting

The breeding season extends through spring and summer, with nestlings being recorded as early as April on Cayman Brac and eggs as late as early June on Abaco Island. In most parts of the range nests are in hollow limbs or holes in trees, generally 6m or more above the ground and often in old nesting holes of woodpeckers. On Abaco Island, where suitable tree hollows are not available, nests are in natural limestone solution cavities in flat ground or on low ridges, and 58 nests examined by Gnam were in cavities ranging from 0.9m to 3.0m in depth, with a mean depth of 1.36m. Clutches are of two to five, usually three or four, eggs and incubation by the female lasts 26 to 28 days. The sit-

ting female leaves the nest three to six times during the day, for periods of from 10 to 30 minutes, to be fed by the male, and this same routine is maintained during the first two weeks after hatching while the nestlings are fed only by the female. Thereafter, the male assists with feeding of the chicks, and young birds leave the nest approximately eight weeks after hatching.

Gnam reported a low nesting success rate on Abaco Island, with less than 50 percent of nests fledging young, and predation by feral cats was identified as a significant cause of nest failures. I would point out that a low nesting success rate is not uncommon in island populations of potentially long-lived birds, and it is maintenance of adequate recruitment levels that determines future survival of the population. ♦

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Cuban Amazon, rear view.

Photo by Cyril Laubsher