

The Red-lore and the Red-browed Amazons

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RED-LORED AMAZON
Of the 29 species of Amazon currently recognized, ten have red on the frontal band and/or forehead and crown. It seems that this sometimes causes identification problems. One of the best known is the Red-lore or Primrose-cheeked (*Amazona a. autumnalis*). It has a large range of nearly 1,000 miles north to south on the Caribbean slope of Mexico and Central America. It occurs as far north as Tamaulipas (the eastern state that meets the Texas border), through Guatemala and Honduras to northern Nicaragua. In Mexico its numbers have declined (as have those of all Mexico's parrots) due to habitat loss and trapping.

I recall the first one I ever saw at the London Zoo – so tame and friendly, in marked contrast to the thousands of wild-caught adults that had the misfortune to be trapped. Many of these never adapted to captivity and remained very nervous and wary. Unfortunately, Nicaragua is still exporting these birds – 2,262 in the year 2000, for example.

The first one I set eyes on so many years ago at London Zoo was a beautiful bird with a tinge of orange in the yellow. I was very impressed by its large eyes and by the dark eyelashes. When I was curator of the breeding centre at Palmitos Park, Gran Canaria, there were several birds, wild-caught and presumably from the same area. They were the most beautiful specimens of the nominate race I have ever seen. The red from the lores spilled down on to the cheeks, blending into yellow on each side. (One of these birds is depicted on page 255 of *Parrots in Aviculture*)

Another had a tinge of red, so that the cheeks looked orange. Some of the lilac crown feathers were tipped with red.

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Immature birds have slightly less yellow and red on the head than adults. They otherwise differ from adults in having the iris dark grey-brown, becoming browner, then orange-brown. Length of this race is about 34cm. Weight is in the region of 350g.

I have seen a mutation in the Red-lore Amazon. When visiting Fundacion Ara in Mexico in 1997 I saw two lutino females (wild-caught). They were all yellow with the red markings retained – very beautiful. In 1992 Ramon Noegel and Greg Moss sent me a photograph of one of the most extraor-

dinarily-colored parrots imaginable. It was at the zoo in Tuxla Gutierrez in Chiapas. The head was pink, with whitish margins to the feathers; the feathers of the underparts were pink with faint greymauve margins, and the wings were pink and grey. I would expect such strange coloration to be the result of a metabolic or liver problem – not genetic. As it was in a Mexican zoo, housed with a Red-lore, it was logical to believe it was this subspecies. But my feeling was that it was a Salvin's. The extensive area of white skin surrounding the eye was typical of the latter sub-species. It also appeared to be a larger, heavier bird.

In Nicaragua, the nominate race intergrades with Salvin's. Presumably Salvin's with a few yellow feathers on the cheeks are from Nicaragua. The Red-lore Amazon is the most common Amazon throughout some of its range. It is found mainly in lowland forests of various types. Out of the breeding season it may move into secondary growth areas and has also been seen in pine savannah.

AVICULTURE

In aviculture, the Red-lore Amazon is neither rare nor common. In the U.K. it is bred annually in small numbers. In 1992 the Breeding Register of the Parrot Society (U.K.) showed that three members reported breeding a total of six birds. In 1998 this figure had increased to 17 members and 20 birds. This is certainly not a high success rate!

The clutch size is usually three and the incubation period is 26 days. Chicks should be closed ringed with 9.5mm rings at about 16 days. They remain in the nest

for eight weeks or up to nine weeks.

**RED-TOPPED AMAZON OR
RED-BROWED**

(*AMAZONA RHODOCORYTHA*)

In my opinion, this Amazon is outstanding for its beauty and personality. All the birds in aviculture have been illegally exported from Brazil, or are the offspring of such birds. One cannot condone breaking the law; on the other hand, it is well known that these Amazons are among the parrots which are eaten by native Brazilians. And that even if they escaped with their lives, the chances of them finding themselves in a breeding situation in Brazil are remote. All those outside Brazil are treasured birds, usually in the possession of the more experienced and serious breeders. Their price is too high for them to enter the pet market.

Variation in plumage

The head coloration is even more variable than in the Red-tored Amazon. The shade on the forehead and crown is a soft orange in some birds; the feathers of the top of the head are plum colored – faint or intense – and green. The feathers of the nape and mantle are margined with plum or grey. The cheeks and throat are a soft and pleasing shade of blue or green washed with blue. The lores are yellow. Generally this colour extends downward on to the throat in females whereas in males the lower part of the lores are blue. There are exceptions. The soft and pretty head coloration is set off by the colour of the upper mandible,

which is mainly pink or tinged with pink. The eyes are beautiful – large and appealing and usually lacking the aggression seen in many Amazons. Finally, the pleasing red and yellow on the head is repeated on the tail.

In my opinion, this is an outstandingly beautiful Amazon. All Amazons can be aggressive but, like the Mealy, it gives the impression of a gentle giant and is not a naturally aggressive species. In temperament these two Amazons, and the Bluecheeked (*A. a. dufresniana*) are very much alike. It is nearly as large as a Mealy, measuring about 36cm. Captive birds weigh between about 375g and 465g, males being heavier. They are inclined to obesity so dietary fat must be kept to a minimum and large flights are recommended..

Endangered status

The coastal area of Brazil which is its natural habitat is dominated by the cities of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. Most of the native forest has gone. What is left is so fragmented that some populations are now genetically isolated. And still these parrots are being trapped for the domestic pet trade. This Amazon is one of the most endangered of all neotropical parrots. Ultimately it may survive only in aviculture. The importance of captive breeding cannot be over-estimated. Unfortunately, captive numbers are not large and, in the UK, the gene pool has been swamped by one very successful breeder. Thus most of the birds in Britain are closely related.

Wild-caught birds were usual-

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ly brought in by sailors as single specimens in the 1960s to 1980s. A few were sold to pet shops in coastal ports where their identity was unknown. Eventually a few of these birds found their way to aviculturists. To my knowledge, there have never been any negotiated importations of wild-caught birds into the U.K. but this occurred in at least a couple of European countries before the CITES authorities were very active there.

I have never seen a wild-caught bird that was not tame. I assume this indicated all had been hand-reared from the nest and not taken as adults. Some of them whistled and one imitated a chicken about to lay. Quite possibly it had been reared where there were chickens running about. One of them caused a lot of amusement by his whistled version of "Happy Birthday to you." Among a number of pairs of Amazons, it took quite a time to discover who was the performer.

In Europe

The Red-topped Amazon has been or is still breeding in at least three major bird parks in Europe and in a handful of private collections. It seems that the larger Amazons, with the exception of the Double Yellow-head, are harder to breed than the small ones. This includes the Mealy – common enough in aviculture yet infrequently bred.

My own experience in breeding *A. rhodocorytha* is limited to two pairs. They seemed to take a long time to mature or perhaps, as so often happens with Amazons, they were not with compatible partners. When two pairs were housed next to each other in suspended cages, in September 1992 the male in one cage and the female in another spent three weeks trying to preen each other's head through the welded mesh, so the following month they were put together. The female laid her first clutch at the end of April 1994. There were two infertile eggs in the first clutch and three in the second.

The other pair gave me a

great deal of pleasure, partly because they were so compatible and partly because their suspended cage was right next to my house. The front of their cage was by my kitchen window and the back of it overlooked my bathroom window. The pair was housed away from all other Amazons. They loved to look into my kitchen, especially when my Amazon (Yellow-fronted) was sitting on her stand by the kitchen window. She often joined in with their chortling calls.

The extreme affection between the male and female of this pair of *rhodocorytha* was demonstrated in hours of mutual preening; sometimes they would preen each other's head simultaneously. They could also be seen vent-preening, which is not common in Amazons. They often played together, hanging from the roof of their cage. They would swing by one leg and grasp the partner's leg with the free foot. Such behavior was seen throughout the year and was so unlike that of many forced-paired Amazons. Incompatibility is surely the reason why Amazons are more difficult to breed than some of the larger parrots. At Loro Parque, success with more than one pair of this species was not achieved until birds were allowed to choose their own partners in a 9-foot "pairing cage."

For several weeks at the start of the breeding season there were prolonged sessions of copulation by the compatible pair at Palmitos Park. This might occur at any time of day. In 1992 the female's eggs were infertile. In mid-February 1993 I saw the female crouching to invite copulation; it was two weeks before the male was seen to respond. It appears to be not uncommon for female Amazons to come into breeding condition before the male. This often results in infertile eggs.

The male's initial attempts at copulation were unsuccessful. He obviously lacked experience. By April 6 the female was incubating two eggs, both of which proved to be fertile. The chick in the first egg died not long before it was due to

hatch. On April 29 I found that the other egg had been opened by the parents. At first I thought that this was due to inexperience, as this is not uncommon with Amazons. But it was soon obvious that the chick could not hatch unaided. The inside of the egg was very dry. I placed the egg in a hatcher with high humidity and the chick hatched the following day. It looked unhealthy and dehydrated and unfortunately lived only three days.

In 1995 the first egg was laid on April 22. It was enormous but I did not want to upset the female by removing it to measure it. I inspected the nest daily for the next five days or so because the female left the nest quite often. But it contained only one egg. After that the female became aggressive and nest inspection was impossible for some while; when I could look I saw a second egg.

The first egg hatched on or about May 20. When the female left the nest two days later I suspected that something had gone wrong. Sadly, inspection revealed a dead chick with the upper mandible removed. Either the female had killed the chick due to inexperience or the chick had died and the injury to the mandible had occurred when the female was trying to revive or feed it and obtained no response. The other egg was pipping so I removed it to a hatcher where there was an egg of a Pesquet's Parrot.

On the evening of the next day both chicks were calling loudly from within their egg. Next morning, May 24, I was greeted with the sight of two beautiful chicks, both of which weighed 18g. I hand-reared the Pesquet's and placed the Amazon immediately in the nest of a pair of Finsch's (or Lilac-crowned) Amazons (*Amazona finschi*) which had a newly hatched chick. Every year they would rear three young of their own and were such good parents I had also fostered other Amazons and Hawk-headed to them. The Hawk-headed would be removed at three weeks for hand-rearing.



A beautiful Red-browed Amazon Parrot.

By May 28 three Finsch's chicks had hatched. The *rhodocorytha* was so large I feared the smallest *finschi* chick might have to be removed – but this was not necessary. I weighed the chicks when I could but after a few days the male showed his disapproval by rushing aggressively to the nest entrance. The nest was inspected from a service corridor behind the nest-box; although the male could not see me he knew I was there.

By the time the four chicks were four weeks old they filled the interior of the nest-box and the female entered only to feed them. After this age, it became impossible to weigh the *rhodocorytha*; it was too difficult to handle. Weights were obtained as follows:

at hatch

18g

day

6	83g (full crop)
8	125g (full)
10	160g (full)
13	211g (nearly full)
16	256g (empty)
21	384g (nearly empty)
25	441 (nearly empty)
28	466 (nearly full)

Note that at only 25 days the chick had already equalled or exceeded adult weight - testimony to the excellent feeding skills of the parents. The rearing food con-

sisted of their normal mixture of seeds, fresh fruits and vegetables (much of it grown on the premises, such as courgettes, spinach beet, and guavas), cooked maize and beans, plus a home-made rearing food consisting of grated carrot, hard-boiled egg and wholegrain bread. This was reduced to a fairly fine crumbly consistency in a grinder. Home-grown corn cobs were given when available - on average, every other day. Everything was eaten.

By six weeks the *rhodocorytha* was fully feathered, except for the shorter tail. The beak already had the pink tinge of the adult. The first Finsch's left the nest on July 14, next came the Red-topped on the 18th and the other two Finsch's left the nest on July 19 and 21. They would sometimes sit in a line on the back perch of the aviary, all in perfect feather and quite beautiful.

In 1996 two chicks were hatched and reared by this pair. In the same year, thirteen young were hatched at Loro Parque! This very successful year was the result of birds having the opportunity to chose their own partners. In 1997 the female at Palmitos Park laid three eggs, one of which was infertile. The other two hatched. In 1998 the female laid three infertile eggs in April (I would guess the

male was not then in breeding condition). She laid again in September, after the molt, and three chicks were reared. That year the other pair produced four infertile eggs. (My thanks to A.L.Garcia del Campo for the information on the 1997 and 1998 breeding seasons.)

I would urge everyone fortunate enough to keep this species to make a big commitment to breeding only from unrelated birds and to allow the parents to rear their young - or at least to give them the opportunity. Responsible avicultural practices are essential if this Amazon is to survive in aviculture over the long-term. ❖

If You Have Any Questions, You are Always Welcome to Contact the AFA Office

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