

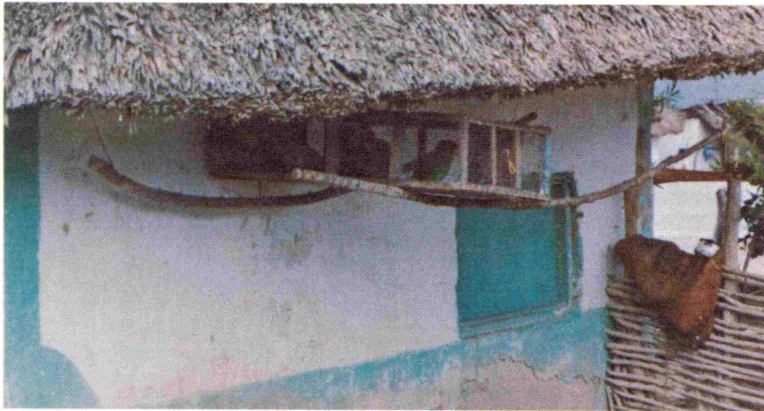


A hunter lowers a recently captured *A.o. oratrix* for the author's inspection.

Two of the hunters' prized decoys.



Photos by J. Clinton Eitnhear



A crate of parrots ready for market. It contained five *A.o. oratrix*, one *A. viridigenalis*, and six *Aratinga holochlora*.



The nylon loop used for capturing parrots.



Green-cheeked Amazons, *A. viridigenalis*, offered for \$11.00 each.



A village near Tampico, Mexico where the author was shown the art of parrot catching. Green conures, *Aratinga holochlora*, raised from nestlings.

the Double Yellow-head

Mexico's most popular parrot

by J. Clinton Eitniear

The Yellow-crowned Amazon, or Yellow-head parrot, *Amazona ochrocephala* is one of the most popular and commonly kept parrots in captivity. Its desirability is not seen only in private collections and pet stores in the United States, but is strongly felt in the villages of Mexico. Although found in scattered populations from Mexico to Peru, it is unwise to assume that the species is abundant. Species do not exist uniformly throughout the entire country, as range maps tend to indicate, but rather are found only in ecologically suitable areas. For example, in northeastern Mexico these parrots are generally not found more than 140 Kilometers inland and are most abundant in riverine woodlands. Therefore, populations are contained only in areas of favorable habitat.

The most popular of the eight subspecies, the double yellow-head, *A.o. oratrix* (Forshaw, 1978), has disappeared from parts of its range due largely to loss of habitat, coupled with the capture of adults and chicks for the pet trade. In order to determine the effect of the pet trade upon wild populations, I recently travelled throughout the range of *A.o. oratrix* in northeastern Mexico.

The market demand north of the Mexican border is great for parrots of all varieties, and many are smuggled across in handbags, or, for a small fee, are carried across the river by some young swimmer. The demand for the Yellow-crowns is so great that Green-cheeked Amazons, *Amazona viridigenalis*, frequently have their heads dyed yellow before being sold to some unsuspecting gringo.

Within the interior of Mexico, not all eighteen local parrot species are popular as pets. The choice is generally the Yellow-crown, with the larger, *A.o. oratrix*, the most treasured and "macho" of them all. Except for the military macaw, *Ara militaris*, no legal restrictions exist on capturing and keeping one or two parrots as pets.

Capturing parrots for sale or legal export is a different matter. Permits must be obtained from Mexico's wildlife department, Direccion General de la Fauna Silvestre. No capturing is permitted during the breeding season, and most of the birds I found for sale after the season were from two to six months old. An importer from Brownsville, Texas, informed me that the youngest Amazons he could obtain for

sale were two months old. In addition to the hunting permit, one is also required for the birds export to foreign markets. A thirty day quarantine is also required within Mexico prior to the United States quarantine period.

Nestlings are captured by lowering a nylon string loop into the nest cavity and snagging the young birds. Certain individuals will cut open the tree trunk and remove the young, but most hunters who rely on the sale of parrots for income refrain from this method as they know that the parrots will return to the nest cavity next year if they leave it undisturbed. For large scale export or quantity local sales, this technique is of limited use because of the ban on hunting during the breeding season after which most of the young parrots have fledged.

After the breeding season has ended and the hunting season begins, the following method for capture is used. Several of the more tame and mature parrots from previous seasons are retained as decoys, "sanchos", by the hunters. These older birds are placed in the tops of the trees which have had most of the leaves trimmed away. Leaves and branches along the trunk are also trimmed away and a ladder is constructed by lashing limbs to the trunk with rope. The ladder facilitates climbing to the top of the tree with little noise. The decoys are set in the evening and are tied to the trees with long strings. The hunter then returns to his village and prepares a long dry branch for capturing the wild parrots. Nylon loops with slip knots are fixed to the end of the branch, and several branches are prepared in this manner.

In the early morning the hunter returns to the tree where the sanchos have spent the night. Flocking parrots which have been lured to the tree by the calls of the decoy and have roosted there for the night are snagged on the leg with the loops at the end of the long branch and are encouraged to then step onto the branch. Because of the early morning darkness and the calm decoy, the wild birds seldom take flight, and one hunter told me he had caught up to ten birds from one tree in this manner. I observed Yellow-crown Amazons, *Amazona ochrocephala*, Green-cheeked Amazons, *Amazona viridigenalis*, Yellow-cheeked Amazons, *Amazona autumnalis*, and White-capped parrots, *Pionus senilis* taken by this method.

After the birds are captured, they are carried to the village on the branches. One wing is clipped and the birds are placed in one of the small trees within the confines of the village. Children can often be observed carrying recently captured parrots around the villages on long branches as part of the taming process. Tame birds are also kept with the recently caught wild birds, which also helps to calm them down. I did not observe any other activities involved with the taming process. After two weeks, the hand tamed birds are taken to the nearest city and sold, either to the local villagers or to the buyers who purchase them for the quarantine stations.

The feeding of the parrots while in captivity varies with the individual and his or her knowledge of the birds' requirements. Most of the birds are fed "masa", a ground corn mixture. I have never encountered anyone giving vitamin supplements. In southern Mexico, where the villages are less well off, corn is not even fed, but rather food scraps, berries, and legumes picked by the children. Several of the more "seasoned" parrot hunters place their birds in any of the several varieties of leguminous trees which are the natural food for these birds. In general, most of the parrots kept for any period of time in captivity are not in good health.

In the market place, hand tamed parrots cost more, but the prices from these native hunters are very reasonable. Green-cheeked Amazons, *Amazona viridigenalis*, were offered to me for 250 pesos (\$11.00 U.S.). Untamed Yellow-crown Amazons cost 400 pesos (\$18.00 U.S.) or 800 pesos (\$35.00 U.S.) each for tame birds. These prices vary. In one village I was offered *A.o. oratrix* for 75 pesos (\$4.00 U.S.) each.

The effect of the pet trade market on the wild populations of *A.o. oratrix* is undetermined. Local demand coupled with the increasing foreign interest in this species will undoubtedly be an important factor in population maintenance. The pet trade will not drain the country of all its Yellow-crowns as Mexico's wildlife department, in all probability, will discontinue issuing export permits long before this stage is reached. The decision to issue permits should be based on a census of wild populations, but whether this will materialize is not known at this time. To assure aviculturists of a continued future supply of these interesting birds efforts should be made now to establish self-sustaining captive populations in our aviaries •

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