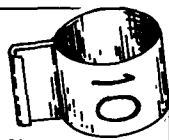


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The St. Lucia Parrot

by Rosemary Low

The Saint Lucia parrot (*Amazona versicolor*) has the dubious distinction of being the third or fourth rarest of the parrots of the neotropics. It is found only on the island of that name, part of the Windward group in the Caribbean.

Island fauna, of course, is the most vulnerable and easily endangered by habitat destruction: the massive and widespread denudation of tropical rainforest, which is decimating up to 15 million hectares annually, has had a catastrophic effect on many species.

St. Lucia, which measures only 27 x 14 miles, was once entirely clothed in rainforest; parrots must then have been found all over the island. Today, despite its predominantly mountainous landscape, much of the rainforest has been cleared and replaced by banana plantations (bananas form 80% of the island's exports) and crops which feed the 140,000 inhabitants. Thus of a total land surface of 380 square miles, it is believed that parrots survive in only 40 square miles of forest.

The latest population estimate, made in 1979, suggests that only about one hundred parrots survive. However, the difficulties inherent in attempting to assess populations in mountain rainforest must be borne in mind.

Equally as alarming as the small number of birds which survive is the fact that the population is declining rapidly. It is believed (although there is no proof) that only 30 years ago the population

totalled 1,000 birds which ranged over an area of 150 square miles. The rate of decline must be halted at once if the St. Lucia parrot is to survive.

On September 23 last year — within two months of the new government being elected — the parrot had been declared the national bird. One week of activities associated with the occasion included radio and television programs about the native parrot, a newspaper supplement devoted to it, and posters and T-shirts which feature it prominently. Children took part in an essay competition, the subject of which was the St. Lucia parrot, in conjunction with which 300 youngsters were taken on a walk through the forest. In addition, education packs containing information on the parrot reach 20,000 children in biology, English and geography classes.

Even although some might believe it is a little late in the day and the parrot's survival is an urgent matter for the present generation, it is vitally important that the younger element should be taught to recognize their parrot as a national treasure to be guarded at any cost.

Further protection measures include a new ordinance which has had its first reading in the House of Representatives. If it becomes law, the penalties for attempting to catch or export parrots and the powers of forest officers will be increased. A fine of about (U.S.) \$2,000 will be imposed on would-be parrot smugglers.



*This photo represents
an adult bird of
the less colorful type.*

To further aid the survival of the St. Lucia parrot, the World Wildlife Fund granted a sum which made it possible to set up a sanctuary in the center of the island. It will also provide the finances to train two officers locally and at Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust in the Channel Islands.

The St. Lucia Parrot is a species which was totally unknown to me until I visited the island. I had long anticipated seeing this bird — one of the largest of the genus — and I was not disappointed.

It measures about 16 in. The head is blue, of a deeper shade on the forehead and forepart of the cheeks, and the feathers are edged with black. Coloration of the underparts is most variable and some specimens entirely lack the area of red on the upper breast. The feathers of the breast and abdomen are green, broadly edged with vinaceous or with quite and extensive area of dark red on the abdomen. The wing speculum (patch on the secondaries) is red. The bill is black and horn coloured. The orange iris of the eye has a peculiar prominence, quite unlike that of all other Amazons but the Imperial (*A. imperialis*).

*Captive
St. Lucia parrot.
Note the variation
in the plumage.*



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Even if no parrots were breeding there, the Central Forest Reserve would be worth conserving for its outstanding natural beauty. The mountains and rainforest are awe-inspiring in their magnificence and the vegetation is dense, lush and green.

The most cursory glance reveals that the trees of a tropical rainforest have a totally different appearance to those of temperate climes: each one is a world in miniature, harbouring a host of epiphytes, such as bromeliads and orchids, and hung with lianas which descend many feet to the forest floor.

If one climbs to a ridge one can look down on the forest canopy or at the more distant view of steeply sloping, luxuriantly clothed mountains, their peaks shrouded in cloud.

I was surprised by the paucity of birds — species and individuals — in the forest. Only gray kingbirds — large flycatchers — hummingbirds and bullfinches seemed numerous. Two species which I saw for the first time were the oriole (*Icterus laudabilis*) found only on St. Lucia, and the well-named trembler (*Cinclocerthia ruficauda*) which has the habit of drooping its wings and shivering them rapidly.

Would I be fortunate enough to see the rarest of St. Lucia's birds, the handsome jacquot, as the parrot is known in local patois? In vain did I listen for its calls. Occasionally a single, almost bell-like note reached my ears. What could it be? It sounded as though it should belong to a large fruit-eating bird of some description. It was not until a couple of days later, when I encountered my first captive St. Lucia parrot, that I knew the truth. These notes, entirely atypical of the genus *Amazona*, belonged to *A. versicolor*.

I would almost certainly have missed my first glimpse of this bird had not Gabriel Charles, the most knowledgeable forest officer, pointed it out. High above us I saw the dark, round-broad-winged shape of the jacquot in flight.

Thenceforth we several times disturbed single parrots from their vantage points, not all of which were too high above us to afford a good view. Indeed, one parrot flew out of a tree only a few feet away, providing a thrilling view of its bright blue face as it took to the wing to find what it obviously considered a safer haven. The parrots were quiet in flight, unlike other members of the genus. Perhaps this habit is borne of generations of evading the gun, for man has ever been the principal enemy of the

St. Lucia parrot.

No wonder then, that they were exceptionally wary and difficult to see. During the next two weeks I had the great good fortune to visit St. Vincent and to see the magnificent Guilding's or St. Vincent parrot in its natural habitat, likewise the Red-necked Amazon (*A. arausiaca*) and — by an extraordinary stroke of luck — the Imperial parrot (*A. imperialis*) on Dominica. Neither Guilding's nor the Red-necked were as wary or as difficult to observe as the St. Lucia parrot. However, the latter's territory is easily accessible and does not necessitate making difficult and even dangerous mountain ascents as is the case on Dominica and St. Vincent. One can actually take a relatively leisurely stroll through the St. Lucia rainforest, although the chances of seeing the parrot are much slimmer. I counted myself very fortunate to see this wary bird in only five hours spent in the forest.

The three main factors which have contributed to its decline are shooting, deforestation and competition for nest sites and possibly also predation of eggs and young by the Pearly-eyed thrasher (*Margarops fuscatus*). The latter is a bird of about the same size as a cardinal with a gleaming yellow eye. I am tempted to say that it looks as evil as it actually is!

Despite legislation, shooting still occurs, for a dead parrot is a source of food and a live parrot of income — a huge income by local standards. Fortunately, I believe that "wing-tipping" — the barbaric practice of shooting a bird in the slender hope of taking it alive to sell — seldom occurs now. But many parrots are still shot, probably by those whose main prey is the Red-necked pigeon (*Columba squamosa*).

In its remaining habitat, *A. versicolor* does have one factor in its favor. Food is abundant and varied, in rainforest and in the secondary growth. It includes the fruits of figs, breadfruit and aralee. The large round breadfruit, with a rough light green exterior, contains numerous black seeds, about 4/10th of an inch long, and it is on these that the parrots feed. They also relish the fleshy heart found at the base of the cabbage palm.

Large flocks of parrots which must once have fed on these food are totally unknown today. Probably the largest flock seen in recent years was that observed by Stephen Jovovich from Houston, a member of the 1975 expedition to St. Lucia financed by SAFE (Save Animals From Extinction) International. Charles Gabriel, the forest

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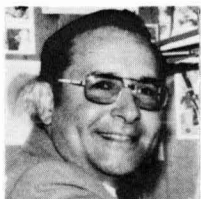
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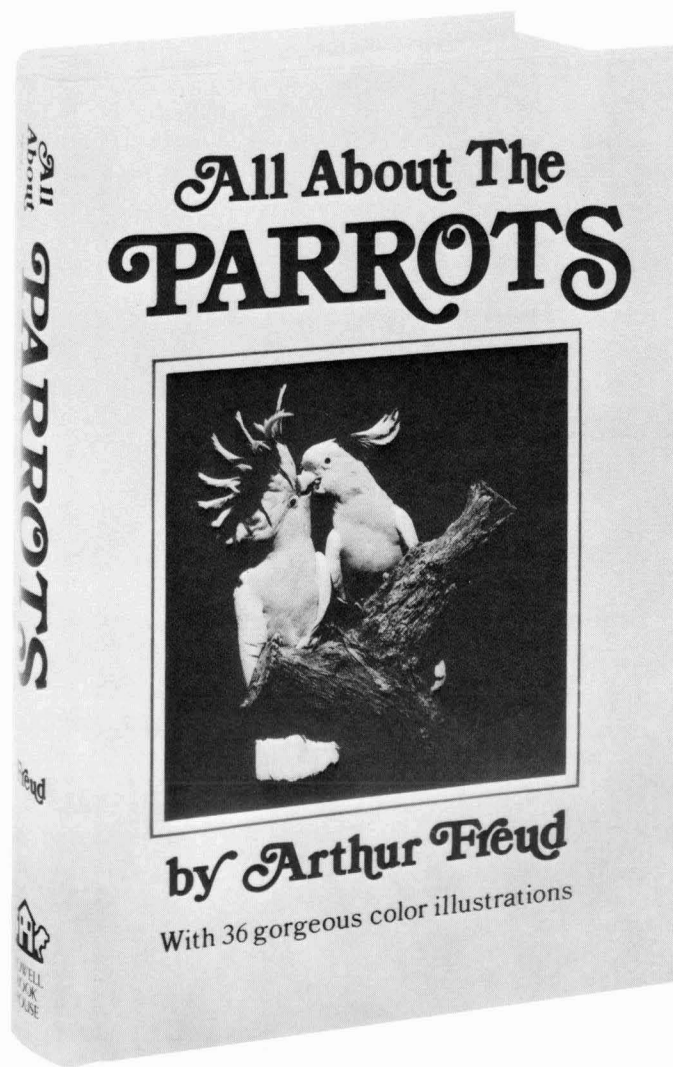
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About the Author

Arthur Freud is a widely known aviculturist-writer and parrot authority, and a regular contributor to such publications as *American Cage-Bird Magazine*, *Pet News* and the magazine of the Parrot Society (England).



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Rainforest inhabitant—an inquisitive gray kingbird.



Imperial parrot—captive bird on St. Vincent.

photos by Bob Grantham



*Rainforest on St. Lucia,
habitat of
Amazona versicolor.*

supervisor, once saw 15 together and the largest flock seen by the four members of the 1977 expedition of the North East London Polytechnic, was seven or eight birds.

Perhaps even more significant is the observations of one guide who had worked in the forest for 24 years. It was that the parrot population has declined dramatically during the past ten years and is still declining. He believed that the populations in the three localities in which parrots are found consisted of approximately 70, 40 and 10 birds.

Remnant populations are, of course, especially susceptible to the effects of natural disasters, such as those which occurred last year — the hurricane which hit Dominica and the volcano eruption on St. Vincent, two islands in the same group as St. Lucia. Even those who are against the principle of captive-breeding must admit that in the face of such a disaster on St. Lucia, a captive breeding program based out of the island could be the parrot's only hope of evading oblivion.

At the present time, the sole onus rests on Jersey Zoo. No other captive St. Lucia parrots are found anywhere in the world, if one excludes the possibility that illegally taken birds could have been smuggled off the island. However, there is no evidence to suggest this. Jersey's St. Lucia parrots have not yet attempted to breed as seven are only now approaching sexual maturity.

Although there are six captive *versicolor* on St. Lucia, it seems unlikely that a breeding program will be inaugurated there — at least in the near future. It would depend on a radical change of heart by conservationists such as Paul Butler (a member of the North East London Polytechnic team who returned to the island to take up the post of conservation adviser). He was totally opposed to the idea.

My own feelings concur with those of David Jeggo, deputy curator of birds at Jersey who, in 1975, wrote: "Ideally the captive breeding program depends on taking sufficient specimens to provide a minimum of three pairs at 2-3 institutions."

However, I would qualify "institutions" to refer only to establishments which have experience in breeding the larger parrots, and especially Amazons. Such precious genetic material must be placed only in the wisest hands. This would seem to be the only additional practical step which can be taken at present to safeguard the precarious position of St. Lucia's parrots.

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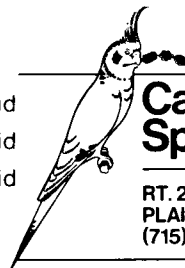
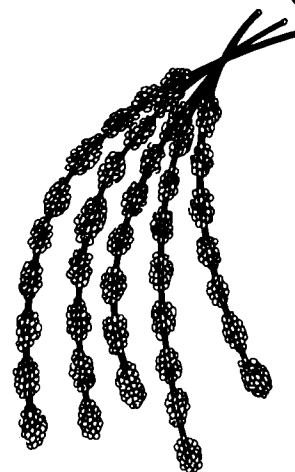
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