

# PARROTS, ANTS, and OWLS

by Jack Clinton-Eitnrear  
McAllen, Texas

It appeared to be an easy climb as the old decayed Quamwood tree (*Schizolobium parahybum*), situated in the Chiquibul Forest Reserve in the Central American country of Belize, was a mere forty feet tall and without branches. Soon, however, I would realize that a far greater hinderance to climbing would be encountered. As I completed the final adjustments on my tree climbers I could hear the screaming of distant scarlet macaws. Only red specks in the sky, these large parrots were flying from their roosting area to feed in the interior of the tropical deciduous forest. This old tree, for a softwood, was very firm, making the climb to the top a rather easy task. Half way up the tree, however, I felt a sharp pain in my right leg and upon glancing down discovered that I was slowly being covered with large biting black ants. Despite the annoying pain caused by the ants, I was determined to complete my objective of documenting the growth and development of the white-crowned parrot, (*Pionus senilis*). With the nest cavity now at waist level I carefully reached in, remembering the local belief that snakes den up in tree cavities during the day, and removed three young parrots. Covered only with pinfeathers, they would be placed in a cot-



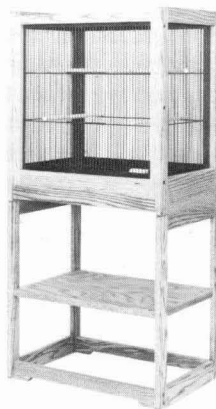
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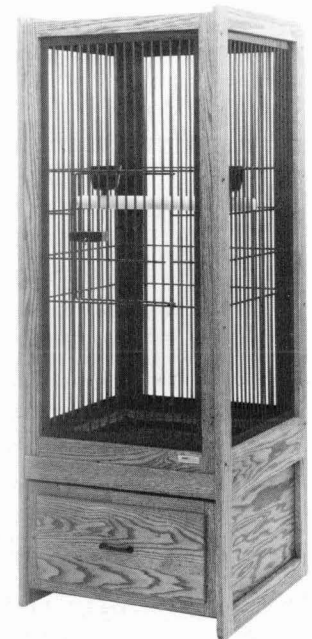
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The author atop an ant infested Quamwood tree inspecting the nest of the Whitecrowned Parrot.

ton sack and lowered to the ground. After being weighed and photographed they were hoisted back up the tree and reunited with their cavity. The entire process may have taken only five minutes, but being covered with the angered ants made it seem like hours. This sequence was repeated at this site, and several others, countless times throughout the breeding season.

This parrot was not the only avian species to realize the protection that these insects so freely provided. In every study tree (all were Quamwood) another cavity, usually within several feet from the parrots', was being occupied. The tree most frequently observed was also the home of a pair of ferruginous pygmy-owls (*Glaucidium brasilianum*). Only 6½ inches in length, the silent residents of the Quamwood appeared to view my research as a bit disturbing, but not worth getting worked up about. During the final weeks of the investigations they would simply tilt their heads downward and view my climbing about. Never flying off, they soon lost interest with the whole event. Within a few minutes, they would retract their bodies back into the cavity. Only one attempt was made to observe the development of the young owls. And only one small white egg was discovered at the bottom of a very deep cavity. Since my ground crew frequently shouted that the tree appeared to be breaking loose, I decided to give up further attempts.



The top cavity was inhabited by a pair of Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls.

The ants never harmed the young parrots or the adult owls, but were driven into an uncontrollable rage by the appalling impact of my tree spikes as they pierced the tree. Only seconds after I began my ascent, a black stream of ants would flow down the tree to greet me. Arriving on the ground after such a reception meant rapidly changing clothes.

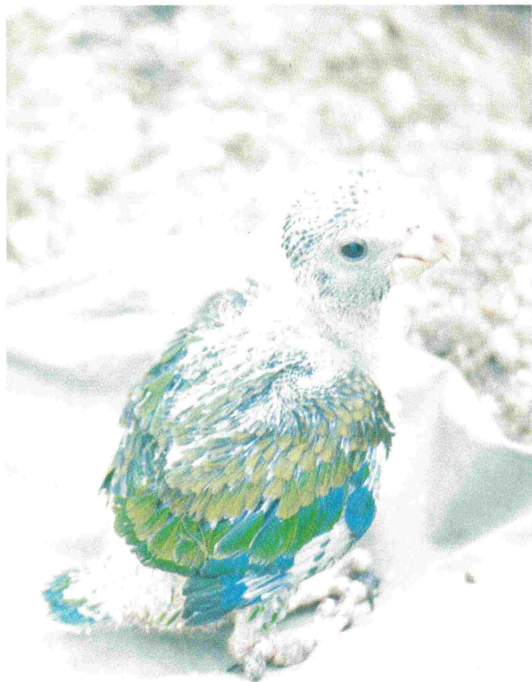
The smallest of the seven species in the genus *Pionus*, the whitecrowned parrot ranges from southern Mexico along the caribbean slope to Panama. Also called the white-capped parrot, it is found in a variety of habitats ranging from lowland rainforest and savannah woodlands to semi-open areas. Its plumage is green with purplish-blue on the wings and tail. A small patch of red is found on the undertail feathers. Its most frequently relied upon field mark is the white on the forehead, forecrown, and chin up to the middle of the throat. The sexes are not dichromatic but the females appear, from study skins, to be slightly smaller in size.

In Belize courtship begins in February or March with 3-4 white eggs being laid in early April. Requiring 26 days for incubation, the pair leads a solemn existence.





Adult White-crowned Parrots spent several hours lingering about in a nearby tree. Soon they would leave the area and spend the day in the dense tropical forest.



Young White-crowned Parrot with feet covered with a purplish-red berry that was its sole diet for a few days.

A typical day for the parrots started at dawn with the arrival of the adults at the nesting cavity. During the first few weeks after the young chicks hatched one of the adults remained in the nest at all times, only leaving to forage but always being replaced by the other member of the pair.

This situation changed after the young no longer required brooding by their parents. At 4 weeks of age the young were alone in the cavity except for feeding, which was done by both parents. After the morning feeding the adults lingered about in the large trees near the nest. During mid-afternoon they flew off and did not return until early evening when they frantically made trip after trip from the forest to the nest cavity. The scenario went unchanged for the remaining weeks until the 20 gram chicks reached an adult weight of approximately 180 grams. The entire process from egg laying to fledging took about 13 weeks during the country's dry season.

Attempts were made to determine what the adults were feeding the young. For several days the young were fed solely a purplish-red berry which can be seen in the photo clinging to the young birds' toes. To identify the fruit was no easy matter as the only sample I had was crushed to a fine pulp. After mashing every fruiting body and berry in the area I decided that it might be more "fruitful" to follow the adults in hopes that they would lead me to the tree. However, by this time they were no longer feeding the berry but spent hours ingesting the buds of a *Ceiba pentandra*.

Unlike the more popular Amazon parrots that share the forest, the pionus is comparatively quiet and secretive. Even when alarmed they fly off silently, turning sharp angles through the tree tops. Only after they are a great distance do they begin to screech in typical parrot fashion. When feeding in the nearby tree tops they remain silent and show great affection for one another. This contrasts greatly with the yellow-cheeked Amazons (*Amazona autumnalis*) in the same tree as they screamed and chattered throughout the entire day.

Their lack of brilliant coloration and smaller size has kept most pionus low on the list of desirable parrots for both the local and foreign pet trade. Within Belize, residents prefer the scarlet macaw or the yellow-crowned amazon for pets but will keep other species if those are not available. Such was the fate of the young in one of my study nests. As soon as they developed pinfeathers, the cavity was chopped open and the young removed. A short talk with the district forest officer stopped further problems of this nature.

The remaining young parrots fledged the old tree just days before the rains came. And soon the young owls would also leave. If the old Quamwood survives the rainy season the parrots will probably return allowing the ever present ants to protect them, and the occupants of the upper cavity, from predators and researchers, once again.

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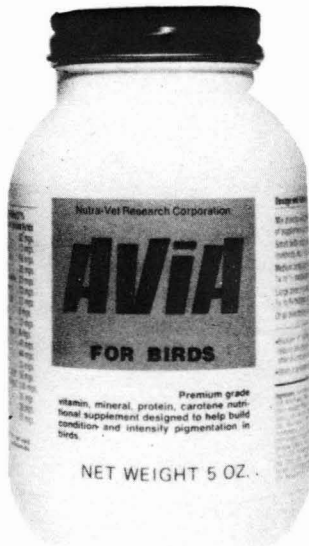
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