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from
the field . . .

by Jack Clinton Eitnrear
McAllen, Texas

Mangrove Parrot

While traveling the dirt road to Altun, an ancient Mayan ruin in northern Belize, the clay-red dust clung to my perspiring arms. Minutes seemed like hours. Just as I was pondering over the benefits of my efforts, I rounded the bend and the ruin appeared. Leaving my vehicle, I was observing birds in the nearby forest when the caretaker arrived. After paying the modest fee of fifty cents we began what would be a lengthy discussion on wildlife. According to him, the forest was being over hunted and the popular practice of "leaving stock" was not the predominate philosophy as animals and birds of all ages were being hunted. Realizing that I would learn little about wildlife in this area I returned to my vehicle. Upon entering, the caretaker asked if he could get a ride down the dusty path to his home. Offering a cold beverage in return, I eagerly obliged.

The caretaker's home was neatly tucked behind a flame red royal poinciana tree. On the front step, in an obviously aged wrought iron cage, swung a parrot. Fed a diet of corn and poinciana seeds, it was in excellent condition. Upon inquiring about the bird I was told that it was a mangrove parrot. He went on to say that the bird often nested deep inside holes, made by woodpeckers, in palm trees. This relationship has perpetuated the belief that the parrot will incubate and raise the woodpecker's young, in addition to its own, if the cavity is occupied when the parrots are nesting. This incredible undocumented account of dubious factuality is a common element of local lore.



Young Yellow-cheeked Amazon (*Amazona autumnalis autumnalis*) recently removed from its nest cavity for sale as pets.

To most of us this is not the mangrove parrot but the red-lored or yellow cheeked Amazon (*Amazona autumnalis*). Although the species is found from east Mexico to northern Brazil it varies greatly in coloration, as do a number of other wide ranging Amazons. In the northern portions of its range it's referred to as the yellow cheeked Amazon. (*A. a. autumnalis*) because of its striking brilliant yellow cheeks. The yellow cheeked integrates in Nicaragua and Costa Rica with the Salvin's Amazon (*A. a. salvini*). This subspecies differs from the yellow cheeked by having green cheeks. In South America two additional subspecies occur. In Ecuador the cheeks change to lime green and the tint and extent of the red changes. This parrot the lilacine (*A. a. lilacina*) is not as frequently encountered in captivity as the previous two. The third subspecies, the diademed (*A. a. diadema*) can be found in northern Brazil and is of uncertain status.

In terms of aviculture we are concerned that subspecies are matched with individuals with similar coloration. Certainly the serious parrot breeder would not breed a yellow cheeked subspecies with one that has green-cheeks. In terms of conservation however, we must remember that despite the numerous common names for the various subspecies they are all the same species. Population demise in a subspecies is of valid concern but in a species it is tragic!

In my opinion the yellow cheeked is the most attractive of all the Amazons with striking green, yellow, blue and reds. Specimens that I have had contact with were good natured. Two in residence at the Posada Tropicana in Belize City were receptive to my complaints about the weather, allowing their heads to be scratched. The accompanying Pionus bit my finger!

Data from the Oological collection at the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology (courtesy of Lloyd Kiff) confirms that the species nests in palms. On April 17, 1960 a nest was discovered in northern Veracruz, Mexico containing five eggs. Twelve feet up in a palmetto the parrot was nesting in the vacated hole of a woodpecker. During May of 1981 a resident in Belize pointed out a nest of *A. a. autumnalis* at the top of an unidentifiable tree (not a palm). Towards the latter part of the month he removed the chicks for sale as pets.

In Mexico the species appears to be thriving if not increasing in numbers. Able to adapt to a variety of habitats it does not appear to be declining as is the yellow crowned (*Amazona ochrocephala oratrix*) and the green-cheeked (*Amazona viridigenalis*). Because of its large range and abundant numbers it is a good choice for the serious aviculturalist concerned that the importation of wild caught birds is not overly detrimental to the wild population. ●

Photo by Jack Clinton Eitnrear

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