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Will the Real Panama Parrot Please Stand Up?

by William D. Clark, D.D.S., M.D.
Galveston, Texas

Yes, the Panama parrot does exist. Frankly, I had almost come to the conclusion that there was no such bird. After all, no two authors seem to agree on the appearance of the bird and photographs often label distinctly different parrots as being the Panama.

My search for the truth has included field trips to Central America, the study of about 30 books and conversations with several importers, collectors and aviculturists. The lead that finally "broke the case" came as a result of correspondence with an aviculturist in south-central Texas. This lady claimed to own several Panamas. She had bought them from individuals who had acquired them while living in Panama and imported them when moving to the United States.

Not willing to let a 500 mile round trip cheat me out of seeing these birds, I paid a visit to the "Panama lady." It didn't take long to convince me that these were the "real things." One of the few consistencies in textbook descriptions of the Panama is size. Most authors list the Panama as being the smallest of the nine sub-species of *Amazon ochrocephala*, with the average length being about 12 inches. All of this lady's Panamas were about a foot long and while resembling other members of the *A. ochrocephala* clan, showed consistent differences.

Before going further, it seems logical to discuss the sub-species of *Amazon ochrocephala*. Several of the most popular and familiar Amazon parrots are members of this sub-species, including the double yellow head and yellow nape. Taxonomists are scientists

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who classify animals. Those responsible for classifying birds have determined that nine parrots are related closely enough to be called the same species but are different enough to be distinguished as separate sub-species. A sub-species is, more or less, the same as a race. Sub-species are capable of natural interbreeding but are usually geographically separated. Whether or not taxonomists are correct in their classification of *Amazona ochrocephala* is debatable. For the present, we are stuck with it.

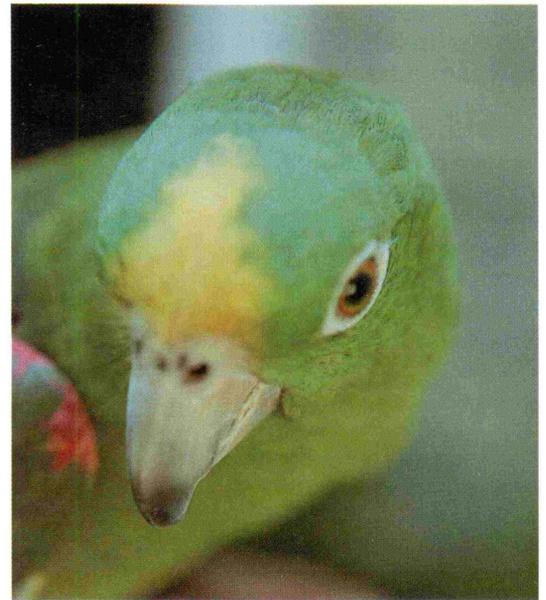
The nine sub-species of *A. ochrocephala* are: 1) *A. o. ochrocephala*, the yellow-crowned Amazon; 2) *A. o. oratrix*, the double yellow head; 3) *A. o. belizensis*, the Belize yellow head; 4) *A. o. tresmariae*, the Tres Marias Amazon; 5) *A. o. auropalliata*, the common or large yellow naped Amazon; 6) *A. o. parvipes*, the small or parvipes yellow naped Amazon; 7) *A. o. xantholaema*, an obscure, if real, sub-species; 8) *A. o. nattereri*, Natterer's Amazon and 9) *A. o. panamensis*, the Panama parrot.

The Panama parrot is said to inhabit portions of northern Columbia and western Panama. The limited distribution along with Panama's ban on commercial exportation of birds help to explain the relative rarity of these birds in American aviculture.

The reputation of the Panama parrot as a talking pet is unblemished. It seems that all who have written about these birds consider them to be among the top two or three talkers. I can't find fault with their conclusions, only with their method of arriving at them. My chief gripe with the parrot literature is the common practice of coming to conclusions with insufficient data. This is particularly true regarding the Panama parrot, since few have had significant experience with this sub-species. Also, there has been considerable confusion with other sub-species. Twenty to thirty and more years ago it was common to tag yellow napes with the Panama name. Later, yellow napes became much more common in American parrot collections and earned their own fine reputation. As strange as it may seem, there is still some confusion between these two birds. Both Miami's Parrot Jungle and Tampa's Bush Gardens have performing yellow napes that they insist on calling Panama parrots. In recent years there has been a tendency to confuse yellow crowned Amazons (*A. o. ochrocephala*) with the Panama. Some of the reasons for this are the diversity of physical descriptions assigned to the Panama, the mislabeling



Typical Panama parrot (7 year old male).



Typical Panama pattern of yellow on forehead and forecrown.



Typical beak color of Panama parrot.



Light color of the Panama's toenails helps to distinguish it from similar sub-species.



Parvipes yellow naped Amazon is very similar to the Panama. This hen has yellow on the nape of the neck. Immatures of this sub-species lack the yellow nape and may be easily confused with the Panama parrot.

of many photographs and the rarity of the Panama versus the yellow crown's abundance.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PANAMA PARROT

Admittedly, it is presumptuous of me to try to do what so many before me have not been able to do. Some have used museum specimens, some have observed captive specimens said to be Panamas, and some have merely copied the descriptions of others before them. My conclusions are based on careful personal observations of living specimens with the history of having been purchased in Panama. Later, I added four of these birds to my personal collection and have continued to make observations.

The Panama parrot is the smallest of the nine sub-species of *A. o. ochrocephala*, averaging 12 inches (30 centimeters) in total length. This one characteristic will often allow one to determine that a particular bird is not a Panama parrot.

The general coloration of the Panama is similar to other members of the species. The wing and tail feathers do not differ enough from other "*ochrocephalas*" to be useful in identification.

The physical characteristics that I have found most useful in separating the Panama from its close relatives are: 1) Pattern of yellow on the head, 2) Color of beak, and 3) Color of the toenails.

HEAD COLOR

The yellow on the head begins just above the cere, with no green intermixing. The yellow patch is more or less triangular with the apex at the mid-crown. Some yellow napes, especially those of the *parvipes* sub-species, have a very similar forehead and forecrown pattern. In some Panamas, there are orange-red bases to some of the yellow forecrown feathers, especially the first few rows. This characteristic is well seen on three of my Panamas and just detectable on the fourth.

COLOR OF BEAK

The lower mandible of the Panama is a light tan to grey. The upper mandible is the same color, but tipped with a dark grey. There is much individual variation among Panama beaks in regard to the extent of the dark area of the tip, and side-to-side variation has been observed frequently. The beak is not so valuable in determining that a bird is a Panama as it is in proving that one is *not*.

Continued on next page.

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COLOR OF TOENAILS

All of the dozen or so Panamas I have examined have had *some* colorless toenails with the exception of my hen who has grey nails. By colorless I mean clear to the point of being able to see blood vessels in their center (not unlike those of mature double yellow heads). Most of the specimens I have examined also had one or more darker nails (light to dark grey), but the colorless nails predominated.

COMPARISON OF CHARACTERISTICS

Now that we have some distinguishing points for comparison, let's compare and contrast some of the sub-species often confused with the Panama parrot.

Head Color

Head color alone will not always separate the yellow nape from the Panama. This is especially true regarding the *parvipes* nape, whose forehead and forehead are often identical to a typical Panama. The presence of yellow on the nape is the obvious identifying characteristic in mature birds. However, immatures of the *parvipes* sub-species may be indistinguishable from Panamas on the basis of head color. The typical yellow crowned Amazon will have some green between the cere and the yellow of the forehead. It may take close inspection of mature yellow crowns to detect the sometimes subtle intermixing of green with yellow just above the cere. The shape of the yellow patch is also a clue to the true identity of a specimen in question. The yellow crowned Amazon usually has an oval rather than triangular patch of yellow and it is usually wider.

Color Of Beak

The yellow crowned Amazon usually has a dark grey beak with an orange patch at the base of the upper mandible. The common yellow nape has a dark grey beak with a light grey base to the upper mandible. Both of these contrast to the much lighter beak of the Panama. The *parvipes* yellow nape has a light tan beak, not much different from the Panama. So, in immatures (no yellow on nape), one may have difficulty in using the beak to distinguish Panamas from *parvipes* yellow napes.

Color of Toenails

Both the common yellow nape and the yellow crown have toenails that could be described as dark grey to black. The *parvipes* yellow napes that I have

owned (three) have had medium to dark grey toenails. None have had colorless toenails.

PANAMA PARROTS AS PETS

I have been able to observe the Panama parrot and its behavior as a pet in only eight specimens. Admittedly, this is an insufficient sample to form conclusions. All in all, these eight birds have lived up to their reputation. Each has been tame and talking, probably having been nest robbed and hand fed, as seems to be the custom in Central America. Comparing the Panama to the several dozens of yellow napes I have owned, I would say that they are a bit more active and less tolerant of handling. All have been good talkers, a couple were exceptional. From my limited experience I cannot rank the Panama above or below the yellow nape; although, I suspect that much of the Panama's reputation has been gained by observations of misidentified yellow napes.

SUMMARY

Panama parrots do exist, although they are rare in collections in the United States. In the past, they were often confused with the yellow naped Amazon. More recently, they have been confused with the yellow crowned Amazon. Books are not reliable in their descriptions or photographs in regard to this parrot.

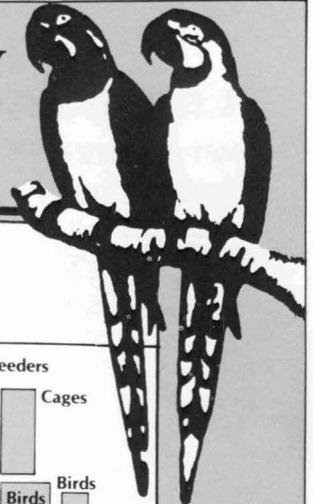
As a general rule, if a bird thought to be a Panama parrot has been recently imported through a commercial quarantine station it is probably *not* a Panama parrot (most likely it is a yellow crown). This statement will, no doubt, infuriate those who have used the confusing and inaccurate descriptions or mislabeled photographs to justify calling their yellow crown a Panama.

Now that some questions about the sub-species of *A. o. ochrocephala* have been answered, how about these: 1) Is there really a justification for separating the Belize yellow head from the double yellow head? 2) Is there really a bird to go with the name *A. o. xantholaema*? 3) Should the double yellow head and Tres Marias be accorded separate sub-species status? 4) If so, what are the distinguishing features? 5) Is there really a Natterer's Amazon? One potential question about this group has been answered to my satisfaction. There really is a *parvipes* yellow nape and it is quite different from the common variety.

You don't believe me? Will the real *parvipes* yellow nape please stand up? ●

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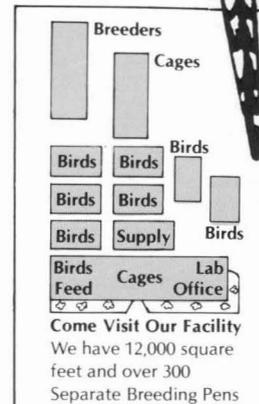


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