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Grand Cayman Parrots

A Status Report

by Terry Brykczynski
New York City

Editor's Note: Tony Silva's article on the Grand Cayman Amazon parrot (Watchbird, June/July '85) elicited two informed responses wishing to update facts and present the most current and correct status of the parrots. Ramon Noegel reported that for the first time in 15 years of observation he is encouraged and feels A.I. caymanensis is increasing its numbers on Grand Cayman Island. This increase, according to Noegel, is partly due to the successful mosquito abatement program conducted on Grand Cayman Island—mosquitos have been a hazard to baby parrots even in Florida as well as on the island. Noegel and his organization are cooperating with the Grand Cayman Island government by assisting in field studies and, of course, Noegel's success captive breeding the Cayman Island parrot is unparalleled. Noegel's concern at the moment is the numbers of foreign birds that have become established on Grand Cayman Island. He is worried that feral Indian ring-necked parakeets may have a serious effect on the future of the Cayman Island Amazon.

I personally feel that Noegel's eagle eye and close cooperation with Grand Cayman Island officials will bode well for the future status of the Cayman Island parrot.

The well-researched and authoritative report by Terry Brykczynski follows in its entirety. The AFA membership is much indebted to Noegel and Brykczynski for their thorough and up-to-date research.

A self-composed tricolored heron languidly beats along the wall of mangrove, reluctant to penetrate, while dozens of shrieking grackles, intent on ambushing dragonflies, swoop in acrobatic sorties from the dense jungle. The

charged twilight air hums with rush-hour activity. It feels odd to be able to drive nearly a mile into a tropical swamp but I'm grateful for the luxury, even though the road is nothing more than a ribbon of dredged marl barely wider than the car—the skeleton of an extensive network of mosquito control dikes piercing the interior of Grand Cayman. Within a few minutes of the engine being turned off the parrots approach.

You hear them first, staccato bursts of raucous squawks, then pairs of their distinctive silhouettes are spotted—stocky bodies with blunt heads, wingtips fluttering with deceptively powerful downstrokes. In the fading light none of their brilliant colors can be seen; only their black outlines and unmistakable chatter make for positive identification.

A severe drought has hurried the mango season and the parrots are returning for a rich feast of ripened food. Around me at least half a dozen pairs settle themselves for the night but no matter how hard I strain I cannot hear the gook-gook of youngsters begging for regurgitated food. It's mid-May and from reports of boys familiar with the nests the young are almost fully feathered except for a patch of bare throat. As I start the car and gingerly thread my way out of the mangrove, my headlights scatter hooting ground doves and I worry over the unpleasant prospect of punctures as huge claw-waving land crabs rush out of their burrows to do battle with my tires.

Of the five subspecies of the Cuban Amazon, two are confined to the Cayman Islands—a British Crown Colony a hundred and fifty miles south of Cuba. Together they provide unique examples of the best and the worst outlooks facing endangered island parrots today. *Amazona leucocephala* bes-

terna inhabits the smallest land mass of any Amazon in the world—38 square kilometers of Cayman Brac. Various reports put their number at less than 100 and declining inexorably. *Amazona leucocephala caymanensis* is found on the main island of Grand Cayman—76 square kilometers—and while accurate figures are yet to be established, they certainly number far more than earlier published estimates of 300 and may, in fact, be substantially increasing.

The two subspecies differ only subtly in outward appearance. Both have the rich green body plumage of typical Amazons but with their striking maroon abdominal patch, wine throats, rose cheeks and white eye rings, they are the more spectacularly colored of the parrots. In bright sunlight it's virtually impossible to pick them out among the lush greenery and vividly colored fruit.

It is this combination of beauty and rarity which has sometimes embroiled *caymanensis* in controversy. Readers of Rosemary Low's outstanding book, *Endangered Parrots*, will find an account of a Grand Cayman parrot who came into her breeding program via a sailor who quite unintentionally failed to secure the necessary export permits. The bird was seized by U.K. authorities and after an emotional appeal was overruled, returned to Grand Cayman.

"I guess they gave me all kinds of hell in Europe," sighs Kearney Gomez, Principal Secretary of the island's Department of Agriculture, Lands and Natural Resources and the CITES official responsible for Cayman's endangered wildlife. A slim, soft-spoken man, he recalls the Low incident as an unfortunate and regrettable episode. "Under the terms of the CITES convention, any bird taken illegally out of the country must be returned to that country. If a proper (initial) approach had been made we might have gone along with it. But that bird was taken illegally and it cost us \$800 to fly it back."

Gomez considers the parrot one of the island's most unique and prized possessions along with the blue iguana, the black coral, the Cayman orchids, and the green sea turtle. His staff has met with U.S. Customs officials in Miami and Houston to coordinate interdiction procedures to avert smuggling but he explains that the most effective tools for preserving the island's wildlife is public awareness. "In order to get people interested in conservation sometimes you have to educate them." He is most proud of a poster his depart-

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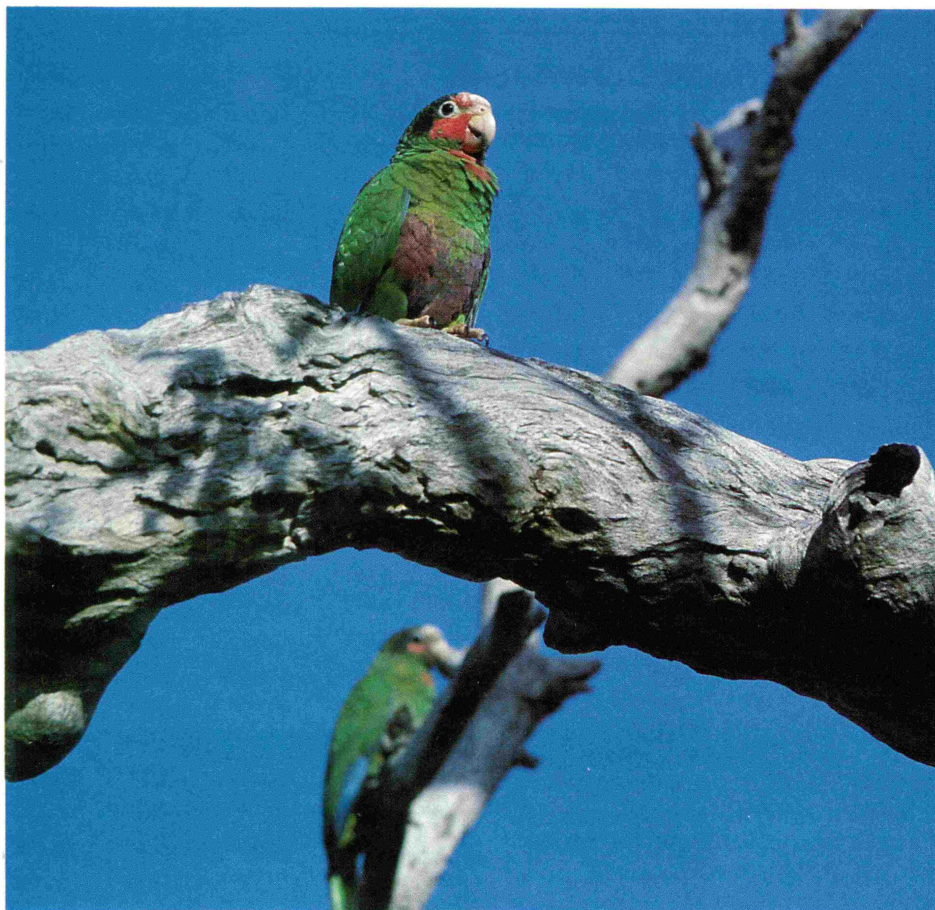
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A wild pair of Cayman Island parrots Amazona leucocephala caymanensis on Grand Cayman Island.



Cayman Island parrots nesting.

ment created last year prominently featuring *caymanensis* which was circulated in each district's school, blown up as a large transparency to inform arriving tourists, and distributed to participating CITES countries all over the world.

Last year Gomez' department spent \$12,000 on a wetlands research program, part of an intensive effort which has already seen five areas on the islands declared bird sanctuaries with a sixth proposed. The most important and ambitious government project recently undertaken is a parrot census. Supervised by expert field worker Patricia Bradley, the computer-aided census will operate on three fronts: the identification and isolation of the major breeding areas employing grid surveys and transects; a spotter-assisted flock count late in the year after the young have left the nests to gather in large gregarious groups; and a thorough inventory of the parrots kept by residents as pets. The survey, projected to take from two to three years to complete including Cayman Brac, will add critically important data to the base of knowledge established by Bradley's recently published field guide to the birds of the Cayman Islands. Superbly illustrated by the noted wildlife photographer Yves-Jacques Rey-Millet, this first-rate guide joins what is hopefully a growing practice of donating part of its selling price to the World Wildlife Fund.

"You take your snare on a long stick, stand quietly under the tree, and slip it over anything you can." The straightforward manager of one of the island's larger mango/banana farms frankly reveals his methods. He has probably captured more *caymanensis* than anyone else on the island. He has to, he explains with a shrug, or he'd literally be eaten out of business. "They eat the flowers, the green mangos, anything. They take a bite and go on to the next one. But the worst is when they pinch off the stem just to watch them drop."

He nods above my head, toward a sagging branch bent almost to the snapping point with heavy, ripe fruit. "See? Two parr-uts. . . ." He pronounces the word with the pleasing lilt of the island's musical speech. No matter how hard I stare I see nothing but leaves. "They're quiet when they have young to feed, they freeze—you don't know they're about."

At a wave of his machete two emerald missiles explode out of the tree—six feet from my face—whirring across the road into a field choked with plaintain



Pet parrots are displayed at an agricultural fair on Grand Cayman Island.

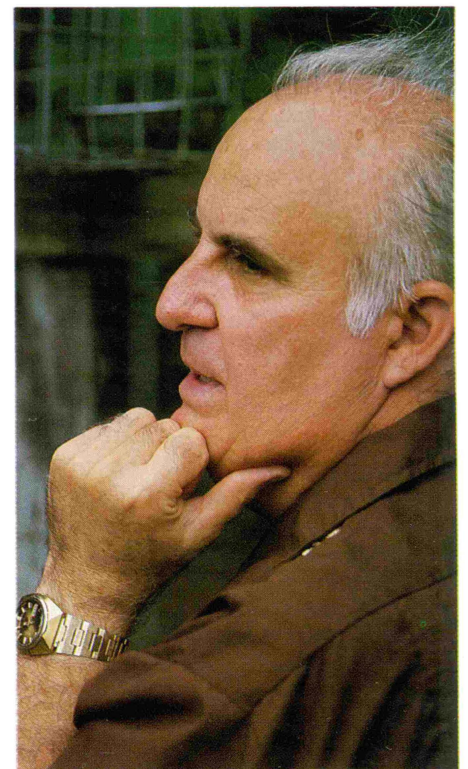
and paw-paws. "I don't catch them now, they're still on their nests. I'll wait another couple of weeks when the young are able to take care of themselves."

To keep the parrots away he has tried everything, even going to the trouble once of tying strips of colored plastic onto twigs until one tree took on the carnival disguise of a gas station on its grand opening. "When the wind blew, the parrots kept away. When it died, they came and bit off the plastic to get at the mangos." With some of his larger hybrid mangos selling for as much as a dollar, one can understand his frustration. And he is one of the fortunate farmers, one with a road to his orchard.

Capturing from 50 to 70 parrots a year, he sells them for \$30 to the two pet shops on the island who typically offer them to residents for \$60. The government gives tacit approval to such trade, largely because it is also involved in arranging loans for farmers and funding agricultural hybrid research—programs some see jeopardized by an uncontrolled parrot population. Live capture for the local pet trade also avoids the much more controversial shooting. Incredible as it may sound, at present there are no laws specifically preventing the hunting of parrots outside the designated sanctuaries although a growing public outcry will soon force the legis-



One of Noegel's most important contributions to aviculture is the "Noegel cage" now used in many variations by a large number of aviculturists.



Ramon Noegel, who with co-worker Greg Moss, has raised over one hundred Cayman Amazons.

lature to schedule hearings on the matter.

The Cayman Islands have set an extraordinary Caribbean example in marine conservation, banning spearfishing and setting strict bag limits and seasons on conch and lobster. A new statute totally prohibits the taking of any coral, algae, hermit crab or sponge as well as the export of any live fish, turtle egg, or "any free-moving sea creature." The importance of an economic incentive for the Island's strict stance cannot be overemphasized.

The crystal clear waters (Cayman has no rivers to discharge silt—underwater visibility of 150 feet or more is not unusual) and spectacular coral and sponge encrusted walls attract tourist dollars to what is arguably the finest scuba diving in the world. It is not unreasonable to expect that as more visitors arrive with the express purpose of freely observing the natural birdlife in a politically stable and eminently hospitable country that their economic clout will influence further legislation favorable to the parrots' survival.

The single most critical factor affecting island bird populations is land development. Grand Cayman has not escaped this pressure. Prime beachfront land that sold for \$50 a foot in 1967 can command as much as \$10,000 a foot today—the phenomenal increase due to the allure of the island's tax haven status. At present, two thirds of the main island resists developers' attention—largely mangrove swamp or arid bush which poses serious obstacles to facile exploitation.

The prognosis for the survival of free-ranging *besterna* on the smaller sister island of Cayman Brac, however, is bleak. A new road on the previously remote bluff has violated their last undisturbed sanctuary. It seems likely that as more of the critical bluff is cleared for construction the remaining bush will not be able to support a self-perpetuating parrot population.

One of the first to recognize the critical urgency of *besterna*'s vulnerability was Ramon Noegel—an aviculturist well known to readers of *Watchbird*. As early as 1971, Noegel focused his attention on Cayman's endangered Amazons, importing to his Florida aviaries a small group of *caymanensis* (with the help of former Washington National Zoo Associate Director Lear Grimmer) which bred for the first time in captivity in 1974. A group of *besterna* subsequently collected in 1974 bred—again for the first time in captivity—a few years later. To date

Noegel together with co-worker Greg Moss have reared over a hundred Cayman Amazons—an unparalleled achievement resulting in an astonishing three generations of captive breeding.

Aviculturists experienced with the difficulties of Amazon husbandry can best appreciate the enormous significance of Noegel and Moss' accomplishment—a feat sometimes taken for granted if numbers alone are held up as a prize. At the risk of contradicting Noegel's often ventured claim that "there are no secrets in breeding these Amazons," it must be pointed out that he is directly responsible for several critically important methods of revolutionary import for aviculture.

Foremost among his innovations is the "Noegel Cage"—a suspended welded wire aviary three and a half feet wide and high and thirteen feet long. Discarded food and droppings fall through a wire floor to the ground where they are raked away daily—effectively and ingeniously controlling spoilage, parasites, and predators. Square, not round, perches of roughly milled softwood prevent leg tendon deterioration while the cage volume promotes sufficient free flight. The portable aviaries are grouped in rotating positions simulating a flocking configuration yet at the same time maintaining a critical privacy for the induction of pair bonding.

Noegel's isolation of the parameters of personal space is, perhaps, his greatest contribution. The interior of the aviaries are kept scrupulously inviolate. Nest boxes are attached externally to allow covert inspection; feeding and watering is likewise accomplished without ever opening or entering the cage. Because the presence of an unfamiliar person can affect the birds' psychological well-being, casual visitors are denied entry to the grounds. It may be that there are few secrets to successful Amazon husbandry but there is no doubt that hard work and constant attention to details are of fundamental importance.

The Cayman Island's government in the past has contributed modest financial assistance to Noegel's efforts, recognizing the significance of a captive breeding colony of Cayman parrots. Not only is a geographically distant population insurance against a catastrophic disaster (such as the hurricane which severely depleted *besterna* on Cayman Brac a few years ago) but in addition an isolated colony serves as a bank for genetic diversity—both factors looming significantly in the crisis cur-

rently facing *besterna*.

If *besterna* is doomed—as it regrettably seems to be—on Cayman Brac, what can be done? Consideration is being given to the third island in the colony—Little Cayman. With 28 square kilometers it is only slightly smaller than the Brac and of all the three islands, Little Cayman promises to maintain its rugged character for some years to come. In an interview granted to A.F.A. on May 21 of this year, Principal Secretary Gomez released hopeful news—a proposal to declare a substantial portion of the eastern end of Little Cayman a bird refuge (in addition to the present sanctuary on the western end now protecting a flourishing booby rookery).

Only five miles separate Little Cayman from Cayman Brac—a distance which does not prevent *besterna* from temporary daytime feeding visits although no breeding has ever been observed on Little Cayman. Obstacles exist, however, for a *besterna* colony to be casually established, among them frequent drought conditions and a scarcity of suitable dead trunks for nest activities (Cayman Amazons are invariably seen in the company of indigenous woodpeckers and flickers and are thought by some observers to expropriate their nests). Research concentrating on practical solutions to these problems is of vital urgency if *besterna* is to be saved.

The aviculturist with even a casual interest in the current status of wild parrots may view conditions in the Cayman Islands as a somewhat awkward situation, verging on a paradox with some government policies in direct conflict with one another. It must be pointed out that this posture is by no means unique to the Cayman Islands and indeed is exhibited by most countries harboring endangered species. Given the rather pragmatic nature of Caymanian history it is to be hoped that its rich tradition of individual accomplishment and self-reliance will continue to assert itself over the threat of short term expediency.

In a shop at Grand Cayman's impressive modern airport is to be found small but perhaps the most hopeful evidence yet for Principal Secretary Gomez' confidence in education paving the way for preservation. For the first time in this frequent visitor's memory I was able to buy a t-shirt on which was reproduced—not the traditional brilliant tropical sunset—but rather two of the most beautiful parrot sub-species in the world. The Cayman Island Amazons. ●

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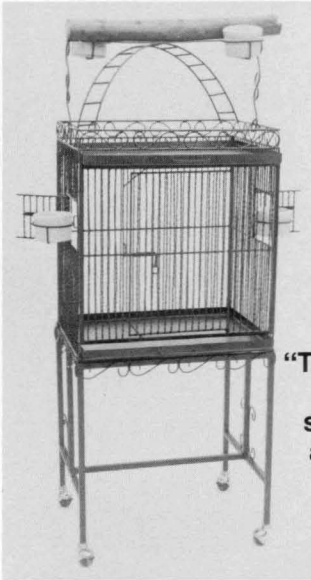
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