

# First Captive Breeding of the Yellow-shouldered Amazon

(*Amazona barbadensis barbadensis* and *Amazona barbadensis rothschildsi*)

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This colorful little parrot, the yellow-shouldered Amazon parrot, often mistaken for a small double-yellow head, may owe its current popularity to Rosemary Low. She has written extensively on this bird and done in-the-field research of its Netherland Antilles habitat. It was due to her inspiring and informative discourse on *barbadensis* at the 1979 A.F.A. Convention that

prompted my young assistant Greg Moss to begin to seek out specimens in the fall of that year for our captive breeding program. After many phone calls, flights to Texas and a lot of cash expended, we came up with ten long-term pets. All sexed out as males with the exception of one. Two of the males are on loan to us from the Ellen Trout Zoo (Texas) and San Diego Zoo. One

was brought back from Venezuela by a well-known baseball professional. Most came to the U.S. by missionaries and merchant marines. By meeting the former owners we obtained a detailed history of each bird's place of origin. The old hen and two of the males had come from the Island of Bonaire, the rest from the coast of Venezuela. These additions gave us a total of three females and eleven males.

We paired the old hen with a like subspecies male. The two young females were paired with like nominate species. It might be mentioned here that, like Rosemary Low, I see little difference between the two races except that in most specimens the nominate is larger, in some specimens quite large, and has a darker green body and more golden yellow on the head. The yellow on the shoulders is more extensive. With so few examples it is difficult to make a judgment as many differences can be attributed to individualism.

In 1981 the *rothschildsi* pair produced two clutches, one in May and the other in July, consisting of three eggs each. One chick hatched from the first and two chicks from the second but the parents failed to rear them. In 1982 the pair again nested and three eggs were deposited on May 22, 25, and 28. Due to the previous bad experience we placed one of the eggs under a nesting pair of Cayman Brac Amazons (*A. leucocephala hesternna*). It hatched June 16th and was well cared for by its foster parents until removed for hand rearing at ten days of age. In the meantime the two remaining eggs had become quite soiled by the hen's bad nest habits and failed to hatch though both were fertile. Prior to this, one of the two nominate race pairs deposited three eggs on May 13, 16 and 19. The inexperienced young female was so often out of the nest box that we decided to move the eggs to a pair of Jamaican yellow-bill Amazons (*A. collaria*). The three eggs, being fertile, hatched June 9, 10 and 12. The foster parents gave excellent care to the chicks which became very fat in appearance. They were removed between ten days and two weeks of age and hand reared.

All four chicks at time of writing (Dec. '82) are fully on their own in an outside aviary. They are, in size, nearly as large as their parents which means when they reach full size in four years they will prove larger than the two parent pairs. I have noticed this in our second and third generation *leu-*

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Photos by Life Fellowship, Seffner, FL



World's first captive breeding: yellow-shouldered Amazons, hatched June 1982. Foreground: *A. barbadensis rothschildsi*. Rear three: *A. barbadensis barbadensis*.



Three *A. b. barbadensis* youngsters, November 1982.



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*cocephala*. This limited experience shows captive bred offspring in a few generations may show an increase in size. The grandparent *leucocephala* are approximately a third smaller than their grandchildren. The young Cuban Amazons bred and hand reared by Velega Hart in the sixties, from the Herb Melvin pair which Herb obtained from Edward J. Boosey who had bred them in 1956 in England, proved very large birds also. Likewise these yellow-shoulder chicks are following this same tendency. It will be interesting to see in another generation or two if this growth increase continues. It has been the belief of former aviculturists that captive bred generations degenerate into smaller birds. It is possible that this was due to improper diet and that, in fact, captive generations on a proper, nutritionally-sound wide range of foods should, as I suspect, produce much larger specimens. This may account for gigantism in some of the Island species if we knew what foods might trigger such growth.

Though often not included, *A. rothschildsi* from the Netherland Antilles should be included as a West Indian parrot. Its restricted area plagued with drought, lack of abundance of natural food supply and increasing human population places this Amazon on the threatened list. The nominate race is common only in limited areas along the coast of Venezuela. Therefore, these brightly colored and excitable little parrots should be considered by all breeders seriously interested in conservation by captive programs. I know of only two other pairs in the U.S. in breeding set-ups. Individual specimens are, however, available and should go to breeders. All of ours seem perfectly willing to breed, even more so than most other species. The problem with captive breeding then may lie in their hyperactive dispositions necessitating fostering their eggs under other parrots or hatching the eggs in an incubator. Often the parents, due to this excitableness, may not be trusted to rear the young.

Rosemary Low has been working with this species for several years and has greatly contributed to the knowledge of their habitat. She has, I believe, three pairs and has, on occasion, had fertile eggs but her experience has been the same as ours, i.e., poor parents. This year, however, one of her pairs produced three eggs. A newly hatched chick was rescued on July 15th and it was successfully hand reared. This is a

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first European captive breeding for Rosemary. Rosemary's dedication to this species deserves a great deal of praise because the odds she had to overcome in obtaining her original specimens were tremendous. Listening to old line British aviculturists who insisted eggs be left with the parent birds, pioneering a new species for captive breeding, etc. are just a few of the obstacles she faced. Congratulations are in order for this laudable achievement.

It is interesting to note here that a pair in the collection of Jean Delacour hatched chicks in 1977 but the parents failed to raise them to maturity.

Rosemary points out that her *barbadensis* are easily sight sexed. "It became apparent that they could be sexed by the extreme aggressiveness of the males. They are intrepid; there is nothing they would hesitate to attack when in breeding condition." For some unknown reason this fierce aggression is oddly enough displayed by all our specimens against Greg Moss. Even during breeding season the pairs will take food from my fingers but instantly seek to attack him when he approaches their aviaries. As individuals they were all delightful pets when we received them but soon turned vicious when paired. The males are very protective of the hens to the extent they would easily kill a hen if we did not keep their wings clipped. We recently sold a male yellow-shoulder and instructed the new owner to clip the male's wing because he also had a hen. The wings were not clipped and the male consequently beat the hen so badly he had to be removed. Instead of clipping the male's wing, the owner ground the upper mandible down to the quick which not only kept the bird from attacking its mate but kept it from feeding as well, therefore, it did not breed this spring. This is a very inhumane and unnecessary practice. Clipping one wing is an old and safe practice by knowledgeable aviculturists who have saved many psittacine females in this way for thirty years that I know of.

We can all learn from each other's experiences and this is the reason I so often include these little experiences in my writings. Aviculture has become a science in the last decade and the more we pool our knowledge the more successes will be experienced, thus justifying aviculture from a conservation standpoint and insuring these birds for future generations to come. ●