



from
the field

Amazona oratrix belizensis

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The sun was setting into the distant horizon, creating one of the most magnificent of sunsets I had yet observed in the tropics. Among the distant treetops, a familiar call was barely audible. Described by Paul Slud as a "kurr-owk, kurr-owk," it is easily recognized as that of the Yellow-headed Parrot (*Amazona oratrix*) as it sounds like no other

psittacine that inhabits the area. Proceeding a short distance further up the highway, we located the parrots in a Caribbean pine tree, twisting and turning while vocalizing loudly. What in reality was only three birds sounded like 20! I observed the birds until darkness crept in, then proceeded back into town.

In the United States, the final word as to the official common and scientific names of avian species in North and Middle America is the "Checklist of North American Birds" published by the American Ornithologists' Union under the advisement of the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature. In 1983, the checklist included birds found in Central America, therefore dealt with Yellow-headed Parrot taxonomy.

It should be noted that while a number of ornithologists do not agree with the AOU's decisions, the fact remains that scientific journals generally support its usage. So what did the committee decide and is it different from our past taxonomy? Up until this point, most aviculturists



Amazona oratrix photographed in northeastern wilderness of Mexico by the author. Note yellow extends beyond cheeks and down head to nape.

Photos by Jack Clinton-Eitnrear



Typical "*Amazona oratrix belizensis*." Note yellow does not extend beyond the cheeks and forehead areas. Photo taken at the Belize Zoo, Belize, Central America, by the author.

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and ornithologists considered Yellow-heads found in Mexico and Belize as one or more subspecies of the species *ochrocephala*. The subspecies were often debatable with little consistency in usage. For example, while Joseph Forshaw in "Parrots of the World" considered the Belize subspecies as *A.o. belizensis*, Stephen M. Russell, the author of the "Distributional Study of the Birds of British Honduras (Belize)" lists the Belize birds as *A.o. oratrix*.

Back at the species level, the AOU committee on taxonomy has ruled the Belizean birds are, in fact, members of the species *oratrix*, not *ochrocephala*. So that you do not become totally confused, I refer you to the enclosed chart.

Forshaw (1978) AOU (1983)

Amazona ochrocephala sp.	This is actually three distinct species:
	A. oratrix
	A. ochrocephala
	A. auropalliata

Distribution of three species of Amazona parrots formerly considered *A. ochrocephala*:

A. oratrix

(Yellow-headed Parrot)

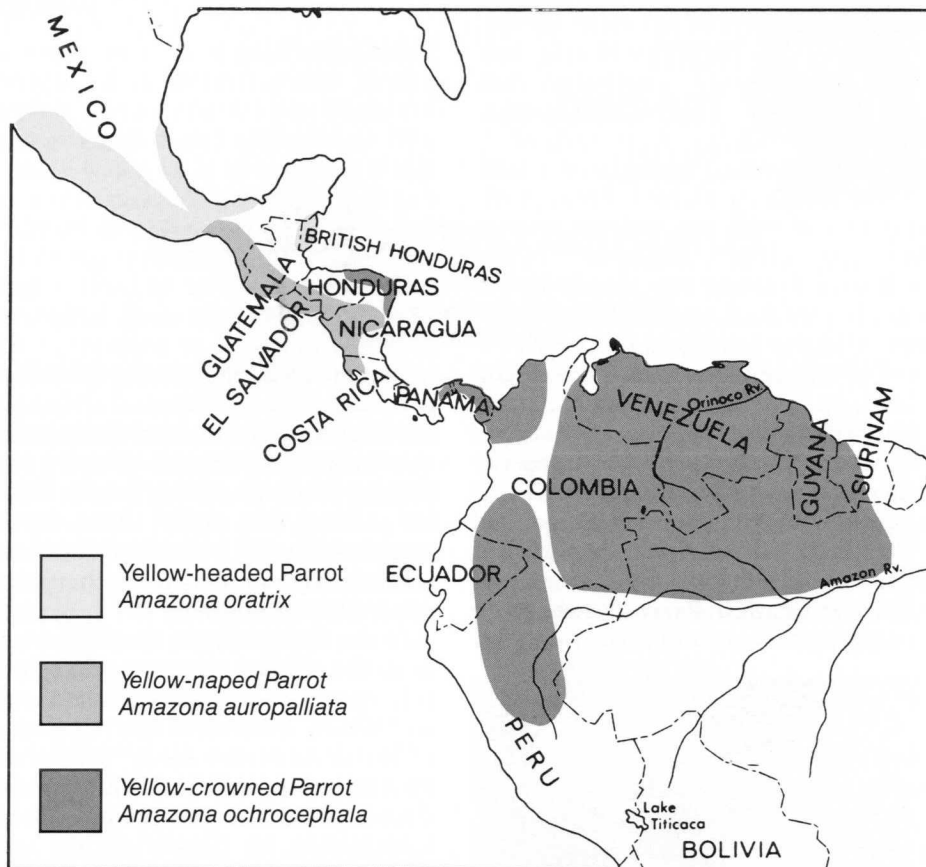
Found on Pacific slope of Mexico south to Oaxaca and along the Gulf-Caribbean slope south into Belize.

A. auropalliata

(Yellow-naped Parrot)

From Oaxaca south to Costa Rica on Pacific slope and into Honduras (not Belize) and northeastern Nicaragua.

Distribution of Yellow-headed, Yellow-naped and Yellow-crowned Parrots



A. ochrocephala

(Yellow-crowned Parrot)

Found from Honduras south to Amazonian Brazil.

Both *ochrocephala* and *auropalliata* can be found in Caribbean Honduras as well as both *oratrix* and *auropalliata* in Oaxaca, Mexico. In both cases, however, no evidence of interbreeding has been documented. It is, therefore, now the consensus of the scientific community that what was once considered one species with several subspecies is now three distinct species. Having observed *A. oratrix* both in northeastern Mexico and Belize, it has become apparent that the bird is not exactly the same in both areas. Belizean birds have, generally, less yellow on their heads. In only one wild specimen have I observed the yellow extending down the crown to the nape of the head. Belize birds seem to be a bit smaller and of different body proportions than their northeastern Mexico counterparts.

Most of my observations of *Amazona oratrix* in Mexico have been in arid scrub in northern

Tamaulipas. Surviving on the tender new growth of trees and shrubs, seed-pods from the numerous acacias and an infrequent trip to feed upon palm fruits that grow along the coast and in riverine areas, their thorn forest home can be quite an inhospitable place, especially in August when that tropical sun irradiates the area. In addition to the summer heat, the area is not infrequently the victim of a winter "northern" that cools the area down to 40°F or below. Parrots that inhabit this area are "tough" birds. It is little wonder that birds from this area tend to be larger than those inhabiting other parts of their range. Their ability to survive in this harsh environment is undoubtedly reflected in their ability to adapt to foreign environments and establish viable feral populations.

While the AOU does not include subspecies in their list, I suspect that sufficient evidence exists for the creation of *Amazona oratrix belizensis*. Nevertheless, whether you're observing yellowheads in northeastern Mexico or Belize, it's now considered *Amazona oratrix*, not *Amazona ochrocephala*. ●

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