

# Grand Cayman Parrots: An Update

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**Note:** The following article is based on a report of a census of *Amazona leucocephala caymanensis* and *Amazona leucocephala hesternus* undertaken in 1985 by Patricia E. Bradley and sponsored by the Portfolio of Development and Natural Resources, Grand Cayman, British West Indies.

While not completely a cause for celebration, a recently published population census of Grand Cayman parrots indicates that previous reports of their imminent extinction have been exaggerated. The 1985 wild population estimate for *A.l. caymanensis* is 1,351; for *A.l. hesternus*, 38 to 45. While the former figure is welcome news, the latter suggests stern measures are necessary to maintain a wild population of this endangered and seriously threatened subspecies. The census also estimated parrots kept in captivity, finding at least 500 on Grand Cayman and at least 200 on Cayman Brac. However, nearly all of these birds are kept solely as pets, effectively eliminating a breeding role in propagating the species. In addition to flock counts, a number of other variables were studied which significantly impact the population.

Concerned by unsubstantiated reports of a declining population, the Cayman Islands government funded the study which required seven months of rigorous fieldwork conducted on the two main Caribbean islands in 1985. Led by Patricia Bradley, who drew upon her three years' work preparing a field guide to Cayman birds, more than a dozen fieldworkers contributed to the effort. Although some bush roads existed, paths often had to be laid by compass and cut through dense mangrove swamp or across harsh, knife-sharp ironshore (limestone) outcroppings. Roosting colonies were initially located by extrapolating binocular-aided sightings of dawn/dusk flight paths and, once pin-pointed, actual nest areas were logged and inspected often with the help of "cherry pickers."

Although cavity-nesting birds, Grand Cayman parrots are unable to initiate nest construction and are dependent on old woodpecker nests or tree hollows caused by fungal or termite activity.



Grand Cayman parrot (*Amazona leucocephala caymanensis*)



Northern flicker, male (*Colaptes auratus gundlachi*), a welcome assistant for creating nesting sites for parrots.

Trunk diameter must be a minimum of 20 cm. This is a severe handicap for the Cayman Brac subspecies since no woodpeckers exist on this sister island and most of the suitable mature dead trees were destroyed by Hurricane David in 1980.

The average clutch size of *A.l. caymanensis* was found to be 3.2 with a fledging success average of 1.8. Comparable data for *A.l. hesternus* were not obtained for fear of inducing nest aban-

donment. However, fledging success for this subspecies was estimated at 1.25.

Although no figures in the report are given for total annual hatchings, multiplying the fledging success rate by the total number of adult pairs gives a theoretical upper limit of approximately 900. Actual estimates of juveniles observed in flocks were 45%, or 416 total, indicating substantial annual replenishment yields on the main island.

Significant though unquantifiable trapping, hunting, and predation mortalities exist and the report sets forth a number of protective recommendations for managing the wild parrot population. Among these measures are pleas to remove both parrots from the list of game species, controls on trapping with a ban on the removal of unfledged parrots from nests, instituting restrictions on "wanton clearing of habitat until required for immediate use," and establishing a local captive breeding program for *A. l. besterna*.

The prognosis for free-ranging *A. l. besterna* is grim, with the capacity to carry wild parrots on the small 38 square kilometer Cayman Brac seemingly doomed. Apparently more secure, *A. l. caymanensis* is still gallantly holding its own on the main island.

As aviculturists Rosemary Low and Ramon Noegel (among others) have noted, a high political cost is attached to any island parrot conservation effort; the situation on Grand Cayman being no exception. Land management issues on this British Crown colony are especially controversial due to the island's recent explosive financial growth. Land development, with its concomitant habitat destruction, remains for the foreseeable future the single greatest threat to wild Grand Cayman parrots.

#### For Further Information

Readers who wish to order the full report (*Cayman Islands Government Technical Publication No. 1, 1986 — Parrot Census*) should write to: Portfolio of Development and Natural Resources, Government Offices, George Town, Grand Cayman, British West Indies.

Grand Cayman is easily reached by frequently scheduled one-hour flights from Miami; tourist accommodations (lodging, restaurants, car rental, etc.) are of excellent standards. Visitors interested in the island's birdlife should not fail to obtain a copy of *Birds of the Cayman Islands*, by Patricia Bradley and Yves-Jacques Rey-Millet (difficult to order in the U.S. but easily available on Grand Cayman). The guidebook and the parrot census contain detailed maps which make bird observation (especially wading birds and parrots) remarkably easy. Somewhat more difficult to reach, the sister islands of Little Cayman and Cayman Brac offer rewarding birding as well — the rare *Amazona leucocephala besterna* on the Brac and a spectacular frigatebird and booby rookery on Little Cayman. ●

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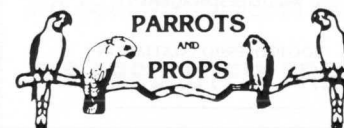
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