



PHOTO BY MARK MOORE

Juvenile birds socialize and learn flocking behavior in large exercise aviaries.

THE PUERTO RICAN AMAZON

A U.S. Indigenous Endangered Species

By Rick Jordan

The United States does not have such a great track record pertaining to the conservation of its native parrots. Historically two species of Psittacines have been recorded as “native” to the continental United States, the Carolina Parakeet (*Conurensis carolinakelelj*) and the Thick-billed Parrot (*Rynchopstitta pachyrhync*). The last wild specimen of the Carolina Parakeet was killed in Okeechobee County, Florida, in 1904, and the last captive bird died at the Cincinnati Zoo on Feb. 21, 1918. This was the male specimen “Incas,” who died within a

year of his mate “Lady Jane.” Coincidentally, Incas died in the same aviary cage in which the last Passenger Pigeon, “Martha,” had died nearly four years prior. It was not until 1939, however, that it was determined that the Carolina Parakeet had become extinct. The Thick-billed Parrot disappeared from the southwest U.S. in the early 1900s, but is still found in remote parts of Mexico. It was also re-introduced into its historical range in the 1980s, but due to some technical issues with the program, it vanished once again from the skies of the United States.

However, a much more encouraging story can be told of the Amazon parrot that is found on the island of



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Above, the group gathers before the tour. Below, Jafet Velez-Valentin, director of the Puerto Rican Parrot Recovery Program, welcomes guests.

Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory. The Puerto Rican Amazon (*Amazona vittata*) was once so close to extinction that its total population numbers could be counted on the fingers and toes of two American children. During the 1960s and 1970s, the U.S. government took an interest in this endangered bird and initiated the bureaucracy needed to protect it in its native habitat. Later the inclusion of captive breeding into that program would make a huge difference and kick-start the success realized today.

The total estimated population of the Puerto Rican Amazons was less than 50 birds back in the 1960s. By the early 1970s, population estimates showed that number had fallen to around 13 individuals. And although parrots were popular as pets around the world, the pet trade could not be blamed for the demise of this species, as there were none in captivity off the island. Some were kept as pets by island residents, but it was so rarely encountered that





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Above, juveniles perch high away from visitors. Below, the tour of the hurricane shelter is quite impressive.



thankfully pet owners settled for other “talking” species and did not pursue *vittata*. Instead, habitat destruction and the island’s location, sitting right in the path of many strong hurricanes, reduced its numbers to a critical level.

The habitat of *vittata* is the island rainforest starting at about 800 feet above sea level. The average rainfall in the native habitat is in excess of 200 inches per year and some days it may rain 37 inches in one 24-hour period. It is said the bamboo and other plants in the forest can grow a foot a day. Interestingly, *vittata* will utilize more than 80 different plants and shrubs within the native habitat, but it prefers the Sierra Palm seed as its main food source. Wild birds may eat as many as 500 seeds per day, per bird. (Velez, interview with Jordan)

The actual facility is located in the El Yunque rainforest in Puerto Rico. The initial conservation program aimed at saving the species set the ground work for later, more

successful efforts, but it did not concentrate on captive breeding. A new attitude about captive breeding and its role in in situ conservation of parrots was later introduced and became the saving grace for this little non-descript amazon through the hard work and dedication of Jafet Velez-Valentin and his staff at the Puerto Rican Parrot Recovery Program. Using the proven methods of captive breeding, Velez and his staff managed to boost the captive population of birds to more than 200 today. In addition, there are another 30 or more birds flying free in the original habitat.

There is another breeding facility in Puerto Rico located in the nearby Rio Abajo forest. This facility is managed by the Puerto Rican Department of Natural Resources. Ricardo Valentín is the person in charge, and he and Velez are off to a good start in saving the Puerto Rican Amazon. The two facilities work together on certain aspects of conservation, and this gives the native parrot an even bigger chance of survival. Recently there was a release of captive-produced birds back into the wild; this release was orchestrated by the Rio Abajo facility. This first attempt has resulted in plans to release more captive-hatched birds in the near future from both facilities.



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Breeding pairs are monitored 24/7. Aviaries as well as nest-boxes are fitted with digital cameras. Perimeter security, below, is also high-tech.



Last November, a group of parrot enthusiasts just happened to be cruising by the facility. Seemingly without any hesitation, Velez invited them to view the facility and to give input on this valuable pilot program designed to combine captive breeding and traditional in situ conservation efforts. The tour was a thrill for all involved, and a chance to see a species that is not displayed in any zoo on the mainland of the U.S. or anywhere else in the world, for that matter.

The group of motley, tourist-attired aviculturists, made their way by bus to the top of the mountain and to the security gates of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Puerto Rican Parrot Recovery Program's headquarters. There they were greeted by Velez and a hot, muggy, Caribbean day turned into an adventure to be cherished for a lifetime. Velez began by giving the history of the project and discussing its "less than encouraging historical results," and took the group through the evolution of the facility, its staff, and its eventual success with the species. He showed them incubation facilities, nest-box cameras, hurricane evacuation facilities, and he explained how and why they do the things they do to train their captive-bred birds for eventual release back into their native habitat.

Aviculturists that would normally build a nest-box from plywood were shown the natural way the project



PHOTOS BY MARK MOORE

Above, breeding pairs are nestled into the native flora of the island. Next page, top, repurposed wood is used for natural substrate, nesting and enrichment. Next page, bottom, Jafet Velez-Valentin and Brent W. Gattis examine a nest-box design constructed from PVC pipe.





PHOTO BY MARK MOORE

The state-of-the-art facility includes a kitchen that helps to ensure the success of the project.

engineers constructed nesting materials from repurposed native trees. And, many nest boxes were constructed of PVC. They were educated on the feeding regime of captive birds, and the “training” required so that young birds would recognize native plants as food once they were released. Small groups were even given access to the giant flight training aviary where captive produced birds were conditioned for flight before release. The exchange of knowledge between parrot breeders and government conservationists that took place that day was priceless. You could almost feel the progress from the old ways, to a new and invigorating outlook and camaraderie.

Velez is well aware of the pressures facing the wild population of *Amazona vittata*, and he is actively involved in trying to solve some of the issues that may limit the survival of the species in its native habitat. The conservation of a species requires hard work and a dedication to the

cause that goes above and beyond the call of duty. Without such personal dedication, this project would merely be a science project. Conservation, especially in this situation and with such a limited habitat, requires education of the local people as well. Additionally, it all requires funding and cooperation. We all owe a big thank you and congratulations to Velez, Valentín, their staff, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Puerto Rican Department of Natural Resources, and the people of Puerto Rico for their dedication to this program. Captive breeding and conservation working hand-in-hand to save a species gives all of aviculture a renewed reason to continue its endeavors.

Footnote: A great deal of gratitude is extended to Dwight Greenberg for helping to organize this visit and the necessary transportation required to get such a group from the docks, up the mountain and back again.