



Photo by Dwight Greenberg

The St. Lucia Amazon

Amazona versicolor

By Rick Jordan



St. Lucia is a small island in the southern Caribbean known for its pristine rainforests. The St. Lucia Amazon or St. Lucia Parrot (*Amazona versicolor*), one of the most amazing parrots in the world, is endemic to this island and is the national bird of St. Lucia.

As a bird person in general, when I travel I always try to see the native birds or get a glance at any native parrots when I am visiting a country or area where they can be seen. Recently, on a cruise through the Caribbean I had the opportunity to visit a small education center operated by the St. Lucia forestry department. It was not far from the port of Castries, the capitol of the island nation. With so many other sights to take in on a short visit, including breath taking water falls, incredible forested mountains, and the varied fields of tropical fruits and crops, the trip by short bus to the education center was a vacation in and of itself. But I will never forget the sense of awe I felt when I glanced upon

their national bird for the very first time. You just find yourself staring when you are face to face with the stunning bright blue faces of *Amazona versicolor*.

It might be important to mention that the education center, funded by the St. Lucia Forestry Department, is always in need of money for improvements. They take in sick or injured wildlife and rehabilitate it for release or use in their education programs. Being an island nation, supplies such as good welded wire, commercially manufactured cage clips, bowls, perches, and things we often take for granted, are simply not available. If they can be acquired, they are often at a premium and not affordable to these programs. Remember that St. Lucia is a very poor country, and often the governmental budgets do not include wildlife programs. It is for this reason that the people on our cruise all chipped in and put together a donation when we were allowed to view the facility. In the photos you will see several of the visitors from this “unofficial” group of AFA members and supporters. Our group included me, Rick Jordan, Lena Weigel (Rick’s mom), Mark Moore, Margaret Steimling (Rick’s Aunt), Marcia Romig, Beth and Dwight Greenberg, Matt and Allison Baird, Alycia and Eric Antheunisse, Katie Secor, Madelen and Ronald Landis, and Mary Ellen LePage.

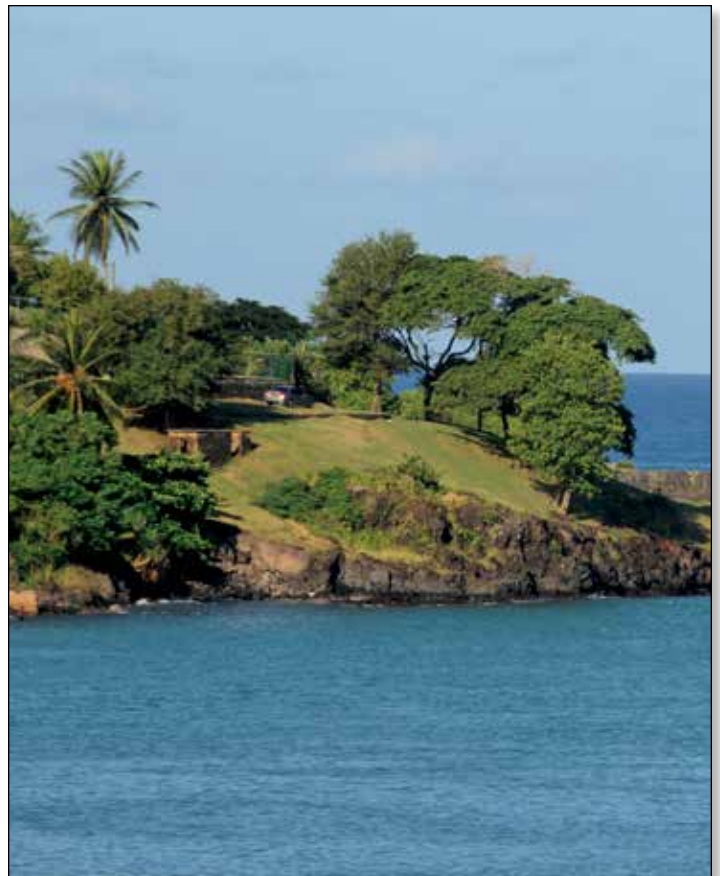
A rather large bird for an amazon, the St. Lucia parrot measures approximately 16-18 inches in length. The color of the wings are generally green with bright splashes of red on the carpal edge, but the most striking physical feature is the intense blue head color and splashes of red on the neck, wing edges and abdomen. In many ways it does resemble the Red-necked amazon (*Amazona arusiana*) endemic to the island of Dominica, but the colors of *versicolor* are much more intense.

In the past three decades, the conservation of this species has been a major concern. In the early 90’s, island populations were estimated to be as low as 200-250 birds. By mid-1990 due to intense education programs on the island, and real field work by the forestry division and non-profit organizations working in St. Lucia, the population was up to an estimated 300-500. During my latest visit to the island I spoke with the Assistant Chief Forest Officer, Mr. Lydon John. He informed me that the latest counts accomplished only recently estimate the island population to be over 1500 and probably closer to 2000.

The St. Lucia parrot prefers a mountainous habitat 500-900 meters in altitude but also forages in secondary growth (Juniper and Parr 1998). Like most amazon parrots, it nests in hollow trees. The breeding season appears to be February thru April or May. Apparently a governmentally approved captive breeding program for this species exists on the island and has been successful, fledging 19 individuals as of 1995 (Copsey 1995). But until very recently, the St. Lucia parrot did not exist in aviculture anywhere outside of its native island. There were a few individual representatives in zoo-type establishments in Europe, but no breeding successes were ever reported ex situ of the island. The species was like a rare jewel; it was desirable but not available.



Photos by Dwight Greenberg (this page, following page)





Malay Rose Apple (*Syzygium malaccense*)



Native Palm Fruit



A pair of St. Lucia Amazons rest on a branch at the rehab center



The rehabilitation center uses these cages to house the St. Lucia Amazons that need care



A pair of Amazons snack on an apple in St. Lucia



Photos on this page, by Dwight Greenberg / The Visitors Center at the Union Nature Trail & Interpretive Centre St. Lucia



Mark Moore / Pictured from left to right, back row: Marcia Romig, Matt Baird, Rick Jordan, Alycia Antheunisse, Eric Antheunisse, row 2: Allison Stuart, Margaret Steimling, Katy Secor, Beth Greenberg, Lena Weigel, Dwight Greenberg (Mark Moore, not pictured).



Mark Moore / Rick Jordan and Lyndon Johns in St. Lucia



Dwight Greenberg / Beth Greenberg and Mark Moore in St. Lucia

The Conservation of a species with a restricted island range is a difficult task. Human inhabitants of these islands must rely on their available natural resources to make a living; this often leads to the destruction of prime habitat. Life on St. Lucia is no different. The local people cut the forests to make room for agriculture such as banana crops, sugar cane, or other produce. Thankfully tourism is a leading livelihood on St. Lucia as well, which may actually help to conserve some of its forests in line with today's "eco-tourism" ideals.

It is prudent to mention that some exceptional conservation work has been accomplished on St. Lucia by Mr. Paul Butler of the organization known as "R.A.R.E". The work of Paul Butler is well known on several Caribbean islands where he has educated the local inhabitants on the importance of their native birds. In fact, on virtually any island where RARE has worked, you might see a photo of native parrots on city trash cans or public busses. Mr. Butler and RARE have managed to instill pride and respect for nature in the local people, which has resulted in their protection of native birds, rather than hunting or taking nestlings for the local or international live-bird trade.

The government and forestry service of St. Lucia has taken this concept one step further by establishing reserves, which will also help to bolster future populations of the St. Lucia parrot. This has certainly made a big difference in the survivability of a parrot that, due to the location of its habitat, is so vulnerable to hurricanes, and due to its beauty, would be a potential collector's item or would be harvested and used as pets.

While chatting with a forestry service worker on St. Lucia, I heard that there has been a strange "happening" among these birds around the island. It seems that some of them are being found on the ground "rolling around" or acting "drunk". The people of the island have been bringing these "sick" birds to the forestry service for rehabilitation. Although the source of the "illness" has not yet been discovered, most of the affected birds do recover and are eventually released back into the wild or are maintained for educational or breeding purposes. Perhaps some plant, fruit, or berry is producing a toxin that causes this strange illness.

The St. Lucia parrot is certainly very vulnerable to natural disaster, especially hurricanes. The island is situated in a corridor often traversed by these storms on their way toward North America. As a "bird person" I find myself concerned about any species that is confined to one small habitat, and not found or established in captivity. Hopefully, the new concepts of sustainable use and captive-breeding for preservation will be adopted by the forestry service in St. Lucia, and this beautiful treasure will find its way into conservation breeding programs off of the island in the near future. In the meantime, we must do whatever we can do to help those that have the hands-on opportunity to assist this species' survival. Contributions to the AFA conservation fund will be assisting this education center in the future.

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