



Conservation Concerns: TOP THREE NORTH AMERICAN PARROTS

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Green-cheeked Amazon (*A. viridigenalis*)

Everyone knows that the gravest threat to most wildlife is the relentless loss of habitat, and with respect to parrots, the added pressure of being subjected to poaching for the pet trade. The fragmentation or destruction of habitat and poaching occurrences are frequently invisible to the eye. When it does become apparent that an environment issue exists and action is required, it will most likely run afoul with certain life styles and economic justifications. Unfortunately, the crisis might often get brief attention but, whatever action will be too little and often too late. The United States and Mexico share an interest in the conservation of the Thick-billed parrot, the Green conure, and the Green-cheeked or Mexican Red-headed Amazon, the subjects of this article. That responsibility constitutes, and requires, levels of international cooperation, which history has shown to be rarely successful. However, there are noteworthy efforts being made in the case of these three North American parrots.

Thick-billed parrot

The Thick-billed parrot (*Rhynchopsitta pachyrhyncha*) should have dual citizenship as it inhabits high-elevation coniferous forests of northwestern Mexico and formerly occurred and possibly bred in the mountains of southern Arizona and southwest New Mexico border regions of the United States. Their current breeding range within the Sierra Madre Occidental (mountains) in Mexico extends from northwest Chihuahua and northeast Sonora, south to northwest Durango.

Flocks containing as many as 1500 individuals were sighted in the U.S. and the species was reliably reported from Arizona until at least 1938. A small flock was documented in the Animas Mountains in New Mexico in 1964. An ill-fated reintroduction program was started in Arizona with confiscated illegal birds, but

failed due to avoidable problems in 1986 and ended in 1992. Some of the reintroduced U.S. Thick-bills did breed in the wild and were visible into the late 1990s. A single Thick-billed parrot was discovered at the southwestern ranch of Ted Turner in 2003, and there may be some adults or offspring out there yet.

The greatest current threats to the Thick-billed parrot are from continued logging of remaining mature and old growth pine-oak forest within the Sierra Madre Occidental and the vulnerability of young birds having to feed on their own in fragmented, scattered or unhealthy habitat with fewer and fewer mature pines as well as some residual poaching. Practically the entire habitat which constitutes the species' breeding and wintering ranges is within communally owned land cooperatives (*ejidos*), which are heavily invested in the logging industry.

There have been a series of conservation actions taken, however, e.g. the establishment of a 15-year conservation easement, ending this year, on 6000 acres owned by a local *ejido* negotiated by several NGOs with a payment of \$240,000. In addition in 2013, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife announced that the governments of the United States and Mexico have jointly produced the Thick-billed parrot Final Recovery Plan Addendum, which was collaboratively written by the Arizona Game and Fish Department and the Services; Tucson office with participants by experts in Mexico. This agreement, in essence, focuses on restoring populations and habitat in the parrots' current range in Mexico and establishing criteria for measuring recovery progress.

Apparently, the species' long-term prospects rely completely on ensuring a healthy population within the Mexican breeding range, where there is little protected habitat. Much of the remaining appropriate habitat within the U.S. is already within protected areas. Also, several U.S. zoos maintain captive flocks

of Thick-billed parrots and have successfully bred birds in captivity and those zoos, all with species survival plans, keep meticulous records on the genetics of all progeny. It has been recommended that future reintroduction efforts in the U.S. use wild birds relocated from healthy populations of Thick-billed parrots in Mexico and—perhaps there will be a supplementary role for the work accomplished by the U.S. zoos in captive breeding husbandry.

Green parakeet

Birdwatchers will tell you that the northernmost naturally occurring parakeet in North America (since the extinction of the Carolina parakeet), the Green conure (*Aratinga holochlora*) can be seen frequently in all kinds of wooded habitat in and around the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas and all the way south to East and Southern Mexico and several sub species further south into Central America. Important sites for this particular species are in Tamaulipas, where I was fortunate to see them in 2003, along with three species of Amazons at Rancho Los Ebanos. Here is what I reported in the now defunct, Amazona Quarterly:

“Finally we had one sighting of a flock of Green Conures on one of our birding forays. Unlike the stocky Amazons with their short tails, these long-tailed green birds with a few scattered red feathers on or below the throat were streamed-lined for flight. They made a beautiful sight as they left, in unison, a large bush upon which they were dining. In the bright sky their velvety green bodies shone with brilliance. It was only that one sighting, but there were a flock of 25 or more in that one bush and it was a thrilling experience for any parrot lover.”

In the U.S. the species occurs most commonly in urban and suburban areas around Brownsville, Weslaco and McAllen, Texas. Again, natural habitat outside the small protected sites, such as the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, which lies next to the Mexican border, are fewer and fewer compared to what has been lost to agriculture. However, there has been conservation action taken by U.S. Fish and Wildlife and nongovernmental conservation groups, e.g., the Nature Conservancy, within the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas to increase the amount of natural habitat through purchase of remaining fragments of natural habitat and through restoration of degraded habitat.

It is reported that the Green conure also faces threats from the wild bird trade although I have never seen the Green conure described as a suitable pet in any commercial publications, nor have I seen this species offered for sale. It simply appears to be an *undocumented visitor* to the U.S. from neighboring Mexico, hoping to establish a permanent residence, where there are large shade trees and palms, which are favored for roosting and nesting.

Green-cheeked Amazon

There have been some interesting Amazon parrot articles in the AFA Watchbird recently, but the reports on the Green-cheeked Amazon (*A. viridigenalis*) all seemed to imply that they were just holding on, and not doing as well as the two other species of Amazons on the ranches in Tamaulipas region. Additionally, they have the most restricted range distribution compared with the Double Yellow-headed (*A. oratrix*) and the Red-lored (*A. autumnalis*) Amazons. The Green-cheeks are the smallest of the three as well and may not be the best competitors for nest sites, etc. Perhaps, these threatened parrots even have a sense of persecution and, as you might expect, have come to the States, illegally, but as *asylum-seekers* from tenuous and unsafe conditions in their homeland. And, like many immigrants, are working hard to establish themselves in a new promise land. The U.S. has always been a nation of immigrants.



MAP: The mountain topography on this map depicts the Sierra Madre Occidentals in the western part of Mexico. This is the last stand of habitat for the Thick-billed parrot, all of which is threatened by logging interests. See also the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, where a small restricted range near the Gulf of Mexico, the Green-cheeked Amazon shares its habitat, with two other species of Amazons and cattle ranching. The Green conure, of which there are four sub-species, have much more extensive habitat also in the eastern side of Mexico, including Tamaulipas.

These Mexican Red-heads are now breeding in the urban Rio Grande Valley of southeastern Texas, some of which are attributable to escaped or released captive birds, but some proportion are now thought to have come from the native Mexican population located 180 miles south. They are an ambitious lot and are now breeding in southern California and in southern Florida as well as Hawaii and Puerto Rico.

For a while, I haven't seen too many Red-heads/Green-cheeks for sale as pets, but currently, there are several babies at a local bird store here in Virginia, D.J. Feathers, and so I hope more breeders will maintain these handsome species for the future. They are listed as endangered and AFA once had a program encouraging their breeding and good record keeping for the future of this species.

There have been for a number of years several conservation initiatives underway within the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas to increase the amount of natural habitat for wildlife through outright purchase and restoration of degraded habitat. Our U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service has continued to purchase lands to connect the natural existing tracts of habitat left along the Lower Rio Grande within the Lower Rio Grande National Wildlife Refuge, which has grown to 90,000 acres in 112 separate parcels since its establishment in 1979. These accomplishments have benefited the Green-cheeked Amazons as they scramble for survival as an endangered species. Protected areas within the region are still relatively small and mostly confined to the U.S. side of the Rio Grande in southernmost Texas. Green-cheeks also face capture of birds for the cage bird trade, which now may be their greatest threat.

While at the Mexican ranch in 2003, cited above, my recollections on seeing these handsome parrots were as follows:

The first sighting of the Green-cheeks was a party of three. I surmised that one of the three was one of the previous year's progeny, as it sat a little apart from the parents, but followed them from tree to tree. I thought that the parents would probably drive it off when the nesting season begins in earnest, sometime in April, and it will be forced to find some roosting companions, like itself, recently independent but too young to breed. Later, we were also fascinated to watch an animated pair of Green-cheeks, flying back and forth, while inspecting a potential nesting location in a large tree branch of a "gringo tree". This particular tree's bark turns red in the sun and peels—like I did after a couple of long, enjoyable days "stalking the wild Amazons."

I still believe that **aviculture is conservation**, too! When we breed birds for resale, it is only natural to breed those species for which the commercial market has demonstrated that there exists a demand. Often, however, it falls to the zoos to breed rare species of parrots or other birds as protection against their potential extinction. We as aviculturists, who know a great deal about what it takes to breed birds successfully, certainly have a moral obligation to reserve space to work with a species that is threatened in the wild by loss of habitat and other environmental pressures or at least be willing to contribute to those organizations that actually buy up habitat as preserves for avian wildlife.

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