



Amazon Parrots in Tamaulipas, Mexico: BACK TO THE RANCH 20 YEARS LATER

By Donald J. Brightsmith, PhD
Schubot Exotic Bird Health Center, Texas A&M University
and Ernesto Enkerlin-Hoeflich, PhD
Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey

The coastal plain of Tamaulipas, Mexico, is home to three species of Amazon parrots: red-crowned Amazon (*Amazona viridigenalis*), double-yellow-headed Amazon (*Amazona oratrix*) and red-lored Amazon (*Amazona autumnalis*) (see Figure 3 in previous article in this issue). Like many Neotropical parrots, these populations have been under considerable stress during the last decade of the 20th century and the first few decades of the 21st due to habitat loss and capture for the pet trade. Habitat loss eliminates the large trees needed for nesting and reduces food supplies, while capture for the pet trade directly eliminates birds from the environment through a mixture of capture of adults and chicks. Sometimes chick harvesting is done by cutting into the nest cavity to remove the young or felling the entire nest tree, which further impacts the population by removing good nesting sites. Many parrot species can tolerate moderate to even heavy habitat modification, while some small species recover quickly even from the harvest of thousands of individuals.

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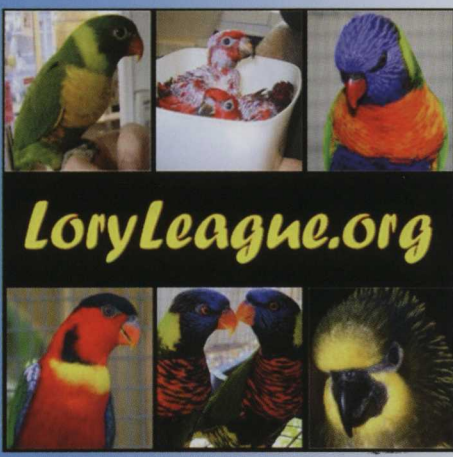
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In the 1990's Ernesto Enkerlin-Hoeflich conducted extensive work on the ecology and status of the populations of these three Amazon species at Rancho los Colorados, Mexico, located about 5 km from the Gulf of Mexico in Tamaulipas state (see earlier article in this issue). From this work, he hypothesized that the three species of Amazons would be able to survive in the highly impacted matrix of pasture with large isolated trees (~ 85% of the landscape) and native forest fragments (~15%) as long as poaching rates remained low. In 2013, with funding assistance from Loro Parque Fundacion and the American Federation of Aviculture, we returned to Los Colorados to test this hypothesis that these Amazon parrots can survive in these highly impacted landscapes for > 20 years. This is of great importance to the conservation of these species, as it has broad implications for future conservation planning and landscape management. If true, it would suggest that work with ranch owners and their employees could go a long way to improve the conservation status of these birds in areas dominated by cattle ranching.

In the 20 years since the last work on the Amazons in Tamaulipas, much has changed in efforts to reduce poaching pressure on wild parrots. In 1992, just as Enkerlin-Hoeflich's work was beginning, the United States passed the Wild Bird Conservation Act, which greatly reduced the importation of

wild-caught parrots into the US. Europe banned importation of wild caught birds in 2007; and Mexico passed a ban on the capture and sale of native birds in 2010. These actions should have reduced the impact of capture for the pet trade in the region.

Our background research showed us that the region was heavily deforested by the early 1990's, but the deforestation ban passed in the 1980's has apparently reduced the rates of forest loss, as the region is no longer considered to be losing forest cover. In addition, when we examined recent images we saw, that there has been no new deforestation and that the amount of forest cover actually appears to have increased somewhat in the area studied in the 1990's. The reduction in deforestation and increased legal protection for wild parrots led us to be cautiously optimistic about the fate of the wild parrot populations in Tamaulipas. However, we know that enforcement of environmental laws is still weak, and widespread illegal activity remains common in many areas of Mexico. As a result, we knew it was possible that capture for the pet trade may still remain unsustainably high in rural areas like the coastal plain of Tamaulipas. We also didn't know how suitable the heavily human-impacted landscape of cattle ranching truly was for sustaining the significant populations of Amazons that had existed there 20 years before.



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When we arrived at Los Colorados Ranch, it was clear that the remote images were correct, the habitat had remained almost completely unchanged. This was a great relief, as the large isolated pasture trees are incredibly valuable to all sorts of wildlife, and once cut are very difficult to regenerate.

Our first nights in the region confirmed that the parrots continue to use the same roost site as the one studied in the 1990's. Our 2013 roost counts were done from the same spot as those in the 1990's and during the same time period (April-July) – the nesting season -- when prior roost counts had been the least variable. Overall, the number of birds coming to roost was similar to the numbers recorded in 1992 and higher than those in 1993 and 1994. This gave us the first evidence that our hypothesis was correct and that the birds were successfully surviving long-term in these wooded pastures. The numbers of Red-lored (Yellow-cheeked) Amazons were very similar to those from 1992 – 1994, suggesting little change in the status of this wide-spread species. The numbers of Red-crowned (Green-cheeked) Amazons was very low but similar to values recorded during the 1990's. The best news was about the Double Yellow-headed Amazons which showed a massive increase over the 1990's - a jump from 14 per night in the 1990's to 85 per night in 2013!

Nest searching also revealed some good news. Nesting density of all species combined increased from about 5.5 per 100 hectares in the 1990's to 7 - 8.5 in 2013. The increase was most notable in the Double Yellow-headed parrot which went from < 1 nest per 100 ha in the 1990's to 2 - 3 per 100 ha in 2013. Red-crowned (Green-cheeked) Amazons increased slightly in nest density while Red-lored (Yellow-cheeked) Amazons remained basically unchanged.

During the visit we also had the opportunity to talk with the ranch manager about poaching at the site. He suggested that poaching rates had been low, but variable, with occasional spikes when poaching specialists were allowed to work

as ranch hands. He has been there for many years, and during that time, poaching has been "low." However, the previous year (March – July 2012) poaching from nests on the property had been high, as one of the workers on an adjacent ranch systematically poached all the nests he could find. This had not happened in the previous years. Once field technician Jose Luis Manzano began his field work on the parrots in early 2013, the manager realized that the owner was interested in the conservation of the resources on his land. At this point he reported to the owner what had happened regarding poaching the previous year. The owner thanked him and told him that he wanted to know about these sorts of activities so that he could help maintain control of what happened on his land. It seems that the owner has taken steps to ensure that this poaching was not repeated in 2013. However, the nest monitoring data suggested there was still some poaching going on. The importance of being vigilant against nest poaching was clear, as small numbers of people working with impunity can have a large effect on local reproductive success.

One of the highlights of the trip was that the ranch owner visited while both of us were at the ranch in May 2013 and hosted a wonderful barbeque. It was not the same owner as 20 years previously. This owner had purchased Los Colorados 4 years before, but he had owned the two ranches on either side since well before then. We spoke with him at length about a variety of topics including the parrots, their nests, and the importance of maintaining trees in the pastures, not only for the birds, but also to fertilize the grass for the cattle (both through nitrogen fixation and making of leaf litter). Overall the meeting was very positive, and opened the door for potential future collaboration.

The greatest surprise from the 2013 data was the dramatic increase in the population of Double Yellow-heads. Nest densities appeared about 3 times higher in 2013 than they were in the mid 1990's; and the numbers of birds coming



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to the roosts were as much as 6 times higher. Given that the Double Yellow-head has been among the most valuable parrot species in the Mexican illegal pet trade, the dramatic increase in Double Yellow-heads supports the conclusion that poaching at Los Colorados has been on average fairly low in the previous decade. The increase documented here is extremely encouraging, given the estimated 79% contraction in the historic range of the species on the Pacific coast of Mexico documented by Tiberio Monterrubio and his colleagues and the drastic declines reported by Birdlife International throughout most of its range. This suggests that once illegal poaching is kept under control, the species may well be able to recolonize areas with remaining suitable habitat.

However, the news on the Red-crowned (Green-cheeked) parrot is not nearly as good. The slight increase in nesting density is obviously good news; but the very low numbers at the roosts sends a mixed message about the status of the species in the area. The species remains listed as endangered, but unfortunately, there has been almost no research on the status of the species in its native range in Mexico since the major burst of work in the 1990's. This means there is almost no new information on the status of the species; and our work at Los Colorados shows little evidence for strong recovery. As a result, it is clear that more research is needed on this northeastern Mexican endemic.

This single season of research has clearly confirmed the hypothesis that these three species of Amazon parrots can survive successfully in a habitat made up of mostly active cattle pastures with isolated big trees. This is an extremely encouraging finding. During the 1990's it was uncertain whether the artificially open pasture land habitat which dominated Los Colorados Ranch and the surrounding area was serving just as a refuge for birds displaced by habitat loss in the surrounding areas or if the ranches held suitable habitat which could support high population densities of

the birds over the long term. The keys to success in this system seem to be the presence of large trees for nesting, adequate food supplies, and the apparently low level of poaching occurring on the ranch. The good news is that, if poaching can be controlled, pastures and woodlots like these are capable of maintaining parrot populations while still providing for human livelihoods. This opens the door for extensive cooperation with ranch owners to encourage them to create landscapes that are sustainable for both parrots and people.

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