

# The Marajó Island Yellow-fronted Amazon

by Tony Silva  
Loro Parque, Tenerife

The loudspeaker at Ezeiza Airport, Buenos Aires, Argentina called my name. The respond elicited a message to call Horacio Cornejo, a local dealer and aviculturist. He took me to the nesting range of the Yellow-winged Amazon *Amazona aestiva xanthopteryx* in order for me to record the development of wild young, data that could be compared to domestically produced chicks. Calling Cornejo brought the news that a Brazilian aviculturist friend would be waiting for me at the Rio de Janeiro Airport, where my plane was scheduled to stop for about an hour, in order for me to see his "papagaio real". That name did not ring a bell, and I am extremely knowledgeable of native names for parrots (they often give a clue as to the species' habits or characteristics, i.e. the Quechua

name for *Pyrrhura frontalis* is chiripepé, this refers to its habit of sitting with feathers fluffed). There can be various names for one species (e.g. Ararauna, Arauna, Arara canindé for the Hyacinthine Macaw *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus* in Brazil). Cornejo had never heard the name. By then my curiosity had apexed. I had to alter my plans of returning to the States in order to see the birds.

After clearing customs and collecting my luggage, I was greeted by my friend. My first question related to the name. He replied that I had received two slides of the birds. It immediately dawned that the bird was *Amazona ochrocephala xantholaema*—the little known subspecies of the Yellow-fronted Amazon endemic to Marajó, an island about the size of Switzerland at the mouth

of the Amazon River.

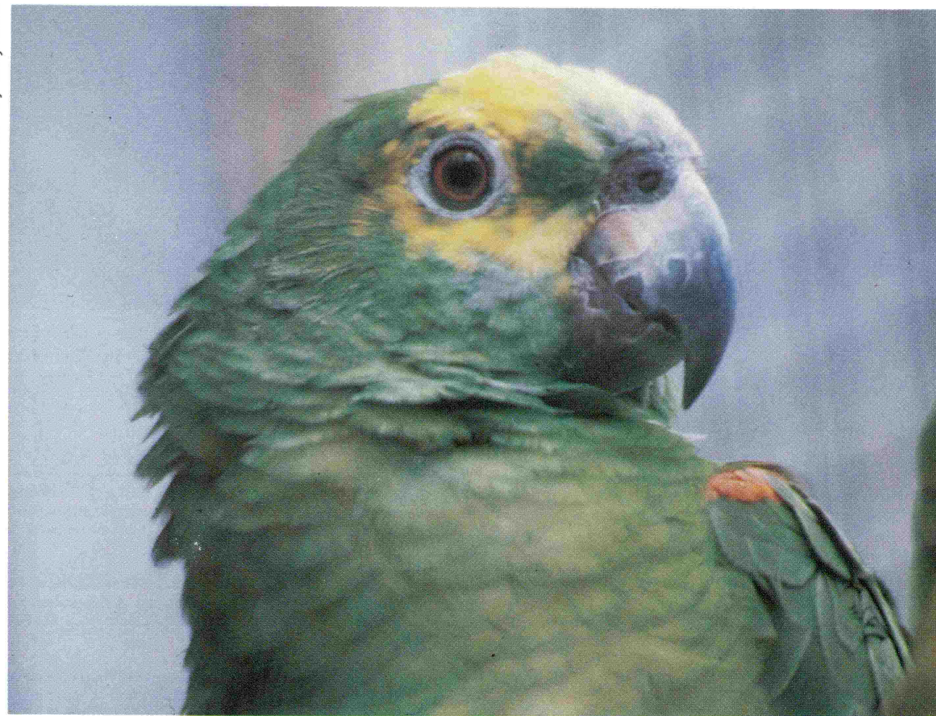
The Marajó Island bird is larger than a Yellow-fronted or -crowned Amazon, approximating the Double Yellow-headed Amazon. Adults weigh in excess of 500 grams, with one registered at 582 grams (a pet held in Belém). The amount of yellow in the face is variable, but usually this circles the eyes and may, in exceptional specimens, extend back to the nape. The bill is larger than in *ochrocephala*; it is blackish, except for the upper mandible, near the base, which is pinkish-horn colored. The front has a narrow line of green feathers—the characteristic which with the bill color separates this bird quickly from the true Blue-fronted Amazon *Amazona aestiva aestiva*. Interestingly, many of those that participated in the October 1986 Loro Parque Conference did not realize that the Marajó Island individual on display there had an *aestiva* as a mate. Such are the strong affinities between these two species—and this will undoubtedly be used as an argument to amalgamate the two into one species.

The bird's large size and reputation as a clever and reliable mimic is reflected in the Portuguese name, as the word "real" means regal.

The two birds in Rio de Janeiro were tame, as is the case with most *xantholaema*, presumably because they are taken as nestlings. The next *xantholaema* that I would see was in February 1987, in an enclosure containing other *Amazona* parrots at the Museu Emílio Goeldi in Belém, Pará, northern Brazil, the stepping stone for Marajó Island.

Travel to Marajó is not regular and is generally via a boat or private plane. It is best known for its Scarlet Ibises *Eudocimus ruber* and the large population of introduced water buffalo, which are being reared experimentally for their meat, milk and hardiness. These two species

Photo by Tony Silva



The Marajó Island Yellow-fronted Amazon (*Amazona ochrocephala xantholaema*) is a little known subspecies of the Yellow-fronted Amazon. It is larger than the common Yellow-crowned Amazon and is similar in size to the Double Yellow-headed Amazon. The yellow in the face of this parrot is variable, usually circling the eyes and sometimes extending to the nape.





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occur in mangroves which, with stands of palms growing in fields that were probably long-ago deforested, constitute eastern Marajó; the western sector is still covered in forest. The bird life is so abundant and spectacular that there are plans for building hotels and bringing bird watchers from around the globe. I have been asked to participate in two schemes, one being to buy a 10,000 hectare farm for such a purpose and the harvesting of palm fruit for açai (a drink reminiscent of black currant juice that is gritty—but unlike this fruit, açai settles in the stomach like a rock) which is very popular in Brazil; indeed, the heavy machinery that crushes the fruit are very evident in Belém.

Within Marajó, the parrot appears to be most numerous where Ronald van Dieten recorded the species during 1984: the region of the Rio Paru and to the west of there. My brief observation, of flying birds, was on the fazenda of João Moreira, whose livelihood is earned breeding buffalo. The parrots flew in typical *Amazona* parrot fashion — the wings are never raised above the horizontal — and called in a distinct manner. I had difficulty putting the sound on paper until van Dieten did so. It is a distinct *oeri-oeri*.

Back in Belém, I asked some of the local bird merchants about *xantholaema*. One had nestlings for sale in February, but he pointed out that they are usually obtained earlier. He noted that many purchase "papagaio real" because of its reputation, without actually knowing what they are obtaining. In this way, many *aestiva* and orange-winged Amazons *Amazona amazonica* are sold.

My second question related to the bird. How long has it been known in the trade? The reply gave no specific time. Although a mention was made of some having been sent to Surinam about ten years before; these were doubtlessly sent to Europe.

The importance of this query related to the unknown status of *xantholaema* before 1984, when it was known by two specimens, a pair in the Senckenberg Museum, Frankfurt, one designated the type by Berlepsch when describing the subspecies. The lack of other individuals was used by Joseph Forshaw (*Parrots of the World*, 1978 edition, Lansdowne Press) when writing: "Further specimens are needed to establish the validity of its race." That it is valid is

incontrovertible, but the fact that Forshaw remarked not having examined individuals is enigmatic, for the Museu Emilio Goeldi in Brazil, which Forshaw visited, has had a specimen (number 3457) since 1904! It was either overlooked as another species (perhaps *aestiva*) or, less likely, the skin was on loan elsewhere at the time.

Nothing has been recorded in the ornithological literature about this species, although many years ago the Swiss ornithologist Emil Goeldi (after whom the museum is named) described seeing *amazonica* on Marajó. But was it *amazonica*? It is very conceivable that this bird (or *aestiva*) could be confused with *xantholaema* in the field: both are green, have yellow in the face and dark tipped bills. Alas, the answer will never be known.

The Marajó Island Amazon is safe in its remote island, but if development reaches Marajó as is happening in even the most remote areas of Brazil, its fate may change. To lose this unique species would result in a void in the parrot fauna of Brazil. ●

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