

Smuggling of the Yellow-naped Amazon out of Guatemala

by Victor Acedo
Antigua, Guatemala

The majority of the Yellow-naped Amazon parrots being sold on the international market have been smuggled from the south coast region of Guatemala. The wild populations of these birds are still being depleted by poaching because of the demand in the United States and Europe. Yellow-naped Amazons are one of the most popular psittacines in aviculture today. They cannot legally be exported from Guatemala and there are very few successful Yellow-Naped Amazon breeding programs in the States. Whether due to carelessness, greed, ignorance or blind trust of the proprietor who claims they were hatched domestically, people are still buying smuggled napes. Considering the demand for these parrots and the poverty and desperation of the Guatemalan campesino (native), it is easy to see why Yellow-naped Amazons are still disappearing from their native habitats and reappearing in living rooms around the world.

Young Yellow-naped Amazons are taken from the nest in Guatemala to be smuggled into Mexico and from there to the U.S. Tiny and still featherless, they are very fragile at this age. It is estimated that they suffer losses of 40 percent during capture and transport alone. The smuggler knows this and compensates by buying five to ten times more live chicks than they expect to sell. The World Wildlife Fund study on international parrot trade estimates that 150,000 live parrots enter the U.S. from Mexico each year. Considering the ones that die during capture and transport, that translates to about one million parrots taken from the wild in Latin America yearly. One wonders how long wild parrot populations can sustain themselves, suffering this degree of decimation. The Military Macaw (*Ara militaris*), once a resident of the highlands of Guatemala, has completely disappeared in a relatively short period of time. This is an example of just one species of bird that has disappeared from Guatemala.

Despite the drastic reduction in numbers of Yellow-naped Amazons

observed in their native coastal habitat in Guatemala in the past few years, they are still being smuggled out of the country in large numbers to meet the demand abroad. I have had the experience of seeing thousands of Yellow-naped Amazons on the borders of Mexico and Guatemala destined for the U.S. market for the past eight years. During this time I have been a witness to this reduction.

The Scenario

Chiquimulilla, Santa Rosa is 30 miles from the El Salvadoran border. December rolls around, marking the end of the rainy season, and there's not much for the campesino to look forward to. His corn and beans have been planted and harvested and he now searches for work to sustain him through the dry season. For some, working for the large land owners or companies will relieve some of their financial burdens, while most will tighten their belts and wait for the rains to return. Still other campesinos will begin keeping a closer eye on the paired Yellow-naped Amazons that begin their search for a suitable nesting site. They're not difficult to find since they tend to stake out certain territories and the same nest year after year. Unfortunately, these days, Yellow-naped Amazons are often forced to seek new nesting sites because their home tree was cut, many times by a novice poacher who seeks to make a quick buck and doesn't care if the pair returns. However, the experienced poacher knows that if he disturbs the nest as little as possible, the pair will return the following year or may even double clutch.

And So The Harvest Begins

Bird poachers have devised countless ways to rob a nest. It's dangerous work climbing the tall trees with only a thin nylon rope and a machete. But empty stomachs and plenty of imagination will get the chicks out of the nest. From there, their future is uncertain. Once the poacher has the chicks, he wants to unload them as quickly as

possible. They are worthless dead and he cannot afford to use his cornmeal as bird food. There are options at hand. The campesino can go directly into the larger cities along the south coast and sell the chicks to the dealer in the central markets. These dealers are not hard to find. They are usually draped in gold jewelry and they sell domestic animals along with a myriad of odds and ends, all a cover for the thousands of endangered birds and other wildlife that pass through their hands. The other option for the poacher is to sit tight for the middle man to come directly to the source in search of a better deal.

There are several ways for the smuggler to bring the birds into the United States. Some birds are smuggled into El Salvador, where restrictions on bird smuggling are not so strict. There they are sold to nationals or to the "gringo" who buys birds for pets. They are smuggled into the States by claiming their origins are from other countries. Others are laundered through Honduras, as Honduran Yellow-napes. They are a different subspecies, but are not too distinguishable from the Guatemalan species when young. The easiest and most common smuggling route is through Mexico, a large country with as many ways to get the birds into the States as there are smugglers and imaginations.

Tapachula, Mexico, in the State of Chiapas, is a large city on the Pacific coast bordering Guatemala. It has nice, clean streets and handsome people . . . in general, very prosperous. One would never suspect this to be a place where you can buy any kind of exotic animal no matter how endangered it is. This area is notorious for exotic bird trafficking if the price is right, and if you know where to look. And here is where I have been given the rare opportunity to see 1,500 baby Yellow-nape chicks (as well as Scarlet Macaws, howler and spider monkeys, baby jaguars and a slew of reptiles) in one person's home awaiting export to the United States. This was no small operation and I was later to learn that a plane was coming in to fly these animals to Tijuana, Mexico.

From Mexico City, the surviving birds end up for sale in shops along the Mexico/American border. Anyone who goes to Tijuana or El Paso can see these birds on the street for sale. If persistent, you can find thousands of

them and other psittacines from all over the world waiting to be smuggled into the United States. This brutal journey is a common procedure that has been going on ever since these birds have been considered valuable.

I feel that the Yellow-naped Amazon is in trouble from all sides. Poaching is not the only factor adversely affecting the survival of the Yellow-naped Amazon species. Alarming deforestation rates, resulting in reduction of food and roosting sources for the birds, are challenging the species' chances for survival.

Yes, there are internal problems, such as a growing human population that is in need of firewood and cleared land for crops. But were there just these pressures to deal with, I feel the napes could hold their own. It's the added pressure of the demand for these napes by the United States that has practically eliminated them from areas where they were once abundant.

During the Gulf War, I noticed that North Americans were not traveling abroad and were not willing to spend their money on anything that wasn't necessary. This had its ramifications in what was to happen in Guatemala during Yellow-naped Amazon breeding season. **NO ONE WAS BUYING!** Because there was no demand that year, people in Guatemala were practically giving Napes away (they were already inexpensive — \$15.00 to \$25.00 per chick). What does this translate to? We as Americans are still buying illegal birds and are a large contributor to the decimation of many of the species of Amazons, specifically the Yellow-naped Amazon in Latin America.

When I think about what is going on in the world these days, from the depletion of the world's ozone to the destruction of our rain forests, it becomes apparent that the responsibility is on everyone's shoulders: aviculturist, pet fancier, stockbroker, developer, car dealer, biologist, etc. We cannot detach ourselves from the rest of the world and insist that what is happening to our rain forests and wildlife is someone else's problem or fault. We must begin by taking responsibility for our own actions. By this I mean that we can help alleviate the pressures abroad by being more conscious of what we are doing and the possible affect those actions may be having in another part of the world.

A good example is when the price of a Yellow-naped Amazon is too good to be true (usually an indicator of a smuggled bird) or that the closed band on its leg is too large. (This band should be an indicator that the bird for sale was bred in captivity; however, the smugglers are now taking the closed bands down south and banding poached chicks, making them legal once they enter the U.S.).

A WWF TRAFFIC survey indicates that fewer than five percent of all parrots in the world market come from captive breeding centers. But most pet stores will tell you that their birds were bred in captivity. This tells me that one has to be careful when buying an exotic bird. We as aviculturists, of all people in the world, are unconsciously contributing to the demise of some of our most treasured species. We can help to stop this needless butchery of wild birds by taking some simple precautions when looking to buy a bird. In essence, asking more questions about who the breeder is, calling up reputable organizations to find out whether a breeding facility is genuine, and maybe, more importantly, using that intuition that is acute in bird people but is often overridden because of a "good deal".

For my part, I could turn in or give more details on these poachers, dealers, middle men, smugglers, etc. But the problem is not only that these people are acting illegally. If they were apprehended, their places would soon be filled. This is because the demand is still there. When you buy that illegal bird, you almost literally ask that the campesino go and poach a nape for you. I know it's hard to let a bargain pass by. If we are to see a change in what is now happening to our jungles, we have to start by changing our own behavior.

So, as one bird lover to another, I would suggest that our contribution to saving the Yellow-naped Amazon from extinction in the wild is to observe the bird you are buying and begin asking questions. Let your intuitive nature give you the answer of its legality. Guatemala and all countries of Latin America are desperately trying to save their jungles and wildlife. I cannot begin to tell you how fortunate I feel to be working with them in their efforts. But they cannot do it alone, if we North Americans are undermining their efforts. ●

Thomas Arndt

PARROTS Their Life in the Wild



Lg. Print Edition
8-1/2 x 12 inches
192 pages text
230 color photos

- is written exclusively on parrots in the wild.
- describes natural parrot behavior and habitats.
- details parrot breeding & nesting habits in the wild.
- natural diets & nutrition.
- parrot conservation efforts.
- extraordinary color photos of parrots in the wild.
- author is world authority on parrots.
- includes both rare & common parrots.

\$75.00 + \$3.50 p/h (CA res. + 8-1/4%)

Dale R. Thompson
(805) 252-4871

P.O. Box 1122
Canyon Country, CA 91351-0122

BIRDSEED



KESTER'S INC.

P.O. Box 516-WB, Omro, WI 54963

CLEAN QUALITY MIXES
&
CUSTOM MIXES
Available
per hundred lbs.

Cockatiel	\$33.00
Lovebird	\$29.00
Deluxe Parakeet	\$29.00
Deluxe Parrot	\$36.00

also mixes for Canary and Finch
above prices do not include shipping and handling
Send for our complete list. Many other seed
items available and smaller quantities.



Breeder
Inquiries
Invited



Can ship
U.P.S.

(414) 685-2929
(800) 558-8815
outside Wisconsin