

Working With the Yellow-shouldered Amazon at J&B Exotics

by James R. Miller
Ramona, California

What kind of Amazon would you get if you combined the talking ability of a Yellow-naped Amazon, the affection of a handfed cockatoo and the energy level of a caique? You would almost for sure end up with the delightful little Yellow-shouldered Amazon.

The Yellow-shouldered Amazon, *Amazona b. barbadensis*, is a slender bird measuring from 11 to 13 inches. The feathers on its forehead are white in color. The yellow color on its head is suffused with blue on its cheeks. There is yellow on its thighs and on the bend of the wing. Combined with an orange colored iris, a horn-colored bill and the green colored breast feathers that are edged with black giving it a scalloped look, this Amazon is truly a beautiful little bird. The subspecies, *A. b. rothchildi*, has less yellow coloration on its face and considerably less yellow on the bend of its wing. Due to the color variation from bird to bird, we consider the separation of *barbadensis* and *rothchildi* as questionable.

The Yellow-shouldered Amazon has never been available in the U.S. in very large numbers and is considered to be endangered in its native habitat. This is due partially to its limited range as it inhabits the coastal regions of Venezuela and its offshore islands. It is also found on the Netherlands Antilles where it inhabits areas that are dry, rocky and sparsely wooded.

My first exposure to the Yellow-shouldered Amazon was in 1980. At that time a friend had one as a pet. It was the most talented, talking Amazon I had ever seen. It was able to speak and sing in at least six different languages. A second bird was in a mixed flight at the San Diego Zoo. This delightful little Yellow-



Yellow-shouldered Amazon in a holding cage.



Yellow-shouldered Amazons are rare, but wonderful birds to work with.

Photos by James R. Miller

shouldered Amazon would fly to the side of the aviary to be scratched through the wire. Little did I know then that it would be 12 years before I would see another Yellow-shouldered Amazon.

In 1992, my wife and I became friends with a person who had three pairs of Yellow-shouldered Amazons and an extra hen in their aviary. The lone hen was as wonderful in temperament as any other Amazon I had been around. She put her head down and fluffed up her feathers to be petted by anyone who would take the time.

In the early part of 1994, we were offered on a breeding loan basis, two proven pairs and one young pair of Yellow-shouldered Amazons belonging to our friend. This was an opportunity we quickly accepted. When these Amazons arrived at our aviary they were placed in the very same cages and nest boxes that they had previously used. We had moved their cages and nests with the birds. These cages measured 3 ft. x 3 ft. x 6 ft. in length and were mounted on strong PVC legs. They were suspended 3 ft. above the ground. Their nest boxes were L-shaped with a diameter of 9 in. x 9 in. and a vertical height of 20 in. The boot portion was 16 in. in length. The nest boxes were hung on the outside of each cage. Sight dividers measuring 2 ft. in length were placed on the rear portion of the cage to provide privacy near each nest box. We are planning in the near future to supply full length sight dividers on all of our Amazon cages to supply even more privacy.

The new pairs of Yellow-shouldered Amazons were placed on the diet we give all of our Amazons. We are currently working with 11 Amazon species. Our Amazons have a very varied diet consisting of apples, papaya, persimmons, pomegranates, grapes, figs, pears, kiwi, yams, carrots, cucumbers, corn-on-the-cob, bell peppers, eggplant, different squashes and a variety of citrus fruits. Swiss chard and other fruits and vegetables are supplied to our Amazons when seasonally available. A soak-and-cook bean mix is also supplied with a good seed mix that does not contain any peanuts. Each Amazon pair is supplied daily one cup of food that consists mainly of beans, fruits and vegetables and only 15-20% seed. This is mixed together within one bowl. Vitamin and calcium supplements are added twice each week. Fresh water is supplied every day at feeding time which is between 9:00-11:00 a.m. After observing the Yellow-shouldered


Amazons, we found that they were much more active than the other Amazons. They seemed to have a much higher metabolism similar to that of a caique. We soon increased their food amount to 1 and 1/2 cups per day. They have shown no signs of becoming overweight and lethargic. The Yellow-shouldered Amazon is a very high-energy Amazon preferring to fly rather than crawling around their cage which certainly burns up the extra calories.

We did not expect to have any breeding successes until the 1995 season as we figured it would take some time for them to settle into their new surroundings. Much to our surprise, the young pair laid its first clutch of three infertile eggs in the latter part of July, 1994. This pair consisted of a mature male with a three year old female. Of the two proven pairs the #2 pair did not go to nest. It must be noted that this pair was the only pair that showed any signs of mate aggression even though this pair had produced one chick the previous year. The #1 pair laid seven fertile eggs the previous year before coming to us and they were extremely bonded to each other. In 1994 this pair laid a clutch of four fertile eggs for us. The eggs were laid four days apart. Even during the breeding season, this pair did not become aggressive to me or to each other. They did, however, become more active and more vocal during this time. We found this pair showed great affection to each other as there was much mutual preening.

The four fertile eggs were artificially incubated and the first egg hatched after an incubation period of 26 days. Due to an incubator malfunction, the remaining three eggs failed to hatch. The lone baby resembled most Amazon babies at hatching. We had been told that Yellow-shouldered Amazons were very difficult to handfeed from day-one and either grew very slowly or not at all. I was hand-feeding a day-one caique at the time the Amazon hatched and decided to treat both of them the same. Caiques seem to have a higher metabolism than other parrots and have the same growth problems as day-one babies. We fed both of the babies a handfeeding diet of Pretty Bird (8% fat), Gerber's (in the jar) baby food, carrots, squash, applesauce, mango and lots of papaya. This seemed to work well for the young Yellow-shouldered Amazon and it grew at the same rate as did the babies of other Amazon species we have fed. It was sent to the owner of the parent birds at three

weeks of age and we believed it to be a female.

Our goal at J&B Exotics is to have a minimum of six unrelated pairs of any endangered or rare bird species we keep. We hope to accomplish this in two to three years by retaining our own stock and trading for new bloodlines. We would like to see a Yellow-shouldered Amazon Studbook started for these wonderful little Amazons. We also feel that those breeders keeping and breeding the Yellow-shouldered Amazon should always keep this species in a breeding program. Single pet birds should also be placed in a breeding program as they increase the gene pool.

In conclusion, I would hope that the Yellow-shouldered Amazon would be reproduced to the point of excess where they could then be made available to the pet trade. This Amazon species would be greatly enjoyed and accepted. After all, who can resist a high-energy, great talking and wonderfully affectionate Amazon. I certainly can't. 



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