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by Jack Clinton Eitniear
McAllen, Texas

Mangrove Parrot

While traveling the dirt road to Altun, an
ancient Mayan ruin in northern Belize, the
clay-red dust clung to my perspiring arms.
Minutes seemed like hours. Just as I was
wondering over the benefits of my efforts, I
rounded the bend and the ruin appeared.

Leaving my vehicle, I was observing birds in
the nearby forest when the caretaker arrived.
After paying the modest fee of fifty cents we
began what would be a lengthy discussion
on wildlife. According to him, the forest was
being over hunted and the popular practice
of "leaving stock" was not the predominate
philosophy as animals and birds of all ages
were being hunted. Realizing that I would
learn little about wildlife in this area I returned
to my vehicle. Upon entering, the care-
taker asked if he could get a ride down the
dusty path to his home. Offering a cold bev-
erage in return, I eagerly obliged.

The caretaker's home was neatly tucked
behind a flame red royal poinciana tree. On
the front step, in an obviously aged wrought
iron cage, swung a parrot. Fed a diet of corn
and poinciana seeds, it was in excellent con-
dition. Upon inquiring about the bird I was
told that it was a mangrove parrot. He went
on to say that the bird often nested deep in-
side holes, made by woodpeckers, in palm
trees. This relationship has perpetuated the
belief that the parrot will incubate and raise
the woodpecker's young, in addition to its
own, if the cavity is occupied when the par-
rots are nesting. This incredible undocu-
mented account of dubious factuality is a
common element of local lore.

To most of us this is not the mangrove
parrot but the red-lobed or yellow cheeked
Amazon (Amazona autumnalis). Although
the species is found from east Mexico to
northern Brazil it varies greatly in colora-
tion, as do a number of other wide ranging
Amazons. In the northern portions of its
range it's referred to as the yellow cheeked
Amazon (A. a. autumnalis) because of its
striking brilliant yellow cheeks. The yellow
cheeked integrates in Nicaragua and Costa
Rica with the Salvini's Amazon (A. a. sal-
vini). This subspecies differs from the yellow
cheeked by having green cheeks. In South
America two additional subspecies occur. In
Ecuador the cheeks change to lime green
and the tint and extent of the red changes.
This parrot the lilacine (A. a. lilacina) is not
as frequently encountered in captivity as the
previous two. The third subspecies, the
diadem orange (A. a. diadem) can be found in
northern Brazil and is of uncertain status.

In terms of aviculture we are concerned
that subspecies are matched with individuals
with similar coloration. Certainly the serious
parrot breeder would not breed a yellow
cheeked subspecies with one that has green
cheeks. In terms of conservation however,
we must remember that despite the numer-
ous common names for the various sub-
species they are all the same species.
Population demise in a subspecies is of valid
concern but in a species it is tragic!

In my opinion the yellow cheeked is the
most attractive of all the Amazons with
striking green, yellow, blue and reds. Speci-
mens that I have had contact with were good
natured. Two in residence at the Posada
Tropicana in Belize City were receptive to
my complaints about the weather, allowing
their heads to be scratched. The accompa-
nioning Pionus bit my finger!

Data from the Oological collection at the
Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology
(courtesy of Lloyd Kif£) confirms that the
species nests in palms. On April 17, 1960 a
nest was discovered in northern Veracruz,
Mexico containing five eggs. Twelve feet up
in a palm tree the parrot was nesting in the
vacated hole of a woodpecker. During May
of 1981 a resident in Belize pointed out a
nest of A. a. autumnalis at the top of an un-
identifiable tree (not a palm). Towards the
latter part of the month he removed the
chicks for sale as pets.

In Mexico the species appears to be thriv-
ing if not increasing in numbers. Able to
adapt to a variety of habitats it does not ap-
pear to be declining as is the yellow crowned
Amazon (Amazona ochrocephala oratrix) and
the green-cheeked (Amazona viridigenalis). Be-
cause of its large range and abundant num-
bers it is a good choice for the serious av-
culturalist concerned that the importation of
wild caught birds is not overly detrimental to
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