The Grand Cayman Amazon Parrot

by Tony Silva
North Riverside, Illinois

Between cloud formations one could see a stretch of land in the distance. With passing minutes it became clearer and finally one could see palm trees. We then made our descent on Grand Cayman, an island 37 km. (23 mi.) long that lies some 280 km. (190 mi.) south of Cuba and northwest of Jamaica. This tropical island is besieged annually by plane loads of Americans intent on scuba diving in crystal clear Caribbean waters, soaking up the sun, or just plain relaxing. In my case, it was none of these that lured me but the endemic parrot, a subspecies of the Cuban Amazon.

The only thought I had while going through customs or hiring a car was observing the Cayman Amazon Amazona leucocephala caymanensis in the wild.

First on our agenda was a visit to Savanna, to the east of Georgetown, the capital. It was here that Rosemary Low and Bob Grantham had observed parrots several years ago. Here we met Lindberg Eden, a resident with knowledge of caymanensis. Rosemary had suggested that I contact Lindberg for he would be able to suggest where the parrots were foraging.

It was about five in the afternoon and the sun was still bright, but even with the recommendations from Eden, the parrots were elusive. After an hour of traveling about, we returned to Georgetown to secure a hotel and dispose of the impedimenta. My indefatigable search resumed shortly thereafter.

Grand Cayman is flat, with considerable stands of mangrove in the interior, the habitat of the parrot. It was on slightly swampy ground, on the northern part of the island, that I had my first close meeting with this extremely endangered amazon in the wild. Two were perched in a royal palm (Roystonea spp.), feeding on the tips of the unopened central leaf. The two would have gone undetected had it not been for their call. Although we sighted more parrots that day, it was at North Sound Estate that we had our greatest success.

The Cayman Amazon can be described briefly as green, each feather edged in grey, most prominently on the head. The forehead is white, often contaminated in pink or yellow. Cheeks and throat are rose-red, ear coverts are dark grey, and the abdomen has maroon. Breast and rump are tinged with turquoise, a diagnostic feature that can be used to separate it from the Cuban (A. l. leucocephala) and Isle of Pines (A. l. palmarum) subspecies.

Back to parrots in the wild. Early one morning we observed two caymanensis foraging quietly. They permitted a very close approach, suggesting that they were not persecuted for food. In complete contrast, the St. Lucia Amazon (Amazona versicolor) is very shy and elusive, and was formerly persecuted. Two other birds on Grand Cayman, Columbidae (the white-
Entail the use of walkie-talkies and many individuals to keep track of each bird as it moves about. An assessment would certainly not be facile.

*A. I. caymanensis* has become an endangered species because its habitat is disappearing. In a paper presented at the International Council for Bird Preservation's 1980 Parrot Working Group Meeting, Noegel gives an insight into the causal factor:

"This subspecies is making its last stand in the central and eastern part of the island. This area has, until recently, remained free from development and thus afforded this Amazon a safe refuge. Now, much of it is being cleared for agricultural purposes."

In my opinion, encroachment is the primary factor in this bird's decline. Consequently, the establishment of vital areas as reserves would be propitious.

The birds are also actively sought for the local trade and captives are kept under poor conditions, both of which must be stopped immediately. Eventually they die and are replaced by others which meet the same fate. In my opinion action such as that taken on St. Lucia is called for: all parrots currently in captivity should be registered and their sale or trade contingent upon approval from authorities. If death occurs, the body must be turned over to the same governing body. Violation would result in a very stiff fine.

Cayman Amazons are being bred by Ramon Noegel, Tom Nichols, both in the U.S., and it is listed as one of the species bred during 1983 in the U.K. by John and Pat Stoodley. Proper management could eventually result in its being established in avaries. In my opinion, highly competent aviculturists should be permitted to take pairs from the island for the establishment of additional colonies. These would be permitted to leave only under the strictest of measures and would ideally originate from the pet population. Alternately, a captive breeding scheme could be implemented on the island, deriving the foundation stock from the same source. Progeny could, in turn, be placed with aviculturists. Alas, none of these measures or those listed in the previous paragraph will be acted upon.

While boarding the plane at Owens Roberts Airport, I looked back and wondered how long *caymanensis* will survive. The lack of formal protection of it and its refuge may ultimately mean that future generations will know of *caymanensis* only as aviary birds.

Crowned pigeon *Columba leucocephala* and white-winged dove *Zenaida asiatica*, are far more numerous and consequently easier to bag. Certainly their flesh would be more palatable than that of parrots. The two *caymanensis* were so free of fear that attempts to startle them were ignored altogether. I threw stones at a tree several times, but they looked askance as if to suggest that it was futile.

The day of my departure was an auspicious one, for I left with the memory of a pair of parrots defending their territory from an intruding pair. Again, they had paid no attention to my presence, being consumed in the fracas.

Cayman Amazons have been studied extensively by Ramon Noegel who estimates the population at perhaps 200 or less. While this figure may be correct, it is entirely possible for this number to be over or under optimistic since there are impenetrable areas on the island and the parrots are highly mobile. An accurate census would entail the use of walkie-talkies and many individuals to keep track of each bird as it moves about. An assessment would certainly not be facile.

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