

Status of the Green-cheeked Amazon in Northeastern Mexico

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Two hundred miles south of the Texas-Mexico border a dramatic transformation occurs. Arid mesquite woodlands and sorghum fields adjoin tropical rivers and lakeshores. Supporting a variety of plants many of which produce edible fruits or seed pods, the scene is set for the Amazon parrot.

The yellow-crowned Amazon (*Amazona ochrocephala*) is the first species encountered. In the northern portions of its range it shares the arid tropical lowlands and riverine forest with the smaller green-cheeked Amazon (*Amazona viridigenalis*). Proceeding southward, the yellow-crowned Amazon continues to be observed, in one subspecies form or another, into South America. The range of the green-cheek, however, is much more restricted extending only into the Mexican state of Veracruz. With the encroachment of tropical, deciduous forest, the green-cheek is replaced by the more forest-loving yellow-cheeked Amazon (*Amazona autumnalis*). Westwardly the green-cheek can be observed well into the pine-oak belt of the Sierra Madre Oriental range.

Due to its restricted range and popularity in the pet trade, I began a field study in 1983 inquiring as to the status of the species in the wild. Funded, in part, from A.F.A. Avian Research Grants in 1982-83, this paper summarizes my findings during the preliminary trips into the species' range in 1983. A subsequent paper will deal with the species' diet and conservation. "A great flock of red-crowned parrots flies swiftly down river. Some of them are very low, only a few yards above the house. Heelo, heelo, heelo, cra, cra, cra they shriek, the sound is deafening." Cornell-Clarleton Expedition of 1941 in: *At A Bend In A Mexican River*,

Sutton, 1972.

Mexico has changed a great deal since the early travels of George Sutton. The mighty El Salto Falls has since been tamed by a hydroelectric facility, the magnificent ornate hawk-eagle is seldom seen and the shrieking cry of the green-cheeked parrot can hardly be "taken for granted as the air we breathe." Throughout 1983 I made seven trips into the range of the species. Trips were made in the months of January, February, June and August. With the aid of a LANDSAT satellite photograph, I attempted to visit all areas of undisturbed forest accessible by a four-wheel drive vehicle. Residents were frequently questioned as to the abundance of the species. Captive birds were investigated as to their origin.

DESCRIPTION

Since most individuals are familiar with this species, only a brief description will be given. In general, the species is approximately 12 inches in length and green in coloration. The forehead, lores and crown are crimson to varying degrees. As with the other members of the genus *Amazona*, the base of the outer webs of the first five secondaries have red markings. In the field its call, a distinctive cra, cra, cra, is unmistakable and often the only means of identifying young birds in flight. Several authors have mentioned that the amount of crimson is greater on the males. Not having examined a large number of birds of known sex and noting several examples that did not conform to this statement, I can't support its validity.

RESULTS

As stated previously, the green-cheeked Amazon is first encountered approximately two hundred miles

south of Brownsville, Texas. One of the first areas where the species' presence has been documented is along the Rio Corona, one of several rivers that feed into the popular bass fishing lake Vicente Guerrero. During a camping trip in 1978, the species, although not abundant, was present along the riverine forest in small numbers (5-15 birds). Within recent years, however, extensive clearing of the vegetation along the river combined with the accelerated popularity of the area for bathing, washing and swimming purposes has had a dramatic, negative effect upon the parrot population. In addition to the Rio Corona, parrots are also present along the lake itself. Other rivers flowing into the lake (e.g., Rio Purificacion, Rio Soto la Marina) support additional populations of *A. viridigenalis* although, like the corona, the numbers are low and on the decline.

Proceeding south from the lake through the city of Ciudad Victoria the arid slopes of the Sierra Madre Oriental are soon within view. Without the moisture provided from rivers and streams, only sparse dwarf oaks and thorny scrubs exist. From this point south the habitat vegetation takes a tropical "twist." The major section of such is found along the Rio Sabinas in what is frequently called the Rio Sabinas river valley. Approximately 100 miles south of Ciudad Victoria a great deal of the area is in a "more or less" natural state providing feeding, roosting and the nesting requirements for the green-cheeked Amazon.

Although most often observed along the river itself or within the associated riverine forest, I did note that in winter it was much more abundant in the higher elevations. Throughout the winter months large flocks (10-30 birds)

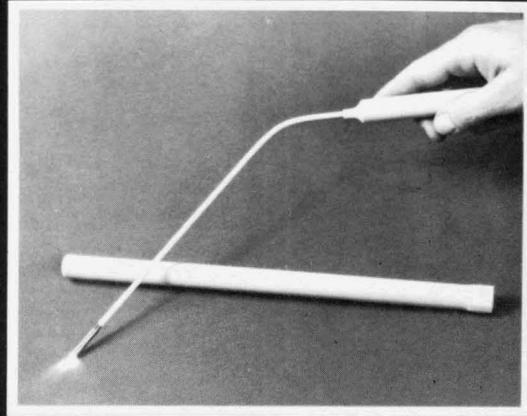
were frequently observed feeding upon acorns and pine nuts. Centered at the city of Gomez Farias, a bird count is made within a ten mile diameter circle each year in December. Published in the July issue of *American Birds* these Audubon Christmas Bird Counts provide the only long term data available as to the relative abundance of avian species in the area. In regards to the status of the green-cheeked Amazon at Gomez Farias NAS, count data from 1972 until 1981 documents an average population of 153 birds. The high occurred in 1972 with 280 birds being counted and the low in 1981 when only 3 individuals were observed. In general, the population appears to be stable if not decreasing slightly. A great deal depends upon the amount of clearing for homes and/or grazing livestock. Gomez Farias' geographic location between the cities of Ciudad Victoria and Ciudad Mante, both growing cities, is not encouraging. Certainly establishment of a protected park within the Sabinas River valley would help matters a bit but it does not appear realistic at the present time.

Sixty-five miles southwest of Gomez Farias lies the El Naranjo River. Included within the El Naranjo Christmas Bird Count circle, the status of *A. viridigenalis* within this 12 mile diameter circle is well documented.

Consisting of montane wet-oak-sweetgum forest, brushland and a limited amount of arid upland grassland and dry oak forest, the parrots' abundance varies greatly throughout the year. The ten-year high for its wintering numbers was in 1981 when 1,438 birds were counted in a single day. It is of interest to note that this high was reported on the same year as the ten-year low at Gomez Farias. This fully illustrates the nomadic nature of the species during the winter months. The average number of green-cheeked Amazons counted in El Naranjo is slightly less than the number normally observed at Gomez Farias, being 127. The future of the El Naranjo population appears more secure than other areas. The forest directly adjoining the hydroelectric plant "El Salto," a popular roosting area, is protected by the Mexican army.

Although large tracts of forest are becoming increasingly harder to find, long-ranging parrots are able to easily travel between the lush lowland areas in order to derive their needed seeds and fruits. Although the winter population within the count circles were on the average 150, it was much less during the

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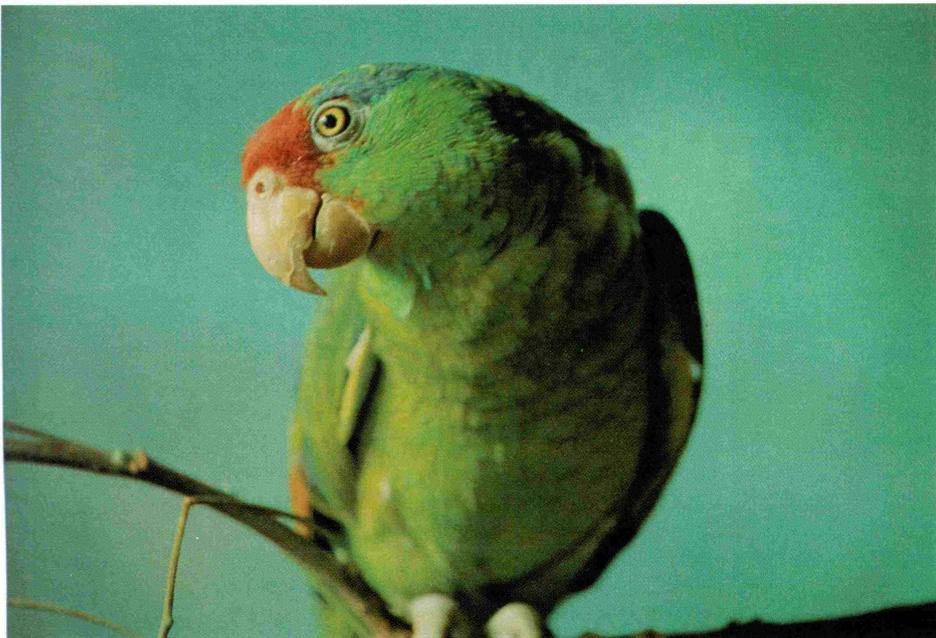
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Green-cheeked Amazon (Amazona viridigenalis) is frequently called the Mexican redbearded or red-crowned parrot.



Lush vegetation along the Rio Corona River. The large trees that grow along Mexican rivers provide much needed nesting cavities for parrots.

spring and summer months when the parrot flocks broke up with pairs going off to nest and rear their chicks. The same area, when visited in June, supported only 15 pairs of nesting parrots.

Travelling west to highway 85 then southward toward the city of Tamazunchale, in the state of Veracruz, I found the species to be sparsely distributed mainly along rivers and in lowlands. Several were observed roosting in trees along the Rio Moctezuma, however, none were seen along the Rio Axtla.

Within the city of Tamazunchale, a marketplace vendor offered several green-cheeked and yellow-cheeked Amazons for sale as pets. When I inquired as to the abundance of each, he responded that the latter is much more abundant.

Travelling from Tamazunchale to Tampico, then northward, little favorable habitat exists for the species until you reach the thorn forest near the Presa de Español north of Aldama. Camping in a hillside gravel pit over-

looking the Sierra de Tamaulipas to the west and the presa (dam) to the north, impressive morning and evening flights of parrots were observed. Travelling in the evening to roost in the sierras, birds would return to forage in the morning along the coast upon palm nuts and seed pods. Counts made in the area in 1979 by the author indicated a population of about thirty pairs of *A. viridigenalis* and fifteen pairs of *A. ochrocephala*. Returning to the same area in 1983 painted a more dismal picture. Counts made during a four day period in June and August documented the presence of fourteen pairs of *A. viridigenalis* and eight pairs of *A. ochrocephala*. Few young were observed with the adult *A. ochrocephala* whereas numerous young *A. viridigenalis* were noted. The overall reduction may have been due to the limited time that I spent in the area but most likely due to the rather obvious habitat destruction. The numerous pet yellow-crowned Amazons offered for sale communicated rather overtly that, despite the national ban on the exportation of Mexico's parrots, a strong, internal demand exists for the best talker of them all, the yellow-crowned Amazon.

SUMMARY

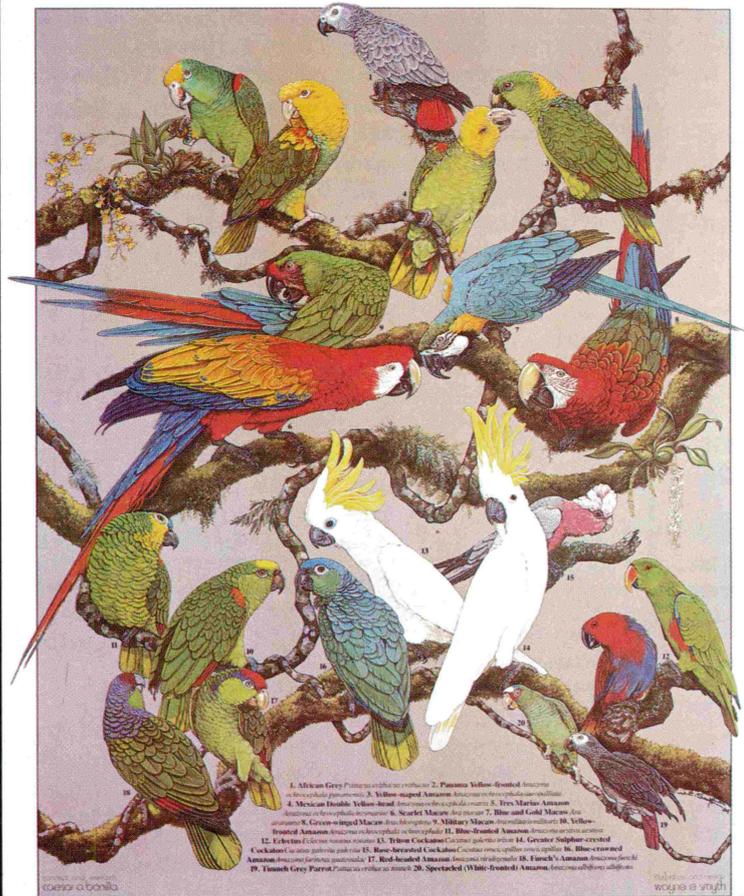
The green-cheeked Amazon (*Amazona viridigenalis*) is a frequently encountered psittacine found in arid, tropical Tamaulipan lowlands and dry, open pine-oak ridges. Its range extends from lake Vicente Guerrero in central Tamaulipas southward to Tamazunchale, Veracruz. It is especially abundant along the eastern coast near the Sierra de Tamaulipas and on the eastern slopes of the Sierra Madre Oriental. Although its numbers have undoubtedly decreased over the past decade, due to both extensive habitat destruction and large scale exportation to foreign pet markets, where found, its numbers are stable, possibly declining slowly. Efforts are currently being made to define the species' exact ecological requirements so that specific recommendations can be made to promote its future survival.

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