

WHAT'S UP WITH THE BLUE-FRONTED AMAZON IN ARGENTINA?

By Tom Marshall

The Blue-fronted Amazon is found in several South American countries: Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina. In Argentina it is one of 28 species of parrots and one of four Amazon species, which include the Tucuman Amazon (*A. tucumana*), the Red-spectacled Amazon (*A. pretrei*) and the Vinaceous Amazon (*A. vinacea*).

The Blue-fronted Amazon is still widely distributed in the northern part of the country, although its numbers have markedly declined in many years, primarily in the Chaco region. It ranges from Jujuy, Salta, Formosa, and Misiones to Cordoba, Santa Fe and Corrientes. It is still common in the basal forest of Salta and Jujuy, and fairly common to uncommon in the remaining areas. Much of this area is referred to as the "Impenetrable Forest" where the breeding pair of Blue-fronted Amazons choose to nest.

The Blue-fronted Amazon found in Argentina is the sub-species (*Amazona aestiva xanthopteryx*) exhibiting much yellow on the face and head, especially males, and on the bend of the wings as compared to the nominate species (*A. aestiva aestiva*) with little yellow on the head, if any, and which has at the bend of the wings red or mainly red and is a slightly smaller bird.

My interest in the Blue-fronted Amazons from Argentina is two-fold: Amazons are my favorite companion species and "Lola", my domestically-bred Blue-fronted Amazon, purchased at a great bird store located in Northern Virginia, D.J. Feathers, is climbing all over her cage and encouraging me to simultaneously, write this article, and watch her attention-grabbing antics. The overriding reason for my interest, however, is that Argentina is one of the last countries in the world still exporting their wildlife and it has been doing so for quite some time. Uniquely,



Lola, a Blue-fronted Amazon next to the flag of Argentina

Photo courtesy of DJ Feathers Aviary

they are also a country whose government thought, at least at one time, that Blue-fronts could be harvested like a crop.

The theory upon which this idea was based stemmed from an insufficient understanding of Amazon nesting success and/or lack of success in the wild as well as concerns that flocks of thousands of Amazons parrots could prove to be an enormous pest problem in the production of oranges and other citrus fruits.

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The original plan for harvesting involved the capture of chicks by taking all but one chick from the nest, and 20% of adult birds to equal a quota of 5000 parrots each year.

It is important to note that the ethical question that might be asked by parrot aficionados in the United States (which banned the importation of wildlife in 1992) or parrot enthusiasts of the European Union (which banned imports of parrots from the wild in 2007), is whether birds should or should not be harvested from the wild? A completely separate question is whether that action would or would not have an impact on wild populations?

The Argentinean government was operating under the accepted premise that parrots lay a number of eggs and hatch from one to four babies. Unfortunately, it is unusual that all eggs hatch and/or produce offspring, and it also is unfortunate that those chicks that are produced have a low probability of survival because in most nests, something called natural brood reduction occurs. Eggs and young often suffer predation, and the differences in size of hatchlings between the first hatch and the last hatch favor the first born in competition for food from the parents. There can be other unfortunate natural disasters, such as insect infestation or weather-related calamities. It is also true that nest cavities can be destroyed and that pairs do not necessarily nest every year. Therefore, theoretically, partial chick removal would not greatly affect the number of chicks fledged, as it is likely that only one or possibly two would fledge in any case, due to the typical pressures that the parrots face in their natural setting.

The brood reduction theory, however, upon which the Argentine harvesting concept was developed, runs afoul (no pun intended) with what most likely would happen in reality. When a harvester approaches a nest with several young, he is going to choose the eldest chicks, as those would be less problematic, given their developmental stage, in keeping them alive for export. Blue-fronted chicks which have reached the age of 40 to 50 days old have passed the most vulnerable time of their short-term existence in the nest cavity, and their probability of survival is now at the best it is ever going to be. They have a very good chance at this juncture of surviving to a point where they could fledge into the wild. However, if the harvesters take the stronger



Young Blue-fronted Amazon chicks staying warm in a nest of blankets

chicks and leave the more vulnerable ones, they have in effect lowered the odds for a successful breeding season for that pair of Blue-fronted Amazons.

In writing this article, I have relied heavily on the work completed by Igor Berkunsky, a field biologist who completed four seasons studying the reproductive ecology and population dynamics of this sub-species beginning in 2002. According to Igor Berkunsky and associates, from 1983 to 1991 approximately half a million Blue-fronted Amazons were authorized by the Argentinean government to be collected for the pet trade. I hope that number of exported parrots would have dropped substantially, especially after the U.S. stopped the importation of avian wildlife in 1992, and Europe followed suit in 2007. A 5000-approved quota for annual export by Argentina seems untenable and unreasonable.

In the second week of May, 2013, after contacting Glenn Reynolds of the World Parrot Trust, which had committed major funding to the project, I was able to get the e-mail address of Igor Berkunsky, who was somewhere in Bolivia working with the Blue-throated Mcaws (*Ara glaucogularis*). I asked him in my e-mail the following questions, and here are his responses:



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1. Is there any additional work being done on the Blue-fronted Amazons in the Chaco region of Argentina?

"Not now. We are planning a monitoring census of the wild population in the harvest area. Nobody is studying the Blue-fronted Amazons in the field presently."

2. Is Argentina still exporting Blue-fronts of up to 5000 individual birds per year?

"No. That peak was during the breeding season in 2005. After that the numbers decreased, and in theory there is not any exporting right now. The main cause of this was the avian flu. In response to the avian flu concerns, Europe banned the importation of wild parrots (2007) and most airlines declined to transport wild birds."

3. Is Argentina still using the "Harvesting Concept"? I am aware of the fact that they suspended it for a while, but did they resume it?

"I don't know whether they are still using that concept. Probably yes. They have a book that includes examples with caimans, parakeets, conures, foxes, lizards, etc."

4. Do you know where the exported Amazons are being shipped?

"The last shipments were to Mexico and Jordan. However, I don't have details. The reason I have few details is due, in part, because the Argentinean government doesn't like the fact that I am asking these types of questions of them"

The Blue-fronted Amazon may have received a reprieve from

a governmental-endorsed program that allowed for the harvesting of this beautiful species of parrots. Given the fact that the United States and the European Union countries are no longer customers for importation of wildlife, as well as the pressure from conservation groups on the government of Argentina with regard to their policy of harvesting, there is some mitigation to their plight. On the other hand, if Amazon parrots continue to be a serious pest species to agriculture and a means of additional income for the locals in an area where eco-tourism is not practical, the concept may be a viable alternative to a more sinister reaction by farmers who depend on the citrus crop for a living. Is it possible that harvesting could be done in a controlled fashion with the help of non-government conservation groups and the wildlife authorities in Argentina working together to improve the capture techniques and the welfare of recently captured birds and to help develop more equitable distribution of any revenue garnered from such activity that would benefit the local people involved? Could a model be developed for any country that exports its wildlife?

References: *PsittaScene* Volume 17 No 3, August 2005;
PsittaScene Volume 18, No. 4 November 2006;
PsittaScene Volume 19 Number 1 February 2007



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