

ST LUCIA AMAZON / PARROT



Scientific name – *Amazona versicolor*



Credit: James Morgan

Background

The St Lucia Amazon is arguably the most striking parrot of its kind. The species is found only on the island of St Lucia in the eastern Caribbean, where it is known locally as 'Jacquot'. The Government of the island became aware of the plight of its endemic parrot population in 1975 when Durrell Wildlife first became involved with St Lucia, and was asked to help by starting a captive breeding programme for the species at Jersey Zoo. In 1989 a pair of captive-bred parrots returned to their native home with the Prime Minister of St Lucia.

Deforestation by humans has been the most devastating factor for the parrots, followed by their capture for food and the wild bird trade and the effects of hurricanes. In three decades, starting with the 1950s, numbers had decreased from about 1000 to a mere 100, and the parrot's habitat had shrunk to a fifth of what was already a tiny area. Although 'Jacquot' has been officially protected since 1849, the legislation had been largely ignored, but in 1979 it was made St Lucia's National bird and St Lucians started to care about their parrot. 'Protection through Pride' education programmes have been crucial in helping to save the species – there are now thought to be over 500 parrots living in the wild.

Species classification

The world's parrots are in the group or 'order' of birds called the Psittaciformes. This large group is broken down into 3 'families' the Loriidae (lories), Cacatuidae (cockatoos) and Psittacidae (parrots). The St Lucia parrot is one of the 275 or so species in the Psittacidae. Within this family there are 64 smaller groups or 'genera', the largest of which is *Amazona*, which contains 30 species, including *Amazona versicolor*. The Amazon parrots are found throughout Central and South America, and the Caribbean.

Description

In the darkness of the forest St Lucia parrots look quite dull, and their largely emerald and yellow-green plumage serves to camouflage them amongst the trees. However, when the sun shines on their feathers a fantastic array of blue and red can also be seen. Plumage colour does vary between individuals, but in general is as follows: The face is cobalt blue and the rest of the head turquoise, turning to green at the neck, and there is an area of scarlet on the breast and small amounts of maroon on the abdomen. Wing colours include blue-black and bright red-orange, which makes them really spectacular when extended. The tail is quite long and can be spread into an impressive fan, with paler green towards the tip and some blue and red markings. The parrot's eyes are bright orange and its legs and feet, as well as its large and powerful beak, are grey. Adults have a body size of around 40cm (16in), from head to tail, and usually weigh 500-700g (18-25oz).

Distribution and habitat

The Caribbean island of St Lucia, just 45x23km (28x14miles), lies between St Vincent and Martinique in the Lesser Antillean chain of islands. It is the only place in the world that this parrot is found in the wild. The species is now confined to the mountainous central-southern region of the island's interior, in what remains of its rainforest. Birds are usually seen singly, in pairs or in small groups of 3 or 4, which probably consist of a pair and their most recent offspring.

Feeding habits

In the wild the St Lucia parrots feed on a wide variety of fruits, seeds and foliage depending on what is seasonally available. The birds make soft noises whilst feeding, supposedly to keep in contact with each other, and if disturbed they fly off screeching loudly. In the Zoo a great deal of research has been carried out to ensure that the nutritional requirements of the captive parrots are being met. The fruit and vegetables eaten by birds at the Zoo also vary according

to season, and in addition they receive special parrot pellets, pulses (such as beans and chickpeas), cheese and foliage. Nutritional supplements, such as cuttlebone to boost calcium levels, are also provided.

Breeding

In the wild, the nesting season is from March to June, but actually St Lucia parrots do not build nests, they lay one or two eggs in the bottom of a cavity in a mature, tall tree. The female incubates the eggs for about 28 days, at the end of which the chicks hatch - bald, blind and totally helpless. Both parents feed the chicks by regurgitating partially digested food, and after 50-70 days the young amazons join their parents in the search for their own food. St Lucia parrots can start to breed at 4-6 years old, and may live for around 30 years. Like humans, male and female parrots have to be compatible and 'get on' in order to stay together. Pair bonds are thought to last for many years, depending on breeding success, and for some may last for life.

Conservation status

Under the method that now evaluates the conservation status of a species, the St Lucia parrot is currently classified as *Vulnerable* on the Red Data List by The World Conservation Union (IUCN 1996 & 2000). This means that the species faces a high risk of extinction in the wild in the medium-term future. Since 1975 the St Lucia parrot has also been listed under Appendix I of CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora). This affords it the highest degree of legal protection against any international trade.

The loss of the parrot's habitat through deforestation, and the uncontrolled hunting of the birds for food and the pet trade were largely responsible for taking the species to the brink of extinction. The prevalence of hurricanes in the Caribbean region has meant that there have always been periodic falls in parrot numbers, as trees are destroyed and some birds get swept out to sea by high winds, but under natural circumstances, the population is expected to recover well after such a storm. The parrot's situation had become so desperate that in the late 1970s there were only about 100 birds remaining on St Lucia in an area just 60sq km (23sq mi).

The most recent assessment of the St Lucia parrot's wild status by Birdlife International suggests that conservation action has saved it from imminent extinction - numbers are now around 500 and continue to increase. There also appears to be some evidence that the range of the species has recently expanded slightly. However, it is thought that the amount of apparently suitable but as yet unoccupied habitat is still decreasing because of human activity. If this starts to encroach on the habitat currently occupied by the parrots, the species will immediately qualify as *Endangered*.

In the Zoo

In 1976 the captive breeding programme at Jersey Zoo was begun, under the instruction of the St Lucia Government, with 7 wild-caught fledglings and 2 adults that had been kept in captivity elsewhere. The first breeding success was in 1982, and initially the chicks were hand-reared. However, with time, careful research and the development of more successful husbandry methods, captive birds now rear their own offspring. The monitoring of nestboxes during the breeding season, using small infra-red cameras, has provided researchers and bird staff with vital inside information about what is usually very private behaviour.

In 1989 the Prime Minister of St Lucia took a pair of Jersey-bred amazons back to their homeland to take part in a second captive breeding programme. For St Lucian people, these parrots, housed in aviaries funded by the Trust, are an opportunity to meet their National bird face to face and may be the only ones that some will ever see. Wild birds are very shy and retiring and their natural habitat is largely inaccessible to people, but they can be seen on bus tours that take ecotourists to the forest.

Of the original 9 wild-caught birds, 4 are still at the Zoo. Although now in what are ordinarily thought to be their twilight years - they are aged between 25 and 31 - they are still going strong! The other 9 parrots that make up the current Jersey population are captive bred and themselves breeding successfully. A further 4 birds, captive-bred in Jersey, have been transferred to Chester Zoo and the headquarters of the World Parrot Trust in Hayle, Cornwall.

In the wild

In 1979 the St Lucia parrot was declared the island's National bird and the Government introduced new protective laws to help save it from extinction. From 1975 to 1996, Durrell Wildlife supported parrot field research and monitoring. In 1977, an Englishman called Paul Butler, who was alerted to the plight of the species through his own studies, began an imaginative and highly successful education programme with the philosophy of 'Protection through Pride'. The operation of this scheme, now co-ordinated by the Rare Center in the US, has spread and is helping to conserve many native species on St Lucia and other islands in the Caribbean and the Pacific. The St Lucia parrot programme featured the 'Jacquot Express' - an old, brightly painted bus that doubled as a classroom and toured the island's schools and villages, and Jacquot himself - a person in a parrot suit who appeared to children while they were taught about their National bird and its forest home.

The future

Essential research and monitoring of the wild population and education of Jacquot's human co-inhabitants is ongoing, to provide St Lucia's spectacular National bird with the best chance of survival. Only time will tell whether these measures are enough to sustain and further improve the parrot's current situation to the point at which the species can be declared 'safe.' However, if the designated forest reserves remain intact and hunting is fully controlled, the outlook for the St Lucia parrot is good.

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