

"Iguaca"— the name given by the Taino Indians

to the native parrot. Its scientific name is *Amazona vittata* but in Puerto Rico it is best known as the Puerto Rican Parrot.

### Status

The Puerto Rican parrot is the only endemic or native parrot in Puerto Rico. One of the rarest birds in the world, this bird and its habitat are strictly protected by Federal and Puerto Rican laws as an endangered species. It is illegal to possess, buy or sell the parrot or any part of it (including feathers, eggs and nests).

### How to identify it?

The Puerto Rican parrot is a small amazon parrot, about 11 inches (29 cm) in length and weighting about 10 ounces (270 g). Its tail is a short, squared-off tail as opposed to the long, pointed tail



of a parakeet. The overall color of the Puerto Rican parrot is green. The wing tips are blue and usually are visible only when the bird is in flight. It has a white ring around the eyes and a red blaze above its beak.

### Where to find it...

Originally, this parrot occurred throughout the entire island of Puerto Rico. Today, it is confined to the Palo Colorado, Palma de Sierra and Tabonuco forests types of the upper zones of the Luquillo Mountains within the El Yunque National Forest.

### Population size

It is estimated that before the Spanish colonization of the island the population was about a million birds. By the nineteenth century a large population decline occurred and by the 1950's the population declined to approximately 200 birds. In 1971 the total population was at its lowest point: only 16 parrots were known to exist in the wild and 3 in captivity. By 1989 there were approximately 99 birds: about 47 in the wild and 52 in a captive flock, which is maintained at an aviary within the El Yunque National Forest. After the Hurricane Hugo the wild population was reduced by about half to an estimated total of 25 birds.

### Causes of decline ...

Several factors have caused the decline. Habitat loss is the major cause. Most Puerto Rican forests were cutover for agriculture and urban development during the late 1800's and early 1900's. By this time almost 90% of the Island was deforested. Large and mature trees, which served as nests were selectively

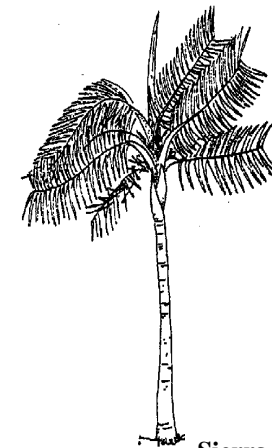
removed for charcoal production from many forests that formerly were used by parrots.

Also, direct impacts on the bird have contributed to the decline. Chicks were robbed from the nests for pets and adults were hunted to avoid crop damage. Once the population was low, the parrot became particularly vulnerable to some naturally occurring effects such as: three major hurricanes (1928, 1932, 1989), parasitic flies, competition from honey bees for nest sites, and predation by thrashers, rats, snakes and birds of prey.

### Food habits

The Puerto Rican parrot feeds primarily on the fruits of the Sierra Palm, Tabonuco and Cupeillo trees. Although they are essentially fruit eaters, they are known to also eat young leaves, seeds and flowers. In captivity, the parrots are fed with a mixture of corn, rice, beans and oat as well as fruits and vegetables.

They are also given a special formulated dry, pelleted supplement. During the breeding season captive parrots are also given sierra palm fruit.



Sierra Palm

### And.. what about its reproduction?

The parrot mates for life. If one of the pair is lost, the other will usually find another mate by the next breeding season. Breeding is done during the dry

season, from February to June. For its nest, parrot select a large, deep tree cavity, usually in a Palo Colorado tree.

This parrot does not build its own nest but parrot recovery biologists do build artificial cavities, which are generally accepted by them.



The female lays a clutch of 3 to 4 eggs and does all the incubating. The male brings food, which it regurgitates for the female. Chicks hatch after 26 days of incubation and both parents feed the chicks. The young leave the nest when they are about two months old, although they remain dependent upon the adults for food and survival skills for several more months. The family group stays together until the beginning of the next breeding season.

## Conservation efforts

Protection of the Puerto Rican parrots began in the late 1940's with a ban on hunting in parrot habitat. In 1968 intensive cooperative efforts to recover the species from near extinction were initiated by the US Forest Service, by the Puerto Rico Department of Natural Resources, the US Fish and Wildlife Service and The World Wildlife Fund.

The goal of the recovery program is to increase the parrot population to a point where it is no longer in danger of extinction. This is done by means of:

- laws and policies
- protection of current and potential habitats
- improving nesting sites
- controlling parrot enemies
- establishing captive flocks to propagate more birds
- conducting further research to provide better ways to increase parrot numbers

Actual and potential nests sites are maintained yearly by program biologists. The nests and birds are protected from competitors such as thrashers and honeybees; predators such as rats and the Red tailed Hawk and parasites such as the botfly and the soldier fly larva.

All active nests are guarded and closely monitored throughout each breeding season to prevent egg and chick mortality. Parrot population counts and movement patterns are conducted regularly to help determine population status and habitat preferences.

Intensive management and research is being done to increase the number and productivity of breeding pairs in the wild and captive flocks. In 1989 five breeding pairs were active in the wild and four captive pairs were active in the aviary. Some of the young that are produced in captivity are used to prevent nesting failures in the wild population or to add different genes to the wild population. The others are used in the establishment of a second population in the Río Abajo Forest in Utuado.

## Seeing the Puerto Rican Parrot

The wild Puerto Rican parrot sometimes can be seen in groups of two or more as they fly or forage in the upper part of the Luquillo Mountains within the El Yunque National Forest. The parrots are usually heard before they are seen, as they emit loud repetitive bugle-like call when they fly.

The future of the Puerto Rican parrot looks promising but it depends on our determination in its conservation and protection. We should not allow the disappearance of this unique species. But...

## ...What can you do?

- Help protect all the forests of Puerto Rico particularly the El Yunque National Forest and the Río Abajo Forest.
- As you walk in the trails try not make a lot of noise and do not leave trash.
- If you see a parrot enjoy it with binoculars - remember it is illegal to possess, trap or bother a parrot.
- Share this information with your family and friends.
- Be a volunteer in the recovery program
- Give a donation to the program

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# The Iguaca



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