



Breeding the Cuban Amazon in Australia

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY GRAHAM MATTHEWS

It was over 20 years ago that I first saw Cuban Amazons *Amazona leucocephala* in an Australian aviary. They were in a private collection in Melbourne and the aviculturist lucky enough to own these birds was slowly becoming more successful at breeding them. After that introduction I was in awe of their beauty and immediately added them to my list of species I would aspire to own one day. That day eventually arrived many years later but alas with the upheaval in the exotic bird industry at the time it was imperative the birds be sourced from an establishment that had been registered under the National Exotic Bird Registration Scheme. Without being reckless I set about sourcing my Cubans from such a collection and, finally, the aspirations of all those years ago were fulfilled.

Distribution


The natural range of the Cuban Amazon is not large, being restricted to Cuba, the Bahamas and nearby islands in the West Indies.

Description

Without going into a detailed description, the beauty of the Cuban Amazon is obvious from the photographs. There is, however, a degree of colour variation with the pink on the throat and maroon/red on the abdomen that may be intensified with selective breeding.

Housing

Typical of the Amazon species the Cuban Amazon does not have a preference for either conventional or suspended aviaries. Given their somewhat aggressive nature towards those who care for them on occasions, however, I personally find suspended



Suspended aviaries are positioned over a concrete pit adjacent to fruit and Lilly Pilliy trees



Dietary items include seeds, fruit, vegetable and soaked seed mixture and a vitamin and mineral mix

Enrichment

Further therapy and stimulus is provided for the birds at least once a month with the addition of sizeable fresh eucalyptus branches including leaves and flowers (when in season). Cuban Amazons really enjoy climbing through these and chewing them up, often stripping the bark before they destroy the leaves and flowers. Larger branches are

also sliced into lengths of about 200mm and allowed to dry, then put into the aviaries for the birds to chew the bark. Because they are dry it often takes many months for the birds to remove the bark—providing extensive enrichment.

Also supplied on an irregular basis are soft pine board pieces that the birds totally destroy and reduce to sawdust. For additional climbing therapy a length of small galvanised chain is attached to the wire roof of the flight—often the cause of many an argument. It is vital to thoroughly wash new galvanised chain with a vinegar and water solution.

Feeding

Due to the number of different species in my collection it is not physically possible to feed specifically for one species, so the diet has been averaged out to include the following. The dry seed mix (similar to small parrot or lovebird mix), comprises 8% Red Panicum, 8% Panicum, 18% Hulled Oats, 18% White French Millet, 20% Canary, 8% Safflower and 20% Grey Striped Sunflower, and is fed once a week.

The quantity is monitored closely as all Amazons enjoy eating and it's important for both their health and breeding capabilities that they don't become overweight. I've found that by feeding a set quantity of seed at a specific time each week, the birds generally eat all the 'lollies' (sunflower and safflower) on the first couple of days, then the smaller seeds over the remainder of the week.

Each morning a fruit, vegetable and soaked seed mix is fed. The soaked seed consists of equal parts of pigeon mix, large parrot mix, lupins, whole maize and grey sunflower seed. The amount required is placed in a container at least twice the size of the amount to be soaked. Boiling water is then poured over the mix to the top of the container and left to stand overnight. After rinsing thoroughly the next morning, frozen vegetables (carrots, peas, beans and corn kernels) thawed in boiling water, then diced apple, celery, and capsicum are added and all mixed together. Corn on-the-cob is also fed daily, being cut into slices then quarters and fed with the above mixture. In the lead up to and during the breeding season, Vetafarm™ D Nutrical powder is sprinkled over this mix as each aviary is fed.

Other fruit and vegetables fed, depending on seasonal availability, include pear, orange, kiwi fruit, passionfruit, rockmelon, grapes, broccoli, cauliflower, silverbeet and pomegranate. Seeding grasses are fed occasionally when available, usually every couple of days. ➤

Fresh branches are available at all times providing ample therapy

aviaries to be more suitable. If you were to house these birds in a conventional aviary I would suggest that a minimum size should measure around 3.6 metres long x 1.2 metres wide x 2.1 metres high, preferably with solid side walls to minimise aggression towards neighbouring birds. If there is to be wire mesh on the sides then this should be double-wired to prevent potential feet, beak and other damage to those birds on either side.

As Cuban Amazons are relatively small it may be possible to house them in a smaller sized aviary, however when it becomes necessary to enter the aviary to clean, change perches or for some other reason, there must be room for the birds to settle and not fly around relentlessly. Under the roofed section of the aviary the side walls should be solid to provide privacy for eating and nesting. Ideally, a safety passage should be located at the rear of the aviary to provide access for all feeding and husbandry requirements, including the nest site location, thereby minimising the amount of time spent invading the birds' territory.

My Cuban Amazons are housed in suspended aviaries in a small/medium parrot breeding complex together with other small Amazons, caiques, *Poicephalus* species and conures. The aviaries measure 2.4 metres long x 90cm wide x 1.2 metres high and are suspended 1.2 metres above a concrete path and directly over a 600mm deep concrete pit. This aviary design provides a happy medium for all the species housed in them—the birds' space is not intruded upon as there is absolutely no reason why a person would need to enter the aviary. Although the aviary is hung within another larger building, the roof is still partially enclosed at the rear to 1.2 metres, and the sides are fully closed apart from a small double-wired window measuring 60cm x 40cm positioned just above the wire floor approximately halfway along the side. This allows for interaction between the birds on either side but may be closed off with a solid divider should the need arise.

The wire used is 25mm x 12mm weldmesh and the solid sides are flat iron sheeting powder coated in 'Rivergum green'. Doors are fitted at both the front and the rear to allow for easy maintenance and perch replacement with minimal disturbance to the occupants.

The aviaries face a garden of trellised fruit trees interplanted with Lilly Pillies—the fruit trees providing fruit for me and occasionally for the birds and all the prunings are provided to the birds. When the Lilly Pillies fruit and ripen, they are fed to the birds and are devoured by most, from large macaws to small conures.



Cuban Amazon cock protects his nestbox



Cuban Amazon chicks are similar to other Amazon species in their handrearing requirements

Available in the aviaries at all times is Vetafarm™ True Grit vitamin and mineral grit which is consumed to varying degrees, depending on the time of the year. Whilst this feeding regimen is working, I do believe that there is some merit in replacing the dry seed portion of their diet with pellets, so it is intended to introduce Vetafarm™ South American Mix pellets over the next 12 months.

Breeding

As the season changes from winter to spring (although that may be questionable with global warming these days) the Cuban Amazons become a lot more vocal, in particular early in the morning and late in the afternoon. The cock will be seen flaring the feathers on the back of his neck, partially spreading and dropping his wings and strutting back and forth along the perch while calling out. It is at this time that aviculturists need to become vigilant with this species. If not closely monitored, the cock may become rather aggressive towards the hen in his attempts to entice her to breed, to the extent that he may just kill her. Unfortunately, Cuban Amazon cocks have a bad reputation for this behaviour—as do some other species of Amazons—and it appears that some of these bad personality tendencies may be inherited.

To date I've found that when young pairs have been introduced to each other at an early age and have grown and matured together, problems are minimal. Perhaps this bad reputation of aggressiveness is the result of mature aged birds being paired together.

The nestboxes I use are constructed of solid 20mm thick pine board with internal measurements of 600mm deep x 250mm square with a 100mm entrance hole and a 120mm inspection hole. A wire ladder is provided directly below the entrance hole and pieces of pine are attached around the internal walls at the base for the hen to chew on while preparing the nest and incubating. The nesting substrate consists of two parts small red gum splinters/mulch to one part coarse washed river sand which is dampened and packed into the bottom of the box. The nestbox is hung vertically on the outside of the back wall of the aviary in the safety passage enabling ease of inspection without disturbing the birds. Access is provided from the inside through a wooden face plate with a landing platform.

The cock shows a lot of attention towards the nestbox, often chewing around the entrance for hours and entering the box with the hen while she prepares the nest. This begins around September–October and may continue for three to four weeks until she is ready to lay her clutch of 3–5 eggs, usually four, on every second day around

October–November. Incubation is just under a month so chicks are due to hatch during November–December prior to the extreme hot weather we experience in our region.

Due to the minimal number of Cuban Amazons available and their potentially inherited aggressive nature, I have chosen to artificially incubate this species for the short term to ensure the species becomes better established in Australian aviaries. As it is most unlikely we will ever experience legal importation into Australia again, I believe it is imperative that a concerted effort be made to breed these rarer Amazon species to ensure that they are not lost forever.

I have found Cubans to be no different to the other Amazons I have handreared—they even have that gentle companion bird trait about them—however, I don't anticipate that they will be bred as a pet bird for many years to come.

Cuban chicks wean just as easily as the other Amazons. They readily take to the assortment of foods and array of colours provided. Once weaned the young are introduced to aviary life in smaller suspended aviaries housed with one or two of their siblings—or even young of another species—and provided with lots of fresh branches to enjoy and destroy. I believe that this is the best way for young to learn the art of flight without major damage from gathering too much speed in a larger aviary. They become accustomed to the front and rear walls and sides of the aviary so when finally introduced to the larger aviary they are aware of what these look like and know when to 'put the brakes on'.

Young pairs are also introduced to each other in the smaller aviaries. These aviaries are close to my house and therefore the birds' interaction with each other can be monitored to ensure compatibility before they are moved into the breeding complex. It has been written that Cuban Amazons may be mature and able to breed at three years of age, however I suggest that this is an exception and it's more likely to be from four years onwards.

Conclusion

In closing I would say that Cuban Amazons are not a species for those unable to spend the time observing their birds. While they are much the same as other Amazon species they do have differences in their personalities and traits that need to be monitored. They are a relatively small but beautiful looking species that I have enjoyed the challenge of keeping and breeding in my collection.



Recommended reading **Amazon Parrots—Aviculture, Trade and Conservation, Bird—The Definitive Visual Guide, Good Bird—A Guide to Solving Behavioural Problems in Companion Parrots, Parrot Problem Solver—Finding Solutions to Aggressive Behaviour, A Guide to Basic Health & Disease in Birds, A Guide to Incubation & Handraising Parrots** and the DVD **A Selection of South American Parrots**. (See Free Mail Order Card.)

