

# Puerto Rican Amazon

*Amazona vittata vittata*



Distribution

**Family:** Psittacidae  
**Order:** Psittaciformes

## Description

The Puerto Rican amazon, or as the taínos called it, Iguaca, is a bright green bird, with a red forehead and white rings around its eyes, as well as blue covert and primary flight feathers. Its beak is ivory-colored, and its tail is rounded. Juveniles are very similar to the adults. Males and females are also very similar in appearance, and measure about 12 inches (approx. 30 centimeters). Sometimes, the red band on the forehead is wider in males than in females. While flying, the bird makes a distinctively loud “kar . . . kar” call. This sound can carry across great distances. It also makes a variety of other sounds and calls when communicating with other parrots, as well as to establish its territory.

## Biological Information

### Reproduction

The Puerto Rican amazon reaches its reproductive age between 3 to 5 years. The parrots usually establish a

mating bond that lasts a long time, often lifelong. A pair of parrots remains together almost all year long, except for when the female is incubating the eggs while the male provides food. The amazon nests in cavities found on large trees, such as the leatherwood tree (*Cyrilla racemiflora*), among others. If necessary, amazons may also nest in cavities in limestone rock walls. Nesting begins from February through March, all the way to June. Traditionally, nesting coincides with the driest season of the year, and during the fruiting period of plants of which the seeds, fruits and leaves serve the amazons as nourishment.

### Diet

This parrot feeds on plants such as: sierra palm, royal palm, nance, Maria tree, guava, pacay, balsam apple, guarea, and trumpet tree, among others.

### Distribution

The Puerto Rican amazon, a native species, was once very abundant in the Island, including the nearby islands of Culebra, Vieques and Mona. This parrot is the last psittacid species existing, and originated in, US territory. Psittacids are a family of birds, usually tropical, which have brightly colored feathers and a short, highly placed and curved beak. Psittacids are true parrots, like the macaw. The native population has shrunk in size and scope and is mostly concentrated in El Yunque National Forest, the eastern side of the island, and the Río Abajo National Forest, between the municipalities of Arecibo and Utuado. At least three of the amazons liberated in Río Abajo have dispersed and were sighted in Morovis, Vega Baja and Manatí in 2012.

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## Threats

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Besides having a small population, and a limited area of distribution, the species is threatened by the pearly-eyed thrasher (*Margarops fuscatus*), which destroys amazon eggs and hatchlings in order to take over the nest. The red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), the Puerto Rican broad-winged hawk (*Buteo platypterus brunnescens*) and rats (*Rattus rattus* and *R. norvegicus*) are mortal predators of young and adult amazons. The *Philornis pici*, a parasitic fly, deposits its larvae onto hatchlings, causing them to sicken and die. European and Africanized bees (*Apis mellifera*) have also been known to invade amazon nests in order to establish their colony. They sting and kill birds unable to fly away. Hurricanes and other such climate events affect the stability of the population in its natural environment. Habitat loss as a consequence of deforestation is an ever-present threat which limits the options available for suitable places to reinsert amazons into their natural environment.

## Conservation Measures

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The Puerto Rican amazon was classified as an endangered species in 1967, before the Endangered Species Act amendments went into effect in 1973. There is a Cooperative Agreement between the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Department of Natural Resources and the Environment, and the United States Forest Service, which work together to foster the Puerto Rican amazon's recovery. The three agencies make up the Puerto Rican Amazon Recovery Committee. Initially, a captive breeding program was established, which has grown to include the insertion of amazons back into the wild, habitat management, and research. Other private and academic entities have joined the effort and perform research and education endeavors.

The Recovery Committee periodically surveys the amazons in the wild, and estimated the presence of about 18 – 22 amazons in El Yunque and about 60 – 70 in Río Abajo. Field biologists use several strategies in order to manage the habitat. The shortage of mature trees with the kinds of cavities amazons prefer to build their nests in requires biologists to build and install artificial nests for the birds to use. Also, biologists

may cull the predator species as needed, in order to foster the normal development of eggs and hatchlings.

The captive population is kept as such for various reasons: breeding and building up their numbers, ensure additional populations (especially in the event of a natural catastrophe such as a hurricane), and for the eventual reintroduction of the species in the forests in which they used to thrive. In aviaries, advanced technologies are used to diagnose illnesses and provide treatment. In actuality, there are nearly 350 amazons distributed between the Iguaca Aviary, managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service, in El Yunque, and the José L. Vivaldi Aviary, managed by the Department of Natural Resources and the Environment, in Río Abajo.

The Endangered Species Act, amended in 1973, prohibits the killing, harassing, trapping, purchasing or selling any species, as well as parts and products derived from the species, which is listed as endangered.

## References

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## Additional Information

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