

PsittaScene



Twenty Years

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Saving Parrots

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Amazon Territory

Article and Photos

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Years of watching Yellow-shouldered Amazons on Bonaire has led to some exciting and unexpected encounters. The birds sometimes engage in extended aerial confrontations when territory is disputed.

Over three years investigating the breeding system of Yellow-shouldered Amazons (*Amazona barbadensis*) on the island of Bonaire I was lucky to spend hundreds of hours watching the behaviour of pairs around their nests. Time and again I marvelled at how aggressive these wild parrots could become towards other parrots. At other times I would be shocked; parrots can get downright nasty.

Almost every day I saw interactions between nesting pairs and “others.” Whether these other parrots were hapless passersby or intruders

intent on taking over a nesting cavity, I could never be sure, and things never got too serious as long as a respectable distance was maintained (50 m – 150 ft or more). Pairs would display to each other, emitting guttural gurgles accompanied by tail-fanning and wing-raising, revealing splashes of red under-wing feathers.

At times the tension visibly increased. Individuals would fly at and displace others from their perch (often a cactus on Bonaire), and proceed to land in the exact spot of the displaced bird. From my human perspective this

behaviour looked like a symbolic assertion of dominance. You could almost hear them: “This is my patch, do you hear me? Mine!”

Now and again things would really escalate with pairs physically pursuing intruders away from the nest area. They would fly in circles, backwards and forwards, up and down, each trying to outmanoeuvre the other. These dogfights were accompanied by guttural squawks that reverberated around the cliffs. Occasionally claws and beaks grappled in mid-air clashes; pulled feathers would gently float to the ground.

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One bird displaces a rival on a favoured prickly perch. It may not look very comfortable but often it's the best option available in this arid climate.

After inspecting a nest one day I found myself right in the middle of such a dispute. The parrots involved were apparently so preoccupied with each other that they didn't notice me sneaking up with my camera, or perhaps I was the least of their worries. These guys had a serious fight on their hands...

Why fight?

The big puzzle is to figure out what exactly they are fighting over. A lack of suitable nest sites is often assumed to be an issue for parrots, but actually identifying how nest site availability

limits breeding is fraught with difficulties. In some populations there is little aggression between pairs despite many pairs not breeding. On Bonaire the limestone cliffs are riddled with holes and many, which appear suitable for nesting, go unused. Indeed some cavities that produced three of four chicks one year were left empty the next.

On Bonaire, Yellow-shouldered Amazons nest in loose aggregations, perhaps as a result of using social cues to identify good nesting spots. It could be something akin to sheep syndrome in

humans – if others are nesting there, then it should be a good area; or, taken further – if others are successfully breeding in that nest cavity then maybe it's worth fighting for. Studies of other birds have found that by manipulating social cues pairs can be tricked into nesting in areas they didn't previously use.

We still understand surprisingly little about why parrots use one nest site but not another. If we can get closer to an answer we may be armed with a powerful conservation tool for boosting parrot populations the world over.



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