

Choosing A Pet Bird: Unique Amazon Parrots

Thinking about choosing a pet Amazon parrot? Get to know everything about the food-loving, talkative Amazon parrot family.

By John Geary

When people conjure up the image of a parrot, it often takes the form of a saucy, green-feathered imp riding around on a pirate's shoulder. In other words, they picture an Amazon parrot.

Amazon parrots are intelligent, outgoing birds, which can be challenging.

Courtesy Monika Frank, Texas

While Amazon parrots rarely ride around on pirates' shoulders these days (indeed, allowing an Amazon parrot on the shoulder is generally not recommended), these pet birds do have a reputation for being saucy and impish. Amazon parrots are very intelligent, outgoing pet birds. They can be a real challenge, however, and they are not for the faint of heart, and they might not be the best pet bird for a person with little-to-no bird experience.

"Amazon parrots are absolutely full of themselves," said Diana Holloway, president of the Amazona Society. "They love attention, they love to talk and sing — they're real 'divas.'"

"They've been described as 'good-time' play birds, and I certainly agree with that," added Sussanne Hardy, an animal health technician and bird behavior consultant at Vancouver's Night Owl Bird Hospital. "They like life and like to have fun."

This playfulness is just one of the factors people find so alluring about Amazon parrots. Their colorful feathers combined with their good talking ability also make them desirable as pet birds. While some may argue that they do not talk as well as African grey parrots, people do find the Amazon parrot's feathering more attractive.

"African greys are phenomenal talkers, but they are gray," said Wayne Davey, a former Canadian World Parrot Trust director and a senior keeper at the Niagara Falls Aviary. "People tend to be drawn to an Amazon parrot's colors. "When an African grey talks, it usually knows what it's saying, but when an Amazon parrot talks, it's usually mimicking. But Amazon parrot's talking ability is still very high."

Uniquely Amazon Parrot

They typically have short, stout bodies with short, square-shaped tails. An Amazon parrot's feathers are mainly green, although they are often highlighted with a myriad of other colors including yellow, red, blue, orange, plum, brown and lilac. Most Amazon parrots are monomorphic, meaning both males and females have the same coloring; you cannot usually determine gender by simply looking at their feathers, as in the case of some sexually dimorphic parrots, like the Eclectus parrot, for example.

The best talking species tend to be the blue-fronted Amazon parrot, yellow-naped Amazon parrot and double yellow-headed Amazon parrot. Not all species are good talkers, though. Mealy Amazons and orange-winged Amazons, as a rule, tend not to talk as well as blue fronts and yellow napes.

In addition to their color and talking ability, other appealing characteristics of Amazons include their ability to learn tricks and their affectionate nature.

Common Amazon Parrots

There are more than 60 species of Amazons. The species most commonly kept as pets include blue-fronted, yellow-naped, double yellow-headed, white-fronted, orange-winged and Mealy Amazon parrots. The first three are by far the most popular pets. Other less-common Amazon parrots kept as pets include yellow-faced parrots and yellow-shouldered Amazon parrots.

Here are some brief sketches of some of the more popular pet species.

Blue-Fronted Amazon Parrot (*Amazona aestiva xanthopteryx* and *A.a. aestiva*): These Amazon parrot subspecies can exhibit wide mood swings, particularly during a breeding cycle. They're generally excellent talkers.

Double Yellow-Headed Amazon Parrot (A. ochrocephala): These birds are renowned for their combination of excellent talking skills and beautiful feather colors. They can be temperamental, although less so than yellow napes.

Yellow-Naped Amazon Parrot (A. ochrocephala aurocollata): They also make excellent talkers, but they require intelligent, firm owners, as they can easily dominate a timid human.

Orange-Winged Amazon Parrot (A. amazonica): This bird can be a fair talker, although it's not renowned for its talking. Reported to be good with children, orange wings often "shadow box" at their own shadows or imaginary enemies in the air.

White-Fronted Amazon Parrot (A. albifrons): This is the smallest Amazon kept as a pet in the United States. It is the one species that can be sexed visually, because males have a red patch on their wings, while females sport a white patch in the same place. They tend to enjoy petting more than yellow-headed or blue-headed Amazons.

Lilac-Crowned Amazon Parrot (A. finschi): This is generally considered to be one of the quieter, gentler Amazons. Its vocalizations tend to be softer than other Amazons.

Mealy Amazon Parrot (A. farinosa): This is the largest Amazon parrot kept as a pet bird. It is less prone to bite than most Amazon parrots. The mealy Amazon parrot is not considered a good talker.

Amazon Parrots In Our Home

George Rason, Curator of Birds for the Niagara Falls Aviary, has worked with Amazon parrots for 30 years as a breeder and keeper at the Toronto Zoo. He believes the Amazon parrot's outgoing nature helps it thrive in an aviary environment. "An aviary is a rough-and-tumble environment, and Amazon parrots are a rough-and-tumble bird," he said.

It is probably this rough-and-tumble nature that allows Amazons to adapt to life with people much easier than pet birds like African greys or cockatoos, another appealing quality for someone looking to keep a parrot as a pet.

More so than many other large parrots, Amazon parrots adapt well to our homes. Even in less-than-ideal conditions, they seem to bounce back very quickly. "Amazon parrots don't seem to carry around baggage like other species can," Holloway said. "We've had Amazon parrots living in horrendous conditions for 20 years, and they come to us like stuffed bunnies. You watch them come out of this. They're absolute survivors."

Amazon Parrots Are Enthusiastic Eaters

In the wild, Amazon parrots eat nuts, berries, fruits and vegetables, including shoots, buds, pods, seeds and blossoms. They are not completely vegetarian; they will eat grubs and, when available, carrion. Pet Amazon parrots need a base formulated pelleted diet with some seed, along with a wide variety of fresh foods like fruit and vegetables, raw or cooked. This helps provide a balanced diet and helps hold an Amazon parrot's interest.

Amazon parrots tend to be less fussy or wary about new foods than other pet birds, but they also can become bored with the same food, so vary their diet regularly. "You name it, they like it," said Holloway. "I've never seen an Amazon parrot turn down anything."

Rason finds Amazons to be much more fruit- and veggie-oriented than many other parrots. "I recommend one-third of their diet be made up of formulated pellets, the other two-thirds, fruit and a mixture of pulses, such as peas, beans and chickpeas," he said.

All parrots need plenty of vitamins A, K, E and calcium in their diets. Carrots, pumpkin, squash, sweet potatoes, papaya, cantaloupe and mango are good sources of vitamin A. Calcium is present in food like peas, broccoli, almonds and Brazil nuts. Bell peppers are also good sources of A, K and E.

Offer occasional treats like small pieces of lean meat, hard-boiled eggs and nuts. Go easy on the nuts, though; while most are rich in protein, they also contain a fair amount of fat. Amazon parrots can become obese if they don't exercise regularly.

Food presentation can also enrich an Amazon parrot's environment. Provide additional stimulation and foraging opportunities for these intelligent pet birds by sticking pieces of fresh fruit and veggies on a skewer hung in the cage or on a playgym.

Amazons In The Wild

Amazon parrots are “New World” birds, occurring naturally in the rain forests of Mexico, the Caribbean Islands and Central and South America. There are some flocks of non-native Amazon parrots in parts of the United States

While all wild birds face issues of habitat loss, Wayne Davey indicated that most Amazon parrot species are not endangered in the wild. “Island species are the ones at highest risk, in places like Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent — they’re all endangered heavily,” he said. “Most of the mainland populations are fairly healthy with the exception of the double yellow-headed Amazon, which was just recently put on CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) Appendix I [species that may be threatened with extinction and which are or may be affected by international trade].”

All Amazon parrot are on Appendix II (species not considered to be under the same threat as those in Appendix I, but which may become so if trade is not regulated). Some others, in addition to the double yellow-headed parrots are on Appendix I.