

Hot Islands, Cool Birds

Check out these bird- and people-friendly destinations

By Susan Chamberlain

You want to go somewhere exotic where you can catch a glimpse of parrots in their natural habitat, but you also want room service, air-conditioning, a place to shop, warm water for swimming, surfing or diving and nice restaurants. "Parrotise" is closer than you think:

Bonaire

Bonaire, in the Netherlands Antilles, just off the coast of Venezuela, is a short flight from Aruba or Curacao. The trio is known as the "ABC Islands." Bonaire enjoys a reputation as the best snorkeling and scuba diving spot in the Western Hemisphere. You'll see colorful parrot fish underwater, but the real feathered fantasies exist above Bonaire's water line, namely flamingos. Enjoy breakfast or lunch at one of the open-air restaurants on Bonaire, where you'll share your space with the wren-like chibi-chibi birds that flit about as they pilfer the packets of sugar on the tables.

Bonaire is home to more than 190 species of birds. Drive north on the Island and you may hear the call of the brown-throated conure (*Aratinga pertinax xanthogenia*) before you see the flash of green wings as a small flock flies across the road. The birds, slightly smaller than sun conures, are mostly green with bright yellow-orange cheeks and lores.

Continue on to the rough terrain of Washington/Slagbaai National Park, where huge cacti abound, and you may be lucky enough to spot the yellow-shouldered Amazon (*Amazona barbadensis rothschildi*), known locally as the Lora. These parrots may also be seen at other locations around the island, even in residential areas where the gardens boast fruit trees.

Visit the tourist office in town for more information on the best birding sites to visit, as they may vary according to season and recent rainfall. (Average rainfall on Bonaire is 22 inches a year.) Inquire about a guided birding tour or explore on your own. Resident naturalist Jerry Ligon leads field trips on the island. For a comprehensive report on the Lora, or yellow-shouldered Amazon, visit: www.mina.vomil.an; www.infobonaire.com or phone (800) BONAIRE (266-2473). Contact Jerry Ligon at: jcligon@telbonet.an or call him from the United States by dialing 011 (599) 717-2098.

Cayman Islands

The Caymans are a small group of Caribbean islands, only about an hour's flight from Miami. It is popular for its beautiful beaches, botanic gardens, historic buildings and bird sanctuaries as well as a host of fashionable shops and art galleries.

The national bird of the Cayman Islands is the Cayman Amazon Parrot. This designation includes the Grand Cayman Amazon (*Amazona leucocephala caymenensis*) and the smaller Cayman Brac Amazon (*Amazona leucocephala hesternae*). As their common names imply, one subspecies inhabits Grand Cayman and the other makes its home on the smaller Cayman Brac. They are both subspecies of the Cuban Amazon.

The population of parrots on Little Cayman was wiped out as a result of a hurricane in 1932, but some birds from Cayman Brac occasionally fly over to visit. Lucky vacationers may spot the birds foraging for berries and mangoes among the vegetation on Grand Cayman and Cayman Brac. Watch for glimpses of their red and white heads among the greenery.

Hike through the Brac Parrot Reserve on Cayman Brac, where many of the island's reported 400 (1994 census) Amazons reside. According to <http://www.caymans.com/>, August is the best month for parrot-watching. The birds nest in March and April; the chicks are fledging by June and flying free by August. For more information, visit <http://www.caymanislands.ky/>; <http://www.naturecayman.com/>.

Trinidad

Noted for its steel-drum bands, annual Carnival, beautiful beaches and friendly people, Trinidad is home to more than 150 species of birds, including orange-winged Amazons, green-rumped parrotlets, yellow-crowned Amazons and other hookbilled species. Trinidad's lush environment is courtesy of an annual rainfall in excess of 72 inches.

Bernadette Plair, the Neotropical Conservation Program Manager at the Cincinnati Zoo, is at the helm of the blue-and-gold macaw reintroduction program on Trinidad. According to Plair, blue & golds can be sighted on ecotours of the Bush Bush Wildlife Sanctuary, which is a restricted area but accessible to ecotour guides who obtain government permits to visit the area. People who stay at Asa Wright Nature Centre (<http://www.asawright.org/>) are guaranteed sightings of the Amazons but not of the blue-and-gold macaws. Visit <http://www.visitnt.com/>.

Costa Rica

Tamarindo Beach is on the Pacific coast in the northern region of Costa Rica. The area is known for surfing and sportfishing. Shopping and restaurants are plentiful. Stay at a bed-and-breakfast style inn, like La Casa Sueca, rent a private home or opt for a full-service hotel. Costa Rica is home to more than 800 avian species, including the orange-chinned parakeet, orange-fronted conures, white-fronted Amazons and even scarlet macaws.

Travelers can now fly into Liberia, which is closer to Tamarindo than San Jose's International Airport. Visit <http://www.tamarindo.com/>.