

## Reality Birding



Another, independently derived, analysis of this quiz appears on the ABA website. Check it out: [aba.org/birding/v42n4p66w1.pdf](http://aba.org/birding/v42n4p66w1.pdf)

**B**irders often use the word “real” in a rather idiosyncratic way. A bird isn’t “real” to many of us unless it’s a native species or a naturally occurring vagrant. But as long as it’s perceived to have arrived without human aid, it’s in. Oddities like this past winter’s Bare-throated Tiger-Heron and Amazon Kingfisher in south Texas are as “real” as it gets for birders. Although their occurrence in the ABA Area is on the periphery of peripheral, such birds are welcomed and accorded instant status, even cachet.

Introduced birds get a distinctly chilly reception to the point that birders have organized campaigns to deny their existence outright. House Sparrows, European Starlings, and a dozen others are seldom mentioned without a note of disdain, a verbal asterisk to mark their illegitimacy.

Of course, some introduced—or “exotic”—species have serious negative impacts on native species, so a certain annoyance or alarm may be justified. But such impacts only emphasize that, whether we like it or not, exotic birds are every bit as real as native ones. The chicken in the barnyard is just as much a bird as a Gunnison Sage-

Grouse.

There are a limited number of instances in which we turn a birder’s eye toward exotics and usually then only to add certain species to our lists. I love leading bird tours, but I admit that one of my least favorite ques-

tions, heard nowhere more often than on Florida tours is, “Can I count that bird?”

Of course, it’s a fairly simple matter to enumerate which species are officially on the ABA *Checklist* and which are strong candidates to be added in the foreseeable future. But that solution, I contend, isn’t really what people want. After all, only a small percentage of people asking the question

submit their lists to the ABA, and those who do typically already know which species are in bounds and which are out.

What those people really want to know, I believe, is whether the exotic species they see are something they should concern themselves with, or if they may be safely ignored. They are asking, in essence, “Is that bird real?”

For the purposes of this quiz, I’m going to stipulate that *all* birds are real. Yes, I know we’re fishing in a stocked stream, but let’s not worry about that for now. Instead, let’s just identify what we can. For now, they’re all real. They all count. And I’m just going to add that the birds shown in the video are psittacids: parrots and/or parakeets.

Right away, we’re faced with a big obstacle: Range and season are of limited use. A number of parakeet and parrot species are known to occur as free-flying exotics in Florida, and almost anything could show up at any time in a feeding flock like the birds in our quiz. Further, in the hothouses of aviculture both professional and amateur, hybrids can easily occur.

On the plus side, we have actual moving pictures with sound, so we’re given a good deal more information to work with than in a typical still photo-based quiz. But that information, due to the lack of resolution in the video and the, ahem, skills and equipment of the videographer, is somewhat muddier than most still photographs. A plea to the cameraman: “Dude! Tripod. Tri... Pod... Next time. Please!”

Since video operates on a timeline, I’ll go through the two-minute, 22-second clip pausing at various points to comment on what I’m seeing and hearing. As a reminder, the video is on the ABA website: [aba.org/MayQuiz.html](http://aba.org/MayQuiz.html).

**0:00**

We open with a feeder full of largish parakeets,

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Miami Springs, Miami-Dade County, Florida; 14 November 2004.  
From video made by © Bill Pranty.

some showing red about the faces. I'll leave them alone for the moment, as our attention is quickly drawn to two smaller birds: one on top of the feeder at the back and another on the chains supporting the foreground feeder. These take flight and travel left toward another feeder, as a birder chuckles in the background; the cameraman pans with the birds.

Because of their medium to smallish size, grayish hoods, black bills, whitish orbital rings, and blackish flight feathers, I believe these two are **Dusky-headed Parakeets** (*Aratinga weddellii*).

### 0:06

The Dusky-headed land on or near another feeder. At the back right, the head and upper body of a **Monk Parakeet** (*Myopsitta monachus*) is clearly visible, its gray throat, fore-crown, and pale bill all showing quickly but clearly. There are also more of those larger, red-faced things. But we are saved further worry about them by another quick camera move.

### 0:09

A glancing look at some birds perched on the wires reveals at least one more Monk—the bird at the far left. Several others look like they could be Monk or Dusky-headed, but I'm not certain which.

### 0:16

We return to the original scene, but now a different bird has settled onto the chain on the front feeder. We more or less follow this individual until the 1:00 mark, so clearly it's a bird of interest to the cameraman.

Most obviously, it has a bright, sherbet-orange patch on the forecrown. It otherwise looks similar to the Dusky-headed at the center (and later left) of the seed tray below it. A comment on the soundtrack beginning around 0:18 sounds like, "There's the orange guy again, top of the right feeder," but it could be "orange crown" or "orange front."

This bird looks a good bit like an Orange-fronted Parakeet (*Aratinga canicularis*), a Central American species. However, I believe the black bill marks it as a **Peach-fronted Parakeet** (*Aratinga aurea*), native to South America.

### 1:01

From here to the end of the clip, we have repeated views of two of the species cited above—some Monks around 1:20–1:45 and Dusky-headed from about 2:00 to the end of the video. Also, we see lots of those larger, green parakeets with varying amounts of red on their faces. This is where it starts to get tricky.

There are a number of species of mostly green, more-or-less red-faced *Aratinga* parakeets, several of which are regular in south Florida, so, again, almost anything is possible. That said, some plausible candidates include Green, Red-masked, Scarlet-fronted, Mitred, Crimson-fronted, and White-eyed parakeets.

Speaking in broad terms, tropical birds, including parrots and parakeets, tend to have less age and sex variation in appearance than many temperate and polar species do. Mostly, males look like females and young birds look like their parents—if not at fledging, then fairly soon afterward.

These green *Aratinga* parakeets present a further complication in that young birds often show less red on the face than do adults, leading to potentially more confusion. Often, birders identify young parakeets by the adults with which they travel, a functional, if not entirely satisfying, approach.



Miami Springs, Miami-Dade County, Florida; 14 November 2004.  
From video made by © Bill Pranty.

One thing that might really help here is voice. Temperate zone birders tend to think of parrots and parakeets—at least those not mimicking human speech—as producing a cacophony of undifferentiated screeches and squawks, and our clip's soundtrack sounds at first just like that. In the field, however, psittacid voices are often quite distinct and useful as an identification aid. Learn the characteristic *CLEE-o crack! crack!* of the Red-crowned Parrot and you'll have little trouble detecting the species' presence even in mixed or distant flocks.

I'm handicapped a bit in dealing with many of our more likely species because, although I've done a great deal of birding in Central America, I've spent comparatively little time in South America, where many of the relevant *Aratinga* species occur. Someone who knows the voices of the pertinent species well would have a much easier go at sorting out these medium red-on-green guys.

With that disclaimer, here are a few things I've been able to determine:

### 1:02

A bird flies in and lands at the center of the image, above and in front of a Peach-faced Parakeet. It shows little or nothing in the way of red on the face. Around 1:10, it flies out to the left. On both approach and departure, the bird appears to have yellow underwing coverts, which would argue for its being a **White-eyed Parakeet** (*Aratinga leucophthalma*).

Underwing color is an important character in a number

of parakeets, but it can be frustrating to use as a mark in the field or on video. In the video, we have the benefit of replaying and slowing down the clip, but it can still be tricky to determine what is actually yellow plumage vs. green plumage that is merely catching the light. It's the Luneau video all over again, tropical style.

### 1:40

A bird with a fairly extensive red face is feeding on the front right corner of the feeder. It seems distinctly larger than the other species we've seen and appears to lack colorful wing linings when it flies away around 1:42. I'd call this a **Mitred Parakeet** (*Aratinga mitrata*). In fact, I believe a goodly number of the larger parakeets in this clip are Mitreds, based in part on the harsh calls that permeate the soundtrack. You can also see birds that look good for Mitred jumping around the right side of the feeders at 2:00.

### 1:46

There's a quick pan to a bird perched on a garden hook. The bird looks a bit small for Mitred and more extensively red on the face. As such, it's a good candidate for **Red-masked Parakeet** (*Aratinga erythrogenys*). That's also the species I'd suspect for the videograb on p. 65; it shares a perch with a Dusky-headed and a Peach-fronted.

I also suspect that the bird at the front left corner of the feeder in the other still frame, p. 66, might be this Red-masked, as it appears to show red underwing coverts peeking over onto the shoulders.

The other birds in that still frame look good for Mitred, with the Peach-fronted—its peach front cunningly concealed—hanging from the chain at top right. This frame seems to match the video clip at about 0:21.

If there are other species present, beyond things like Boat-tailed Grackles and Blue Jays audible in the background, I'm not finding them, which is not to say I don't think there are others there. I'm very curious to see what other birders find and how they evaluate the clip.

While I don't think that sorting out introduced species chowing down at a suburban feeder will ever have the aesthetic appeal of seeing wild birds flying free over tropical forest, it's clear that, as an exercise in identification, such ecologically contrived puzzles are useful, and at times even more challenging than the "real" thing.