

Answers to the May Photo Quiz - Online Version

The analysis that follows is by Bill Pranty, one of North America's foremost experts on the population status and identification of exotic birds—especially parrots in Florida. Pranty filmed and edited the quiz video; therefore, his perspective is a bit different from that of Jeffrey Gordon, quizmaster for the print version of this quiz (*Birding*, July 2010, pp. 64–66).

A worthwhile exercise is to compare and contrast the approaches and answers of Pranty and Gordon. They agree on various points, but they disagree on others. As both authors note, the parakeet genus *Aratinga* is a major identification challenge—especially in North America. Pranty and Gordon are cautious and a bit speculative in their analyses, and that's entirely appropriate. *Aratinga* parakeets remind us that we should embrace cutting-edge identification challenges—but carefully so.

—Ted Floyd, Editor

Although many regions in the lower 48 states contain parrot populations, in only two areas—southern California and southern Florida—can one find several species interacting. In California, there seems to be a larger number of fewer species, whereas in Florida there are generally smaller numbers of a greater variety of species. This videotape is from Miami Springs, Florida, a residential community immediately north of Miami International Airport.

Judging by the size of the feeders, all parrots in the video are medium sized, and they are generally green with long, pointed tails. The long tails suggest parakeets or macaws. None of the birds in the video shows a large area of bare facial skin, thereby ruling out macaws (some are surprisingly small), and none shows yellow or white patches in the wings, ruling out the two *Brotogeris* species (White-winged and Yellow-chevrons parakeets). So we're probably dealing mostly or entirely with the genus *Aratinga*, a diverse group of at least 19 species that occur primarily in the American tropics and that are common in aviculture. And we should be alert for something else—Monk Parakeets, the most numerous and widespread parrots in Florida.

Eleven species of *Aratinga* parakeets have been photographed in the wild in Florida. Many of these also occur in California, and populations of a few occur in other states—for example, Mitred Parakeets in New York City. But the Green Parakeet is the only *Aratinga* that has been ratified as an established species by the ABA Checklist Committee. The sole “countable” population is found in southern Texas, but small numbers are resident in southern Florida.



Probably owing to their “non-countable” status, *Aratinga* parakeets are inadequately illustrated in North American field guides. The largest number of species—five—is illustrated in David Sibley's North American (2000) and Eastern (2003) field guides and in the fifth edition (2006) of the National Geographic Society guide. Clearly, additional references are needed to be sure of the identification of the parakeets in the video.

Two books, *Parrots: A Guide to Parrots of the World* (Juniper and Parr 1998, Yale University Press) and *Parrots of the World: An Identification Guide* (Forshaw 2006, Princeton University Press), along with volume 4 of the *Handbook of Birds of the World* (del Hoyo et al. 1997, Lynx Edicions), are the most helpful books available. However, these books are weak at distinguishing among species that occur in the ABA Area because they do not recognize populations of parrots outside their natural ranges. Many *Aratinga* parakeets with natural ranges hundreds of miles apart are found in the same Florida neighborhoods—even at the same feeders, as here. Unfortunately, all three of these books use avicultural names (del Hoyo et al. less than the others), creating confusion. The

English names used in my analysis are those recognized by the American Ornithologists' Union.

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This quiz has two components. First, the quiz is composed of two images “grabbed” from more than 12 minutes of digital videotape of amateurish quality. These are reproduced in the

New Photo Quiz in the May 2010 *Birding*, p. 80. Second is a video posted to the ABA website <aba.org/MayQuiz.html>. This video is an edited, two-minute, 22-second version of the longer

video. All birds mentioned in my analysis include the time in minutes and seconds of their appearance. I believe the videograbs show four species of parakeets, and I believe a fifth species is visible in the video.

Let's start with the parakeet missing from the videograbs. Two are visible perched on top of the left-hand feeder in the video (0:05–0:08). They are smaller parakeets that show the grayish-white forehead and breast and pale yellowish bill of **Monk Parakeets**, the only non-*Aratinga* in the video. Monks make two more appearances in the video (1:20–1:25 and 1:35–1:40). The Monk Parakeet is the most common and widespread parrot in Florida, although numbers have been declining steadily since about 2003. Reasons for the decline are not known but are thought to include harassment and nest-removal by power companies, combined with capture and recapture for the pet trade. Monks' communal stick nests are conspicuous components of ballfield light towers, power-line towers, electrical substations, and palms and other trees in many urban areas in Florida and several other states.

All the other parakeets in the video appear equal in size to or larger than the Monks, and these size differences help with their identification. Let's move now to the first videograb. We see three parakeets, and each represents a different species of *Aratinga*. Let's start with the parakeet on the left. It's smaller than the other and shows a bold orange forehead patch and a conspicuous white orbital ring (0:20–0:45). The orange forehead limits the identification to either Orange-fronted Parakeet (*A. canicularis*), which is pale billed, or Peach-fronted Parakeet (*A. aurea*), which is black billed. With its black bill, the parakeet in the quiz is clearly a **Peach-fronted Parakeet**, a species not treated in any of the modern North American field guides. (Ignore my on-tape identification of the bird as “the Orange-front”!)

The parakeet in the center is small, with a bluish-gray head (scaly-looking when seen well), a wide white orbital ring, and a black bill. These three field marks are definitive for **Dusky-headed Parakeet** (*A. weddellii*), a species included in the current editions of the Sibley and National Geographic guides. Established in 1984, the population of Dusky-headed at Miami Springs is now extirpated. Interestingly, my sighting of 14 Dusky-headed the day of the video (14 November 2004) seems to be the final observation. Blue-crowned Parakeet (*A. acuticaudata*) can be ruled out by its larger size, non-scaly bluish head, and pale upper mandible, along with its reddish undertail.

The parakeet on the right is the largest of the three, with red on much of the head—perhaps darkest at the forehead, a white orbital ring, pale bill, and barely discernible reddish or orange splotches on the upper body, including near the shoulder. At this point we are confronted head on with one of the

greatest avian identification challenges in Florida.

At least four species of *Aratinga* are green with white orbital rings and red patches on the face. Even if we exclude the possibility of confusing captive- or wild-bred hybrids, uncertainties in age-related and subspecies-related plumage differences render many identifications tentative. Two of these *Aratinga* parakeets are found in some modern North American field guides—Mitre Parakeet (*A. mitrata*) and Red-masked Parakeet (*A. erythrogenys*)—whereas the other two are not found in any North American guide—Scarlet-fronted Parakeet (*A. wagleri*) and Crimson-fronted Parakeet (*A. finschi*). Mitre generally shows the most red on the head, followed by Red-masked, which has the red restricted to the face—although some individuals can show more red than some Mitres. Furthermore, the red on a Mitre varies among birds from bright red through dark red to orange, whereas Red-masked Parakeets seem to always be bright red. On Scarlet-fronted and Crimson-fronted parakeets, the red is restricted to the forehead and forecrown, and it varies slightly among the two species in hue, corresponding with the species' English names. Another difference is that Scarlet-fronted and Mitre parakeets are noticeably larger than Red-masked and Crimson-fronted parakeets. The large size, extensive red on the head, and orangish patches on the upper body of this individual make it a **Mitre Parakeet**.

Turning now to the second videograb, we see the Peach-fronted Parakeet again in the center, surrounded by several other parakeets, most of these partly obscured. The large parakeet in the right rear appears like a Mitre, but the red is limited to the forehead and forecrown. This is a **Scarlet-fronted Parakeet**. A second Scarlet-fronted is visible in the left rear. In the left foreground, we see a large parakeet with dull red patches on the head, neck, and shoulder. This appears to be a sub-adult Mitre Parakeet. In the video (1:56–2:08), one of the Scarlet-fronteds is shown to the right of a slightly smaller immature Mitre, and it shows a yellow leading edge to the wing. Although not illustrated in parrot books, yellow on the shoulder seems often to be visible—albeit usually with a longer red stripe—in the *frontata* subspecies of Scarlet-fronted Parakeet.

Does the video tell us anything else? Those who have field experience with the genus *Aratinga* may be able to identify some of the species by their calls. I can hear one or more Boat-tailed Grackles in the background throughout the entire video, but I cannot ascertain any other species—other than the parakeets, of course. That afternoon, James Tucker and I tallied 36 parakeets at the feeders in this yard: 14 Dusky-headed, 13 Mitre, 6 Monk, 2 Scarlet-fronted, and 1 Peach-fronted. We also saw a Diamond Dove (*Geopelia cuneata*), native to Australia, but I did not get diagnostic footage of it.

Putting It All Together...

As the videographer of the Miami Springs parakeet quiz, I chose two videograbs that included the four *Aratinga* species present in the video. In comparing my quiz answers to Jeffrey Gordon's, I have the advantage over Gordon of having seen his answers prior to publication. I may also be more experienced than Gordon in the current makeup of the



psittacifauna of southern Florida, giving me another advantage. I agree with Gordon that virtually any psittacid could escape captivity and be observed “in the wild” in Florida. Indeed, the Peach-fronted Parakeet in the video was such an escapee—and was only the second of its species to be documented in Florida. James Tucker and I may well have been the only birders to see

this individual.

Gordon and I agree on the identity of four of the parakeet species in the quiz video—Monk, Dusky-headed, Peach-fronted, and Mitred. Gordon identifies one White-eyed and one or more Red-masked parakeets that I don't think are present in the video, while I identify two Scarlet-fronted Parakeets that Gordon does not mention.

Gordon identifies a Red-masked Parakeet in the first videograb, and tentatively identifies another or the same one in the second videograb. I think both of these birds are Mitred Parakeets, apparently of the recently described subspecies *tucumana*, because of the amount of red on the head, along with patches on the nape, neck, and shoulders. I don't see any parakeet in the video that stands out as an obvious Red-masked.

Gordon suggests the identity of one parakeet (1:02–1:10 in the video) as a White-eyed Parakeet based on the yellow flash in the underwings. I think this bird, too, is a Mitred Parakeet, presumably an immature given the limited amount of red on the head. It shows a dark red crown and all-green wings. Although White-eyed Parakeets often show a narrow, dark band above the bill (not mentioned in any parrot book I have read), the color does not extend beyond the forehead. On their underwings, White-eyed Parakeets show a bold red patch on the median primary coverts and a yellow patch on the greater primary coverts, with the flight feathers a dull yellow-green. These red and yellow patches on the underwing are usually visible as a narrow stripe at the shoulder when the parakeet is at rest. I think the yellow flashes visible in the video are the flight feathers of a Mitred Parakeet catching the light.

Finally, Gordon does not mention Scarlet-fronted Parakeet as a candidate for any of the birds in the video. But two parakeets in the second videograb (the left-hand bird is somewhat obscured) display characteristics of the species, especially the large size and bright red forehead and forecrown. Except perhaps in juveniles, Mitred Parakeets, the only similar *Aratinga* that approaches the size of Scarlet-fronteds, should show dark-red patches elsewhere on the head and perhaps the upper body.

—Bill Pranty