

A PARROT OF THE CARIBBEAN

(with a passing nod to Johnny Depp)

Subtle – never!! Bling – forever!! They advertise themselves with vivid, saturated colours with scant regard for composition. The voice is so far from harmonious that more than one pet parrot has found itself in court for disturbing the peace!! They

have an ugly, hooked beak, cleave the air with noisy, whirring wings and their gait on the ground has all the characteristics of a sozzled waddle. *Right Image S.G. 257*



However, they are very endearing and, through the ages, always have been. During explorations in Central and South America, the Spanish and Portuguese referred to these areas as 'the lands of the parrot' and they were regarded as natural treasures. In a short time, a parrot became part of the regalia of the pirate along with the cutlass, the eye patch and the Jolly Roger – and, of course, the ability to copy the human voice and the language used, mostly not for one's maiden aunt. The 'pieces of eight' catchphrase from 'Treasure Island' is the definitive literary one. This mimicry has given them comedic licence and, in Tudor times, a 'popinjay' was considered a social asset and took its place alongside jesters in high-ranking courts.

Unfortunately, even in recent history, ownership is still deemed to confer status and has generated huge profits, mostly illegal, to place the survival of many wild species in jeopardy. *Right image S.G. 1759.*



In the archipelago of the Lesser Antilles lie two chains of islands, the more northerly Leeward Islands and its southern neighbour, the Windward Islands. Covering just 239 square miles (some 63% of the Isle of Wight) is St. Lucia. Confined solely to its own land and the only parrot on the island is the St. Lucia Amazon (*Amazona versicolor*). It declined almost to the point of



extinction as the result of two overwhelming factors: habitat loss caused by deforestation and uncontrolled hunting for food and the pet trade. By the late 1970s, its entire global population had been reduced to a mere 100 birds all living in an area of just 23 square miles.

Left image S.G. 418. Other names for it are Blue-masked Amazon, Versicolor Amazon and the St. Lucia Parrot.



Locally it is known as the *Jacquot* as many of the human population speak a French patois due to the island changing hands some dozen times between the British and the French (who else?) until 1803 when it was

finally secured by Britain. *Image above S.G. 3217.*

The St. Lucia Amazon was declared St. Lucia's national bird in 1979 with further action being taken in 1980 revising wildlife legislation. Forestry laws were also tightened to protect watersheds and illegal clearing of forest can attract a year in jail.

Right image S.G. 572.

In 1976, the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust (DWCT) at Jersey Zoo started a captive breeding programme with just nine wild-caught birds brought in from other collections – two adults and seven fledglings. It was six years for the first breeding success to be achieved but, happily, in 1989 St. Lucia's Prime Minister took two Jersey-bred birds back to the island to be used in a second captive breeding programme with the DWCT funding the aviaries.



In recognition of the efforts of the Zoo, Jersey has issued several series of Wildlife Preservation Trust stamps and in the 4th series in 1984, the top denomination was the St. Lucia Amazon (*S.G. No. 329 shown left*). Over 220,000 of these stamps were issued before they were withdrawn in the following January.

Also in 1989 the World Parrot Trust was founded based at Paradise Park, Hayle in Cornwall.

This Trust founded an imaginative public education programme for the parrot called 'Protection Through Pride'. The team at Paradise Park bought a secondhand bus, painted it brightly and fitted it out with working models, video programmes and other educational facilities. Then it was shipped out to St. Lucia on a banana boat and handed over to the island's Forestry Department to tour the schools and public venues with *Jacquot* himself – a person dressed as the parrot - to reinforce the message. It has been an immense success and has resulted in similar buses being provided for the neighbouring islands of Dominica and St. Vincent and even on the South American mainland in Paraguay.

For their work, Paradise Park and the World Parrot Trust won the *BBC Wildlife Magazine's Zoo Conservation Award for Excellence.*

The St. Lucia Amazon Parrot (2)



The St. Lucia Amazon can be difficult to see in the wild as its natural habitat is the canopy of the tropical rainforest between 2000-3000 feet, the major stronghold being the Government Forest Reserve in the central mountain massif. It does make forays into secondary growth to feed with its main diet being fruits, seeds and flowers and also bananas following the passage of a hurricane. *Left image S.G. 969.*

The parrots are most active in the early morning and evening – hardly surprising given the midday temperatures on the island!! Their flight is on shallow, powerful wingbeats, at times interspersed with glides and raptor-like swoops. Flocks of around 20 birds are usual with communal roosts. *Right image S.G. 970.*

It is largely green with a blue face and forehead, a maroon breast patch, dark blue primary feathers, orange eyes and a grey bill. Through this bill comes raucous screeching, a squeaky pig-like shriek and goose-like honking. But there are also soft purring noises when the birds are feeding or preening. There is no visible difference between the sexes



and both grow to around 17 inches. These long-living birds are reputed to mate for life, maturing after five years with the breeding season from February to August. *Image left S.G. 3145.*



The 'nest' is normally a cavity in a tall, mature tree and, whilst two or three white eggs may be laid, there is usually only one chick which matures. Incubation starts on the appearance of the second egg and lasts 27 days. The surviving fledgling leaves the nest 67 days after hatching. However, with the previous deforestation of the trees and the single offspring, the specie has been slow to recover and is on the IUCN list as 'Vulnerable'. Punitive fines and the prospect of a jail sentence now protect both the birds and the forest. Rare as this bird is, there is an even rarer member of the human population on St. Lucia - the young man who captained his country to two cricket T20 World Cups, Darren Sammy, the West Indies' skipper. In that achievement, he is not just rare but absolutely unique!!

Image right S.G. 343.



Left image - St Lucia, 2003, S.G. 1288

Image below - Antigua and Barbuda 2002, S.G. 3559



Image left - Marshall Islands 2013, S.G. 3101

Image below - United Nations, New York 1994, S.G. 650

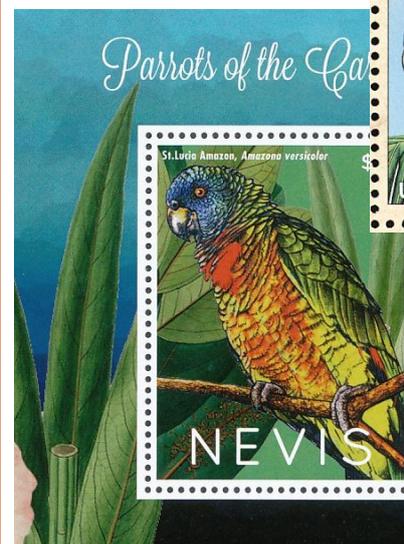
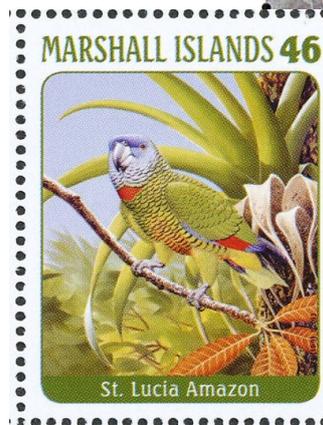


Image left - Nevis 2013, S.G. MS2311

*My heartfelt thanks to Carol Mitchell for supplying yet another fantastic article on an individual bird. I absolutely love the way these articles are written and composed of such interesting facts and figures, mythology, legend, folklore and more. Do keep them coming Carol, as I'm sure they are very well received by the majority of the Membership. And I also hope these articles will inspire others to put pen to paper and send me something to pop into the magazine. **The stock is getting low, so I need some help here!** Please do have a think and send me any material, no matter how small or bizarre ... anything of interest with an ornitho-philately related subject will do. I wait with baited breath*