



## The identity of the mysterious “Azara’s Parakeet” *Sittace flaviventris* Wagler, 1832

PAUL SMITH<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Para La Tierra, Centro IDEAL, Mariscal Estigarribia 321 c/ Tte. Capurro, Pilar, Dpto. Ñeembucú, Paraguay

<sup>2</sup>FAUNA Paraguay, Carmen de Lara Castro 422, Encarnación, Dpto. Itapúa, Paraguay

Manuscript received on November 1, 2017; accepted for publication on January 19, 2018

### ABSTRACT

*Sittace flaviventris* Wagler, 1832 was the name given to Azara’s No. 276 “Maracaná cabeza y encuentro roxos”, but since then the identity of the species has remained a mystery. Based on a tail-less domestic individual, it has most often been attributed to an aberrant *Aratinga* parakeet, and is currently considered a doubtful taxon. In this note the identity of “Azara’s Parakeet” is confirmed as Red-spectacled Amazon *Amazona pretrei* (Temminck, 1830), a species that still occurs today in the region from where Azara described it. *Sittace flaviventris* is thus a junior synonym of *Amazona pretrei*.

**Key words:** *Amazona pretrei*, Félix de Azara, *Psittacara leucophthalmus*, Red-spectacled Amazon, synonym.

### INTRODUCTION

Félix de Azara (1742-1821), a Spanish military engineer, was a pioneer in natural history studies in southern South America. He documented the fauna, culture and geography of the “Paraguay and La Plata” region, that includes modern day eastern Argentina, Paraguay, extreme southern Brazil and Uruguay. Azara had no formal biological training but his descriptive abilities and attention to detail made his “Apuntamientos para la historia natural de los pájaros del Paraguay y Río de la Plata” (Azara 1802-1805) a key ornithological work of this period. Though he gave his species vernacular names only, over half of his 448 descriptions were of species unknown to science and later became the basis for their formal scientific description. A

detailed chronology of his movements, life and work is provided by Contreras (2010).

The description of Azara No. 276 “Maracaná cabeza y encuentro roxos” (Azara 1805) is the sole basis for the name *Sittace flaviventris* Wagler, 1832. However, it has never been conclusively identified, leading Hume and Walters (2012) to consider it a “doubtful taxon” under the name Azara’s Parakeet *Aratinga flaviventris* (Wagler, 1832).

### NO. 276 “MARACANÁ CABEZA Y ENCUESTRO ROXOS” AZARA (1805)

“Vi uno doméstico por los 30.5 grados de latitud en la frontera del Brasil, pareciéndome diferente de los que conocia. Poco despues vi allí volando una pareja idéntica; pero como viese tambien algunas parejas que creí Maracanás verdes, y observé que las formas y medidas eran casi las

E-mail: [faunaparaguay@gmail.com](mailto:faunaparaguay@gmail.com)

*mismas, entré á dudar si eran la misma especie: mas al fin me incline á la negativa, fundado no solo en los diferentes colores, sino igualmente en que el doméstico era sumamente mansejon, muy silencioso y poco hablador. Describiré al doméstico por no haber logrado otro, aunque le faltaba la cola, y tenia cortados los remos de los trozos externos.*

*Longitud sin la cola 6.5 pulgadas. Tiene roxa viva la frente hasta media cabeza; tambien el contorno del ojo extendiéndose sobre el oído. Del mismo color es todo el encuentro y 8 lineas en las cobijas y tapadas, la hijuela y todas las cobijas del trozo exterior. Hay además una pluma del propio roxo en lo mas atrasado del escapulario, y un anillo lo mismo algo naranjado en las plumas de la coyuntura del tarso. El resto del cuerpo, cobijas y tapadas, son de un verde poco ribeteado de obscuro; pero las tapadas tienen el verde mas tierno ó amarillazo. Los remos de los trozos internos son del mismo verde en la barba superior hasta salir de las cobijas, y despues morados. Lo mismo parecen ser los del trozo de afuera, segun infiero de los restos que hay.*

*En la cola nacia una pluma verdosa en la raíz, amarilla algo verdosa en el centro, y en la union de ámbos colores se notaba algún roxo en el mástil. Los remos debaxo y el órden mayor de tapadas de un verde marino. El vientre amarillazo: pierna 24 lineas: tarso 11, color de perla; pico 11, trigueño y el caballete con chaflan: iris amarillo puro: la peladurita del contorno del ojo ancha una línea, y blanquizca azulada.*

*Le describi despues de leida la obra de Buffon.”*

My translation: “I saw a captive individual at 30.5 degrees S latitude on the border with Brazil, which seemed to me different to those species I was familiar with. Soon after I saw an identical pair there flying; but as I also saw some pairs that I believed to be White-eyed Parakeets and I observed that the shape and measurements were almost the same, I began to suspect that they may be the same species: but in the end I inclined

towards them being different, based not only on the different colours, but also because the domestic bird was extremely tame, very quiet and not very talkative. I will describe the domestic bird as I have not obtained another, although it was missing its tail and the primaries had been cut.

Length without tail 6.5 inches. It had bright red on the forehead until the middle of the head; down to the level of the eye and extending over the ear. The wing-bend is the same colour and eight lines of the wing coverts and wing lining, the alula and all of the primary coverts. There is also a feather of the same red on the most posterior part of the scapulars, and a ring, somewhat orange, on the feathers where they meet the tarsus. The rest of the body, coverts and underwing are green, slightly edged darker; but the underwing has the green somewhat softer and yellowed. The secondaries are of the same green colour in the upperpart until they exit the coverts, and then are dark purple-blue. From what I can infer from the feathers that remain, the same seems to be the case on the outer wing. On the tail an emergent feather was greenish at the base, greenish-yellow in the centre and at the union of both colours there was some red on the feather shaft. The underside of the flight feathers and the greater underwing coverts are sea green. The venter is yellowish: leg 24 lines: tarsus 11, pearl-coloured; bill 11, horn-coloured and the culmen with a flattened edge; iris pure yellow: the bare skin around the eye is one line wide and bluish-white.

I described it after reading the work of Buffon.”

Sonnini (Azara 1809), in his much-criticised French translation of Azara’s work (Beddall 1983), considered the bird to be no more than a variety of White-eyed Parakeet *Psittacara leucophthalmus*, adding entirely speculatively and quite incorrectly that the colour differences observed could be attributed to “age or sex”. Finsch (pers. comm in Salvadori 1891), later suggested that the description could be “a variety of” Golden-capped Parakeet *Aratinga auricapillus*, the author adding

that it “seems allied to” Scarlet-fronted Parakeet *Psittacara wagleri frontatus*. However, the first of these bears merely a fleeting resemblance to the description and a relationship with the second (which occurs in Ecuador and Peru) seems to have been suggested largely on the basis of head colouration (Juniper and Parr 1998) – though the red of the head described by Azara is more extensive even than in that species. Salvadori (1891) further erred by giving the provenance of the species as Paraguay, when Azara’s (1805) coordinates place it clearly at the border of Argentina and Brazil (“30.5° S at the frontier with Brazil”).

Much of the confusion around the identity of this bird seems to have stemmed from Azara’s statements of comparison with his No. 275 “Maracaná verde”, a description which refers to the White-eyed Parakeet *Psittacara leucophthalmus*. Azara’s statement that the “form and measurements were almost the same” as that species seems to have led all future authors to assume that the species must be an “*Aratinga*-type” parakeet. However, Azara’s comments on similarity were based on field observations in which he admits uncertainty, and his description is of a captive bird in which the “tail was missing” (though his description suggests that it was at least vestigially present). Consequently any association of the captive bird with “*Aratinga*-type” parakeets must be considered speculative at best, and in a group as conservative in form as the Psittacidae, hardly a sound basis for restricting the diagnosis of an individual missing its tail.

Azara’s description is in fact almost faultlessly consistent with the Red-spectacled Amazon *Amazona pretrei* (Temminck, 1830), a declining species confined mainly to *Araucaria* forests in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, with marginal occurrence in Argentina and Paraguay (Forshaw and Cooper 1989, Brooks et al. 1993, Juniper and Parr 1998). No other species shares the combination of extensive red on the head and wing-bend, yellow iris, green underwing and tail pattern which are accurately

described by Azara. The latitude at which the bird is reported is also consistent with the known distribution of the species today, corresponding to the area of the frontier between southern Corrientes province in Argentina and the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Furthermore, consistent with Azara’s observation on the temperament of the captive bird, *Amazona pretrei* is known by aviculturists as being a quiet species with a relaxed disposition, quite unlike raucous “*Aratinga*-type” parakeets (Bird Guide 2017).

The measurements provided (Table I) are essentially consistent with the species with the possible exception of the total length, which must be treated with some caution considering that the age of the bird is not clarified (though a yellow iris suggests adult) and its tail is lacking. Tail length in this species is in the range of 100–120 mm (Forshaw and Cooper 1989), giving a conservative estimate of total length for this bird of 265–285 mm. This is slightly below the expected size range for this species 300–320 mm (van Perlo 2009, Forshaw and Cooper 1989), but given that this is merely a size estimate based on Azara’s measurements of a bird of undetermined age, lacking a tail and part of its wing feathers, it is not grounds for rejecting the identification.

The name *Sittace flaviventris* Wagler, 1832 is thus a junior synonym of *Amazona pretrei* (Temminck, 1830) and available for application.

**TABLE I**  
Comparative measurements of Azara No. 276 and *Amazona pretrei* in mm. Measurements for *Amazona pretrei* from Juniper & Parr (1998). A line, the unit used by Azara, is equivalent to 2.21 mm.

	Azara No. 276	<i>Amazona pretrei</i>
Leg	53.0	NA
Tarsus	24.3	20-22
Bill	24.3	22-25

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author is grateful to the Programa Nacional de Incentivo a los Investigadores (PRONII) program of CONACYT for its support, and to the anonymous library workers behind the Biodiversity Heritage Library who make many hard to find references available for all to consult from the comfort of their own home.

### REFERENCES

- AZARA F. 1805. Apuntamientos para la historia natural de los pájaros del Paraguay y Río de la Plata. Tomo 2. Madrid: Imprenta de la Viuda de Barra, 562 p.
- AZARA F. 1809. Voyages dans l'Amérique Méridionale. Oiseaux. Paris: Dentu 4: 380.
- BEDDALL BG. 1983. The isolated Spanish genius - Myth or reality? Félix de Azara and the birds of Paraguay. *J Hist Biol* 16: 225-258.
- BIRD GUIDE. 2017. Red-spectacled Amazon *Amazona pretrei*. Available at: <http://birdguide.com/red-spectacled-amazon/>. Accessed on May 25, 2017.
- BROOKS TM, BARNES RB, BUTCHART SHM, CLAY RP, ESQUIVEL EZ, ETCHEVERRY NI, LOWEN JC AND VINCENT J. 1993. Bird surveys and conservation in the Paraguayan Atlantic Forest. Cambridge: BirdLife International Study Report No. 57. BirdLife International, 145 p.
- CONTRERAS JR. 2010. Félix de Azara. Su Vida y su Época. Tomo 2. Zaragoza: Calidad Gráfica, 467 p.
- FORSYTH JM AND COOPER WT. 1989. Parrots of the world. 3<sup>rd</sup> revised ed., Brisbane: Lansdowne Editions, 672 p.
- HUME JP AND WALTERS M. 2012. Extinct birds. London: T & A.D. Poyser, 544 p.
- JUNIPER T AND PARR M. 1998. Parrots: A guide to the parrots of the world. East Sussex: Pica Press, 584 p.
- SALVADORI T. 1891. Catalogue of birds in the British Museum. London: British Museum of Natural History 20: 658.
- VAN PERLO B. 2009. A field guide to the birds of Brazil. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 465 p.
- WAGLER JG. 1832. Monographia Psittacorum. Munich: Georg Jacquet, 750 p.