

The Journal of Caribbean Ornithology

RESEARCH NOTE

Vol. 28:17–21. 2015

The Violet Macaw (*Anodorhynchus purpurascens* Rothschild, 1905) did not exist

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Illustration: Claudie Pavis

The Violet Macaw (*Anodorhynchus purpurascens* Rothschild, 1905) did not exist

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Abstract Seventeenth-century French historical accounts from Guadeloupe reveal Rothschild's (1905, 1907a) description of the Violet Macaw (*Anodorhynchus purpurascens* Rothschild, 1905) to be based on a poor depiction of the Guadeloupe Amazon (*Amazona violacea* Gmelin, 1789). There is therefore no evidence supporting the existence of such a parrot in Guadeloupe. However, the island may have been home to a macaw, the Lesser Antillean Macaw (*Ara guadeloupenensis* Clark, 1905). In fact, the same historical accounts clearly distinguish this bird from its continental counterpart, the Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao*), lending credibility to the hypothesis of a now-extinct endemic macaw once inhabiting Guadeloupe.

Keywords *Anodorhynchus purpurascens*, *Ara guadeloupenensis*, Guadeloupe, Lesser Antillean Macaw, Violet Macaw

Resumen El Guacamayo Violeta (*Anodorhynchus purpurascens* Rothschild, 1905) no existió—Los registros históricos franceses de Guadalupe del siglo XVII muestran la descripción de Rothschild (1905, 1907a) del Guacamayo Violeta (*Anodorhynchus purpurascens* Rothschild, 1905) basado en una representación esquemática de *Amazona violacea* Gmelin, 1789. Por tanto, no existen evidencias que apoyen la existencia de tal psitaciforme en Guadalupe. Sin embargo, las islas pueden haber sido el hábitat de otro guacamayo, *Ara guadeloupenensis* Clark, 1905. De hecho, los mismos registros históricos distinguen claramente esta especie de su contraparte continental, *Ara macao*, dando credibilidad a la hipótesis de que un guacamayo, ahora extinto, pudo haber habitado en Guadalupe.

Palabras clave *Anodorhynchus purpurascens*, *Ara guadeloupenensis*, Guacamayo de las Antillas Menores, Guacamayo Violeta, Guadalupe

Résumé L'Ara violet de la Guadeloupe (*Anodorhynchus purpurascens* Rothschild, 1905) n'a pas existé—La prise en compte des textes du XVIII^e s. accompagnant la colonisation française de la Guadeloupe montre que Rothschild (1905, 1907a), dans sa description de l'Ara violet de la Guadeloupe (*Anodorhynchus purpurascens* Rothschild, 1905), s'est basée sur des mentions se rapportant à l'Amazone de la Guadeloupe (*Amazona violacea* Gmelin, 1789). Il n'existe en conséquence aucun témoignage permettant de soutenir l'hypothèse de l'existence passée de cet oiseau en Guadeloupe. Un perroquet a toutefois pu peupler les îles de la Guadeloupe. Il s'agit de l'Ara de la Guadeloupe (*Ara guadeloupenensis* Clark, 1905), dont les mêmes textes apportent un témoignage de la singularité de cet oiseau vis-à-vis de son homologue continental l'Ara rouge (*Ara macao*), rendant d'autant plus crédible l'existence passée de cet ara endémique.

Mots clés *Anodorhynchus purpurascens*, Ara de la Guadeloupe, *Ara guadeloupenensis*, Ara violet de la Guadeloupe, Guadeloupe

Guadeloupe is considered to have been home to two now-extinct macaws, the Lesser Antillean Macaw (*Ara guadeloupenensis* Clark, 1905) and the Violet Macaw (*Anodorhynchus purpurascens* Rothschild, 1905). Both species were first described at the beginning of the 20th century based solely on historical texts as both had already disappeared from the Lesser Antilles by this time. However, the lack of fossil or museum specimens renders

these descriptions questionable (Olson 2005, Olson and Maíz López 2008). While the existence of the Lesser Antillean Macaw is considered possible or probable by most researchers (Snyder *et al.* 1987, Williams and Steadman 2001, Wiley *et al.* 2004, Hume and Walters 2012, Wiley and Kirwan 2013), this is not the case for the Violet Macaw. Consequently, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has recommended a re-evaluation of historical documentation and archaeological surveys to determine the credibility of this purported species (BirdLife International 2012). Here I review French and Spanish historical sources in order to clarify the existence of this hypothetical species of macaw.

The Lesser Antillean Macaw was first described by Clark (1905)

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based on the writings of Father Du Tertre (1667), who stated that Guadeloupe was home to a large parrot with a scarlet body and tail, and yellow, blue, and deep red wing feathers. His indication as to the size of the bird, “the tail, which is from fifteen to twenty inches in length, is wholly red” (Du Tertre 1667:248, translated in Clark 1905), led Clark to estimate it to have been slightly smaller than the Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao*). Size differences between the two birds were actually probably less. Clark’s (1905) estimation of an 18.0 in tail size was based on an English foot (0.3048 m) while the 17th-century French foot was slightly longer (0.3266 m; Guilhiermoz 1913), resulting in a tail size of 49 cm or 19.3 in. The detailed description provided by Du Tertre (1667) nevertheless allowed Clark (1905) to recognize specific color features, particularly its full-red tail. This feature, combined with other documentary sources, including those of Labat (1722), and its docile nature compared to the mainland macaw, led numerous researchers to consider the possibility that Guadeloupe once had an endemic macaw (Snyder *et al.* 1987, Williams and Steadman 2001, Wiley *et al.* 2004, Hume and Walters 2012, Wiley and Kirwan 2013).

The existence of the Violet Macaw is, however, much more doubtful due both to the short description provided by Rothschild (1905, 1907a) and the inability to trace his historical sources (Greenway 1967, Williams and Steadman 2001, Wiley and Kirwan 2013). It has therefore been suggested that Rothschild relied on a poor description of the Guadeloupe Amazon (*Amazona violacea* Gmelin, 1789), or on an example of a Hyacinth (*Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*) or Indigo Macaw (*A. leari*) introduced from South America (Snyder *et al.* 1987).

Rothschild’s (1905:13) original description reads:

Anodorhynchus purpurascens, nom. n. Entirely violet. Native name of the Caraibes Onécouli. Hab. Island of Guadeloupe. Extinct. (Ex. Don de Navaret, Rel. Voy. Christ. Colombe, II, p. 425; 1838.)

His book, *Extinct Birds*, contains an almost identical description:

Anodorhynchus purpurascens Rothsch. *Le gros Perroquet de la Guadeloupe* Don de Navarette, Rel. Quat. voy. Christ, p. 425 pl. II (1838).

Anodorhynchus purpurascens Rothsch. Bull. B.O.C. XVI, p. 13 (1905); Proc. IV Orn. Congr., p. 202 (1907).

The original description of this bird says it was entirely deep violet. Native name *Oné couli*. No specimen extant. I have placed this species in the genus *Anodorhynchus* on account of its uniform bluish colour. Habitat: Guadeloupe. (Rothschild 1907a:55)

I have analyzed Spanish sources recounting Christopher Columbus’ discovery of the Lesser Antilles and historical texts dating to the French colonization of Guadeloupe in order to shed new light on the origin of Rothschild’s (1905, 1907a) description of the Violet Macaw.

Spanish Historical Sources

The inability to retrace Rothschild’s (1905, 1907a) historical source most likely reflects bibliographic errors. His reference

does indeed correspond to a book by the Spanish historian Martín Fernández de Navarrete published in French as *Relations des quatre voyages entrepris par Christophe Colomb pour la découverte du nouveau monde de 1492 à 1504*. However, when I approached the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, which maintains a catalogue of all books published on French soil, they knew of no edition published in 1838 (in litt.). The only French edition of this book dates to 1828 (Navarrete 1828), indicating either an error in the date or the reference cited by Rothschild (1905, 1907a). The indication “pl. II” in Rothschild’s (1907a) book represents a second error, inasmuch as Navarrete’s (1828) book contains no such plate. This citation probably refers to the second volume of the three-volume French edition of Navarrete (1828). Reference to this volume is also logical as it contains the first appearance of a letter by Diego Alvarez Chanca (reproduced on pages 402–453), a member of Christopher Columbus’ second voyage. Columbus’ log book from the second voyage being lost, this letter is the only first-hand account of the discovery of the Lesser Antilles. However, there is no mention of a parrot on page 425 as cited by Rothschild (1905, 1907a).

An account of Guadeloupe parrots is mentioned following the visit to a Carib village by a group of Spanish exploring the island, “Le capitaine . . . y prit deux perroquets très grands et bien différents de ceux qu’il avait vu jusqu’alors” (The captain . . . has taken two very large parrots that differ from those he had seen thus far [my translation]) (Navarrete 1828, vol. 2, p. 409).

The reference cited by Rothschild (1905, 1907a) therefore refers to a text indicating the presence of a large parrot specific to Guadeloupe and, as such, may be taken as support for the identification of a new species. However, neither the term Onécouli nor the color of these parrots appears anywhere in Navarrete’s (1828) book. As pointed out by Wiley and Kirwan (2013), Rothschild (1907b) makes reference to Ferdinand Columbus when mentioning the Carib name Onécouli for this parrot. Not only does this term not appear in either the Spanish or French edition of Ferdinand Columbus’ book (Columbus 1749, 1879), there is no mention of it in his account of the discovery of parrots in Guadeloupe, “Ils trouvèrent . . . des perroquets au plumage mêlé de vert, de blanc, de bleu, de rouge, et gros comme des coqs ordinaires” (They found . . . parrots with green, white, blue, and red feathers, which were as large as common cocks [my translation]) (Columbus 1879:188).

Similarly detailed information can be found in texts describing the second voyage of Christopher Columbus. For example, Pietro Martyr d’Anghera mentions that:

The Spaniards took from Guadeloupe seven parrots larger than pheasants, and totally unlike any other parrots in colour. Their entire breast and back are covered with purple plumes, and from their shoulders fall long feathers of the same colour, as I have often remarked in Europe is the case with the capons peasants raise. The other feathers are of various colours,—green, bluish, purple, or yellow. (MacNutt 1912:72)

Several letters published by HARRISSE (1884:73) from the Florentine merchant Simone Verde detailing accounts of Spanish sailors also provide further evidence concerning Guadeloupe

parrots:

On trouva aussi dans cette île, et dans les maisons de ces Canballi, — car c'est ainsi qu'on les appelle ici, — beaucoup de perroquets, grands et beaux, aux plumes vertes, rouges, noires et de bien d'autres couleurs, avec la queue longue et verte. J'en ai mesuré un, et trouvé que de la tête à la queue, c'est-à-dire au bout, ils avaient environ une coudée 1/4 de longueur. Ils ont le bec très long, presque entièrement blanc, les pieds noirs, la voix forte et désagréable. (We found on this island and in houses of the Canballi—as we call the people here—numerous parrots, large and beautiful, with green, red, and black feathers, amongst other colors, and a long green tail. I measured one, and found that from head to tail, that is their extremity, they were around one and a quarter cubits long. They have a long, almost completely white beak, black feet, and a strong and shrill voice. [my translation])

Las Casas (1875:126) does not provide any additional information, except when reporting the Spanish stopover in Guadeloupe on their way out of the Caribbean at the end of the second voyage of Christopher Columbus, “Hallaron papagayos de los grandes, colorados, que arriba dijimos llamarse guacamayos, que son como gallos, aunque no tienen las piernas grandes” (They found large, red parrots called *guacamayos*, as we mentioned above, which are like cocks but with shorter legs [my translation]).

The size of the parrots found on Guadeloupe seems to have left its mark on the minds of the Spanish, as is clear in Las Casas' (1875:240) account of Christopher Columbus' reaction to birds brought on board by indigenous people from the Paria Gulf coast during his third voyage, “Trajeron papagayos de dos ó tres maneras, en especial de los muy grandes que hay en la isla de Guadalupe, dice él, con la cola larga” (He said they brought two or three types of parrots; especially the very large ones found on the island of Guadeloupe, which has a long tail [my translation]).

These sources all confirm Diego Chanca's account (Navarrete 1828) of a large parrot existing on Guadeloupe. The cubit is an ancient unit of length ranging from 1.5 to 3 ft depending on the region and period (Guilhiermoz 1913). Taking a minimum value for the cubit of 1.5 ft, the bird measured by Simone Verde would have been no less than 56 cm long. While such a conservative estimate is in line with the size range of macaws, it surpasses even the largest parrot of the *Amazona* genus, the Imperial Parrot (*Amazona imperialis*; Raffaele *et al.* 2003). The descriptions of Las Casas (1875) and Martyr d'Anghera (MacNutt 1912) both generally indicate a multicolored, but mostly red bird. With the exception of Simone Verde's account of the bird's green tail (Harrisse 1884), these texts are consistent with Clark's (1905) description of the Lesser Antillean Macaw. At best, these historical accounts suggest that macaws comparable to the ones described by Du Tertre (1667) existed in Guadeloupe when the Spanish arrived in the Lesser Antilles. However, none supports the existence of a purple macaw referred to as Onécouli.

French Historical Sources

This important information can be found in texts written

during the first few years of the French colonization of Guadeloupe that began in 1635. The writings of Father Breton, present in Guadeloupe from 1635 to 1654, are a particularly relevant historical source (Pinchon 1976). This author provided not only the first description of the Guadeloupe environment but also a dictionary of the Carib language. Moreover, the different parrots found on Guadeloupe are described in his account of the island's fauna (Breton 1978:34):

Les perroquets sont gros icy. Ils sont de quantité de couleur, vert, rouges, bleus, violet, tout meslé et sont forts différents de ceux de la Martinique, de Terre ferme ou de ceux de Saint-Vincent qui sont aussi différents les uns des autres . . . Les Arras sont plus gros que les perroquets, d'un fort beau plumage de couleur rouge mêlée dans la queue et les ailes de violet . . . Les perriques sont de même figure que les perroquets . . . mais sont plus petites et toutes vertes. (Parrots are large here. They come in many colors: green, red, blue, purple, all mixed, and they are very different from those on Martinique, the mainland, or on Saint Vincent . . . Macaws are larger than parrots, with a very beautiful red plumage mixed with purple in the tail and wings . . . Parakeets resemble parrots . . . but are smaller and all green. [my translation])

This missionary wrote a Carib-French dictionary following his various stays in the Carib villages of Dominica in the early 17th century. Several terms are dedicated to parrots in this book, including one with a very similar spelling to the name Onécouli used by Rothschild (1905, 1907a): “Onicoali: Perroquet violet de la Guadeloupe” (Onicoali: Violet Parrot of Guadeloupe [my translation]) (Breton 1999:199). Moreover, the corresponding Carib term is provided for each type of parrot (Breton 1999:14):

Allalarou : gros perroquet de terre et de mer qui a les écailles brunes, rouges et vertes sur la tête et la queue. **Couléhuéc**, jeune, celui-ci passe pour genre et se dit de toutes les autres espèces. Les plus communs qu'on amène en France de la terre ferme et qui parlent le mieux, sont appelés **Coúlao**. **Onicoali**, est celui de la Guadeloupe différent des autres en ce qu'il est plus gros, violet, et a les ailes bordées de rouge. L'ara des Iles, se nomme **Kinoulou**, f. **Caarou**. **Coyáli**, c'est celui de terre ferme qui est plus rouge et mieux troussé que celui des Iles. **Erére**, c'est une autre espèce plus petite, on l'appelle : Perrique. (**Allalarou**: large parrot found on the continent and islands, with brown, red, and green feathers on the head and tail. **Couléhuéc**, young, this word applies to all parrots. The most common type we ship to France from the continent and that speak best are referred to as **Coúlao**. **Onicoali** is the Guadeloupe variety, which differs from the others being larger and violet, with red-lined wings. Macaws found on islands are called **Kinoulou**, f. **Caarou**. **Coyáli** is found on the continent, and is redder and more elegant than the island variety. **Erére** is another smaller species that we call parakeets. [my translation with italics added for emphasis])

To begin with, both texts support the existence of a mainly red macaw on Guadeloupe. In the Lesser Antilles Carib language, words are reserved for use by men and others for women, hence two Carib terms describe this bird, a male word (Kinoulou) and a female word (Caarou) (Breton 1999). Above all, Breton's (1999) dictionary shows that, like himself, the Caribs distinguished the parrot from the mainland Scarlet Macaw (Coyali), suggesting that this bird could be the Lesser Antillean Macaw of Clark (1905).

Both texts shed light on exactly which bird is referred to as Onicoali by Carib peoples. The word Erere clearly refers to a parakeet, *perrique* in Old French, whose green color may indicate the Guadeloupe Parakeet (*Psittacara labati* Rothschild, 1905), the only species of endemic parakeet known in the Lesser Antilles. It is also clear that Father Breton (1978, 1999) reserves the term parrot for birds smaller than macaws, in other words, Amazon parrots. Moreover, the plumage of the form specific to Guadeloupe, Onicoali, namely it being multicolored with red lines bordering the wing, is consistent with the Guadeloupe Amazon. Allalarou thus refer to Amazon parrots, with Onicoali designating the form particular to Guadeloupe.

The term Onicoali in Father Breton's (1999) dictionary thus contains all the elements Rothschild (1905, 1907a) used to first describe the Violet Macaw. The slightly different spelling of the term suggests, however, that Rothschild (1905, 1907a) did not consult this text directly, but likely relied on a secondary source. This second author was none other than Dr. M. Guyon, a French naturalist whose note on extinct Guadeloupe and Martinique species was published in the proceedings of the French Academy of Sciences. Of interest is the fact that Guyon (1866) clearly cites Breton (1999) as the source of the Carib term he used. The first few lines of his chapter dealing with psittacids (Guyon 1866:591) read:

Des Aras, des Perroquets et des Perruches (2). - La première mention faite de ces sortes d'Oiseaux pour le nouveau monde se rattache précisément au Perroquet de la Guadeloupe, et nous la devons au fils de Christophe Colomb, Fernand, qui dit, parlant de son père débarqué à la Guadeloupe "Il entra dans des maisons où il trouva les choses qu'ont les Indiens," car ils n'avaient rien emporté; il y prit deux Perroquets, très-grands et "bien différents de ceux qu'il avait vus jusqu'alors" (Don Navarrete, op. cit., t. II, p. 409). (Macaws, Parrots, and Parakeets [2].)—The first mention made of these kinds of birds in the New World relates precisely to the Guadeloupe Parrot, and we owe it to Christopher Columbus' son, Ferdinand, who says, speaking of his father's landing in Guadeloupe, "He entered houses where he found the belongings of Indians," because they had taken nothing away; he took two very large parrots, which were "quite different from those he had seen thus far" [Don Navarrete, op. cit., vol. II, p. 409]. [my translation]

With the following footnote:

(2) Les Caraïbes appelaient Allalarou le gros Perroquet, l'Ara sans doute; Ceceron, le Perroquet de moyenne

grosneur, ou le Perroquet proprement dit, et Hererè, la Perruche. Le gros Perroquet de la Guadeloupe (l'Ara?), qu'ils désignaient sous le nom d'Onécouli, était violet. ([2] The Caribs called the large parrot, probably a macaw, Allalarou; the medium-sized parrot, or the parrot itself, Ceceron; and the parakeet, Hererè. The large parrot of Guadeloupe [Ara?], referred to as Onécouli, was violet. [my translation])

All of the elements comprising Rothschild's (1905, 1907a) description of the Violet Macaw are present in Guyon's (1866) text: the reference to Navarrete, the incorrect reference to Ferdinand Columbus when it was in fact Navarrete (1828) who reproduced Diego Chanca's letter, the mention of a large purple parrot on Guadeloupe, and finally, the appearance of the francized term Onécouli used by Rothschild (1905, 1907a). The above leaves no doubt that Rothschild (1905, 1907a) relied on Guyon (1866) for his description of the Violet Macaw. While the footnote in Guyon's (1866) paper suggests that the large, violet parrot could be a macaw, the original historical source (Father Breton [1999]) clearly states that the "purple parrot of Guadeloupe" does not refer to a macaw, but a parrot of Guadeloupe, the Guadeloupe Amazon.

The Violet Macaw described by Rothschild (1905) should no longer be considered a valid species name—this macaw never existed. Rothschild (1905, 1907a) erroneously based its description on the Guadeloupe Amazon by relying on an indirect source, namely the paper of Guyon (1866). Consequently, only one endemic species of macaw may have inhabited Guadeloupe, the Lesser Antillean Macaw. Historical sources cited in this article provide additional lines of evidence for the presence of a red macaw in Guadeloupe at the time of the discovery of the Americas and eventual French colonization of the island. Moreover, Breton's (1999) distinction between this bird and the South American Scarlet Macaw provides a further argument supporting the existence of the endemic Lesser Antillean Macaw.

Acknowledgments

This study was conducted as a part of the BIVAAG Program established by the CNRS, with support from a European PO-FED-ER grant 2007-2013 n°2/2.4/-33456, the Guadeloupe Regional Council, the DEAL of Guadeloupe, and the DAC of Guadeloupe. I am thankful to M. Gala, D.W. Steadman, and A. Queffelec for constructive comments on a draft of this paper, and a special thank you to Claudie Pavis who provided the illustration for the cover page.

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Cite this article as:

Lenoble, A. 2015. The Violet Macaw (*Anodorhynchus purpurascens* Rothschild, 1905) did not exist. *Journal of Caribbean Ornithology* 28:17–21.