



The Celestial or Pacific Parrotlets

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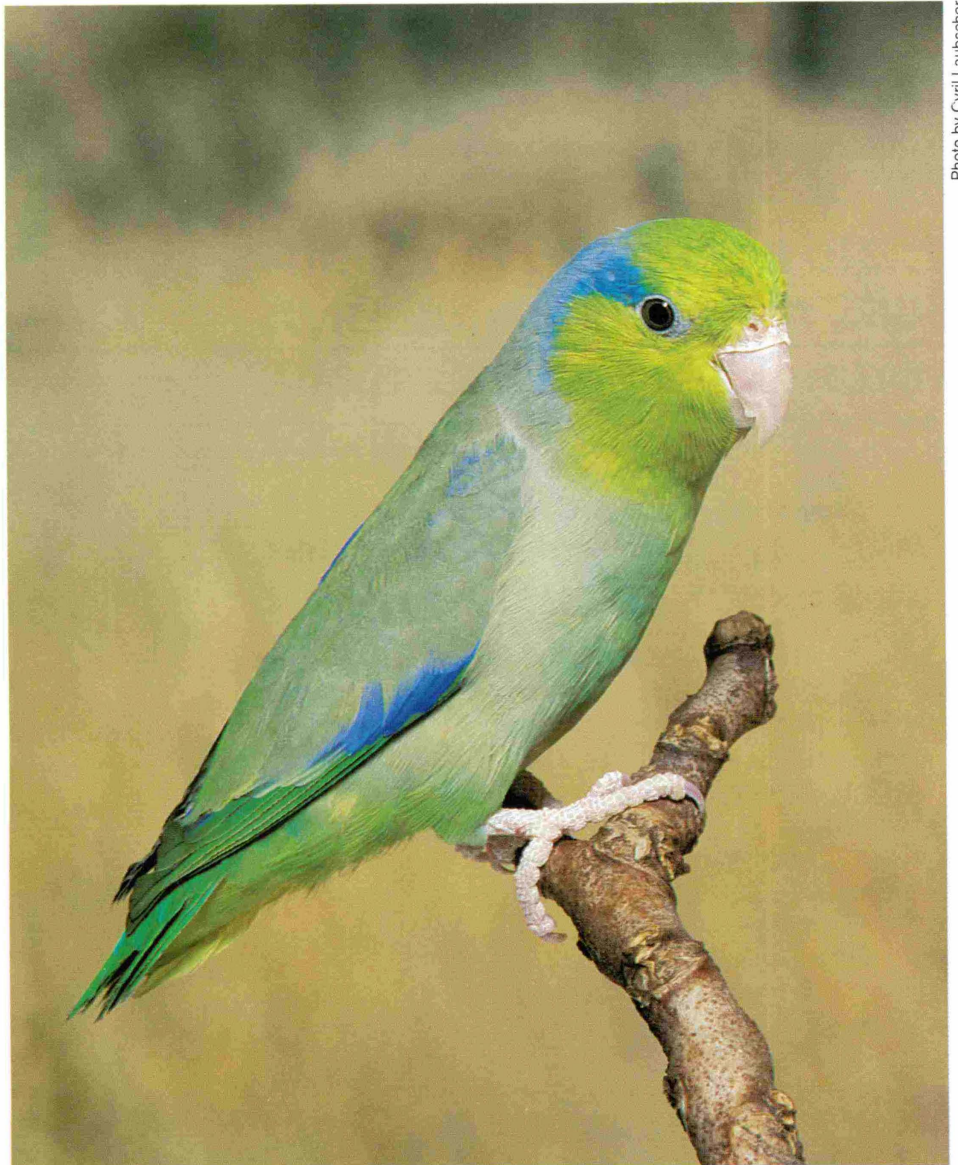
Introduction

I will never forget the first time I saw a parrotlet. My husband and I attended a bird show in Sacramento, California. We were walking around and I saw two tiny green parrots in a show cage. They looked like miniature Amazon parrots! I did not know what they were but I was determined to have some.

It took some time, but I finally found out that these diminutive parrots were called parrotlets. It took even more time to locate a pair for sale. The breeder took the pair out of the cage, showed me the male, then the female. He put them in a paper bag and I took them home. I had no idea what to feed them, what kind of cage to keep them in, or even that there were more than one species of parrotlet.

Parrotlets are among the smallest parrots in the world with their closest relative being Amazon parrots. Most species are less than five inches in length and weigh less than 30 grams. Parrotlets are tiny, streamlined parrots with wedge-shaped tails and large beaks for their size. Primarily green, patches of yellow, gray, and blue identify the species, subspecies, and sex.

Identification of the male of a species is made upon the particular shade and



Celestial Parrotlet male.

location of blue he possesses. Being more difficult to identify, females are generally identified by their size, conformation, and coloring because they lack the blue of the males.

The most widely kept parrotlet (and subject of this article) is the Pacific or Celestial Parrotlet *Forpus coelestis*. Approximately five and one-half inches in length and averaging 28 grams, these bright olive green birds have pink beaks and legs. They are found in the wild on the Pacific Ocean side of the Andes, western Ecuador, and northwestern Peru. Males have deep cobalt wings, backs, rumps, and a streak behind the eye. Females are various shades of olive and emerald green with no blue and an emerald green eye streak. Both males and females have pink beaks and legs.

In the subspecies *F. c. lucida* the females have blue rumps, eye streaks, and, sometimes, wings although it is not as dark a blue as found in the males. Males of this subspecies have silver gray backs and wings as well an eye streak that completely encircles the back of the head. This subspecies is found in Columbia. Both males and females have bright, lime-green faces with pink beaks and legs.

Pacific Parrotlets have the most outgoing and feisty personalities. However, they are also very affectionate and bond strongly with their owners. Pacifics can be very stubborn and strong-willed and can quickly learn to get the upper hand with their owners. They need to be taught limits and commands to control their behavior so they will stay sweet, wonderful pets.

Color Mutations

In captivity, color mutations are highly desirable. Many are breathtakingly beautiful. There are many color mutations of Pacific Parrotlets. These include blue, dark blue, yellow, cinnamon, fallow, lutino, albino, white, dark green, and blue-fallow. It is important to remember that a mutation parrotlet may not be as vigorous as a normal green parrotlet.

Housing Parrotlets

Today's bird cages are made out of all kinds of material including metal, Plexiglass™, wrought iron, and plastic. Whatever material you choose, make sure it is easy to clean and free from zinc and lead. Also, do not use a cage made of brass or copper. Paint should be baked on to keep it from flaking. Powder coating is the best, however does increase the cost of the cage.

Parrotlets are very active and need a good sized cage to keep them happy and healthy. It's always best to get the largest cage you can afford. This will allow the placement of lots of perches and space for a wide variety of toys. Pet parrotlets should have a cage at least 18 x 18 inches. This is the minimum recommended size for a single bird.

Breeding pairs should have cages at least 24 x 24 inches. It is better to have a cage that is wider or deeper than it is tall. The horizontal room is more important than the vertical. Cage bars should be spaced no wider than 1/2 an inch apart. A grate on the bottom is required, as it will keep the parrotlet away from old food and droppings. Many cages also come with seed guards to help keep the area around the cage clean.

Natural wood perches are better than dowels. The bird will have more variety when perching, which will help exercise the feet and toes. Manzanita, eucalyptus, or various unsprayed fruit trees (except cherry and avocado) are also good. Parrotlets love to strip the bark off of branches. Be sure to scrub the perches well before placing them in the cage. Untreated pine is nice because it is soft and can be easily chewed.

Nutritional Needs

Parrotlets utilize a lot of energy in their limitless enthusiasm for play;

therefore, they require top quality nutrition.

Parrotlets thrive on a basic diet of fresh fruits, vegetables, greens, seed, and pellets. They should also receive whole wheat bread, cooked rice, pasta, and cooked dried beans. A healthful diet of a variety of foods is the best. If fresh fruits and vegetables are difficult to obtain, sodium-free frozen vegetables may be thawed to room temperature and substituted.

Breeding Parrotlets

All species of parrotlets are dimorphic. Parrotlets, particularly hens, should be at least a year old before they attempt to breed or they can become egg bound and die. Males who are too young often do not provide enough food for the hen which can cause the babies to be abandoned or destroyed. Young pairs can be kept with one another until they go through their first molt, then they should be separated until they are at least 11 months old. It is not uncommon to have handfed birds begin laying as young as seven months – which can be disastrous and result in the loss of the hen.

Parrotlets breed best when there are more than one pair in the aviary and they can hear but not see each other. Wood barriers, foliage, burlap or even cardboard can separate pairs between the cages. Handfed birds generally make the best parents as they are not as sensitive to stress and are used to people. Take care, however, for handfed birds have no fear of people and, females especially, will inflict a painful, bloody bite if given a chance. Parrotlets also have a much-deserved reputation for not letting go once they latch on. When removing babies, a piece of cardboard can be used to hold the hen back as she will not usually leave the box the way males do. Females have been known to attack babies as they were being pulled so the utmost caution must be used.

Most parrotlet species breed well in a cage with minimum dimensions of 18 inches tall, 24 inches long, and 24 inches deep. They can also be bred successfully in four- to six-foot-long flight cages (only one pair to a flight). Not surprisingly, many breeders feel their

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* Position open: contact regional vice president if interested.

** indicates 2 year term has been fulfilled. If no new interested party comes forward and indicates a desire to serve, incumbent remains in position.

For information about contacting any of these member clubs, please call that club's state coordinator.

parrotlets are in much better condition and have better production with large flights. As with pet parrotlets, perches should be made out of natural wood and be securely attached to the cage. Infertility can sometimes be traced to wobbly or unstable perches. Breeding pairs especially appreciate soft pine perches that they can chew up – this encourages breeding.

Breeding pairs should have nest boxes that are six inches wide by 10 inches tall and seven inches deep, which should be hung on the outside of the cage and filled with four to six inches of untreated pine shavings. Boxes should be placed on the front of the cages so when the birds look out, they only see the inside of their cage. Some birds are fond of throwing the nest material out of the box so be sure to keep it replaced. Babies can develop crippling orthopedic problems if left on the bare floor.

Conversely, sometimes birds will bury their eggs and lose them in the shavings. If this is the case, remove the shavings a little at a time until the problem ceases or try using heavier shavings. In any case, by checking nest boxes daily, you will be able to monitor the pairs and deal with any problems as they arise. Also, following a routine will teach the birds to tolerate your interference.

In all species of *Forpus* parrotlets, the females incubate the eggs and the males provide food and protection. Sometimes the hen will allow the male to incubate the eggs but this is an individual preference.


The male will usually investigate the box first and when he deems it safe, will try and entice her into it. Once mating has taken place, the hen will lay from four to eight eggs although Pacific hens have been known to produce 10 fertile eggs. She will hardly leave that box for the next six to eight weeks. Females lay one egg every other day. The eggs take 21 days to hatch.

Unlike most other species of parrots, parrotlet hens immediately begin incubating their clutch which results in babies of various sizes. Indeed, in large clutches, many times the oldest parrotlets are so large, they crush or starve their younger siblings. This is very

common in the wild. If the babies are being handfed, it may be necessary to take babies from the nest before they reach 10 days on age in order to avoid this problem.

Female parrotlets will eat massive amounts of cuttlebone for several weeks prior to laying. They will also start spending more time in the nest box chewing shavings and arranging them into a nest. Parrotlets do not build a nest in a true sense but dig a depression by pushing the shavings around. The hen will also pluck her breast feathers and use those in the nest as well. Just before laying, her abdomen will swell and her droppings will become huge and very wet.

Handfeeding and Weaning

Baby parrotlets, like all parrots, are blind, deaf, and almost naked when they hatch. Even so, they have loud cries for their tiny size. They are extremely tiny when they hatch – no larger than a bumblebee. The babies should be left with their parents until they are 10 to 14 days old. Their eyes and ears have opened by this time and they have grown considerably. However, each pair of birds have their own varying degrees of parenting skills and a baby should be fostered or pulled if it seems to be in distress. Some pairs make exceptional parents and have even been used to foster other parrotlets' eggs and others are terrible parents who abandon their eggs and/or babies. While it is not unusual for a pair to make mistakes with a first clutch, they often get it right the second time around. It is interesting to note that parents who are attentive to their chicks often produce chicks that become attentive parents. 

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