Burmeister’s Seriema
a worthwhile challenge
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The Burmeister’s or black-legged seriema, Chunga burmeisteri, is a native of northwest Argentina and southwest Paraguay. It is a tall, long-legged, dark grey bird with a pronounced white stripe above the eye. Its white underside and black and white tail are accented by its black beak and legs, which provides good camouflage for its mostly terrestrial habits. Dry woodlands and savannas with sufficient undergrowth for cover is preferred for remaining well hidden while hunting their favorite foods such as snakes, mice, insects, and grain. Often the only hint of their presence is their very loud call, which has become a daily occurrence at the Baton Rouge Zoo.

In 1975 the Greater Baton Rouge Zoo purchased from Charles P. Chase Company, a pair of imported seriemas which made a great addition to our bird collection. In the following years we were fortunate to be one of the few zoos to breed the Burmeister’s seriema. In this article we hope to share our knowledge on the propagation of this somewhat rare bird, so that others will be able to enjoy the success that we have had.

When our birds first arrived, they were placed in one of the individual cages at the Bird House. Their cage is fairly spacious, (15 feet wide, 20 feet long, and 8-11 feet high). The cage is made from aluminum tubing on the east and south side which is covered by one inch mesh chain link. The remaining two sides are cinder block walls which offer shade and some privacy from some of the surrounding cages. About one-third of the rear of the aviary is sheltered and is eleven feet high and covered with chain link. Under the sheltered area of the aviary is located the nest box which is situated about eight feet high. The open nest box is eighteen inches square and four inches deep. During the winter, heat lamps are provided under the sheltered area.

The substrate is mostly sand with some topsoil. Plantings include yucca, prickly pear cactus and ligustrum bushes. Several vines are provided for use as perches, but because the birds are primarily terrestrial, they are seldom used. There is a concrete pool with continuously flowing water and the feeding platform is located at the rear of the exhibit, approximately two feet from the ground and it is under shelter. The pair is kept on exhibit year-round but there is sufficient cover for the birds to seclude themselves as they wish. Fecal samples are checked monthly and worming or dusting is seldom needed.

In the early spring of 1977 we observed nest building and mating activities. During the mating season, which is mid-spring through early summer, the nest is checked every few days, usually by one attendant. The somewhat flimsy nests are constructed of small twigs, rocks and some mud. The nests are very sparse and the eggs actually laid on the bottom of the box. The pair seemed to show no interest in incubating in the beginning and were

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suspected of breaking their eggs.

Finally, the pair started incubating their eggs, but several clutches disappeared two or three days before they were due to hatch. It became apparent after many tries that artificial incubation was our only alternative. Because of this, we began to pull the clutches. The eggs were incubated at 81°F wet bulb and 97.3°F dry bulb, and were turned three times daily by hand. In June of 1978 our first clutch and several clutches thereafter were hatched out in this manner.

When the breeding season of 1983 rolled around, our pair again began to nest build and show mating activities. Eggs were laid on March 19 and 21 and were pulled for artificial incubation. Twenty-six days later the first egg hatched, followed two days later by the second egg. Both chicks were brought to the nursery for handraising. About two weeks after the first clutch was pulled, our pair laid a second clutch of two eggs. It was decided to give the pair another chance at incubating their eggs. To our pleasant surprise, the female became very attentive to the nest and her eggs, and began to incubate with regularity. The female spent the vast majority of time incubating with the male taking over the responsibility for short periods of time. This allowed the female to feed. The pair did not hesitate to defend the nest box if we persisted on checking on their progress, and the keepers had to be especially careful not to endanger themselves or the clutch.

On May 2 our first chick hatched, and on May 4, the second chick followed. The parents began feeding and caring for the chicks like "old pros". The pair kept a close watch on the chicks but, after a week, allowed us to take a few pictures. After approximately two weeks, it was noted that one of the chicks was growing at a rate that was much greater than its nestmate. On the nineteenth day, after the second chick hatched, the smaller chick disappeared. The larger chick then grew rapidly and was fledged after thirty-four days. The fledged chick began feeding on its own at eleven weeks of age, and by summer’s end it was nearly as large as its parents.

The diet for the Burmeister's seriema is fed twice a day. The feed consists of 2/3 Purina Hen Scratch and 1/3 Game Bird Chow in the morning. In addition to their grain, several pieces of soaked Monkey Chow is added per bird. In the evening, small meatballs are prepared at the kitchen consisting of Nebraska Bird of Prey Diet mixed with hen scratch and game bird diet. Crickets are fed daily
and pinky or adult mice are fed when available. The pair has also been observed eating seeds and insects in their enclosure. They have also been known to catch and eat sparrows.

With the arrival of the chicks, the evening meal was served twice a day with an increase in the amount of crickets fed. Hen scratch and game bird diet was given free choice, and the consumption of the soaked monkey chow increased.

Several clutches of chicks had to be handraised after being artificially incubated. The eggs were not turned after twenty-four days and when the eggs hatched the chicks were kept in the incubator for several hours. After they were completely dry and they were able to hold up their heads, they were transferred to the nursery. In the nursery they were placed in a small box with a heating pad which served as a brooder. After several days, when they were able to stand on their own, they were placed in a larger box. Handfeeding at this point in time is now routine for us. The formula we have found best is a mixture of Purina Dog Chow soaked in water, Nebraska Bird of Prey diet, and Avitron liquid vitamin supplement. The first week, the mixture is warmed and is fed at three hour intervals, between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. The second week, the chicks are fed at four hour intervals, and after three weeks the chicks were being fed three times daily. The earlier feedings were done using surgical hemostats and when the chicks grew larger, fingers were substituted. After eleven weeks the chicks began to feed on their own.

Several zoos and some individuals house the Burmeister's seriema and hopefully the success rate of their propagation will improve. With the limitations on importing, better propagation programs will be very important for this and many other species of birds. With a little patience and work, the Burmeister's seriema could make a nice addition to any collection and would be greatly enjoyed by the general public.

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