

Thoughts on Aviculture of *Aratinga solstitialis*

Jim and Janet Voight, Woodside, CA

The Sun Conure, *Aratinga solstitialis*, has come a long way since it first started to show up in the early 1960s. Oh, were we aviculturists excited to see such a beautifully colored parrot. With only a few who had observed the Queen-of-Bavaria Conure, most U.S. bird keepers were stunned to believe that such a vivid yellow and orange parrot could exist in the wilds of South America. At that time, the price matched the bird — around the \$2000 mark.

Aviculturists can be proud of the job they did in breeding this psittacine. It was reproduced so well that prices came down to an affordable level and the question of importing or smuggling this “yellow jewel” became moot. The prices quickly dropped to \$1100 each, then even lower. In the early 1990s the standard price for a producing pair was \$1000 and pet Sun Conures were \$250 to \$350 wholesale.

The question now as we approach the turn of the century is, “Where are we going with this parrot?” During the past summer of 1997, it was with surprise and consternation that West Coast pet bird breeders watched as the “jobber” price of Sun Conures dropped as low as \$75 per bird from certain sources. The average jobber price going in California was \$125 per bird at that time. This significant drop in the price happened in one breeding season.

A bit of background data is neces-

sary here. The Sun Conure species is in aviculture an extremely prolific producer. This is especially true with some of the third generation (and more) handfed birds that are now going to nest at a very early age. Their sexual maturity can appear as early as 18 months. If allowed, some pairs will lay, set and produce large clutches of four and five babies year around. Annual production from some pairs can be 15, 18, 21 babies or more. Some breeders are content to let their prolific pairs lay and hatch, lay and hatch, month after month. Other keepers remove Sun offspring at 14 days and refuse to shut down continually-laying pairs, believing that adequate nutrition will keep the parent birds healthy. Is this responsible aviculture?

It is interesting to note that, unlike some genera of psittacines in aviculture, *Aratinga* fledglings which are handfed on today's potent, protein-rich and high fat commercial baby formulas often outweigh and outsize their parents by five to 10 percent. This might explain the reason for their extremely early sexual activity and large clutch size. It also suggests that the current popular commercial baby foods utilize formulas well suited to conure nutrition — though not necessarily nutrition of other parrot species.

The Sun Conure quickly turned into a commercial species. It was highly desired by both the aviculturist and the pet owner. But are we pushing this

bird beyond its normal biology just to satisfy our commercial needs? We personally have third generation (F3) Sun Conures. Are we a part of this commercialism? One might say so as we held back those babies from our wild caught Suns that showed some yellow on their wings at fledging. Normally juvenile Sun Conures have green wings and acquire their yellow color starting after their first molt which may be at five to 12 months depending upon your environment.

During the next generation of Sun Conures, we again held back babies that even showed more color on their wings at fledging. By the third generation many of our baby Suns had 80% of their wing-coloration yellow-gold. Why did we do this? Only for the reason that the baby Suns that show the yellow color in their wings are immediately purchased by a wholesaler. These babies simply had more early color than their nestmates. Pet owners are attracted to this yellow color and the wholesaler could move this baby quicker. It did not matter that all Sun Conures will have the brilliant yellow wings only a few months later. This was originally why the Sun Conure was so popular.

We do not know if early color acquisition is “pushing” the bird, as many other breeders use the same techniques to acquire red or orange Sun Conures. The seriousness of pushing our birds comes with the concept of getting the maximum number of babies from a pair of birds without considering what we are doing to the parent birds. Problems begin to show up with juvenile hen Suns laying at nine months. We were very surprised to observe second generation Suns reproducing successfully at 18 months of age. Should we be going even further? Could nine months be too early for a hen Sun to have a fully developed reproductive tract? We can well remember thinking our original wild-caught Sun Conures would never lay eggs as we waited up to four and five years to get them to lay. Has the aviculturist lost patience with their breeders. Are they urging them to lay earlier than they should? (The breeders of the 1960s had patience as they did not always know the sex of their “pairs.”)

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Are we pushing our "baby" Suns too quickly to have babies of their own? Are we handfeeding our baby Suns correctly to become breeders or are we imprinting them to humans? Natural roles during mating in many handfed, human-imprinted Sun Conures can be poorly developed. Dysfunctional hens will come out regularly from their nest boxes to feed, ignoring males who wish to eat, then feed the hens inside the nest box. Other hens are known for starting a new clutch of eggs before the chicks in an ongoing clutch are yet three weeks of age, let alone fledged and weaned. Are we allowing our Sun Conures to follow the route of many pairs of cockatiels that are forever doing this? And then there are the aviculturists so locked into the incubator as a tool for raising babies to sell, that they incubate Sun eggs and feed from day one.

Where are we going with this psittacine?

We have seen Sun Conures as four-year-old breeders that were never allowed to fly as handfed babies, hence cannot fly down. We have seen males and females who raise chicks, yet fight and spat at the food dish because of "feeding anxiety" learned when they were force-weaned as handfed babies.

We have seen pairs that will not feed their chicks past 10-14 days of age because keepers have for years taken babies away at that time. Yet the birds are allowed to lay over and over again up to seven clutches per annum — as soon as chicks are pulled for handfeeding. And we have seen Sun Conure babies with only a fraction of the intelligence of the correctly raised Suns of a few years ago.

The correct way is to either parent-rear Suns to become future breeders or at least remove baby Suns from the nest no earlier than 28 days. We have found that they still make excellent pets. One should bring the babies up together and socialize them during the handfeeding and weaning process. This includes being with birds of their own kind during the juvenile and maturing stage. Babies should not be clipped or should be only partially clipped so they learn the art of flying. One should follow the "Progressive

Wing Clip," guidelines of noted Sun breeder, Eb Cravens, where clipping is done in stages.

The truth is, we are going the way of the normal gray Cockatiel with this *Aratinga* species. The Sun Conure in aviculture is becoming so domesticated that it no longer has the capacity to survive in a wild situation.

Is this good or bad? That is not for us to say. But it does raise certain avicultural considerations

What will a flooded market of mass-produced Sun Conures (at a base price of \$75 each) do to conure aviculture in the U.S.? How will the long-term quality of the birds be affected? What kind of homes will be provided this beautiful psittacine when its value falls to such a cheap figure that anyone can purchase one on a whim?

When commercial breeding operations choose to push production of such a species to the maximum, then are forced to slash prices to dispose of the chicks in a saturated market, how does this change the desire of other breeders to commit to this species? How does it affect the quality of upbringing given each individual chick?

And, most important of all, which species will be next as breeders seek to support costly operations and affluent lifestyles by hatching and raising more baby psittacines? Will the next species be the Senegal Parrot, the Umbrella Cockatoo, the African Grey?

The Green-cheeked Conure is fast following the way of the Sun Conure. Now that the jobber price (CA) of this bird has dropped under \$50 where will the quality Green-cheeked come

from. What is surprising about this species is that it is a basically green bird and, unlike the brilliantly colored Sun Conure, is still very popular. The reason for its popularity is that the Green-cheeked Conure makes an outstanding pet. It does not have the loud screeching voice of the Sun Conure. But, we ask you, is this a \$45 psittacine....?

What about the Blue-crowned Conure, or the Slender-billed Conure? Why can't aviculturists offer these delightful conure species a breeding effort equivalent to that which has been put into the Sun Conure over the past 20 years? Give one of the more difficult species the chance to be reproduced to the extent of the Sun Conure, even if it does not have its color. Both the Blue-crowned and the Slender-billed Conure make incredible household pets.

Fellow aviculturists, do you realize how many hobby and expert bird breeders now *refuse* to give their parrots nest boxes due to the deplorable state of the pet bird market-prices in certain parts of the U.S. during certain times of the year? (This is an interesting way of "taking an ethical stand." Yet it denies the captive psittacine a chance to manifest the strongest need of its kind.).

All we know for sure is that we find many of today's loveable handfed Sun Conures to be rather unintelligent. Anyone who has ever had a chance to observe a wild-caught Sun Conure will see immediately that they possess something very special.

Where *are* we going with this parrot? ➔

AVICULTURAL CONSULTATION SERVICES

3807 Main Street, Oakley, California 94561
(510) 625-1878 • Fax (510) 625-8511

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