

# Maroon-bellied Conure

*Pyrrhura frontalis* (Vieillot)

Photograph by Cyril Laubscher

Text by Joseph M. Forshaw

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An apparent scarcity of pure Maroon-bellied Conures in Australian aviaries probably is a legacy of the captive population having originated from very few birds. I suspect that hybridization with the closely-allied Green-cheeked Conure *P. molinae* was necessary at regular intervals to boost breeding, and this is reflected in the present genetic impurity. Every bird that I have seen in Australian collections has shown characteristics of *P. molinae*, and that is most unfortunate, because the *Pyrrhura* conures are one group that should be managed most carefully to maintain genetic purity.

Current research is demonstrating that minor differences in plumage coloration, especially in facial patterns, can be highly significant in determining specific status. This is demonstrated most forcefully in a proposed rearrangement of the closely-related Painted Conure *P. picta* and White-eared Conure *P. leucotis* into no fewer than eight species, and there is a likelihood that further investigations will identify additional species!

Approximately 26cm in length and weighing about 90g, the Maroon-bellied Conure is one of the larger *Pyrrhura* species. It is predominantly green in coloration and, in all but the southern subspecies – *chiripepe*, the green tail is variably tipped with dull red. There is a narrow rufous frontal band, and a few red feathers usually are present immediately behind the yellowish-white cere, but the crown and nape are green. Greyish-brown

ear-coverts are prominent, and feathers of the breast, throat and sides of the neck are olive margined with dull yellow and tipped olive-brown to give a conspicuously barred appearance. A variable brownish-red abdominal patch gives the bird its name, and the prominent bare eyering is greyish-white. Young birds are generally duller, often with little or no red on the abdomen, and the wider eyering is more greyish.

## Common in Wooded Habitats

Ranging north from Uruguay and northern Argentina to eastern Paraguay and to southern Mato Grosso, southeastern Minas Gerais and southern Bahia, in southeastern Brazil, Maroon-bellied Conures essentially are birds of temperate lowland forests and woodlands. In southern regions, up to about 1000m, they are widespread in a variety of wooded habitats, including remnant stands of *Araucaria* forest and riparian woodlands, and seem to be tolerant of disturbance, even regularly visiting major towns and cities to feed in parks and gardens. Conversely, in southeastern Brazil, toward northern extremities of the range, they occur mostly in highland forests up to about 1400m, being replaced in the adjacent lowlands by the Blue-throated Conure *P. cruentata* and the White-eared Conure *P. leucotis*.

Although affected adversely by extensive landclearance in some parts of northern Argentina, these conures remain quite plentiful throughout much of their range. They

have fared much better than most other parrots found in this strongly agricultural region, and in many districts are by far the most commonly recorded species. I came to know them quite well during a visit made in May 1971 to northern Rio Grande do Sul, in extreme southeastern Brazil. Here they were the most common and widely-distributed of parrots, occurring in all types of woodland, except *Eucalyptus* plantations, and were particularly numerous in *Araucaria* forest in valleys penetrating open, undulating grasslands. Small numbers came each day to feed in household gardens in the town of Gramado, sometimes joining mixed foraging assemblages of fruit-eating birds.

## Encountered in Noisy Flocks

At times I encountered pairs, but generally they were in flocks of between 10 and 40 birds. They were noisy in flight, their screeching call-notes always attracting my attention as they passed overhead in swift, erratic flight. Typically, they would glide past a tree before swooping back and down to alight in the branches. While feeding in the tree-tops, they were silent, and so well did their plumage blend with the foliage that locating them became difficult even though I had seen them alight in the tree. On one occasion, near Gramado, I saw a small flock, together with a pair of Scaly-headed Parrots *Pionus maximiliani*, feeding during the late afternoon in a large *Araucaria* tree standing in disturbed woodland; it was the only large *Araucaria* tree in the immedi-

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ate vicinity and the birds were reluctant to leave it, persistently returning each time they were flushed. Near Bom Jesus, also in Rio Grande do Sul, I observed a party quietly resting during the middle of the day; in pairs or threes and fours, they were sitting huddled close together on thick, main branches near the trunk of the tree, and intermittently were preening each other. Post-roosting aerobatics took place at sunrise the next morning, when I watched screeching flocks flying up and down a forested valley.

The diet comprises seeds, fruits, nuts, berries, blossoms, and insects and their larvae, with *Araucaria* seeds being a favored food in southeastern Brazil. Flocks can cause damage in citrus orchards, and they will raid ripening maize crops, but their depredations are of little economic importance when compared with those of Monk Parakeets *Myiopsitta monachus*. Breeding takes place during September to December, and nests are in hollow limbs or holes in trees at varying heights from the ground. A normal clutch comprises five or six eggs, and incubation by the female lasts approximately 30 days. Young birds leave the nest some 40 days after hatching.

### Popular Aviary Birds

The Maroon-bellied Conure is a popular aviary bird, being hardy and generally willing to breed. Indeed, some pairs are quite prolific, and there is a report of 14 youngsters being reared by one pair from three nests. Australian aviculturists routinely house pairs separately in suspended cages or small, open-fronted aviaries, and provide a basic seed mix supplemented with diced fruits and vegetables together with soaked seeds. Fresh corn-on-cob is especially favored by pairs when feeding nestlings. Now well established in captivity in many countries, these attractive, engaging parrots can be recommended as the ideal species to start with when setting out to specialize in the keeping and breeding of *Pyrrhura* conures. 



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