

# Hispaniolan Conure in Field & Aviary

by Tony Silva  
Loro Parque, Canary Islands, Spain

"If conservation is concerned with the survival of endangered species of birds, then private aviculturists must be recognised as an invaluable asset in the realisation of the goal. The general public is led to believe that conservation is the saving of rare species, but rarely told that many species living under the threat of extinction could be saved simply by the application of sound avicultural techniques.

"At a time when natural habitats are being systematically destroyed, due to an understandable desire of people to realise the full commercial potential of their land, it is essential that aviculturists should also be allowed to show their full potential. Failure to give aviculture a fair chance to prove its worth will be to deny certain species their best chance of survival." Blackwell, 1982, *Cage and Aviary Birds*, November 6:1

When I read the above statement by Chris Blackwell several years ago, I nodded my head in agreement; this view is still with me for now, more than ever, aviculture will have to figure in conservation programs if a large part of the parrots now extant are to remain so when it is time to greet the next century.

The Hispaniolan conure, *Aratinga chloroptera*, is just one such species. A largely green conure, which could easily be confused with the white-eyed *A. leucophthalmus* or Mexican green *A. holochlora*, it is not considered attractive by most. Indeed, had I not become familiar with this bird, I probably would have been of the same belief. However, it is very differ-

ent from either the white-eyed or Mexican green; its bill is of a different shade, the orbital ring is very white, but the eye lids are greyish, it has red under wing-coverts (not accompanied by yellow as in *leucophthalmus*, or yellowish-green as in *holochlora*), and is far shyer and quieter. It is also endangered, whereas the Mexican green and white-eyed are common, sometimes very common, in parts of its range.

Forshaw (1978, *Parrots of the World*, Lansdowne Press) gives two subspecies under *chloroptera*: nominate *chloroptera* and subspecies *maugei*. However, this needs revising, for Storrs Olson concluded, after analyzing the bones of both, that they differ sufficiently, especially in the shape of the bill, to be considered separate species.

Prior to 1976, *Aratinga maugei* was known for certain to have occupied Mona Island. That year Olson identified bones as belonging to that species in caves in central Puerto Rico. Much speculation existed prior to this evidence because, while such distinguished ornithologists as Juan Gundlach and Alexander Wetmore wrote of the conure, none were able to collect or observe it in the wild. The situation was described by Wetmore (1927, *The Birds of Porto Rico and the Virgin Islands*, volume 9, parts 3 and 4, New York Academy of Sciences) thus: "In 1912 I was told by a number of persons that parquets were still in existence, but always at a distance point that ever receded before me; so that I never

entered what were, according to popular accounts, their haunts."

On Mona Island the situation was very different. Before it became extinct in 1892, three specimens were collected, the last by Wilmot W. Brown. I examined the immature female in the Field Museum of Natural History collection. At the time I wrote in my notes: "Poorly differentiated and probably invalid subspecies. Until measurements of both subspecies are taken and analyzed, perhaps by a computer, the true status of *maugei* cannot be determined." Things have certainly changed.

The factors contributing to the decline and subsequent extinction of *maugei* which, despite now being classified as a separate species closely related to *chloroptera*, are unknown. Bond (1946, *Notul Nat.*, no. 176, pp. 1-10) suggested that pigeon hunters which regularly traveled to Mona Island in the last century extirpated the conure there. On Puerto Rico, where it is reported by Greenway to have disappeared by 1883 though it probably met its end sometime later, even less is known about its disappearance. One can conjecture that lumbering of timber during the 1800s

Photo by Chris Hale



This photo shows the newly hatched Hispaniolan Conures on a nest box measuring 12" x 12" x 24". This rare conure was raised by Tim Kitchens.



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and early 1900s attributed to the ebb, or, like *chloroptera* on Hispaniola, it had difficulty adapting to living commensally with man.

Sadly, nothing can now be done to relieve this species, but the future of *chloroptera* need not necessarily follow the path of *maugei*.

On Hispaniola, the second largest island in the Greater Antilles and which is composed of Haiti to the west and the Dominican Republic to the east, the Hispaniolan conure is found from sea level to 3,000 meters (9,842 ft.). Its habitat there is varied, ranging from arid scrub to lush forest in the mountains, where it is most numerous. Seasonally it is present on the islands of Beata and Soana, off the coast of the Dominican Republic, but even then it is not plentiful. Its status on the mainland seems to vary considerably from area to area.

Haiti has been largely deforested and there the conure is very rare, possibly even nearing extinction. This is a clear indication of the ebb, because Danforth (1929, *Auk*, 46:366) encountered thousands daily in early July in the region between Mirebalais, Haiti, and San Juan in the Dominican Republic.

In the Dominican Republic it has traditionally been more plentiful, although several devastating hurricanes, loss of habitat and shooting when it raids corn crops have had a negative impact. Further, a dam was constructed earlier this decade in the region of San Juan de la Maguana, where it was particularly plentiful; its effects on the population are as yet unknown (Annabelle Dod, *in litt.*, 1980).

Given the likeliness that man will continue to make inroads into its habitat, one can expect the decline to continue, perhaps at an accelerated pace. To establish a foundation stock in captivity to safeguard the species would be a positive step in its preservation.

My interest in this species started in the mid-1970s, after I examined the last individual taken on Mona Island. A search then began that resulted in a singleton being obtained in June 1981. It was a hand-reared bird, with a slightly dropped wing which impeded long flight and had the tendency to pluck its breast, and had been obtained in 1975 by Van Saun Park Zoo in Paramus, New Jersey.

This particular bird showed aggression to other parrots but, for some unknown reason, especially so with

Petz's or half-moon conures (*Aratinga canicularis*). I conjectured that this behavior may have arisen after an injury was received, perhaps by a *canicularis*.

One afternoon in late 1984, the unexpected happened: a man called after having seen my mention of the species and offered me his six *chloroptera*, all having been imported from Haiti. Could this be another wrong lead? I wondered, after having followed several birds always to meet a white-eyed, but this opportunity was unique — the birds had come from Haiti and had been privately imported. When they finally arrived, I could not believe my eyes. They were genuine *chloroptera*! Luck was certainly on my side, for surgical sexing proved them to be three pairs.

One pair went to Greg Isaacs, this move taking place so that, should an unfortunate catastrophe strike, all would not be lost. They nested and in 1985 several young were reared.

The next year the pair and young were received back, after Greg decided to reduce his collection. By then my *chloroptera* had already nested and since this time a considerable number of young were reared. This year alone over 15 fledged.

Young *chloroptera* are much like their parents, except that the red on the underside of wings is mixed with green and the bill has greyish color near the base of the cutting edge. They wean by 12 weeks and attain sexual maturity by a year of age.

We have placed pairs with several aviculturists and hope to continue doing so in the future. If sufficient pairs are distributed, we will be able to see the establishment of this conure. The largest obstacle we encountered is the ratio of males to females produced; for every hen there are at least two available males. Another disappointment has been the lack of interest from aviculturists. Many appear only interested in breeding those species that will produce great monetary rewards; the gratitude of having helped establish an endangered species appears not to be sufficient reward.

The chance of establishing an endangered species in aviculture, especially one that appears willing to reproduce, is not one that will likely repeat itself. Seizing this opportunity will allow us to look back at some future point and remark that the 1980s was not a decade of lost opportunity. ●

**Editors' Note:** The Avy Award Committee is seeking information on the first breeding of the Hispaniolan Conure, *Aratinga chloroptera*. If any person can confirm Greg Isaac's success in 1985 (see Tony Silva's article), please write to Dale R. Thompson, Chairman Avy Awards Committee through the AFA Home Office.

# Breeding the Hispaniolan Conure

(*Aratinga chloroptera*)

by Tim Kitchens and Mike Weems  
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The Hispaniolan Conure (*Aratinga chloroptera*) is a noisy, green conure from the island of Hispaniola (Haiti and Dominican Republic) and formerly Mona Island. While it lives in all habitats, most are found in the mountains. The plumage is overall green with red outermost underwing coverts, bend of wing, and edge of forewing. The greater underwing coverts are green marked with red, and some birds have a few red feathers on their heads. The underside of the tail and flight feathers is olive yellow. The Hispaniolan Conure also has a creamy white, naked periorbital ring, a yellow iris, and brownish legs.

As an avid collector of conures, having 30 species, I jumped at the chance to acquire a pair of Hispaniolan Conures. I was able to get them in the fall of 1989 from Tony Silva, before he became curator of Loro Parque in Spain. Their ages are