

The Natural Choice



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Conure Sexing A to Z

The logical place to begin a discussion of conure sexing is with the two popular methods of surgical sexing and the more recently introduced blood chromosome sexing. There are several reliable sources across the U.S. for either method and should one have any doubts about one's abilities to visually determine gender, scientific methods should be employed prior to pairing psittacines for breeding purposes.

Whenever we choose surgery, we opt for only those avian veterinarians who have performed hundreds if not thousands of incisions upon dozens of species. Not only are the costs per bird less, but the vast experience of these select veterinarians reduces the procedure to a matter of mere seconds!

Sometimes to ask a less practiced or local vet to surgically sex one of your conures is asking for a worrisome experience for both the vet and you.

Chromosome sexing in a laboratory using a blood sample taken from a clipped toenail is normally safe and reliable.

Over the years, we have avoided the necessity of either method with our domestically bred conures held back for breeding purposes. The reason is simple, the longer you own and observe your conures prior to pairing and setting them to nest, the more reliable "clues" these loveable psittacines will offer you pertaining to their gender.

Initial information toward sexing in unweaned baby conures is available as soon as the chicks are pulled from their parents. Study closely the face and head portions of each chick and make comparisons among the clutch. Males will often have a distinctively thicker upper mandible than the more petite-faced hens. Their head between the eyes can appear more blocky and strong looking. The traditional "flat-top" head shape attributed to males is not by itself to be taken as a deciding gender indicator, but combined with a thicker beak and head and a wider forehead from beak to crown, it may be considered significant.

Observe closely the beak angle where the upper mandible grows out of the forehead. When viewed in profile, a female's beak will often curve out and softly down in a graceful arc; males are more likely to have the upper beak growing thickly straight out and then hooking down. This male beak lines up more with the top of the head when the bird opens its mouth, say in a wide yawn.

I have breeder friends who, using physical traits, regularly predict gender with 85 percent accuracy on their fledgling conures as soon as they are pulled from the nest. Obviously, the more babies one observes over the years the sharper become one's instincts.

We routinely make pelvic touch exams of all our baby conures looking for clues to gender. In truly young birds, bones are far from rigid and not finished growing, but certain chicks will show more flexible, wider spaced, round edged bones (female) as opposed to the males' closely-

spaced, rigid, sharp-edged pelvis. From 16 weeks to 32 weeks these clues become more pronounced and reliable.

Feather coloration in fledglings can be quite misleading regarding gender. Adult plumage may differ slightly from male to female. Male Sun Conures, for example, might show extra orange highlights on cheek and belly. Green-cheeked Conure males may be slightly redder on breast; Cherry-headed males may have larger red patches; Painted Conures may be more vivid; while Peach-fronted males sometimes have more orange feathering around their eyes. These are tendencies only, of course, and not to be taken alone as indicative of sex. The more clues one may amass, however, the stronger the conclusions to be drawn.

At age four to five weeks in smaller conures (pyrrhura, Half-moons, Suns, etc.) and at six to seven weeks in Blue-crowned, Nandays, Patagonians and such, the typical gender behavioral characteristics of our other parrots becomes manifest. This is the real "bread and butter" of visual sexing methods applied to conures.

At this time we watch which babies are quick to peer over the edge of their nursery tub, which are anxious to go exploring, which are precocious in their demands for affection. We have found through the years that these are definite male tendencies — along with the mock attack when a stranger or unannounced hand enters their immediate space. One must be careful not to confuse the fluffing of head feathers and beak threatening of both males and females with a rushing attack. Also, some species such as Maroon-bellies are more aggressive at an early stage towards invasion of their privacy. One bird may fluff and attack with open beak and two or three others follow closely behind by instinct. It is the leading aggressor which is most likely a male. Hens may threaten but stay back or even hide behind brothers.

This is the stage for personality formation in our fledgling conures, a time when close scrutiny will reveal substantial clues to true gender. As the birds pass six months and begin to mature, nearly any pet owner can make an educated assessment of a bird's sex.

Which parrots bob frequently and

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stretch out their necks to stand up taller? Does your pet grab the bar of the cage and make a violent feeding motion or sway his head back and forth at the edge of the wire as if trying to view you from two different angles? Can your conure be heard rapping his beak on the edge of a food dish in a rapid rat-tat-tat gesture? When a perceived intruder appears, which pet can be seen to lift up a foot to ward them off? Is it a common occurrence to observe a foot-raising behavior to the point where the bird passes the front toe back and forth in its beak? These are all diagnostic male behaviors.

And the hens? They may seem more likely to run down your shirtfront or hide in your long hair when a stranger approaches. When our female conures get excited they are likely to back up quickly. At first this appears to be the beginning movements of going to the bathroom, but the behavior is more natural female programming. Combine this clue with the raising of the tail and a loose flicking of the wings when a bird is over six months old and you probably have a hen.

Robbie Harris, esteemed southern

California aviculturist and author of a guidebook on keeping and breeding conures, noted that female birds sometimes perch with their feet farther apart and suggest a squatting down on the branch whereas males may stand taller.

"When conures begin to reach maturity at age one or so, I notice the hens will react to their toys differently than the males," Harris went on. "Females will go underneath a favorite toy and try to rub their backs on it while the males may try to mount it."

Often the smaller conures are quicker to exhibit gender behavior. Our baby male Green-cheekeds will sometimes begin strutting and dominating nearby babies even before their feathers are fully developed. As Blue-crowneds and Nandays take longer to reach puberty, sex indicators are slower to develop. Always remember that strong opinions or emotional decisions concerning visual sexing increase the chances of making a misjudgement. Make your role one of a scientific observer — watch, record and file away tendencies in your pets and potential breeders until sheer

weight of evidence builds up to an unassailable conclusion.

Conure owners who come into our shop asking about their psittacine's gender can with four or five pertinent questions be steered in the right direction for determining boy or girl. They must be cautioned against fallacies such as "male parrots like women and female parrots prefer men." They must learn to recognize the difference between acquired feeding behavior among fledglings, mates, and pet owner. All conures interfeed with beaks and such behavior by itself is not necessarily an indication of gender.

If in doubt, adopt a wait and see attitude — for, indeed, time is on your side.

And when finally one day your beloved pet gives himself away by rubbing his bottom on your wrist and depositing a fluid — or by hunching down, raising her tail and contracting her cloaca in your face — you can rejoice at the correct clues you noticed during his or her growing up . . . and smile because you just saved yourself another conure sexing fee! ●

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