

The Joys of Conures in Aviculture

The conure group of parrots has been taxonomically broken into major groups, *Aratinga* and *Pyrrhura*, with five to six minor groups. They are Nanday, *Nandayus*; Golden-plumed, *Leptosittaca*; Yellow-eared, *Ognorhynchus*; Patagonian, *Cyanoliseus*; Austral and Slender-billed, *Enicognathus*; and the extinct Carolina Parakeet, *Conuropsis*. There are many subspecies within these groups, but I will mainly discuss the avicultural aspects of those species in captivity.

Natural History

Conures come from the New World, ranging from Mexico, Central America and throughout South America. They have a great diversity in their habitats. These range from the tropical rain forests to dry savannas. Temperatures throughout these habitats range from just below freezing to over the 100°F mark. Elevations range from sea level to over 11,000 feet. Nests consist of large and small hollows found in trees, active termite mounds and rock crevices. These parrots range in size

by Dale R. Thompson
Canyon Country, California

from the large 17 inch Patagonian Conure to some of the small eight and a half inch *Pyrrhura* conures (Painted).

Choosing a Conure

When choosing a conure for breeding purposes, there are several considerations to make. Almost all conures have the ability to make shrill calls, so the noise factor is important. The *Pyrrhura* conures, being smaller, have a less annoying call than does the *Aratinga* group. Generally, domestic reared conures sound off to a lesser extent than their wild-caught counterparts.

Price is also a factor. Conures range from the high-priced Golden Conure to many reasonably priced (\pm \$150) species in both the *Aratinga* (Peach-fronted, Petz, Dusky, etc.) and *Pyrrhura* (Green-cheeked and Maroon-bellied) groups. Some conures are

very colorful (Jenday, Sun) and are very commercial, while others are basic green in coloration (Olive-throat, Nanday, Brown-throat, etc.). Although not as popular, many of the less colorful conures need to be reproduced or they may die out in captivity in the upcoming years. The Cuban, Hispaniolan and White-eyed are in very low numbers and need to be worked with. Of great importance to aviculture is a project begun by the Arizona Seed Crackers Society. They have begun a Halfmoon (Petz or Orange-fronted) Conure breeding consortium. They must be commended and their concept followed for other parrot species in the private sector.

Sex Determination

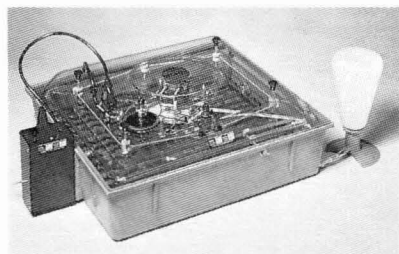
Many parrots do not show external differences in the sexes and this includes the conures. It was not until the 1970's that accurate sexing became a wonderful tool for aviculture. Later, chromosomal sexing was added. These methods replaced the



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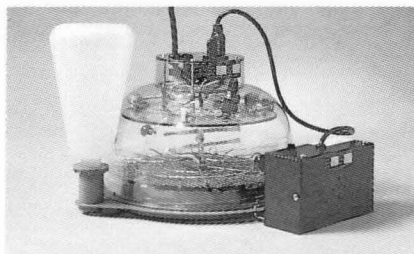
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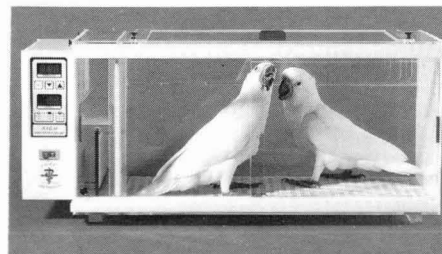
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The large Slender-billed Conure does not belong to the Aratinga genus of conures. It, along with the Austral Conure, is basically green in coloration and needs attention by American aviculturists.

old methods of sexing conures. Although not 100 percent accurate, the males of many species of *Aratinga* conures (Mitre, Sun, Jenday, Peach-fronted and Orange-fronted) have either a larger body size, more massive upper mandible or added (or intense) coloration on parts of their bodies.

There are three reliable ways of sexing parrots:

(1) Laporoscopic sexing is a technique where a laparoscope is placed through a small incision on the left side of the bird and the gonads can be observed. This should be done by an experienced avian veterinarian.

(2) Feather sexing is done via a blood feather, and a lab then determines the chromosomes. (Available through Avian Genetics Sexing Laboratory, Marc Valentine, 6551 Stage Oakes Dr., Suite 3A, Bartlett, TN 38134; phone 901-388-9548.)

(3) Blood sexing is where blood is removed from a parrot's toenail and a lab then determines the chromosomes from this sample. (Available through



The Maroon-bellied Conure and the Green-cheeked Conure are two very popular Pyrrhura conures both with aviculturists and pet owners.



The Painted Conure, one of the Pyrrhura conures, is especially desired by aviculturists because of its striking coloration and patterns. It is somewhat more difficult to reproduce than the more common Green-cheeked and Maroon-bellied Conures.

Photos by George D. Dodge and Dale R. Thompson, Canyon Country, CA

Zoogen, Inc., Joy Haverson, D.V.M., 1105 Kennedy Place, Suite 4, Davis, CA 95616; phone 916-756-8089.) Both chromosomal sexing methods can be done on baby birds which eliminates waiting for the birds' gonads to mature. Laparoscopic sexing, however, has the advantage of allowing the avian veterinarian to observe other internal parts of the bird. It is often less expensive and one has immediate results.

Housing

Conures are most often maintained in suspended breeding cages. They range in size from 2' x 2' x 3' to 4' for small conures and 4' x 4' x 6' to 8' for the large conures. Most are bred in cages somewhere between these two suggested sizes. Although I have kept conures in much smaller cages, I personally have great reservations. Long-term reproduction on parrots in very small cages has not yet been researched completely. It is possible that this may promote muscle deterioration, increased infertility, abandonment of eggs and obesity in future generations.

How secure any bird feels inside its breeding cage is very important. Wild-caught conures need more security in the form of darkness and visual barriers

than do domestic conures. Even though sexually mature, wild-caught conures often take several years to acclimatize and reproduce. Domestic conures, however, often reproduce successfully as early as 18 months to two years of age. Placing visual barriers on the cage sides, back, and most of the top is often very helpful. Shading the nest entrance and the immediate surrounding area is also very important.

The distance between the conures and their keepers should be maximized. Placing cages with the length facing away from human contact is better than width. All perches should be above human eye level.

Conures can be kept successfully in both indoor and outdoor situations. Although the main breeding season for outdoor conures is in the springtime, they will often produce at other times. Many *Aratinga* conures will first lay in December when it is still very cold in some areas. Many conures are triggered by natural rain. Artificial rain from sprinklers is often used to simulate natural rain, but this usually does not work as birds are triggered by the increased change in atmospheric pressure. Sprinklers are excellent, though, for cooling aviaries in hot weather.

Breeding conures indoors is often very successful. Manipulating artificial lighting can often trigger conures to breed throughout every month of the year. Average light cycles range from nine and a half to ten and a half hours in the off season and 14 and a half to 15 and a half hours during the breeding season.

Pair Bonding

As with all parrots, it is highly advisable to allow conures to choose their own mates. It is best to place several known sexed birds of the same species in a large cage or flight. This flight should not contain any nest boxes, but should be filled with plenty of perches. Whether wild-caught or domestic, it will not take long before some of the birds will begin to bond together. After bonding has occurred, the pair can then be placed in their own breeding cage that contains a nest box. Almost all conure species are kept in separate pairs for breeding. This is much more successful than trying to breed them in a colony. Very few conure species do well in a colony. I have observed a producing colony of the Patagonian Conure but these birds were in a very large flight. Usually only the alpha or dominant pair of conures in a colony will breed.

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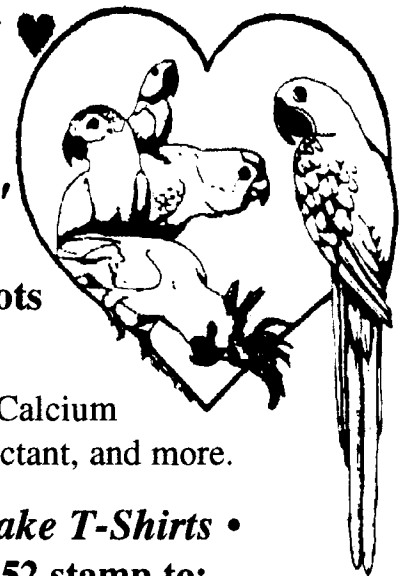
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Conures do not have to be sexually mature to show signs of bonding, so young domestics can be placed together at a young age. It is important to know the lineage of your domestic stock so inbreeding can be eliminated.

Nest Boxes

Conures are noted for their chewing ability. I feel that wooden nest boxes should be used instead of metal ones. Conures need to chew and wooden boxes can be replaced. Chewing in and around their nests often is the key to promoting breeding. It is true that the smaller *Aratinga* conures and *Pyrrhura* conures tend to destroy boxes to a much lesser degree than do the larger *Aratinga* conures. Boxes made of thick wooden planks will help the chewing problem and also aid in insulation.

Nest boxes range greatly in size and shape. They range from the cockatiel nest box size to deep vertical, slanted and boot-shaped boxes. Boxes with narrow, deep chambers seem to promote non-laying conures to feel more secure, hence to nest. Instead of the standard 12" x 12" widths, boxes with 6" x 6" and 8" x 8" widths often entice more interest. The birds feel more secure in these dark, narrow nests. Depths range from 18 inches to 24 inches for *Pyrrhura* conures and 24 inches to 48 inches for large *Aratinga* conures. Nest material is usually made of dry or moistened pine shavings. Care, however, must be given to wet nests so that fungus does not develop. Often nests are lined or filled with cork for those conures which are termite mound nesters in the wild. These include the Petz's Conure (*Aratinga canicularis*) and the Jamaican Conure (*Aratinga n. nana*).

Diet

Carbohydrates make up the majority of the diet of conures in the wild. Most conures can be acclimatized to captive diets. Their diet can be broken into three main parts. The first is dry seeds (parakeet seed, safflower, sunflower) and should not be given as the main staple. They will eat seeds first, often leaving behind the more nutritious foods. The second part is vegetables (raw and/or cooked), beans, rice, etc. and germinated/sprouted seeds. These foods should be given daily because of their nutritional value and because of the great variety of foods found in this group. The third group includes the fruits. Although low in many vitamins, fruit is greatly enjoyed by conures.

Reproduction

Conures have a simple courtship, if any at all. Older wild-caught conures may take some time to become accustomed to their captive environment, diet and new mate. A combination of a wild-caught male with a domestic female is ideal. The domestic bird will help calm its mate.

Aratinga conures lay an average clutch of two to four eggs, while *Pyrrhura* conures have an average of three to seven eggs. The *Aratinga* conures lay their eggs at two- to four-day intervals. Infertility may be due to an immature male, incompatibility or external disturbances. Egg bindness is when the female cannot pass her egg. This can be caused by an immature or overbred female, a diet deficient in vitamin D or calcium, or extreme cold weather. The incubation time for *Aratinga* conures is an average of 23 days, with a variance of 24 hours because of a cold or warm environ-

ment. Incubation may begin with the first, second or third egg, depending upon the individual pair. The beginning of incubation varies between clutches of the same conure pair. The young hatch at different intervals, often causing a considerable size difference while they are growing.

Conures are noted for being good parents, but when individual pairs are found to destroy eggs or young, the eggs can be placed in an artificial incubator or under other pairs of conures. Eggs or young can be interchanged quite successfully among the *Aratinga* and *Pyrrhura* conures. The size of eggs or young often does not seem to disturb them.

The young of most conures are removed from the nest for handrearing. They are removed most often just prior to their eyes opening (9 to 13 days). How conures are handreared is important depending upon whether the youngsters are going to be used as pets or as future breeders. Parrots that are isolated during the handrearing process have a tendency to bond to the human feeder. These would make excellent pets. If the young will be held back as breeding stock, though, they should always be reared with other birds, preferably the same species or genus. These birds should be handled minimally during the hand-feeding process. It has been proven many times that domestic conures can be good breeders including the feeding of young. Male conures that are strongly imprinted on humans often do not make good breeders as they tend to be confused as to which entity they should bond with.

The Joy of Conures

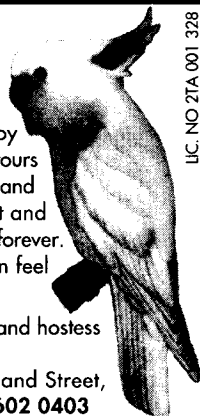
Conures are an excellent choice for beginners and experienced breeders. Many are bright and colorful and most do not take years to reproduce. Conures not only make excellent pets but also good second and third generation breeders. The Sun Conure will soon be the first conure to be 100 percent captive-reared. There are common, inexpensive conures for those aviculturists who want to work with commercial birds, and there are many rare conures for those who want to work with threatened and endangered species. There is a conure for every person and personality.

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