

Caiques

by Fran Gonzales, Cypress, CA

The black-headed Caique, and the White-bellied Caique have been around for breeders and pet owners for some time, however, it is only lately that these inquisitive birds are getting the recognition and attention that they deserve.

Caiques have a very unique personality; they are curious, playful, uninhibited and comical. They are rarely afraid of anyone or anything and are entertaining to watch. Two Caiques that live together will often be seen on the floor of the cage rolling over each other and wrestling. They love to hop, delight in chasing other household pets (including cats) and will often sway back and forth on their perches or rub themselves all over their owner.

The Black-headed Caique has two subspecies: *Pionites melanocephala melanocephala* in which the thighs, sides of the abdomen, and flanks are orange; and *P. m. pallida*, which has lemon yellow rather than orange on the throat, flank and thighs. In Europe *P. m. pallida* is more common but the majority of birds imported into the U.S. have been *P. m. melanocephala*. Unfortunately, many of the few *P. m. pallida* left in the U.S. don't have mates of their own subspecies so are paired with *P. m. melanocephala*.

The White-bellied Caique has three subspecies: *P. leucogaster leucogaster*, *P. l. xanthomeria*, and *P. i. xanthurus*. The nominate *P. l. leucogaster* has green thighs and, not surprisingly, is known as the Green-thighed Caique. This subspecies is more popular in Europe and very difficult to find in the United States. Many U.S. breeders have been unable to find proper mates for their Green-thighed birds and have paired them with *P. l. xanthomeria*, a subspecies often called Lime-thighed Caique. *P. l. xanthomeria* is the most commonly kept subspecies in the U.S. and is also referred to as the Apricot-headed, Yellow-thighed, and White-bellied Caique.

The subspecies *P. l. xanthurus* is extremely rare in collections in the United States.

Choosing Healthy Breeder Stock

As with any new purchase, it is

important to select birds that appear to be in good health: bright eyes, clear nostrils, good weight, bright plumage, good posture and attitude. Caiques have a reputation for easily being carriers of Polyomavirus. Most birds offered for sale nowadays are domestic raised and immature birds. These birds mature sexually fairly soon (average three years) and are a good investment for any breeder willing to wait.

It is a good idea to have any new purchases examined by an avian veterinarian and tested for psittacosis, polyoma, parasites (which are common in domestic birds) and have a full avian blood panel performed. The blood panel will alert you to any potential problems with anemia, liver, kidney, calcium levels and general overall internal health of the bird.

Sexing

Thanks to DNA testing, surgical sexing is no longer necessary. Caiques seem especially delicate when it comes to surgical sexing and many breeders have suffered losses using the procedure (even with isoflurane gas). One year we had 10 Apricot-headed Caiques surgically sexed and eight of the 10 became ill with papovavirus and died. It does not seem to matter how quick or experienced the veterinarian is, it is still a very risky procedure for Caiques. Fortunately, it can now be replaced with DNA testing.

Cage Requirements

There are many types of set-ups for breeding Caiques in captivity. Some individuals in less populated areas prefer to breed their Caiques in aviaries while many of us in crowded Southern California seem to have a lot of success cage breeding Black-headed and Apricot-headed Caiques. Because the birds are small, even the smaller cages offer the birds a fairly decent amount of space. We have bred Caiques in cages 3 ft. x 4 ft. x 3 ft. with the nest box attached to the outside of the cage. We are in the process of moving these birds to cages that are 2 ft. wide, 3 ft. high and 4 ft. deep and are curious to see how well they produce in this new design.

Location

The location of the cages does not seem to have any importance. We once had three pairs set up in the dining room of a friend. The cages were stacked one on top another and the birds could not see each other but could call back and forth. All three pairs bred successfully and, like many pairs in the same close environment, they all laid eggs around the same time.

Noise is another important factor when setting up one or more pairs of Caiques. Even though they do not have a loud squawk or scream, they do possess the capability of producing a shrill, high pitched whistle-like call. And it carries very easily.

Nest Box Requirements

We use an L-shaped, or "boot" nest box that measures 16 in. tall x 16 in. long x 8 in. wide. There is a wire ladder on the inside of the front of the box that the birds use to get in and out. (It is important to remove any open quarantine type bands before allowing the birds to use a nest such as this. The band can get caught on the wire ladder inside the box and the bird will die unless you are lucky enough to notice when this happens.)

Our nest boxes are made of 3/4 in. pine and since our breeding cages are indoors we don't reinforce them with any wire or metal. We usually need to replace the boxes once a year, and it seems to be a good stimulus for the birds anyway.

We line the nest boxes with about three to four inches of pine shavings, much of which gets thrown out or pulverized. It is important to be careful what type of substrate you use in your nest boxes because if the eggs become contaminated, you will have dead in the shell or early fatality in the chicks.

The nest box should be placed as high as possible on the breeding cage so the birds feel secure and content when they go to nest.

Placement of Perches

Perches should be approximately 1/2 inch in diameter and of natural wood. Avoid slippery woods such as manzanita and madrone as these may cause the birds to slip if they try to copulate on their perches.

We have also used some of the new cement perches in our caique cages to help wear down their quick-growing toenails. (Our caiques are the only

birds in our collection that seem to have toenails that grow so fast they require extra grooming between breeding seasons.)

It is helpful to place the perches parallel to each other to enable the birds to fly back and forth in their cages. Because these birds are so active, we will sometimes hang a toy or swing inside the cage to keep them amused.

Caiques love to rub themselves all over their perches and, consequently, after eating their fruit and vegetables they dirty their perches quite easily.

Dietary Requirements

We feed our caiques a large hook-bill seed mixture that is fortified with pellets, star anise, cinnamon sticks, pistachios, banana chips, raw almonds and walnuts, pine nuts and kibble corn. Every pair of birds also gets a fruit and vegetable bowl and two pieces of whole wheat bread or unsalted crackers every morning. I usually cut up two different fruits and two different vegetables every day. And I buy what ever is in season which includes but is not limited to: apples, oranges, grapes, pears, pineapple, cantaloupe, corn, carrots, broccoli, spinach, beets and beet tops, bell peppers, chile peppers, tomatoes, romaine lettuce, mangoes, papaya, kumquats, blueberries, raspberries, pomegranate, bananas, honeydew, watermelon, peaches (no pits), apricots (no pits), grapefruit, strawberries, coconut, kiwi, brussels sprouts, cucumber, alfalfa sprouts, zucchini, green beans, peas, yellow squash, summer squash, and banana squash. Spinach and brussels sprouts contain oxalic acid which binds calcium so should not be fed more than twice a week. However, they do contain many nutrients.

Vitamins

Because our birds eat a large variety of fruits, vegetables, seeds and nuts, we use a multivitamin only twice a week. Before and during the breeding season we use D-CA-Fos every other day, sprinkled on the damp food. At this time we also pass out cuttlebone once a week. Some of the birds eat it while others are happy to just destroy it.

Enhancements

Breeding season is usually in the spring of the year. To enhance successful breeding or for pairs that con-

tinually lay infertile eggs, we will give additional pine nuts and sometimes mix Vitamin E (Nekton E) in the drinking water. Once birds have laid the entire clutch, the Nekton E is discontinued. Do not give Vitamin E to birds that have already laid two or more consecutive clutches of clear eggs because they need time to come into condition before laying again.

Incubation and Rearing

Our pairs usually do a good job of incubating their eggs. Many breeders are not so lucky. Occasionally we will pull eggs due to an earthquake, or the parents appearing to lose interest. We incubate them in a Grumbach incubator at 36.9° C (98.4° F), and 48° on the wet bulb thermometer. The incubator is programmed to turn the eggs six times in a 24 hour period. We put a few drops of EnviroClean concentrate into the water reservoir to inhibit the growth of bacteria and fungus. The incubation period averages 24-25 days.

Day one babies are fed around the clock and are kept in the bottom of the incubator or in a separate brooder. We have been using commercially prepared 12% fat handfeeding formula. Caique babies seem to grow more slowly than other psittacine neonates. It may be normal for these species or these babies may have different nutritional needs that we have not yet discovered. Gail Worth, the well known owner of Aves International, feels that baby caiques need more carotene and vegetables incorporated into the handfeeding formula, and has noticed a marked improvement after doing so. She also commented that baby caiques under three or four weeks old have a strong propensity to choke while feeding. This is due to their vocal nature and the glottis being open while the bird bobs for food. It is critical to feed baby caiques slowly, using very small squirts of formula or, better yet, use a spoon. Once the babies pass three or four week of age, they seem to have more control when they feed and the handfeeder can pick up the pace and gradually feed larger amounts of food.

Problems Breeding Caiques

Caiques are not the easiest bird to breed, but they are not the most difficult either. The most frequently encountered problems are obesity in the adults, breaking eggs, eating eggs, successful hatching of the eggs (by the

parents or artificially), and successfully raising the babies without digestive problems or bacteria. Caiques frequently become overweight if they are allowed to overeat, especially seeds. We have one particular male Apricot-headed that tends to develop a fatty tumor on his lower abdomen and it has to be surgically removed. Pelleted diets can "dilute" the seed mixture, and many breeders feed a small mixture such as canary, finch and millet seeds.

Breaking and eating eggs seems to be quite common with caiques. Just last year one of our pairs of Apricot-headed Caiques was incubating four fertile eggs. About 16 or 17 days into the incubation we made a small change in the seed mixture that we feed daily and the next morning the eggs were nowhere to be found. Routine seems to be an important element with all breeder birds, including caiques.

Our pairs usually hatch their eggs without any problems. However, I know of many breeders who must pull their caique eggs because the parent birds are not reliable, and when it is time for the chicks to hatch it is sometimes with great difficulty and concern that my friends must assist in the hatch. These same breeders will also experience normal hatchings with birds with the same environmental factors.

The first two weeks of a baby caiques life are the most critical and if the baby is strong and gains weight every day, it is promising. It is important to keep all feeding syringes and utensils disinfected. Monitor the babies' progress daily because they are so small that once a problem starts, it is difficult to reverse.

Baby caiques should wean around 11-12 weeks of age but can sometimes be a bit difficult to wean because they love to be handfed. In addition to their daily portions of seeds, nuts, fruits and vegetables, some good weaning foods are Cheerios, wheat bread, rice cakes, unsalted crackers and, of course, millet spray.

Any aviculturist with a mixed collection is likely to have at least a pair or two of caiques. The Black-headed Caiques are the most commonly kept, followed by White-bellieds. Handfed babies make adorable pets although some become aggressive when they reach sexual maturity. Even then, they still hold their value because there is a demand for mature birds. ➤