

Breeding Aspects of Caiques and Pionus Parrots

by Gail J. Worth
Aves International,
Rancho Palos Verdes, CA

The wonderful Pionus parrots and Caiques are interesting groups of psittacines both as breeding birds in the aviary and for pets. Four species of Pionus and two species of Caiques are well-established in aviculture in the United States. Unlike some other psittacine genera, these two are proving to be easily bred from domestic-bred stock. Therefore, we can expect to have these marvelous birds in our aviaries and homes despite the unavailability of new wild-caught breeding stock. Although there are similarities in breeding the two genera, in my opinion the Caiques present a greater challenge to the aviculturist than do most of the Pionus species. However, there are still four Pionus species that are not well-established in aviculture so there are plenty of challenges for the aviculturist in both groups. To begin, I will address some husbandry aspects that are common to both genera and then I will add information specific to each specific genus.

Choosing Breeding Stock

Choosing breeding stock is of utmost importance. Although it is tempting to purchase proven pairs, this is not always the most prudent thing to do. Certainly there are some really good proven pairs offered for sale from time to time. Just as often, an aviculturist will sell a pair that is indeed proven and has produced well in the past but has now slowed in production or has developed bad habits such as breaking eggs or killing chicks. Be sure you can trust the seller of a proven pair and always ask for as complete a history on the pair as is possible to obtain. In previous years, most pairs set up for breeding were wild-caught adult stock

of unknown age and history. We had no way of knowing if a particular bird had been pair-bonded in the wild and if it had ever bred before. Such birds often took several years to settle down and to re-pair in captivity. Today there are domestic, unrelated birds available in the more common species. Both Pionus and Caiques have been bred to several generations in captivity. We are finding that domestic birds, even handfed ones, are breeding well in captivity. In general, domestic birds have the advantage of usually being of known age. Young domestic hens are full of eggs and will have a long breeding future ahead of them.

Exercise caution when introducing two birds together, as aggression is a possibility. It is best to house the birds in adjoining cages for a while and then put them into the intended breeding cage at the same time. Thus neither bird has a chance to achieve prior dominance in the breeding cage. Domestic birds can be introduced at a young age to reduce the chances of aggression. It is always a good idea to have any prospective breeding stock seen by an avian veterinarian. Birds should be screened for bacterial infections, psittacosis, vitamin deficiencies, parasites, and be given other tests that your veterinarian might recommend.

Caging

Caiques and Pionus will breed in a variety of cage sizes and configurations. There are cases from two pet birds breeding in a small pet cage to birds breeding in large flight cages. In general, both Caiques and Pionus will breed in the same size cage. A cage that is two to three feet wide, three feet tall and three to six feet long is sufficient for one breeding pair of birds. It is best to use suspended cages that have perches raised above the eye level of the keeper. Pairs usually feel more secure and are more likely to breed when kept in this manner. Pairs can be housed in side by side cages, but Pionus breed best if separated from sight of other pairs. Aluminum sheeting is ideal for separating adjoining cages. Caiques do not necessarily have to be separated by sight. I have seen successful breeding situations with Caiques housed both ways.

Any caging situation should have a safety area such as a wire safety aisle built around it. This will prevent escape of the birds should they get out of their breeding cage and prevent predation by animals such as raccoons. Caiques are especially adept at opening cage doors.

Nestboxes

I recommend that nestboxes be constructed of wood. I do not like metal nestboxes as they are too cold in winter and too hot in summer. Metal conducts heat and cold far better than does wood. Additionally, I think the chewing of the wooden box prompts birds to breed. This is a more natural type of nest; there aren't metal nestboxes in most tropical forests. Although the nestbox will have to be replaced periodically, I think the benefits outweigh the small cost factor of replacing the box occasionally. Using thick plywood to construct the box will reduce somewhat the frequency with which the nestbox will have to be replaced.

Caiques and Pionus will both breed well in both rectangular and L-shaped or "boot" boxes. A rectangular box with dimensions of 11 x 11 by 22 inches high is readily accepted. Some pairs, especially nervous ones, might breed better in an L-shaped box with dimensions of 12 to 15 inches by eight inches and a height of eight inches on the short part and 14 to 20 inches high on the tall part. An entry hole should be placed high on either type of nest.

If a pair does not accept one style or size box, try a different box. Most pairs prefer snug boxes so don't make the mistake of giving larger and larger

WATCHBIRD BINDERS

Hansome, sturdy binder holds a full year's issues of *The Watchbird* (6 issues). Of rich brown leather-like vinyl/embossed in gold.

\$7.00 each

CONTINENTAL U.S. — Add \$4.00 Shipping/Handling for one binder. Add 75¢ for each additional binder.

FOREIGN — Add \$8.00 Shipping/Handling for one binder. Add \$2.50 for each additional binder. Please remit in U.S. funds.

Phone orders accepted using 

American Federation of Aviculture
P.O. Box 56218

Phoenix, Arizona 85079-6218
(602) 484-0931 • fax (602) 484-0109

sizes to your birds. I recommend that the box be hung on the outside of the breeding cage for ease of inspection and to give less surface area to the birds to chew. Pine shavings, not sawdust or cedar shavings, should be placed inside the nestbox several inches deep to a point just below the inspection door which should be located on the back side of the box. The box should be hung as high as is possible to afford the birds as much security as possible.

Diet

My philosophy for feeding birds is to provide as large a variety as is possible of fresh, natural, and unprocessed foods. We feed very little or no dry seed to our breeding birds and add an avian pelleted food, Mazuri breeder pellets, as one ingredient of many in a dish of fresh foods. These foods include a large variety of sprouted grains and seeds, boiled grains, beans, and peas, boiled root vegetables, fresh fruits, and a large variety of fresh chopped vegetables in season. We use the sprouting kits sold by China Prairie Company of Garberville, CA. These kits have an excellent variety of seeds and grains for sprouting and provide an additive for the soaking water to prevent fungal and bacterial growth, and also a vitamin/mineral powder that contains wheat grass and barley grass along with 88 trace minerals. We boil a variety of grains for about 30 minutes. Included are brown rice, red wheat, lentils, corn, and several bean and pea varieties. We also boil root vegetables such as carrots, beets, yams and sweet potatoes for about thirty minutes to soften them and make them more palatable and digestible. Apple is fed on a regular basis and other fruits in season are occasionally fed. Vegetables that are regularly fed raw include broccoli, cucumber, kale, chard, corn on the cob, squashes, green beans, and pumpkin. All of these various ingredients are mixed together with the Mizhuri pellets and dusted with a small amount of vitamin/mineral powder and calcium/phosphorous powder. This nutritious mixture is fed once a day in the early morning and the birds devour every morsel of it. I feel that sprouted grains and seeds and fresh

vegetables on a daily basis are important to maintain optimum health of caiques and Pionus.

Weaning chicks should be offered dry seed, pellets, spray millet, cooked grains, sprouted grains and seeds, raw and cooked vegetables and slices of apple and corn on the cob.

Captivating Caiques

With just two species in the Pionites genus, the Caiques are quite unique. Often compared to the lorries because of their high energy and curiosity, Caiques are highly entertaining both as pets and as aviary residents. They have a sort of fearless precociousness that I have not seen in any other type of bird. Even pin-feathered chicks will boldly amble about the nursery visiting with other young birds such as macaws several times their size. They are natural clowns rolling and tumbling with their clutchmates.

This past spring, lacking cage space, we put a couple of young caiques in a cage with 10 young Senegal Parrots *Poicephalus senegalus*. After a couple of days, we noticed that the caiques were using the Senegals like props in their playing. The caiques would both lay on their backs and pass a hapless Senegal back and forth between them like a beach ball! Needless to say, we had to separate these groups.

The same two caiques loved to play with the cardboard roll that is in the middle of toilet paper. We noticed that one bird liked to put the roll over his head and walk around blindly. After removing it a few times, we realized that he was doing this intentionally and would often be found dozing on one foot with the roll on his head. Even adults love to play and should always be provided with toys and fresh leafy branches. Caiques love to roll in leaves and seem to derive great enjoyment from stripping bark from green branches.

Caiques are native to South America, occurring in Brazil, Bolivia, the Guianas, Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Colombia. They were mainly exported from Guyana and Bolivia. The two nominate species of Caiques are the Black-Headed Caique *Pionites m. melanocephala* and the White-Bellied Caique *Pionites l. leucogaster*.

This nominate species is also known by the common name of Green-thighed Caique. There is only one subspecies of *P. melanocephala*, the Pallid Caique *P. m. pallida*.

There are two subspecies of *P. leucogaster*; The Yellow-thighed Caique *P. l. xanthomeria* and the Yellow-tailed Caique *P. l. xanthurus*. Of these five types of caiques, only the Black-Headed and Yellow-thighed are well established and there are a few Green-thighed, often hybridized with Yellow-thighed.

The Black-Headed is much more common in U.S. aviculture as this species was imported in large quantities from Guyana until the ban on importation in October 1993. The Yellow-thighed was mainly exported from Bolivia and the export of these stopped a decade or so ago. Fewer of these were imported but they have proven to be prolific breeders in captivity once established.

It took a great deal of patience to attempt to breed wild-caught caiques. Often several years were necessary for these wild birds to settle into captivity and to feel comfortable enough to breed. I waited six years for my Yellow-thighed to breed after I had purchased them from an import station.

Caiques lay from one to five eggs in a clutch and will lay two or more clutches in a breeding season if the eggs or chicks are pulled for hand-rearing. They hatch in 28 days and the chicks are covered with a beautiful white down.

Quite vocal from birth, Caiques demand their first feeding as soon as the down dries. Many people have found Caiques difficult to hand-rear, especially from day one. I think I have discovered the reason why people have found them to be difficult. Necropsies have shown that the cause of death in caique chicks is usually aspiration. The chicks call almost incessantly during handfeeding. I have found that aspiration can be avoided by feeding very small amounts of formula from a small syringe, waiting between bites for the chick to call. If several chicks are being fed, I feed approximately one cc of formula to the very young chick and feed its sibling while it calls, then feed it another small

amount. Never attempt to feed a chick in the middle of its call. This is when it is most vulnerable as its glottis, the opening to the trachea, is wide open. If fed frequently the first few weeks of life, caique chicks grow quickly. Curiously, they stop their incessant calling when they begin to feather and go through a shy and quiet period for a week or so. After this one week of timidity, the caique becomes the bold and charming creature we all love.

Perky Pionus Parrots

Native to several countries of Central and South America, there are eight species of Pionus parrots. Only four species, the Blue-headed *Pionus menstruus*, White-crowned *Pionus senilis*, Bronze-winged *Pionus chalcopterus*, and the Scaly-headed or Maximilian *Pionus maximiliani* are well established in U.S. aviculture. There is a smaller number of breeding pairs of Dusky Pionus *Pionus fuscus* and a very small number of Coral-billed *Pionus sordidus* and Plum-crowned *Pionus tumultuosus*. To the best of my knowledge, there are no White-headed *Pionus seniloides* remaining in the United States. Unfortunately, only one group of White-headed entered the U.S. in the early 1980s and these all eventually perished, most likely from Aspergillosis, a fungal disease that can be seriously detrimental to Pionus that are kept in less than clean environments.

The four more common species of Pionus have proven to be reliable and prolific breeders. I first bred the Bronze-winged in 1984, the same year this species was first bred in the U.S. I'll never forget how excited I was to see the lovely down-covered chicks. Today, we raise 50 or more Bronze-winged in an average year but I have never lost my admiration for the beauty of this multi-colored species.

Pionus mature at an early age. I know of a hen that produced four chicks the first time she laid eggs at 11 months of age. She had been paired with a mature male. Males usually do not mature until their second or third year. An average clutch is three or four eggs but a young hen in my collection produced six fertile eggs this spring. Chicks hatch after 24 to 28 days of

incubation. The chicks are all covered with thick white down. They are extremely hardy and grow quickly, perching by about eight weeks of age.

However, this is only about the halfway point for some individuals, as Pionus seem to take forever to wean. Some wean as early as 12 weeks of age but I have found that Bronze-winged are particularly difficult to wean and do not respond well to being pushed into it. I recommend offering three hand-feedings a day to Pionus until they completely wean. Even if it is only a small bite of formula in the morning and afternoon, these small feedings actually help to stimulate the young Pionus to eat on their own. A very hungry chick will often not attempt to feed itself even if it has eaten soft foods alone on previous days. It will simply sit with a fluffed, bobbing head, emitting the most plaintive begging call you have ever heard. Ignoring such a bird can result in a bird that starves before the evening feed.

Closing Comments

Whether you choose to work with the prolific Pionus or the challenging caiques, both genera are well worth the attention of American aviculturists. Especially in the case of the Coral-Billed, Dusky, and Plum-crowned Pionus, much work remains for the serious aviculturist to establish captive self-sustaining populations of these beautiful birds. Hopefully the regulations governing the importation of captive-bred birds from Europe and other parts of the world will soon be relaxed and we will have more bloodlines of these uncommon species. I have seen a lessening of interest in the four more common species of Pionus in recent years. This is a shame, in my opinion, as they are wonderful pet and aviary birds. We must not become complacent and neglect species that are currently well established. I am thankful to have had the opportunity to work with Caiques and Pionus and cannot imagine not having them in my aviaries. 🐦

VITA • HEALTH™

VITA • HEALTH™

SPIRULINA

Natures Perfect Multi-Vitamin

State-Of-The-Art-Technology

- Patented Ocean-chilled Drying with near zero oxygen levels.
- Internationally recognized ISO: 9002 standards.
- Oxygen barrier packaging.

VITA•HEALTH'S superior nutritional profile and quality, which is second-to-none, makes **VITA•HEALTH** the professionals choice. Used by zoos, breeding facilities, and veterinarians. Safe and 100% natural. Boosts plumage, strengthens immune system & increases fertility.

Sprinkle over food or blend into hand-feeding formula. **VITA•HEALTH** is the product that will make a difference in your birds life!



SPIRULINA	
45 gm. \$5.95	
100 gm. (3.5 oz.) \$9.95	
1 lb. \$29.95	
5 lb. BULK \$99	
10 lb. BULK \$179	
WHEAT GRASS	
1lb. \$29.95	
10 lb. BULK \$149	
(add \$2.00 SHIPPING)	

Send check or money order payable to:
Hawaiian Zoological Products
 2542 Date St. Suite 1504 Honolulu, HI 96826
 Retail, Wholesale or Distributor call:
PH. (808) 239-9573 FAX (808) 949-4573