

Pyrrhura Conures: Status in Aviculture

by Rick Jordan, Kutztown, PA

T **GENERAL**
he genus *Pyrrhura* is comprised of 18 different species and 29 subspecific forms. They are all New World birds and range from as far north as Costa Rica, in Central America, southward to northern Argentina. The majority of the species being concentrated in the north-central region of the South American continent.

Joseph Forshaw in *Parrots of the World* (3rd rev. edition, 1989) states the following with regard to this genus: "Pyrrhura Conures are small to medium sized birds with long graduated tails. The bill is rather broad and there is a notch in the upper mandible. The naked cere is prominent, and in many species there is a very prominent ring of bare skin around the eye. In the skull there is a complete orbital ring. Sexual dimorphism is absent and young birds mostly resemble adults."

STATUS

Deforestation is a major problem in many countries of South America, having a detrimental affect on many species of *Pyrrhura* conures. Several species are already listed as endangered and control of these species is strictly controlled by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). It is interesting to note that many of the species listed as Threatened or Endangered originate in Brazil which has prohibited their export for over 30 years. This fact seems to imply that other pressures within the habitat itself are the major contributing factors to the decline of these species and that trade had little to do with the dwindling numbers in the wild.

Many *Pyrrhura* conures frequent isolated areas of the South American



The painted Conure (*Pyrrhura picta picta*) is one of the most colorful conures found in aviculture. This excellent painting was done specifically for this issue by Susie Christian.

rain forest. Accessibility is a major contributing factor for the lack of information about these birds. A new species, the El Oro Conure *Pyrrhura orcesi* was not even discovered or recorded until 1985, demonstrating how little is known of the members of this genus or their habitat.

AVICULTURE

Approximately a third of the known taxa of *Pyrrhura* conures are well represented in aviculture around the world. Many species are kept by aviculturists but are rarely available due to limited breeding results and poorly crafted trade restrictions. Due to this limited availability of stock, the commonly kept species will become more common and the rare will disappear from aviculture—and possibly the wild—in the future.

As most representatives of the genus are rather small, they are easy to accommodate in captivity. *Pyrrhura* conures have been produced in many collections, even those with very limited space to offer. Their willingness to adapt to small accommodations has made them a favorite with indoor breeders as well as those who can cage the birds outdoors. Most of the commonly kept species have been bred to multiple generations and a majority of the available stock is captive bred.

Pyrrhura conures can be very prolific in the caged environment. Clutch sizes vary but are usually three to five eggs with some species being known to produce seven or eight. Fertility rates are generally very high in the commonly kept species.

Parental habits are probably the most significant hindrance to captive breeding. Some pairs will destroy eggs or chicks in the nest. As with any "rule" in aviculture, there are many exceptions and many pairs will raise any and all of the chicks they produce. Artificial incubation and hand rearing from the first day is to be avoided at all costs. The average weight of a newly hatched *Pyrrhura* chick is only about 4 grams. This small size necessitates around the clock feedings and a very labor intensive nursery regimen. Survival rates are high in collections where the keeper is very attentive to handfeeding.

BREEDING SEASON

The majority of *Pyrrhura* conures

breed in the spring season. Pairs housed out of doors, where the summer is not too hot, may lay second clutches as late as June or even July. Indoor accommodations and the manipulation of light, water and food supplies may result in breeding at almost any time of year. However, even under artificial conditions, most pairs breed in mid to late spring.

THE SPECIES

White-eared Conure

Pyrrhura leucotis

Range: Northern Venezuela and Eastern Brazil.

Status: Little is known of the status of this species. It must be assumed that the population is stable as it has not been uplisted to CITES Appendix I but still remains on Appendix II with all the other parrots.

Aviculture: The White-eared Conure is an avicultural rarity. It is being bred in Europe and the United States but blood lines are limited and inbreeding will undoubtedly take place in the near future. Rumors of its arrival in South Africa have not been confirmed.

Blue-throated Conure

Pyrrhura cruentata

Range: Eastern Brazil

Status: Deforestation is being blamed for the endangered status of the Blue-throated Conure. It is now listed on CITES Appendix I and on the United States Endangered Species Act.

Aviculture: The Blue-throated Conure is rare in aviculture as well. There are a few successful breeders in the United Kingdom, Germany and Spain. This species is not well established in the United States. The total U.S. population consists of two females and approximately seven males. The outlook for this bird is not good unless the breed-

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ers in the United States join together and import more captive bred stock from Europe. The main obstacle to overcome would be the laws that prohibit the commercial use of this species due to its endangered status.

Maroon-bellied Conure

pyrrhura frontalis

Range: Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Argentina.

Status: Common throughout its range. It is probably the most common and widespread of the genus *Pyrrhura*.

Aviculture: The Maroon-bellied Conure is quite common in aviculture throughout the world. Exports from Paraguay and Argentina have helped establish this species in captivity. A large population exists in the United States in both the breeder trade and the pet trade. A lutino form has developed but to my knowledge is not readily available to aviculturists.

Pearly Conure

Pyrrhura perlata

Range: Northern Brazil.

Status: Deforestation of the Brazilian rain forest is the main pressure and cause of decline in the Pearly Conure. Most subspecies are still quite common in areas of virgin forest but they are receding farther into the forest as bulldozers clear the land to make room for increased agriculture. The nominate race, listed below, seems to be the most common and widespread of the four recognized subspecies.

Aviculture: Excluding the nominate form (the Crimson-bellied Conure), Pearly Conures are uncommon in aviculture. The supply of new blood lines into Europe and the United States has been very limited, therefore aviculturists have paid little attention to subspecific descriptions. What has resulted is the establishment of just one Pearly Conure in aviculture that is probably a mixture of blood lines from all available subspecies.

In the United States as few as 16 original birds were imported. From these original imports, a population of over 400 Pearly Conures now exists. Genetic problems have surfaced and many of the captive bred females are incapable of laying eggs. This species is in need of new blood lines from foreign captive bred stock if it is to survive in American aviculture.

Crimson-bellied Conure

Pyrrhura perlata perlata (formerly *P. rodogaster*).

Range: Northern Brazil.

Status: In the wild the Crimson-bellied Conure is quite common throughout its range. It is listed on Appendix II of the CITES treaty only as a vehicle to prevent trade in the species. Brazil does not consider this species endangered or threatened and claims that over 100,000 of them remain in the wild.

Aviculture: Brazil has prohibited the legal export of wild caught Crimson-bellied Conures for over 30 years. However, either by legal or illegal commercial trade, this species is represented in European aviculture as well as in the Philippines and South Africa. In the United States it is virtually unknown except for a few representatives that have been illegally imported in the last few years.

Breeders in Spain and the rest of Europe and in South Africa report that this species is very prolific in a caged environment. Clutch size seems to average three to six eggs and fertility is very high. Females are at a premium as sex ratios are often skewed towards the male gender. New blood lines are needed in the stock that exists outside of Brazil. The Brazilian government has expressed interest in allowing a commercial export of captive reared representatives to aviculturists already holding this species.

Green-cheeked Conure

Pyrrhura molinae

Range: Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina and Paraguay.

Status: In the wild the Green-cheeked Conure is very common throughout its entire range. It can be found in a variety of habitats according to Joseph Forshaw's *Parrots of the World*.

Aviculture: In captivity the Green-cheeked Conure is probably the most common of the *Pyrrhura* conures. Once again, the differences in the subspecies was considered less important than the actual establishment of this bird in captivity. As a result, the captive population of Green-cheeked Conures is largely a mixture of all different blood lines and subspecific differentiation is difficult to impossible.

Probably the most prolific of the genus *Pyrrhura*, Green-cheeked Conures have been bred to multiple generations. The greater percentage of available birds in the United States are

of captive bred origin. In support of this fact, several color mutations have surfaced and are now being established in U.S. aviculture. To date, a fallow mutation, a blue mutation, a cinnamon mutation and possibly a lutino form have been produced in captivity in the United States. Inbreeding coefficients are high and give credence to the suspicion that inbreeding can lead to the production of mutations.

Yellow-sided Conure

Pyrrhura hypoxantha

Range: Brazil

Status: If *hypoxantha* is a valid species, it is extinct or nearly extinct in the wild. In my opinion, aviculture has proven beyond any doubt, that *hypoxantha* is a color mutation of *molinae*.

Aviculture: The original imports of *hypoxantha* into the United States were imported as part of a group of *P. molinae*. All imported specimens were female, as previously described by Forshaw. These females bred with male *molinae* and produced normal looking male and female *molinae* as well as several females showing the color mutation known as *hypoxantha*. After several years of inbreeding, males carrying the color mutation have been produced and pairs have been formed. These "color" pairs produce 100% color mutations of both males and females.

The species known as *P. hypoxantha* is not a valid species. In the United States, where it is now established, it is known as the "yellow-sided mutation" of the Green-cheeked Conure. The mutation has proven to be a sex linked trait as seemingly normal looking males can produce mutation females.

Painted Conure

Pyrrhura picta

Range: Brazil, Peru, Venezuela, Bolivia, Columbia and Panama.

Status: The Painted Conure is fairly common throughout most of its range. As with most South American psittacines, deforestation is threatening its existence in some areas. Little information is available about each of the nine valid subspecies.

Aviculture: Although quite common in aviculture, the Painted Conure is not a prolific breeder and is available only on occasion. Some pairs have been very productive but, generally, they are nervous and not good parents.

In the United States, only the nominate form *Pyrrhura picta picta*, is com-

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monly available. Breeders of this conure often complain about its nervous habits and propensity to feather-pluck in a caged environment.

In Europe, *Pyrrhura picta roseifrons* is available on occasion. This form of the Painted Conure is quite beautiful and demands a very high price. To date only a few pairs are established in Spain and Holland.

Fiery-shouldered Conure

Pyrrhura egregia

Range: Venezuela, Guyana and Brazil.

Status: Little recorded data on the status of this species is available. This is probably due to its preference for mountain areas that have made its study very difficult.

Aviculture: The Fiery-shouldered Conure is very rare in captivity. Only a few pairs have been imported into the United States and there have been only a couple of reports of this bird in European aviculture. It was bred in the U.S. for the first time back in the 1980's but breeding results do not seem to be consistent and this species is currently not available. This is yet another species that will require new blood lines if it is to become established in aviculture.

Maroon-tailed Conure

Pyrrhura melanura

Range: Columbia, Venezuela, Ecuador and northern Peru.

Status: Except in remote areas of its range, the Maroon-tailed Conure remains plentiful in the wild. Forshaw reports that this species is another that frequents several different types of habitat, from mountainous areas to lowland scrub forests. The populations seem to be stable and flocks have even been known to frequent areas that have been deforested.

Aviculture: In the United States, only one of the five known subspecies could be considered established. *Pyrrhura melanura souancei* is being bred by several aviculturists and is frequently available as captive bred representatives within the U.S. This subspecies seems to adapt well to captivity and will readily breed in the caged environment. DNA studies should take place on the captive population to establish how many different blood lines exist within the country.

Black-capped Conure

Pyrrhura rupicola

Range: Peru, Bolivia and Brazil.

Status: Little is known of this species in many parts of its natural habitat. It is reported as locally common in some areas and quite rare in others. The range countries have not listed this species with the Cites convention so we must assume that populations are stable—at least for the time being.

Aviculture: The Black-capped Conure is a popular cage bird. It is fairly common in aviculture throughout the United States, Europe and in South Africa. Blood lines in the United States may be inbred as this species is quite prolific and there are limited records as to the number of imported wild caught birds. As evidence of a possible inbreeding problem, a color mutation has been established in the United States similar to that of the yellow-sided mutation of the Green-cheeked Conure.

Hoffman's Conure

Pyrrhura hoffmanni

Range: Costa Rica and western Panama

Status: The wild populations seem to be fairly stable. Small flocks of Hoffman's Conure are seen on a regular basis even though they appear to be somewhat nomadic, moving from one habitat to another.

Aviculture: A special breeding consortium has been formed to save this bird in captivity within the United States. Breeding success has been good but new blood lines will be imperative. In Europe and South Africa this species is still very rare, if it is represented at all. Details of its captive status are difficult to acquire as aviculturists are hesitant to discuss the birds' whereabouts. Probably fewer than five pairs exist outside the United States.

Rose-crowned Conure

Pyrrhura rholocephala

Range: Venezuela.

Status: The Rose-crowned Conure has a very restricted range and occurs only in the extreme north-western part of Venezuela. This area of the country is prone to vast deforestation and the only saving grace for this species could be the reserve wildlife areas that have been established. Venezuela has not listed this species as endangered but it must be threatened due to its limited range and the deforestation that has occurred within its habitat.

Aviculture: This species is unknown

in the United States. Within the European community it is extremely rare and demands a high price. A few pairs have been reported in Holland and Spain and captive bred young are offered only occasionally. The outlook for this species in captivity is poor. Limited bloodlines and international trade laws will probably destroy its captive potential.

Red-eared Conure

Pyrrhura hoematosis

Range: Venezuela.

Brown-breasted Conure

Pyrrhura caliptera

Range: Columbia.

White-necked Conure

Pyrrhura albipectus

Range: Ecuador.

El Oro Conure

Pyrrhura orcesi

Range: Ecuador.

Santa Marta Conure

Pyrrhura viridicata

Range: Columbia.

Blaze-winged Conure

Pyrrhura devillei

Range: Bolivia, Paraguay and Brazil.

With the exception of the El Oro and White-necked Conures, the species on the above list are still considered common within their known ranges. The White-necked Conure may actually be a color mutation of the Maroon-tailed Conure as it has been sighted flying with flocks of *P. melanura*.

Aviculture: The six *Pyrrhura* species noted above are virtually unknown in aviculture.

Conclusion

Pyrrhura Conures, in general, make good avicultural subjects. Most species are still plentiful in the wild with only a few exceptions that have been pushed to a threatened status by deforestation. There is a need for more scientific studies of this genus, if not to establish their status in the wild, at least to establish the validity of the taxonomic categorization of certain birds.

The future of most species in captivity seems to be good. As deforestation further threatens those species with very limited ranges, captive breeding has an opportunity to contribute to the survival of many *Pyrrhura* conure species—and many, in the future, may exist only in our aviaries. ➔