

The Care and Breeding of Caiques

By Ralph Lima, Woodland Hills, CA

[Author's Note: The following information is based on my personal experience and should not be interpreted as the only way to care for or to breed caiques. Any reference made to "caique" is referring to both the Black-headed and White-bellied Caiques, as they are virtually identical in behavior.]

Introduction

This article was brought about because of the many questions I have received over the years regarding the care and breeding of caiques. Hopefully, this information will answer most of the frequently-asked questions and will also enlighten those who are not familiar with the caique.

I observed my first caiques while helping a friend unload a shipment of parrots into his Los Angeles facility during the early 1970's. The 10 wild-caught White-bellied Caiques were among a large shipment of macaws imported from Bolivia. Their striking color and comical antics immediately endeared them to me and they became the nucleus of my breeding stock.

Throughout the years, they have proven to be one of the most intelligent species of birds that I have worked with; which includes macaws, Amazons, cockatoos, African Greys, conures, and most of the Australian parakeets.

The handfed caique makes an exceptionally loving pet that immediately becomes a member of the family and frequently the center of family life. Handfed caiques have the characteristics of being friendly to friend and stranger alike, an important asset when choosing a family pet.

Description

The most common of the caiques is the Black-headed Caique *Pionites melanocephala*. They are found in South America predominately north of the Amazon River.

The Black-headed have a black forehead, crown and nape. They have a green streak under the eyes and lores, cheeks and throat are orange-yellow. Across the back of the neck they have a wide dark orange band, bordered above and below by a few blue tinged feathers. Their backs, wings, rump and upper tail-coverts are green. Their breasts and abdomen area are creamy-white. Their thighs, sides of abdomen and flanks are orange. Their under wing-coverts are green; axillaries reddish-orange; under tail-coverts yellowish-orange; their primary coverts and primaries are violet-blue edged with green; carpal edge greenish-yellow. Their tails are tipped with yellow. They have gray-black beaks and legs. Adult birds have a dark orange iris. Adults are approximately nine inches in length and weigh approximately 180 grams.

Immature birds are a dull version of the adults with the addition of a yellow wash through area of the abdomen. Immature birds have a dark iris.

Black-headed Caiques were generally imported from Guyana. Imports numbered 300 to 500 per year, through 1992. The Black-headed has one subspecies, the Pallid, which is very rare in captivity.

The White-bellied Caique *Pionites leucogaster* is found in South America, generally south of the Amazon River. The White-bellied has a bright orange

crown, nape, hindneck and upper ear-coverts. The lores, throat and sides of the head are yellow. The back, wings, rump and tail-coverts are green. The breast and abdomen are creamy-white; flanks and thighs are green; under tail-coverts are green; primary-coverts and primaries violet-blue edged with green. The beak is horn-colored, legs are pink, and the iris is red in adult birds. Adults are approximately nine inches in length and weigh approximately 190 grams.

Immature birds again are dull versions of the adults with a heavy yellow wash on the abdomen, black blotching on their feet and have a varied amount of black feathering on the head to which there is no uniformity. In the same clutch, a baby may have half of its head covered with black feathers and its nest mates may have no black feathers at all. The black feathering usually occurs intermingled with orange feathers, but on occasion can be solid. This gives the appearance of a black cap. Usually by three years of age all of the black feathers have been replaced by bright orange feathers. Birds that have had heavy black feathering as babies, have had darker orange feathering as adults.

Very few Green-thigh White-bellied Caiques were exported out of South America and consequently they are very rare in captivity.

The White-bellied has two subspecies, one of which, the Yellow-thigh, is the most common White-bellied in captivity. The Yellow-thigh's coloring differs only by the thighs being yellow instead of green. The

White-bellied has a Yellow-tailed subspecies that does not exist in this country, but is being bred in Europe.

Yellow-thighed White-bellied Caiques were imported infrequently up until 1982, when exports out of Bolivia ceased. Shipments of Yellow-thigheds consisted of very small groups, usually no more than 10 birds at a time. No more than 50-75 Yellow-thigheds were imported in any given year. Therefore, the Black-headed Caique significantly outnumbers the White-bellied Caique in captivity.

I must mention that I hear a tremendous amount of confusion from somewhat newer aviculturists when they hear the term White-bellied, as both the Black-head and White-bellied have white abdomens. I have had discussions with several noted ornithologists regarding the nomenclature used to name the caiques. The most reasonable explanation is that White-bellied Caiques were discovered and named prior to the discovery and naming of the Black-headed. This could explain why the White-bellied is not called the "Orange-headed" Caique.

Housing

My caiques are housed outdoors year-round, which is possible due to the warm climate of southern California. Being an extremely social species, the caiques are maintained one pair per cage with a minimum of 12 pairs adjacent to each other in full visual view. The cages are 2 ft. wide, 3 ft. high and 6 ft. long, constructed of 1/2 in. steel tubing and 1 in. by 1 in. welded wire. Cages are suspended 4 ft. over concrete flooring and are spaced 3 in. apart to avoid physical contact between pairs. Their cages have been placed at a height that allows the perched caiques to be above eye level; this is very important as the birds feel less threatened. The cages are fitted with a perch at each end of the cage, one being a pine 2x4 and the other a natural tree branch (manzanita or eucalyptus).

The caiques are fed in large glazed ceramic dishes with 4 in. high sides to minimize waste. Water is provided in 14 in., shallow glazed ceramic dishes in which the birds enjoy early morning baths throughout the year. Caiques love to bathe themselves, even during the freezing winter spells. An automatic overhead misting system provides relief during warm weather.

Nest boxes are constructed of sheet metal with the interiors lined with 1 in. pine boards. The boxes are 12 in. square and 24 in. tall with a 3 in. square entrance hole. The boxes are hung behind a wall that separates the box from the rear of the cage. The nest boxes occupy a room that resembles a long, narrow enclosed hallway. This hallway is completely insulated for sound and light, keeping the boxes in total darkness. This feature allows the boxes to be inspected without the birds ever seeing anyone. I feel strongly that this has provided the birds with an extra sense of security and has dramatically increased their productivity. A combination of pine shavings and eucalyptus chips are used for nesting material. Caiques do not seem to be very particular about the type of nesting material placed in their nest boxes. By the end of the breeding season they will make fine dust out of whatever is used.

Use care in housing caiques at facilities where possible polyomavirus carriers are located. It has been determined that caiques, both babies and adults, are extremely sensitive to this deadly virus.

Diet

In my opinion the most important requirement in successfully breeding and maintaining caiques is their diet. Considering my success throughout the years in producing large clutches, high level of fertility, and large babies, I feel that my diet is providing the caiques with their nutritional requirements. Due to my lacking a scientific background, I will not attempt to detail the levels of vitamins, proteins and other minerals in the diet. Instead, I will list my ingredients and quantities. The following amounts when mixed will feed 50 pairs of caiques:

- 10 cups sprouted "Racing Pigeon" seed (with safflower and corn).
- 10 cups frozen mixed vegetables (thawed).
- 6 cups diced red apples.
- 6 cups diced broccoli.
- 6 cups pellets (Hagen's Tropical Pellets).
- 5 cups cooked beans (Kidney, pinto, black, garbanzo, pink, white, and lentils).
- 5 cups steamed brown rice
- 1 cup raisins.
- 1/2 cup crushed red chili peppers.
- 1/2 cup powdered vitamins (Clovite /

Fort Dodge).

- 1/2 medium-sized orange per pair.
- 1/4 banana (with skin) per pair.

This mix is fed daily in the early morning hours. Between the months of August and November, the beans, rice and raisins are omitted. This change coincides with the on-set of hot summer days and the conclusion of the breeding season. During those months, sprouted seed and apples are increased to make up the difference.

I am frequently asked if caiques need nectar in their diet. In my opinion, nectar is not required and caution should be used in its use. In warm climates, nectar can become a medium for a number of bacteria. If one is inclined to feed nectar, using one of the dry nectar formulas available on the market would be recommended.

Breeding

I have found that caiques are extremely prolific and willing breeders. The caique normally reaches sexual maturity at the age of three. There have been several occurrences of caiques producing babies at two years of age; however, this is not the norm. When housed outdoors in a warm climate, caiques are seasonal breeders beginning their season in early spring and concluding in late summer. I have several older pairs of caiques, in excess of 20 years in age, that usually begin their egg laying in late November.

Caiques will lay a clutch of three to



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Unrelated to the article, this view of one of the author's finch flights is a fine example of what can be done in a backyard setting.



A partial view of the author's nursery.

four eggs. However, every year I experience a few clutches of five eggs. As many as seven eggs have been laid in a single clutch. Eggs are usually laid at two-day intervals. I have older pairs that now lay at three-day intervals. Incubation usually begins after the third egg is laid and lasts for 25 days.

It is very apparent when caiques are about to commence egg-laying. Their lower abdomens swell-up as if they were nine-months pregnant. It is very amusing to see them clowning around in spite of their "big-bellies." They will usually swell-up a week or so before egg-laying is to begin.

Caiques sleep in their nest box, and this is an indicator of their readiness or willingness to begin egg laying. If the birds are not sleeping in their box, odds are that they will not commence egg laying. This can also be an indicator that the birds do not feel comfortable with their cage, nest box or mate. I have, on occasion, experienced caiques that were afraid of the nest box. This has been remedied by catching the birds late in the evening, sealing the opening of the nest box and placing the birds into the box. The nest box opening is unsealed in the morning and usually one night of being forced to sleep in the box removes their fear of the nest box.

Caiques can display very aggressive behavior towards each other. This usually occurs with the onset of the breed-



A two-month-old White-bellied youngster with one of the blackest heads I've ever seen.



A pair of adult White-bellied Caiques in a breeding cage. Note the hen in the nest box opening.



Unweaned baby White-bellied Caiques.

ing season. The male is usually the aggressor, but not always. I have observed male caiques forcibly attempt to feed an unwilling mate, causing lacerations and bruising to the area surrounding the beak. This behavior has also been observed during forced attempts at copulation. When this occurs, the birds should be separated immediately. I am aware of situations where one member of an established,

producing pair has killed its mate. As previously mentioned, this behavior is frequently observed at the start of the breeding season, but can occur at any time. Pairs are frequently monitored in an attempt to observe the aggression before any birds are seriously injured.

When aggression is observed, the culprit is removed to an isolated flight, out of visual contact with any other caiques. The flight is as far away from

other caiques as possible to minimize vocal interaction. This solitary confinement lasts for a minimum of 90 days. After its sentence has been served, the bird's flight feathers are trimmed and it is returned to its mate. In nine out of 10 occasions, the birds will act as if they were long-lost lovers and aggression does not return. When this does not remedy the problem, the birds are introduced to new mates.

Several caique breeders have mentioned that Black-headed Caiques seem to be more aggressive than the White-bellied Caiques. I have not found one species to be more aggressive than the other.

Artificial Incubation and Hand Rearing

For the past six years, I have artificially incubated the majority of my caique eggs. The eggs are removed from the birds once the entire clutch has been laid. By doing this, the caiques will double clutch and frequently triple clutch. Pairs are frequently allowed to raise their third clutch to weaning. In raising caiques to the third generation, I have found that the caiques that are hand raised, either from hatching or from 10 days of age, have been much calmer in the flights and will breed sooner than the parent raised caiques. Heavier weights at weaning have also been experienced with hand raised caiques.

Eggs are incubated in a Grumbach incubator at 99.5° F. Humidity is set at 55% and the eggs are turned automatically seven times a day. Once the eggs begin to draw down, they are no longer turned. After the chick pips through the egg shell, the egg is removed from the incubator and placed into a hatching unit. The hatching unit is a converted Lyons incubator top with a customized plexi-glass body. The temperature in the hatching unit is set at 100° F. and humidity is 80%. Chicks usually hatch 48 hours after pipping and are left in the hatching unit until ready for their first feeding, usually 12 hours after hatching.

For the past 20 years, I have made my own handfeeding formula. In the old days, the formula was made out of necessity as there were no commercially made formulas available. After experimenting with some of the commercial formulas, I found that I preferred my old formula and so continue to make it. My formula consists of a dry powdered base

to which frozen mixed vegetables and water is added at time of preparation. Following are the ingredients of the dry portion:

- 12 cups ground Zupreen Monkey Biscuits.
- 3 cups ground Hulled Sunflower seed.
- 3 cups ground blanched raw peanuts.
- 8 oz. Gerber's Baby Oatmeal Cereal.

These ingredients are mixed together and stored in zip-lock bags in the freezer. At time of preparation, the following ingredients are mixed in a commercial high-speed blender:

- 6 cups powdered mix (described above).
- 3 cups frozen mixed vegetables.
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon Pancreazyme (a digestive enzyme).
- 6 cups bottled drinking water.

For one to five day old babies, the formula is a little thinner and finely blended. As the babies grow, the formula is thicker and coarser. In its thinnest form the formula resembles pancake batter and in its thickest form resembles watered-down peanut butter.

The feeding schedule is as follows:

- 1-7 day old babies—beginning at 6:00 A.M., one feeding every four hours until 10:00 P.M.
- 7-21 day old babies—4 feedings a day, beginning at 6:00 A.M. and concluding at 10:00 P.M.
- 21-60 day old babies—3 feedings a day, beginning at 6:00 A.M. and concluding at 10:00 P.M.
- 60 day old to weaning—2 feedings a day, gradually reducing feedings as babies begin to eat on their own.

As you can see by my feeding schedule, babies are not fed from 10:00 P.M. until 6:00 A.M. the following morning. I am able to do this because of the thickness of my formula and also because of advice from several "old-timer's." The comment made by these respected aviculturists was "Do you think that the birds feed their babies every two hours through the night?" Probably not. By feeding a thick formula, more time between feedings is possible. At the 6:00 A.M. feeding all of the babies are completely empty. Emptying of the crop should be allowed at least once every 24 hours.

Formula is fed between 100-105° F. The formula is heated by filling the

necessary syringes (from 1cc to 20cc) with cold formula, placing them in a metal container and filling the container with hot tap water. My hot tap water is in the 135-140° range. A stainless steel dial thermometer is placed in with the syringes. When the water temperature reaches 105 degrees the formula has matched the water's temperature. One syringe is used per baby. I have been using this method for several years. This method prevents "hot spots" that are created when formula is heated in a microwave; and the syringes in the container remain warm while feeding. This has eliminated the need to re-heat formula because it has cooled down. It usually takes 25 to 30 minutes for the formula to cool down to 105° F. This allows time to band babies, change bedding, and update records.

Syringes and containers are soaked in a very effective wide spectrum disinfectant, "Virkon S" made by Antec International Ltd. in England. Syringes and containers are heavily rinsed prior to use.

Clutch mates remain together from hatching to weaning. This allows for interaction and bonding to their own kind.

Babies are closed-banded at about 21 days of age. By the age of 10 to 12 weeks, the caiques are weaned over to a diet of spray millet, parrot seed mix, and chopped apples and oranges.

After the caiques have been weaned for a minimum of two weeks, they are surgically sexed by a licensed avian veterinarian. In the over 15 years of breeding caiques, I have produced in excess of 65% males in both the Black-headed and White-bellied. It is also of interest that the majority of the imported wild-caught caiques were males. I currently do not have any clear explanation for this disparity in the sexes.

Following is a chart of average weight gains at five-day intervals: At hatching — 6 grams

5 days —	8 grams
10 days—	12 grams
15 days—	25 grams
20 days—	45 grams
25 days—	80 grams
30 days—	105 grams
35 days—	125 grams
40 days—	150 grams
45 days—	160 grams
50 days—	170 grams
55 days—	175 grams
60 days—	180 grams

During weaning, babies thin down to approximately 150 grams, and by one year of age they attain their adult weight.

Pet Quality

As I alluded to earlier, handfed caiques should be rated near the top of any pet list. Their personality and antics are unmatched. They possess a very unusual characteristic of lying on their backs to play or while sleeping. On numerous occasions, I have been told that I had a dead bird in my nursery or in my flights, only to find a sleeping caique on its back, feet in the air and wings completely extended. I know of an individual who purchased a caique from me a number of years ago, who folds a cloth diaper in a corner of the bird's cage. At night, the caique crawls in-between the layers of the diaper and sleeps on its back with only its head exposed.

A frequently asked question is "Are caiques good talkers?" I know of several caiques that have become great talkers; however, I do not consider this the norm. The majority of the pet caiques that I am aware of do not talk at all or very minimal at best. Their voice is somewhat faint and a little difficult to comprehend. For these reasons, I do not consider the caique to be a "good" talking parrot.

Conclusion

I hope this information has cleared some of the confusion regarding the caique and has served as an introduction to those who have not yet had the pleasure to meet one. The caique is a bird that deserves serious attention by aviculturists.

I am always available for anyone seeking advice or information on their needs. I would like to express my sincere interest in seeing that the caique becomes an established species in captivity.

References

Forshaw, Joseph M., *Parrots of the World*, Lansdowne Editions, 3rd edition, 1989. ➤

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