

The Colombian Pacific Parrotlet

Rediscovering A Forgotten Subspecies

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Pacific Parrotlets *Forpus coelestis* are found in south-western Ecuador and north-western Peru. According to the most respected avicultural publications there are no subspecies. Yellow-faced Parrotlets *Forpus xanthops* which are found in the Maranon Valley in Peru, were erroneously classified as *Forpus coelestis xanthops*, a subspecies of Pacifics for many years. The Yellow-faced are now rightly identified as their own albeit very rare species.

It has long been accepted among Pacific Parrotlet breeders that males can be differentiated from females by their cobalt-blue feathers on their wings, backs, rumps and eye streaks. Although females do have eye streaks, they are emerald green not blue. This distinction is also true of most species of *Forpus* parrotlets with Yellow-faced being the only exception.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, it came as a great surprise when one morning while handfeeding, a little three-week old hen had a very pronounced blue rump. Her wings were green and her eye streak was emerald

but her rump was definitely blue. The rump color was not dark cobalt as in the males but much softer and diffuse, almost dark turquoise. Her sisters all appeared "normal", that is, they possessed green rumps not blue. Upon checking the parent bird, to our utter disbelief, she had the most beautiful, bright, rich shade of turquoise on her rump as well as her eye streak. Since this is a wild-caught hen, she is rarely seen her outside of the box, thus color observation was infrequent. Also, since she was one of the first breeders obtained, inexperience added to the confusion.

Immediately taking inventory of the seven pair of Pacifics in our aviary, four had blue rumps and of those, two had patches of blue on their wings! Contacting several other breeders of Pacific Parrotlets, they too reported some of their Pacific hens had blue rumps. Many of these hens passed on this trait to their daughters although the color patterns often did not come in until after their first molt.

About this time, another pair of birds was obtained from southern

California. This time, it was the male that looked different. Instead of having an olive-green back, this bird was silver-gray. He also had a grayish-mauve band of feathers across the chest and his eye streak extended around his head so the whole back of his head was blue. Even the dark blue rump and wing color was much lighter than the deep, almost black, cobalt blue of other males.

Unknown at the time, these color differences in both sexes of Pacific Parrotlets were related. We began a study with our wild-caught birds as they possess the purest bloodlines and there would be little or no chance of inbreeding or hybridization. We also reasoned that wild-caught pairs, presumably collected from the same area, would give us a true indication of the species in both sexes. It was suspected that they were an undiscovered or at least unpublished subspecies, not mutations or hybrids. When we contacted purchasers of our birds' offspring, a 70% majority stated their hens had blue rumps. Of those, 30% stated the females had some blue on their wings as well. The more research performed, the more we believed these birds were in fact a subspecies and began researching everything possible to prove it.

We began by placing hens with blue rumps with males who had gray backs. The pairs were placed in wooden cages which were 24 in. wide, 18 in. high and 24 in. deep. This allows the pairs to hear each other but not see each other. All species of parrotlets, but especially Pacifics, are extremely aggressive and territorial. They will fight incessantly if another pair is housed too closely. Lovebird size nest boxes were hung on the wire front of the cages. This way, when the pairs look out of the box, all they see is the inside of their cage and they feel more secure. The birds are kept indoors under Vitalites which automatically turn on at 7:30 A.M. and turn off at 9:30 P.M. An air filter is also utilized to reduce the dust and to provide clean filtered air for the birds.

All of our parrotlets are fed a basic large hook bill seed diet with the peanuts in the shell removed and



photo by Robert and Sandee Molenda

A wonderful clutch of 5 baby *Forpus g. lucida* 10 to 14 days old.

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hem, gray striped sunflower and millet seed added. In addition to seeds, seven different kinds of fresh fruits, vegetables and greens are given daily along with cooked beans and rice. A commercial brand of pellets and Petamine, cuttlebone and mineral block are always available. Fresh, clean water filtered through a biological filter is available at all times. Vitamins and powdered calcium supplement are sprinkled onto the soft foods. Egg food is also provided as parrotlets seem to benefit from a high-

er protein and fat diet when breeding, as compared to other small parrots.

In May 1991, the first F-1 generation began to hatch into the world. Boy were we excited! By four weeks of age, their feathers were beginning to emerge and lo and behold about half the little hens had blue rumps. The males, however, looked like normal males with olive backs and no band across the chest. We crossed our fingers and waited. After their first molt, we were rewarded. The hens' rumps became blue and the males' backs



Male baby *F. c. lucida* 4 weeks old.



This male Pacific Parrotlet is the subspecies *Forpus c. lucida*. Note the blue eye-ring which extends around the back of the head. This rare subspecies has a grey-mauve band across its chest and it has a lighter shade of blue on its wings.



This is the nominate male Pacific Parrotlet, *Forpus c. coelestis*. Note the lighter, shorter eye-streak, the dark green back and the lack of a band across the chest.

became gray. By one year of age, all the offspring looked identical to their parents. Hallelujah!

In July, 1992, the F-1 generation was set up and by August, healthy baby birds had been produced. True to form, some of the hens had blue rumps as soon as they feathered out and some waited until their first molt. The males also followed the same pattern.

By the time the F-2 generation was ready to breed, in the summer of 1993, we wanted to introduce some new bloodlines. Contacting other aviculturists who were interested in breeding these birds, we traded some offspring. Again, the F-3 generation repeated the coloration patterns as had their predecessors.

One day, a friend sent us a very old article on parrotlets written in 1932 by Karl Plath, the Chicago Zoo curator of

birds. Although most of the information is now known to be incorrect, there was one small paragraph that almost made our hearts stop beating. He described a subspecies of Pacifics that originated in Columbia and the hens had blue rumps. He also described the male as having a gray back and lighter blue on the wings and rump than in the species found in Ecuador and Peru. Eureka! Proof in hand! There *was* a subspecies; it even had a name—*Forpus coelestis lucida* also known as "Ridgway's Parrotlet."

As of April 1995, generation F-4 is now on a clutch of eggs. Several articles have been written in the International Parrotlet Society newsletter along with photographs for easy reference. Many people have identified these birds in their own aviaries and are endeavoring to breed them only with others of their kind. Aviculture is a new science and we must share our knowledge and experience to help ourselves as well as the birds. The odyssey taken over the last six years has helped us to feel the thrill of the pioneer spirit and hopefully, give better insight and understanding into the importance of captive breeding in identifying as well as preserving species.

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