

Aviculture of Pionus Parrots

Breeding, Care and Personality

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There has been little written recently on the *Pionus* parrot species with regards to their breeding and care.

John and Pat Stoodley's book *Pionus Parrots*, published in 1984 has been of great value for all *Pionus* enthusiasts.

I will briefly describe the eight species and their habitats.

Blue-headed Pionus *Pionus menturus* also known as the Red-vented Parrot

Range/Habitat: Mexico, Costa Rica and Tropical South America.

Its most outstanding blue head, breast and throat are complimented by the brilliant green of the body. The bill is dark gray with red markings at the base of both mandibles. The undertail coverts are brilliant red tipped with green.

Bronze-winged Pionus *Pionus chalcopterus*

Range/Habitat: The Andes of Columbia, Ecuador, and Northwestern Peru. The colors on the Bronze-winged, aside from its subtleness are quite striking. The crown, back of head and upper neck are a deep blue. The wings are bronze, the tail and upper parts of the breast are extremely dark blue. The fusion of color in the throat area varies from a pinkish white to a deeper coral. The tail is dark blue with the under coverts deep scarlet. The most brilliant color appears on the underside of the wings. This is a brilliant iridescent aqua. The eye ring is pink deepening to a darker coral during breeding season. Three pair of my Bronze-winged have obtained full coral eye ring color at two years and have maintained it.

Coral-billed Pionus *Pionus sordidus*

Range/Habitat: Northern Venezuela and Western Columbia to Ecuador,

Eastern Peru, and Northern Bolivia. The coral bill is the most outstanding feature of this species. The body is green with blue bordering and white eye ring.

Dusky Pionus *Pionus fuscus*

Range/Habitat: Venezuela, Lower Amazon areas and the Guianas. The Dusky is an extremely striking bird. The head bears a resemblance to a Peregrine Falcon and is distinctively marked with buff. The skin surrounding the eye is gray in adults. The head is slate blue. The cere is marked with red feathers on either side, and the feathers of the breast area brownish-pink becoming a rich wine as the bird matures. The under tail coverts are purplish red and the tail itself is a bright violet. The underside of the flights is an iridescent silver blue. My most colorful male (imported but in captivity for six years) has phenomenal wine color. His first-year offspring have extraordinary color, the male and female siblings are almost identical.

Maximilian Pionus *Pionus maximiliani*

Range/Habitat: Brazil through Bolivia and Paraguay to Northern Argentina. The Maximilian's plumage is less colorful. Referred to as the Scaly-headed because of the the feathers on the head, white at the base, cast a scale type appearance. The overall color is bronze olive. The chin is a purplish blue which extends to the throat area. Its most striking feature on observation is its white eyering. Once again, as in most all *Pionus*, the most brilliant coloring occurs on the undertail coverts and the underside of the wings. This appears to be a most spectacular green, almost a kelly green.

Massena's Pionus or White-headed Pionus *Pionus senilodes*.

Range/Habitat: Western Venezuela,

Western Columbia, Ecuador, north-western Peru in the Andes.

This is the most rare of the *Pionus* species and has yet to be bred in captivity. The head is a dullish green with a white base which gives it a speckled appearance. The upper parts are a dark green which extends to the tail. The breast is a dark mauvish blue.

Plum-crowned Pionus *Pionus tumultuosus*.

Range/Habitat: Peru, the mountains of Central and Southern Regions. This *Pionus* has unique head coloring—plum on the crown and forehead. The Plum-crowned is very similar in head contour and body shape to the Massena's or White-headed. It is considered rare and endangered.

White-Capped Pionus *Pionus senilis*.

Range/Habitat: Mexico southeast region through Central America, Western Panama. It has a white feathered crown which starts from the beak and extends to a v shape. The eye ring is white until breeding season when it turns pink. At maturity the eye ring becomes more coral. The rest of the head appears dark blue. The upper breast is dark green and the lower breast is bluish green.

In 1993 I obtained a CITES permit and a U.S. Fish and Game export permit and took five pairs of White-capped Pionus to England. Some of these were from my breeding in 1989.

Since then I have sent *Pionus* to Canada, Hawaii and throughout the United States. This fall I will export to the Philippines.

Breeding and Care of the Pionus Parrot

I became captivated with the *Pionus* early 1980s. At the time I was breeding Cockatiels, and was looking for a larger bird with a similar personality. My first *Pionus* was a Blue-headed hen. She was captive bred and acquired at four months of age. She met all of my expectations.

The qualifications I wanted to breed for included a bird that was small, so as not to be intimidating, one of moderate price range, one that did not aggressively chew and, most importantly, one which did not bond

so the bird could be placed in a family situation. The noise factor was also of great consideration, not only regarding a pet in an apartment atmosphere, but also for breeding on two acres in an outside aviary.

I first had to acquire birds and quarantine them. I bought stock not from importers directly but birds that had been in known breeders' possession for a period of time.

In choosing your breeding stock, much care in selection should be taken. Purchase from well known breeders who have been selectively breeding. I prefer to avoid anyone known to hybridize birds. Inquire and ask for references.

The choice to breed *Pionus* exclusively did not come without a traumatic decision, as I had to sell my rare Cockatiel collection to afford the breeding stock. The decision, however, was wise and I still feel very fortunate.

My aviary is located on two acres in Valrico, Florida. It is 1000 square feet under roof with another 400 feet in enclosed free flight. The cages are on casters at eye level. This allows entry to the nestboxes when the pairs are breeding to remove the young. *Pionus* are extraordinary breeders and when given an exclusive setting are prone to breed more readily. In two different situations mature pairs went to nest within four months after they were introduced to the aviary setting.

The cages after much trial went from six feet in length to three feet square, up on casters, which makes them approximately five and a half feet high. Nestboxes are 12 x 12 x 24 in. They are hinged and open on the back. They are mounted outside the cage, which allows me access to observe. In approaching the box I address the hen by name before opening the box. When the hen is on eggs the male maintains his vigil outside on the perch until nightfall when he joins her.

Currently I have a proven pair of Blue-headed who have been sitting in the box for two months. I often see only the tail as they dive back in their box after coming out to eat and defecate. This pair has never bred in my

presence as most of my *Pionus* have.

I have found most of my serious, more mature breeders keep their boxes very clean and retire to their boxes at nightfall to breed. The younger inexperienced pairs make use of the box but it needs to be cleaned more frequently. I often add more soft pine shavings to the box to make sure there is enough to cushion the eggs. I keep concrete perches in the cages which are well utilized by both birds. This keeps the nails trimmed which keeps eggs from being punctured in the turning of eggs.

I usually remove a nest box after the laying of infertile eggs particularly if the male is mature. This may happen in the early part of the year before the onset of longer daylight hours, when the male may not have come into breeding condition. The box is returned after copulation is observed continually for approximately two weeks to a month, depending upon the time of year. Eggs were generally fertile the second time around.

My *Pionus* Parrots are on a pelleted diet supplemented by seed, fruits and vegetables combined with grain and bean mixtures. All of this is routinely changed because of the humidity in Florida. Green vegetables and fruits are given daily along with the pellets.

All *Pionus* chicks are handfed from approximately two to two and a half weeks to weaning which could vary from three to four months. All are given Pedialyte when removed from the nest. This allows a smoother transition from parent feeding and offsets the possibility of dehydration. A digital scale is used to monitor weight. I use Kaytee handfeeding formula and feed it between 100 and 105 degrees mixed with tap water and tested with a thermometer.

The young Blue-headed tend to simulate a wheezing sound soon after becoming mostly feathered, usually between the second and third month. This is not a true respiratory problem, but if you are raising your first *Pionus* you should have it monitored by an avian veterinarian.

Last year I pulled my Blue-headed somewhat later than usual and when feathered put them in a cage made of

1/2 x 1 inch wire giving them plenty of toys while introducing them to their pellets. This seemed to eliminate stress which I feel may have contributed to their wheezing. The other possibility was that the *Pionus* aroma in the newly feathered seemed more noticeable in the Blue-headed and by moving them into a larger area with more open space the wheezing disappeared.

The *Pionus* Parrots are unlike any other parrot in that they maintain a sweet disposition even in a breeding situation, particularly the females. The males tend to mimic talking (slightly) Their personality as young hand-feds going to new homes, is unmatched as they maintain their gentle nature through maturity. I have frequently placed young *Pionus* in families where there are children who have had Cockatiels and desire a larger bird in addition. These young birds are frequently shared by two children and if given equal attention by both do not tend to bond.

I spent years searching for a bird similar in temperament to the Cockatiel. I finally chose *Pionus* and have never regretted my choice. The *Pionus* Parrot is a wonderful avicultural experience and has provided me great pleasure and many challenges that I might never have had or recognized if I had not chosen to specialize in a particular species. ➤



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