The Golden Conure
What the Studbook Tells Us

by Ron Schoenwald, Iowa City, Iowa

The Golden Conure *Guaruba guaruba* (formerly *Aratinga guarouba*), with its vibrant color and appealing personality, is a highly sought after species in captivity. A concern for the dwindling number of these beautiful parrots prompted regulations in international trade by their inclusion in Appendix I of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species). In our country the Endangered Species Act further regulates trade between states through the requirement of a U.S. Fish and Wildlife permit.

Based on field work conducted between 1981 to 1984, Oren and Novaes (1986) estimated that the species is not in imminent danger of extinction primarily due to the remote region of Northwestern Brazil in which it resides. On the other hand, an article in the *US News & World Report* listed the Golden Conure as "one of the South American animals that experts predict will be faced with extinction due to the loss of tropical forests." Recent estimates suggest that the entire population in the wild numbers approximately 5000 birds (Low, 1995).

A studbook that records their numbers in captivity was first published in September 1990 with subsequent editions appearing in June 1992 and November 1993. Alan Lieberman, former Curator of Birds at the San Diego Zoo, was responsible for the publication of all three editions. In the last printing, he indicated that he would not continue as studbook keeper which is unfortunate since each addition of the studbook provided increasingly valuable information.

The 1993 studbook lists 632 living birds of which 241 are males, 239 are females and 152 birds are of unknown sex. Compared to the listings in the previous edition, this is an increase of 217 birds. Other statistics in the current studbook estimate that the total numbers in captivity will increase to 5,000 in the next 20 years. Current indications point to a life expectancy of 30 years or more with most of the breeding pairs likely to produce offspring between the ages of 3 to 22 years for males and 3 to 26 years for females.

Although this data suggests an optimistic future for the Golden Conure, there were other questions that I wanted to pursue in order to give a more expanded view of the holdings up to November 1993. I was interested in where the most prolific birds resided and whether or not a few successful pairs dominated the gene pool. Rather than tabulating the information by hand, I decided to enter the data into FoxPro, a database management system. Although a time-consuming project, after the data was entered the information was easily managed making it possible to glean other demographic information.

Of particular interest was the fact that 212 of the total living birds (up to November 1993) were located in foreign countries with the largest number (112) residing in Brazil. A quick subtraction indicates over 400 are located in the U.S. Also noted was that 11 pairs —8 in the U.S.—produced nearly half (302) of the total number of living captive Golden Conures. Each of these pairs had 19 or more offspring, while three of the most prolific produced more than 40 progeny per pair. As indicated by Rosemary Low (1995) and confirmed from manipulating the studbook information, the Golden Conure is more likely to breed in a flock environment. The most prolific pairs are housed in separate cages but in proximity to other Golden Conure pairs. Of the 11 pairs that have been most prolific through November 1993, eight are still living—3 located in Florida, 3 in California, 1 in Texas and 1 in Iowa.

Clearly, there are a handful of successful breeders located in a few states. However, the median age of the birds is only nine years old and therefore relatively young. The large number of young birds argues in favor of an acceleration in their numbers in the years to come which is predicted in the last edition of the studbook. Nevertheless, care must be taken to prevent inbreeding and to maximize diversity within the gene pool since the founding pool of birds in captivity was not large.

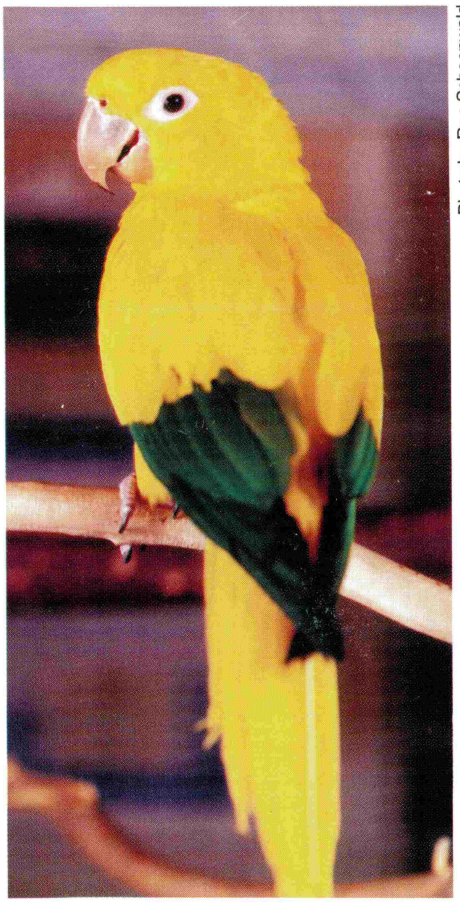

Photo by Ron Schoenwald

The Golden Conure's vibrant colors makes it a highly prized aviary bird.

To do this, it is important that private aviculturists, who hold over 80% of the Golden Conures in the U.S., register their birds in the studbook. It is also important that in states where there are a relatively high number of birds, breeders should acquire a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife even though intrastate trade is legal without a permit. Once a permit is obtained, the birds can be traded to breeders in other states in order to diversify the gene pool.

It is equally important that the trade of Golden Conures between breeders of different countries be encouraged and promoted by the respective government agencies. If trade is restricted, the gene pool also becomes restricted, which is not in the best interests of the birds.

The studbook improved considerably with each addition under the direction of Alan Lieberman but unfortunately he will no longer continue the project. Over two years has elapsed since the third edition was published. Optimistically, the number of unrelated breeding pairs has increased and, assuming another edition will be published in the future, it will include many more birds that were previously not registered. The introduction to the last edition made clear the need to register more birds from the private sector. Although a number of birds are living in Brazil, there is not much information in the studbook about them either.

From the information gathered in the third and last edition, it is clear that a responsible breeding program for the Golden Conure can result if a studbook is available to guide us.

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The Rufous-sided Towhee

by Maartin de Ruiter, Cambron Casteau, Belgium

In America the Rufous-sided Towhee *Pipilo erythrophthalmus* is a well known bird which is found from southern Canada southwards to Central America. There are 25 subspecies in this enormous distribution area. A 26th subspecies, the Guadelupe Rufous-sided Towhee *P. e. consobrinus* became extinct in 1897.

Very few Towhees have reached Europe during their migrations and if a bird is spotted in Great Britain (the only country where the species have been observed so far), all bird watchers worthy of the name gather at the location to see if they can also get a look.

The species is also quite rare in captivity in Europe. During the early part of this century—before import and export controls of any sort—they were kept with some regularity. At the moment, I'm aware of only one place where the Rufous-sided Towhee is kept—the Birdpark Metelen in Germany.

In October 1994, a pair of Towhees was placed together with a pair of Eastern Bluebirds *Sialia silis* in a small outdoor aviary measuring 2m x 3m (6½ x 10 ft.). A small indoor enclosure was connected with this outdoor flight. The aviary was planted with heather bushes and small pine trees.

The Towhees took all the food offered including insect food, insects, fruit, berries and seeds.

At the beginning of May 1995, the female started to build a nest using thick grasses and animal hair.Although in the literature it is mentioned that this species builds its nest on the ground, the first nest at Metelen was constructed in a heather bush about 20cm (8 in.) above the ground. No mating was observed and, later, the four eggs of the first clutch all proved to be infertile.

A second nest was built, this time at the height of about 50cm (19 in.) up in as pine tree. This clutch also contained four eggs which, again, were infertile.

In March 1995 the Birdpark received another male Rufous-sided Towhee and it was placed with the female after the first male was removed. The female accepted the new male without any trouble and a third nest was made. This time it was constructed in a half-open nest box which actually was designed for Bluebirds.

This time the clutch consisted of just three eggs but two of them were fertile and one young was raised to independence. It proved to be a male.

For Europe, this is without doubt a first breeding. I am unaware of any breeding results with this species in any other country so this may be a world-first breeding.

[Editor's Note: The Rufous-sided Towhee is a native or migratory species within the United States and thus cannot be held in captivity as an avicultural subject. DRT]

Photo by Maarten de Ruiter

The Rufous-sided Towhee has been bred in Europe possibly for the first time. It is a migratory bird in the United States and cannot be held in American aviculture.