

# Aviculture of Pionus Parrots

## Breeding, Care and Personality

by Suzanne Henley Myers  
Valrico, Florida

The Pionus parrot has become overwhelmingly popular in the past two to three years. It was not impossible to predict that this lovable pet bird would one day ascend to the very top of the ideal medium-sized pet bird for both family and individual. The handfed Pionus parrot is in greater demand than ever before.

I have been a Pionus enthusiast for many years, first as a pet bird owner, then moving into breeding these wonderful birds exclusively. The venture has been rewarding but not without the pitfalls that accompany taking on a responsibility of this magnitude solely and with very little written information available.

Much credit is to be given to John and Pat Stoodley of England for the first and only Pionus book ever to be written *Pionus Parrots* which is now out of print. The Pionus Breeders Association, founded by the late Hank Brawley, maintains a studbook and supports its membership by distributing a newsletter. Dr. Catherine Toft of U.C. Davis maintains the studbook.

The Pionus parrots, native to Central and South America, are comprised of eight species that vary in size. The smallest is the Dusky, at approximately 10 inches. The White-capped, is slightly larger in length and fullness of body. The Blue-headed, and the Bronze-winged, are of an intermediate size. The largest of the genus are the Maximilian, often referred to as Scaly-headed because of its ruffled head, and the Coral-billed, sometimes referred to as the Red-billed Parrot.

The Pionus can be compared in size to a small Amazon. Two of the Pionus parrots are endangered.

Asanza in Ecuador to study the population and ecology of the White-headed Pionus. On January 17, 1996 in the northeastern side of the Andes Mountains she recorded 45 individuals during a four hour period. In a second nesting area she recorded 56 individuals. I have heard of only one pair in captivity, and do not know the accuracy of this.

### Plum-crowned Pionus

The Plum-crowned Pionus *P. tumultuosus*. Its native habitat is western-central part of South America. It has a unique head coloring with plum on the crown and the forehead. The Plum-



Photo by William Posnanski

Young White-capped and Bronze-winged Parrots at play in a socializing aviary.

### Rare Species

#### Massena's Pionus

Massena's Pionus or White-headed Pionus *Pionus seniloides* is the rarest of the Pionus species. Its range was at one time western Venezuela, western Columbia, Ecuador and northwestern Peru in the Andes. The head is dullish green with a white base that gives it a speckled appearance. The upper parts are dark green, which extends to the tail. The breast is a dark mauvish blue. There has been little breeding success if any as they seem to be non-existent.

Recently the Pionus Breeders Association funded the South American Research Project by putting biologist and P.B.A. member Ana Sosa de

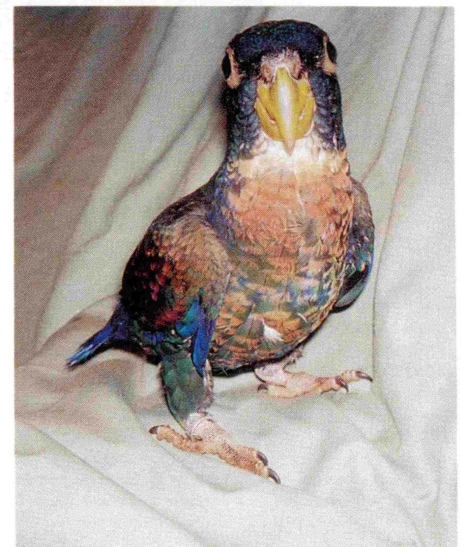


Photo by Suzanne Myers

Bronze-winged Pionus.

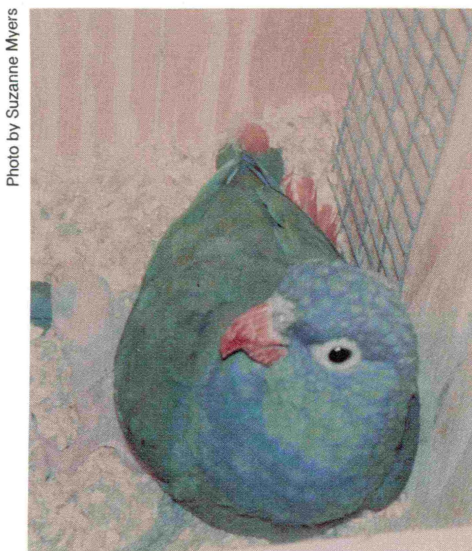


Photo by Suzanne Myers

Red-billed Pionus in the nest with young.





A breeding enclosure at Top of the Crest Aviary.

crowned is very similar in head contour and body shape to the Massena's or White-headed. Their numbers are also very limited. Although most aviculturists tend to keep them as separate species, they have definite physical similarities.

#### Red-billed Pionus

The Red-billed Pionus *P. sordidus*. Its range in the wild is 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 bordered feathers and the eye ring is white. A subspecies is the Coral-billed Pionus, *P. s. corallinus*. This species is bred in limited numbers and should be kept by breeders only.

#### Popular and Available Species

##### Blue-headed Pionus

Blue-headed Pionus *P. menstruus*. This species is also known as the Red-vented Parrot. Its native habitat is Mexico, Costa Rica and tropical South America.

Its outstanding blue 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. A subspecies is *P. m. rubegar*, referred to as the Ruby-throated Pionus, not to be confused with the *menstruus* as both may have red throats but the head of the *rubegar* is a lighter blue. The red throat is quite dominate in the

*rubegar*. These also are limited and may have been bred with the *menstruus* due to lack of knowledge.

##### Bronze-winged Pionus

Bronze-winged Pionus *P. chalcopaterus*. The range and habitat of this species in the wild is the Andes of Columbia, Ecuador and Northwestern Peru.

The colors on the Bronze-winged, though subtle, are quite striking. The crown, back of the head and upper neck are a dark bluish green. The wings are bronze and the tail and upper parts of the breast are extremely dark blue. The fusion of the color on the throat varies from pinkish white to a deeper coral-white. The tail is dark blue, and the under coverts are deep scarlet. The most brilliant coloring appears on the underside of the wings. This is a brilliant iridescent aqua. The eye ring is pink, deepening to a darker coral during the breeding season. Three pairs of my Bronze-wingeds have obtained full coral eye ring at two years and have maintained it.

##### Dusky Pionus

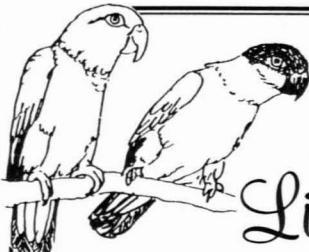
Dusky Pionus *P. fuscus*. This bird's range in the wild is Venezuela, the Lower Amazon areas and the Guianas.

The Dusky is an extremely striking bird. The head bears a resemblance to that of the 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 are a brownish-pink. They become a rich wine color as the bird matures. The undertail coverts are purplish red and the tail itself is a bright violet. At maturity the chest color varies. Some maintain a more grayish pink while others develop into a deeper wine color. The underside of the flights is an iridescent silver blue. My most colorful male (imported but in captivity for six years) has a phenomenal wine color. The first year siblings had extraordinary color; the male and female siblings were almost identical.

##### Maximilian Pionus

The Maximilian Pionus *P. maximilian* is the largest of these birds, very similar in size to the Coral-billed. Its habitat in the wild is from Brazil



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\*\* indicates 2 year term has been fulfilled. If no new interested party comes forward and indicates a desire to serve, incumbent remains in position.

For information about contacting any of these member clubs, please call that club's state coordinator.

through Bolivia and Paraguay to northern Argentina. The plumage is less colorful. The scaly head with the white eye ring is a most outstanding feature. The overall color is bronze-olive. The chin is a purplish blue which extends to the throat area.

### White-capped Pionus

The White-capped Pionus *P. senilis*. Its range is the southeast region of Mexico through Central America and 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 maturity, at which time it becomes coral. The rest of the head appears dark blue. The upper breast is dark green while the lower breast is a bluish green.

Although there is such a range in beautiful colors in the Pionus the common areas are the tail size, and the very distinctive appealing eye. The short tail has an infinite variety of colors, depending on the species.

### Pionus as Pets

Pionus are ideal pets. Their size as well as their temperament is most desirable. They do not tend to chew and are not noisy which makes them an ideal bird for apartments. They are an excellent family bird. In placing them in family situations where they are to be handled by more than one or two people, my choice would be a hen. They tend to be more docile at maturity than are males. When selling the babies I question the type of environment and who will be responsible for the pet. In some instances, after placing one hen, I have had a request for a second. Two females are excellent pets. I would not choose to place two males together as pets as the males tend to be more aggressive.

The males are generally better talkers but cannot be compared to the larger birds that are known for their talking abilities. Most people who consider purchasing a Pionus for a pet are not interested in a talking bird.

When handraised babies are shipped to their new home, they are accompanied by a toy of the same type they had in their cage. The name (given by the new owner-to-be) is

used while handfeeding. By the time the bird arrives at its new home, it has already started to respond to its name. The caging I suggest for the birds is the Hoi 615. I train the birds in this cage individually and they learn to eat from the cups on the door and to respond to training commands. For a young bird it is an excellent choice. This, in addition to a playpen, offers much diversion.

As the bird matures, a larger cage may be purchased. My Pionus spend a great deal of time on their playpen and look forward to their time on it. They will spend hours on the playpen.

Literature pertaining to the diet, a bag of pellets and the Pionus toy accompany the bird. Specifics on the individual bird are a necessity as the bird has been trained to respond to the name given by the owner. This makes the transition easier when being shipped to a new home.

I suggest that the birds be covered at night as I have found that the birds are less susceptible to night fright. The covering should have sufficient thickness so that the bird cannot see through it.

One thing I have learned is to never use a mite preventative in a cage. This is usually in the form of a small metal container which contains mothballs. This can have lethal potential in a covered cage.

I had a bird owner come to me who was an exceptional house cleaner and insisted on the mite protection. After the loss of three Cockatiels and having had all birds necropsied, I suggested that the mite protector which was frequently replaced might be the cause. The Cockatiel that was subsequently purchased is now still alive and flourishing after five years without the addition of the mite protector.

Many people have asked me about the longevity of the Pionus parrots. My only knowledge is of pet birds that have lived to approximately 30 years of age as pets.

### Diet and Nutrition

The Pionus require a high amount of Vitamin A in their diet. I believe their reproductive abilities are greatly dependent on their diet. Too high a protein level can lead to infertility and

subsequent death as described below under breeding Pionus.

I have found Kaytee Exact Parrot Chunky to be my diet of choice. I have successfully raised many domestic breeders on this diet and all of my young Cockatiels as well as Pionus have been raised on the Kaytee hand-feeding formula. I offer other foods but I feel very comfortable when I go into the aviary and see the ceramic dishes with powdered pellets on the bottom and very little on the floor. I feel that I am successfully monitoring their intake. The pelleted diet is supplemented by fruits and vegetables which are offered in the early A.M. and then removed after two hours if not consumed. Once a week in the winter I feed a good seed mixture. This is not mixed with the pelleted diet.

Raw carrots and grated sweet potato are offered as a source of beta carotene. Green beans, Romaine lettuce, broccoli, and summer squash are also part of the diet. I do not use any vitamins.

### **Breeding Pionus**

Prior to my first acquisition of a Pionus as a pet, Cockatiels had been my sole breeding experience. As I became further enamored with the Pionus I recognized the direction I would ultimately take. I also was aware that as a breeder of Pionus this would be a great undertaking because of the limited availability of information. There were very few breeders of Pionus in the Miami area where I originally resided and none who bred Pionus exclusively.

In breeding cockatiels I had gone the full gamut from crop failure to everything imaginable, much of which could not be conclusively identified. I had used both an oxygen tank and a nebulizer for the Cockatiels. My educational experiences were very beneficial in that I was more capable (with the aid of an avian veterinarian) of identifying medical situations in their primary stages.

In choosing to breed Pionus I knew I would have to give up my Cockatiel collection and concentrate on one species only. This was a major change but one I look back on now as being a very positive one.

It has been extremely rewarding in

that I have thoroughly enjoyed the breeding experiences and a few of the challenges.

One of my very first Pionus that I had acquired as a handfed baby was diagnosed with Psittacosis. She was a gorgeous Bronze-winged and I was devastated. As a result of breeding Cockatiels, but never having experienced the disease, I was aware of the seriousness of what I was facing. With much attentive care she was successfully treated. Today she is one of my best breeders and is tested periodically. She has produced beautiful offspring with predominant bronze.

Pionus breeding stock should be carefully selected. A reputable, established breeder is the best source as they will have breeding records.

My choice of breeding stock would be young Pionus raised together. I have found that they make excellent parents. Even the young maturing male will become aggressive when breeding season approaches. The hen will sit the eggs and the male will stay outside the box and go in to feed the hen and the babies as they hatch. I candle the eggs and pull the chicks at 10 days to two weeks of age.

After being removed from the nest-box they are handfed for about three to four months. Initially they are given an oral electrolyte solution to prevent dehydration and to make sure the crop is emptying fully on its own before using the handfeeding formula. Once warmed up, the formula should never be reused. All birds are close-banded and DNA sexed at an early age and individual records maintained on each.

A major concern has been the limited gene pool we are working with as we raise these domestic birds, no longer being able to import any birds from the wild. My older pairs are a combination of domestic and import pairs. The least desirable of this combination has been the one involving an import female. As there is no history, I have found my greatest losses, even after successful production, were with the import hen. This can probably be attributed to the lack of information as to background and age and certainly the greatest stress in breeding is on the hen.

Pionus produce one to two clutch-

es a year and the size of the clutch can vary from two to five, most frequently four in the Blue-headed and the Bronze-winged. The White-capped are more prolific and I have heard of as many as seven if not more eggs to a clutch. Some of these would have to be pulled for incubation as it is virtually impossible for the hen to evenly rotate all these eggs to ensure hatchability. I have never incubated Pionus eggs as the birds are excellent parents. The incubation period is 26 days

I have blood work done once yearly on all my breeders. This after four years ago having bought a domestic "proven pair" of Bronze-winged in excellent color and size that went to nest the following year with infertile eggs in both instances. The following year on Labor Day weekend I found the male dead on the bottom of the cage. Six months later the hen was found dead. These birds had been quarantined on arrival and had been resexed surgically. The cause of death in both instances was visceral gout brought on by too high of a protein level.

I had no experiences with this before and none since but the possibility of elevated protein levels necessitates yearly blood work.

### **Breeding Facility**

Being located in Florida, I breed outside in an aviary that is approximately seven feet high, enclosed with one-half by three inch seven gauge wire. Top of the Crest Aviary is approximately 1400 square feet including two back flights that are walk-in units. These were an addition to the original building. The floor is concrete, combined with fiberglass and is approximately eight inches thick. This I felt was a necessity as we in Florida who breed outside are constantly plagued by raccoons, possums, hawks as well as endangered foxes, not to mention the more common squirrels, rats and snakes. This thickness has deterred the predators. An occasional flapping of wings of a hawk overhead will result in a response from within the building. The roof of the building is pitched.

The cages are three feet square mounted on casters for an approxi-

mate total of five and a half feet high. My goal is to introduce walk-in flights to replace the cages. This will give the birds more freedom and still allow placing nestboxes where the eggs can readily be candled. The cages are approximately one foot apart and have been set as close as eight inches. This has mainly been in breeding pairs that have been next to one another for a period of time. The area is pressure cleaned frequently and the birds thoroughly enjoy the misting on low pressure as they display their wings.

The nestboxes are twelve by twelve by twenty four inches. This size allows me to candle eggs and easily remove the young. I usually put approximately four to five inches of shavings in the box, which they work around until it seems there isn't enough there to cushion the eggs. The mature breeding pairs can be easily identified by the cleanliness of their box.

I have found that the import hen spends more time in the box prior to laying and much care must be taken when removing the young chicks.

The nestboxes can be used the following year as the birds do not destroy the boxes and seem to keep them very clean. In some instances when I have a proven hen with a younger male or have found infertility in eggs, I remove the nest box until I see obvious breeding. In most instances when I have removed the box and then replaced it later in the breeding season, I have had more success. The male, with the presence of the box, seems to be more aggressive and might chase the hen into the box when she is not ready to lay. This behavior is usually cited only in unproven pairs, as there seems to be more consistency in the breeding patterns of the proven pairs.

### Conclusion

Pionus parrots have been a wonderful breeding experience for me. The handraising of the babies has led me to experiences and opportunities I would never have imagined. I have shipped handfed babies birds all over the United States and to some foreign countries. I have received much help from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in obtaining the CITES permits.

As an Aviculturist I have been

unfortunately introduced to the hybridization of the Pionus. After the hurricane in Miami, my long range goal was to get as many unrelated pairs of Pionus into another country as possible.

In response to my ad, I had one contact from South Africa who wanted the Blue-headed, the Bronze-winged and the Dusky. I was very pleased with our contacts over a period of two years and felt that this aviculturist would be the ideal recipient of these

birds. I contacted the U. S. Fish and Wildlife service and they were most helpful in obtaining the CITES permits and in January of 1996 and February of 1997 I shipped the birds into South Africa. I know that they are in a wonderful environment.

For further information contact:

**Pionus Breeders Association**  
**Barbara Avery, Secretary/Treasurer**  
**6580 Providence Hill Road**  
**Garden Valley, CA 95633** ➔



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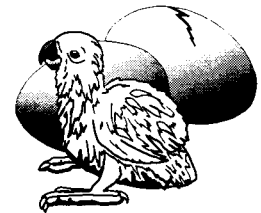
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**Parrot: B-2622 5 kg (11 lb) B-2623 11.34 kg (25 lb)**

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