



the Red-fronted Macaw

Ara rubrogenys

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Part I

Introduction

To present the Red-fronted macaw (sometimes referred to herein as RFM) as a complete entity is a daunting task. To make it easier, I have divided this article into two main parts -- the RFM individual characters I know and the RFM species information available thru the literature and my own experience. I decided to put the story of the characters first as a pictorial review and the species information second, after the reader has learned something about the individuals. The story is in chronological order. The Red-fronted Macaw is the smallest in the grouping known as the "large" macaws, and, like all macaws, each individual has its own personality and way of doing things.

Baby Carmen Miranda

The first time I saw Carmen Miranda, she was in a large playpen at the breeder's with quite a few other varieties of babies. She was eating out of a dish of seed. I asked the breeder, "What kind of parrot is this?" and she replied, "That's my husband's Red-fronted Macaw baby." All of a sudden, the baby looked up and just marched over to the side of the playpen and held up one foot. Of course, I picked her up, and that was the beginning of my interest in RFMs. I said to the breeder, "Tell your husband his baby is sold." (Since I was doing their sexing free at the time, I figured he would agree, and he did.)

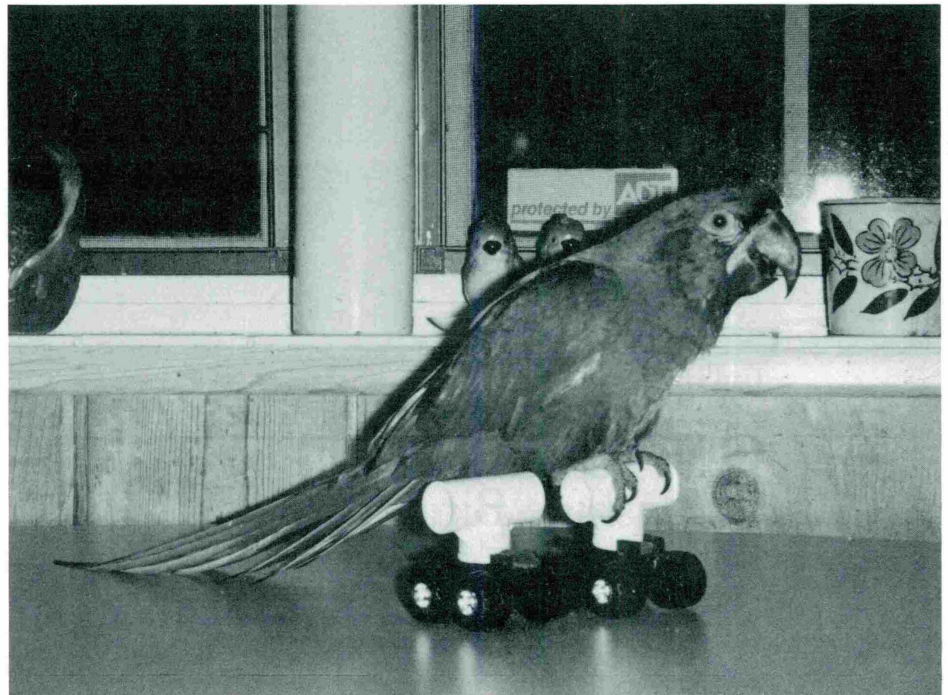
At the time, Carmen was just a little green parrot with red cheeks and not

much other color, and I did not realize what a beauty she would eventually become. I took her home and fixed her a temporary cage and ordered a macaw tree. The cage very soon became too small for her, and when the macaw tree came, we found she could not reach between the perches on the tree, so I fastened natural hemp rope between them and also a knotted rope that went all the way to the floor. Food and water were kept near the top center so whatever spilled went into the tray at the bottom. This macaw tree was kept in my kitchen area and she played, ate, and slept in the tree for

over a year. If she fell or flew off, she would run back to the rope and climb right back up.

As we became better acquainted, I discovered the RFM's charming personality and acrobatic expertise. The only time she was noisy was when I ran the coffee grinder. She hated that and screamed her head off until it stopped. Other than that, she was vocal but not loud. She housebroke herself almost immediately, never even having an accident, always waiting to go back to her perch. I fixed a car perch for her and put a paper on the floor and would stop and put her on the paper every 30 minutes or so and that worked out fine. She loved to wrestle and play "gotcha" and would squeal with delight with any games I could make up.

She loved to be wrapped in a towel and take a nap on the sofa with the TV on. At one point, I taught her to stand on roller skates. The skates I made for her were too big, and she only wanted to stand on one skate. She loved it when I put her on a slanted surface so she could roll down to the end and crash. She also liked to roll back and forth on the skate holding on to my finger with her beak with me providing the locomotion. (She never did become a real skater, but she seemed to think she did.)



Baby Carmen say "one skate is all I need."

Photo by M.L. Simmons, DVM

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Fred and Ginger
Arrive in Florida

By this time, I was so intrigued by the species that I had looked into the RFM adult size and coloration and had started to talk to people on the phone who knew more about them. The more I heard about them, the more interested I became. That's when I started looking for an adult breeding pair. I'm sure I don't have to report that I found what I was looking for – an adult pair four years old and supposedly ready to go. I had them shipped to the Orlando airport. They arrived in a very well made wooden duplex shipper with burlap covers over the wire. (The birds could not be seen at all.) I quickly tore the burlap off the wire and saw two of the most beautiful parrots I had ever laid eyes on. (I had never seen an RFM with the exception of the immature Carmen Miranda at that point.) They were not fearful and came up to the wire and made some chirping noises which I could not, at that time, understand. I was aware that the RFM was the only macaw that totally changed coloration between its immature phase and its adult phase, but I was not prepared for the drama of that change. (I think that's one reason it has been slow to achieve the commercial success of the other large macaws. People see the little green, not-too-colorful parrot, and pass it by for something more exotically colored.)

I brought the pair home, and because they had been shipped in separate compartments, I set them up in adjacent cages. They refused to eat and hung on the bars as close to each other as they could and cried and cried for hours. A very mournful, heart-rending crying it was, too.

Finally, I decided they had to be put together, so first thing the next morning, I put them together in the largest cage. They immediately started beaking and grooming each other, and after about 40 minutes of that, they started eating as though they were starving. The habitat I was building for them was not yet completed, so they had to live in the cage for about a week, during which time I became



Fred and Ginger enjoying their new habitate and some hard nuts.

Photos by M.L. Simmons, DVM



Fred clearly showing the orange around the eye coloration that seems to depict breeding season.

better acquainted with them.

They were full flighted and very wild so I could not handle them. At this point, they still did not have names, but when they were finally put into their new flight, they were so happy that they started a kind of high-energy precision dancing back and forth on the perch, and a friend who was watching them said, "They look

just like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers!" So..... they became Fred and Ginger from that moment on.

The habitat was a disaster! It was made of cyclone fencing, and the first problem was the squirrels, which would waltz in and out, and Fred and Ginger were so laid back that they would sit side by side with the squirrels and eat out of the same dish. (This

would never do!) Then Fred & Ginger began to enjoy unwinding the wires holding the mesh together at the joints, and after one week, they had to be moved back to the cage while their habitat was reconstructed. I had also noticed that insects were getting on their food, so the rebuilding was more extensive than originally planned. The habitat redesign and rebuilding took

considerable time and basically consisted of interior 1 x 1/2 inch wire, then cyclone fencing, then mosquito screening, and finally an exterior hardware cloth. The layers had to be kept far enough apart so the birds could not tear the mosquito screening from the inside, and the squirrels could not tear it from the outside. Finally, they were back to the habitat.

About a year passed, and they had never gone into their nest box. I resexed them to make sure they were a male/female pair. They were! For a still-unexplained reason, they started getting more and more noisy, and a friend in northern Florida offered to build a new habitat for them and take them out on a farm. I thought it sounded like a good idea, and it was only about 75 miles away, so I moved them to the farm.

One day, after they had been there for a few months, I stopped by "unannounced" to see them and found conditions not at all to my liking. I had a discussion with the farm owners concerning these conditions which was not conducive to continued friendship and agreed to pick the birds up on my return trip. (I was on a side trip to deliver some lorries.)

When I picked Fred & Ginger up, my "friends" had put them in a closed box with air holes so I brought them home in that box. When I opened the box to let them out into their old cage, they looked a little scraggly but I was very glad to have them home.

Within six months, they were back to their original beautiful condition and starting to indulge in what I learned was macaw "recreational sex." This would go on every day with a noise that sounded like a car trying to start with a low battery. They still did not go into their box or lay any eggs.

Carmen Meets Bolivar

With Carmen now over a year old and Fred and Ginger not going into their box, I decided to acquire a mate for Carmen. I finally found a male baby not far away in Florida and went to get him. He had just been weaned and was very sweet, so I bought him and placed him in quarantine, and after that period, I introduced him to



Ginger says "I like my mail box!" The sharp edges of the cut hole have to be smoothed and a ledge is fastened at the bottom of the hole to protect their feet when they go in and out.

Carmen. I had named him Bolivar, and it was love at first site. Carmen accepted him immediately, and they have never been separated to this day many years later.

Fred and Ginger's Nest Box Mystery

By this time, Fred and Ginger had been here for several years, mated often and still shown no interest in their "regular" macaw nest box. I looked at ads for RFM babies and started calling people who had them for sale. Most of the breeders were not interested in helping me (So much for helping the species survive), but I did find one that was more interested in the birds than the money. He asked me what kind of nest box I was using and immediately told me it was the wrong box.

He said he used a rural mail box turned around with the front as his viewing access and a hole cut in the back end for the birds to use. He said they like the box to be up as high as possible. I went that day to get such a box and had my neighbor refit it. Then it was cleaned and installed. Not completely convinced, I left the old box in place as well. I then placed pine shavings in their new box.

Within only a few days, I noticed the shavings from their new box on the floor of the flight and checked the box and found it completely empty. I put in more shavings, and the next day, it was empty again. I put in newspaper in wadded up balls, and in two days when I checked the box, I found the paper chewed into a fine bedding and still in the box. Mating started up again (this was in July) at a fantastic rate of four or five times a day, and within a very short time, there were three eggs in the mail box.

Fred demanded that Ginger stay in the box with the three eggs. He would allow her out of the box a couple times a day for more mating and bathing and would then chase her back into the box. He fed her constantly in the box.

Fred would go into the box with Ginger whenever I came into the flight, and when I walked under the box, they would both throw mouthfuls of bedding down on me. That was as aggressive as they ever got.

All three eggs were fertile and were developing very well. At the 28th day, the first egg did an external pip and I expected it to hatch soon. On the 29th day, it still had not hatched, so I put it in the incubator. I could hear the chick

vocalizing inside and expected it to hatch momentarily. As it turned out, the egg didn't hatch, and the baby died in the shell.

I was very upset and started calling the experienced aviculturists that I knew, trying to figure out what went wrong. The consensus was that these

were eggs that would have to be assisted in order to hatch, and I immediately went into a state of total panic, never having done an assisted hatch. I pulled the other two eggs and placed them in the incubator, following the directions given by phone for assisted hatching.

The next two babies survived with

assisted hatchings despite my inexperience and anxiety, and Fred and Ginger went on to have another clutch of three eggs which were all assisted hatches and all survivors. To this day, out of many clutches, only one egg has hatched completely on its own. (I always try to give them every opportunity to do so.)

Photos by M.L. Simmons, DVM



Fred and Ginger's first baby, Mitzi at 21 days.



Fred and Ginger in the year 2000 still enjoying their large habitat and looking good!

Carmen and Bolivar Play Catch Up

While Fred and Ginger were having their first clutch, Carmen and Bolivar were growing up and getting ready for their own family. Having learned the lesson of the right size nest box, I had provided them from the beginning with a wooden box about the size of the mail box, and they took to it right away.

The fact that Carmen was a year older than Bolivar was not good because she was maturing faster than he was, and when she was three years old, he was only two and not the least bit interested.

I was watching them from a window one day, and Carmen was standing with her tail in the air, backing up to him, and he was eating a peanut and ignoring her. She bent her neck down and looked under her body to see what he was doing back there, and when she saw him eating the peanut, she was so disgusted with him that she reached back with one foot and gave his leg a really hard yank.

Unfortunately, all that she accomplished was Bolivar falling off his perch. However, the following year, when she was four years old and he was three years old, Bolivar finally figured it all out, and they had their first clutch of three fertile eggs, and they have been producing two clutches a year of three or four fertile eggs every year since. With the the first clutch, the parents did not feed well, so I pulled them and handfed the babies, but now they have learned to hatch and feed well, so I leave the babies as long as 14 days before pulling them for hand-feeding. More details about methods, habitats and starting techniques will be covered under the section on Breeding. 🐦

PART II WILL APPEAR IN THE NEXT ISSUE