



# First U.S. Breeding of the Crimson-bellied Conure

*Pyrrhura perlata perlata*

by The Staff of Hill Country Aviaries,  
L.L.C.

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**T**he Crimson-bellied Conure *Pyrrhura p. perlata* formerly known as the *Pyrrhura rhodogaster*, was first legally imported into the United States in July 1998. In the wild, it is found mainly in Brazil, but flocks have reportedly crossed the border into Bolivia and have been sighted in Bolivian national parks. Crimson-bellied Conures are still rather abundant in the wild, and to date there are no formal conservation or recovery plans aimed at its survival in its native habitat.

In captivity, however, this species has always been rather rare. This is probably because Brazil has not allowed export of its native birds for many years, and prior to that, only a handful of this species had been in the hands of breeders across the world. Captive breeding has been very successful, and in the last decade, Crimson-bellied Conures have become more and more available to interested aviculturists in Europe and South Africa.

Here in the United States, importation has been stifled by the Wild Bird Conservation Act since 1992, and no legal consignments of this species have ever been recorded prior to July of 1998. A record of "*Pyrrhura perlata*" was found on import summaries from the mid 1980s, but that was prior to the renaming of this bird, and was probably a consignment of Pearly Conures.

Under the Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992, legitimate breeders can apply for exemptions to import restrictions if they possess sufficient knowledge of the species to be imported, and if they form a studbook and breeding plan for imported birds. An avicultural

organization must also "vouch" for the breeders in the program and act as oversight to the program. A program such as this was formed for *Pyrrhura perlata perlata*, and limited imports took place in 1998 and 1999. To date, eight pairs have been imported into the United States, and five of these pairs have produced offspring.

The first import of five pairs took place in July of 1998. After their mandatory 30-day government quarantine, five pairs of sub-adult birds were moved to Texas. They were setup in cages that measured approximately three feet square. Wooden perches and wooden nestboxes were provided. Nests measured 18 inches in height, by nine inches square. A two-inch entrance hole was placed near the top and a small wire ladder was stapled to the interior of the box to allow the birds easy access, in and out.

The pairs could see each other, as there was only about one foot of space between the cages. However, pairs seemed to be content with each other and there was little interaction between the arranged mates. The birds spent the majority of their time on the perches, in the sun, or on the food bowl. They bathed everyday in the water bowls and enjoyed the rain. Most of the pairs ate together and there was no squabbling at the food bowls.

All 10 birds were in perfect feather upon release from quarantine, and only one bird out of all the imported birds developed a habit of chewing on its feathers. Actually, this bird only chewed the small red feathers on its shoulders, and did not chew anywhere



*The Crimson-bellied Conure in adult plumage.*

else, nor did it feather-pluck its mate.

From the moment the birds were setup, they were placing very small feathers in their nest boxes. They would mix these feathers in with the pine shavings that were offered as nesting material. At night, literally all of the birds retired to the nestbox until dawn.

The diet consisted of sprouted sunflower seed, soaked hard corn, dry wheat, oats, millet, sorghum, milo, buckwheat, and ZuPreem Breeder Fruit Blend pellets. To this was added apple, carrot, celery, and occasionally, orange. The birds seemed to relish the apple, carrot, and pellets the most. As the weather turned cooler, more seeds were eaten than in the heat of the summer.

In the first year, and because these birds were imported from South Africa, where the seasons are opposite those in the United States, mating behavior began in early December,

1998. At that time of the year, the weather in central Texas can be unpredictable and cold fronts bringing temperatures in the 40s or even high 30s are expected. The normal daily temperature was usually in the 60s or 70s, but as night fell, the temperatures often dipped into the 40s and 50s. On Christmas day, December 25 1998, the first egg was laid. The hen continued laying an egg every other day until a clutch of six eggs had been collected. We decided not to intervene in the nesting process because we had no other birds on eggs at the time and no place to foster the eggs for incubation.

Three pairs began to lay their first clutches in early January, 1999. Many of the first eggs were clear, or did not develop due to extreme cold fronts that were moving through the area during that time period. Second clutches were laid when the first were removed in late January. The second clutches began on February 13th, and

many of the eggs were fertile. The average clutch size was about six eggs, but some pairs even laid up to nine in a clutch. Fertility seemed a bit low and may have been influenced by the weather. Parental habits were poor, and eggs would disappear or be found broken on several occasions.

The eggs laid in February began to hatch on March 8th, after an incubation period of 23-24 days. Chicks resembled that of all the other *Pyrrhura* conures with white down and a small, "macaw-like" beak structure. Due to cold weather, the first chicks hatched were pulled for hand-rearing. They were fed ZuPreem dry primate chow with added baby foods and peanut butter. Growth was slow for the first week or so, but picked up once the crop size increased. Hatch weights were approximately 6-10 grams. Chicks would stand to be fed, and slept with their heads tucked in between their legs.

A total of 18 viable offspring were produced from four pairs of parents. The other pair did lay, but no chicks were hatched. Keep in mind that these birds nested in the winter, and weather influences almost certainly contributed to the low hatch rates that were experienced and were the main reasons that many of the offspring were hand-reared. If more suitable surrogates, specifically other *Pyrrhura* conures, had been available to incubate eggs, surely the hatch would have been doubled. During the time of the later clutches, some pairs of Rose-ringed Parakeets *Psittacula krameri* were also nesting, and the eggs of the Crimson-bellied Conures were successfully fostered under these parakeets.

Chicks began to wean at six weeks of age when hand-reared. They would fight over food and even places to sleep. Some fights were severe where blood was drawn. Small groups could be kept together for weaning, but introducing another bird from another cage was done cautiously if at all. Like the adults, the chicks preferred apple over any other foods offered. Spray



Juvenile Crimson-bellied Conures. Note that their breasts have not attained the bright crimson color yet.

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millet was also one of the first foods accepted. The weaning process took about three weeks, and once weaned, the chicks did not solicit handfeeding, and would actually run to the rear of the cage when approached. This strange behavior changed after the birds were weaned and independent for a few weeks.

The plumage of the young birds lacked the brightly colored chest and lower abdominal color of the adults. They looked very similar to the other forms of the Pearly Conure. Within two months after weaning, sporadic red feathers were seen on the lower abdomen of many of the chicks. Some birds were in full adult plumage by five months of age. Reports from breeders in South Africa suggest that this species can and often will breed at 8-10 months of age.

The Crimson-bellied Conure will almost undoubtedly turn out to be one of the most prolific conures in captivity. Due to their smaller size and quiet nature, this species will probably become a very common pet bird – if breeders concentrate on its establishment in U.S. aviculture.

Young, unrelated, pairs are now available from the studbook and breeding consortium for this species. Birds are only being sold to those individuals who agree to participate in the studbook and program. Special coded leg bands have been designed for all offspring produced by the members of this breeding consortium. These bands contain the code CB009 denoting the USFWS assigned program number. We respectfully request that anyone offered Crimson-bellied Conures that do not have this code on the leg band, please contact the Program manager or the office of the American Federation of Aviculture, Inc.

We would like to add a special thanks to Mr. Richard Cusick of Fallbrook, California, for adding the pictures for this article. It seems his photos were much clearer and more definitive than the ones we took during the initial rearing of the species. Richard has now bred this species from his imported pairs as well, and the studbook and management program for this species is well on its way. 