



Breeding the Blue-crowned Conure

Aratinga acuticaudata

by Kam Pelham-Polk, Houston, Texas

Over the years I am often approached by people who have non-breeding pairs of Blue-crowned Conures who ask me what I do to be so successful with mine. Hopefully some parts of this article will help others to have some measure of success trying to breed theirs.

I was given the opportunity to purchase my first "pair" of Blue-crowned Conures approximately 13 years ago and I have had a love affair with them ever since. Since starting out with this "pair" of conures I have established two rules that I absolutely never deviate from.

Rule # 1

Re-sex each and every bird unless you have written proof or have physically seen these birds with babies or you are purchasing them from someone you absolutely trust. (Even then you may want to re-sex them.)

This actually is my golden rule. As

happens frequently with new aviculturists starting, out the original pair turned out to be two egg-laying hens. (I would kill for that now!)

While at the vets having these two sexed, I managed to purchase a male that was tattooed under both wings. He was sold as a surgically sexed female. Luckily for me, he was a male. I took him home and set him up with one of the females. As I said before: "When in doubt – re-sex each and every bird."

Rule # 2

Watch, observe, and learn all you can about each and every bird that you own. What subspecies are they? Are the same subspecies set up together? Is the pair truly compatible? Is one aggressive to the other? If there is aggression is it to the point of possibly killing its mate? If they haven't laid are they a young pair? Will they allow each other to eat – or does one devour all the food? Who incubates the eggs? Do they break the eggs? If they break them which bird does and why? Do they kill the babies? If so which bird and why?

By watching, observing, learning and interfering only when necessary, one should have success with breeding Blue-crowned Conures.

Let me take some of the observations one at a time. I have not had luck with domestically raised Blue-crowns producing before the age of 3-3 1/2 years. I generally give them a nest box at approximately the age of 2 1/2 years so that they can get used to seeing it and possibly start working it or sleeping

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in it at night. This seems to work fine for them.

I have a truly compatible pair that eat at the same time, sometimes even sharing the same piece of food, sharing the incubation of the eggs and taking turns feeding the young. Basically, they are doing everything together. This is the ideal pair and unfortunately not every pair falls into this category.

If I observe one mate being overly aggressive to the other I split them up and re-pair them with others that they might be more compatible with.

There is nothing worse than inspecting your aviary and finding a bird that is seriously wounded, maimed, or even dead, the result of mate aggression. By observing the pair I can tell the difference between what is aggression and just beak playing.

If a pair is compatible but seem to be breaking eggs or, worse yet, maiming or killing babies, try to observe them to see what the problems are. If something is as obvious as toenails being too long, catch the birds up and trim toenails. Are they not getting enough protein and/or calcium in their diet? Try boiling eggs and cooking chicken wings, then mash them up together and add this to their diet.

Does the offender not really want to have young with that particular mate? Try re-pairing them. Is another pair bothering and threatening them by their proximity? Move the offending pair or provide a blind of sorts for separation. If a pair will not incubate their eggs for any reason, re-pair them.

I, personally, do not incubate eggs. This is not to say this is not right, I just don't do it. I will not own a pair of birds that will not incubate or feed their young. Try observing and doing whatever is necessary to develop compatible pairs.

Diet

All of my breeding pairs are fed a diet of pellets with a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables each and every single day. The fruits and vegetables are washed and chopped into fairly large chunks that a bird can hold with its foot. I feed whatever is in season: apples, oranges, grapes, corn on the cob, squash (all different types),

peppers (red, yellow, jalapeno, all types), sweet potatoes, broccoli, pumpkin, spinach, kale, and beets, to name just a few. They are given fresh water everyday.

Nest Boxes

I use both wooden and metal nest boxes that measure 12 x 12 x 16 inches. The entrance hole is 4 inches in diameter and 2 1/2 inches from the top of the nest box. The wooden nest boxes are made from 1/2 inch or 3/4 inch plywood. All of them have a sliding viewing door that latches. The viewing door is situated 2 1/2 - 3 inches from the bottom of the nest box to allow for a short wall so no eggs get damaged or fall out during inspection. I found that using an inspection door at the top of the nest box seemed to startle the hen more when I opened it for viewing thus running the risk of breaking eggs or hurting babies.

I have found that the Blue-crowneds seem to like this size of nest box as it gives them a feeling of more security.

Upon questioning people who have not had success breeding this species, I find that their nest boxes tend to be too large. Once they change to a smaller sized box, they seem to have luck where before they had nothing.

Suggested nesting materials are:

aspen shavings, pine shavings, care fresh, or styrofoam or any combination of these. Observe the pair and if they are throwing everything out try a different nesting material or combination.

After pulling of the clutch I immediately clean out the nest boxes and put in fresh bedding. Nest boxes are always inspected for wear and tear and the wooden ones are replaced as necessary or at least once a year.

Many pairs of Blue-crowneds sleep in their nest boxes so they need to feel safe and secure.

Nest boxes are hung up as high as possible on the outside of the cages. The entrance to the nest box is hidden by either toys or branches from a tree. Doing this allows the breeding pair to, again, feel more secure while nesting and hopefully gives them a more natural setting.

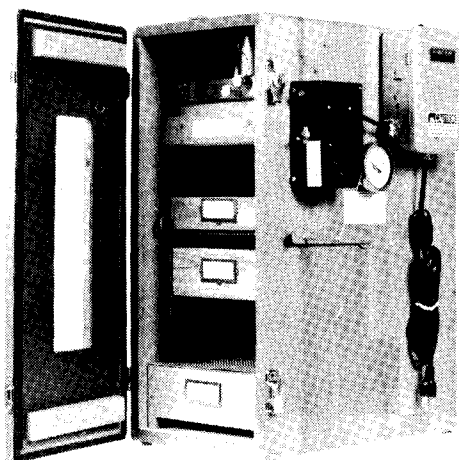
Housing and Cages

As far as housing arrangements go, I have not found that location has made a difference. My birds are all housed inside for now. Blue-crowneds are very social creatures. Once one pair starts laying it doesn't take long before the others start.

Humidity does seem to be a factor though. I have found that the rain and humidity here in Texas seem to make them breed better.

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Every pair is housed in 36 x 36 x 36 inch stackable condominiums made from 1/2 x 1 inch wire. All condominiums are on wheels for ease of cleaning. The cages are filled with lots of toys including swings to keep the birds from getting bored. These toys allow for lots of entertainment and exercise. It also allows them to vent their aggression on something besides each other.

The cages are fitted with a wide variety of different diameter roughened manzanita perches. The perches are hung at different heights in the cages.

The insides of the cages are picked up each day and thoroughly cleaned and hosed down once a week. Even when the Blue-crowns are on eggs or have babies, I still continue the routine of cleaning. Just be careful not to wet down the nest boxes or disturb the parents. I do not vary my routine and I have not found that it disturbs them. I take my time at whatever task I am doing around them and never make quick movements.

During the inspection of each pair just prior to laying it is obvious that the hen starts plucking herself or her mate or both. She uses these feathers to line the nest box. Some of the best pairs of breeding Blue-crowns can get pretty bald during breeding season and feather out beautifully once the breeding season is over.

Incubation

Blue-crowns can lay 2-4 eggs in a clutch with the average being 3 eggs. Incubation is usually 26-30 days with the hen laying every other day. Again, there is always an exception to the rule. I have found that the hen normally does the incubation with the male feeding her. During incubation and hatching I increase the amounts of fruits and vegetables that I feed.

Pulling Babies

I pull babies at 3 1/2 weeks of age and not any earlier unless I perceive a problem. I like my babies to get the best start possible and I feel this is best done by leaving them with their parents as long as possible. I have not found that this affects the sweetness of the

babies one way or another. I band each baby with a #10 leg band immediately after pulling and inspecting them.

I then place them in a brooder with either Carefresh or Bird Country as bedding. The substrate in the brooder is changed every day or more often depending on the size of the clutch. The brooders are thoroughly cleaned, washed, dried, and then readied for babies each day.

Each container of babies is given a tiny stuffed animal to snuggle against. The stuffed animals are washed frequently. I do not mix clutches in the brooders. Each clutch gets its own brooder.

Handfeeding

When I first started handfeeding I used to feed with a spoon and spent hours doing it. I started doing a lot of research and attending seminars on handfeeding and now use their suggested methods. I use a 40 cc syringe as that is just my preference. I use the rule of thumb that the younger the baby the thinner the formula as in reverse, the older the baby the thicker the formula without making it like a chunky soup. Generally I feed the formula about the consistency of a creamy soup. I microwave the water and mix it with the powder. Never, ever microwave the baby food as you can run the big risk of hot spots and thus burn the babies' crops.

When babies are first pulled they are put on at least four feedings a day. Smaller babies are fed more often, possibly every 2-3 hours. I used to wait until the crop was completely empty before feeding again but after reading Eb Cravens' article on feeding, I have since changed that theory and find his works rather well. Thank you Eb!

When feeding Blue-crowned babies, hang on as they impulse very strongly and flap their wings as they eat. I find that they are similar to hand-feeding a macaw in this respect.

Weaning

Between 5-6 weeks I put the babies in a weaning cage which has small wire spacing on the bottom so that their feet can't fall through. Weaning cages have a wide variety of toys and

perches. Perches are placed close to the bottom of the cage initially so the babies can beak them and play footsy with them. Eventually they will start perching and with the perches low I don't have to worry about them getting hurt if they fall.

Once they are transferred to the weaning cage, they are introduced to a wide variety of foods. They are given some millet to pick at as well as a dish with soak and cook, chunks of fresh fruits and vegetables, birdie bread, and pellets. Varying what is put in the dish gives them an opportunity to get used to seeing these funny looking things and start playing with them as well as tasting the food. They are given a dish of fresh water which they play with and quickly learn the art of bathing.

In my household there are only three of us so I make my husband and daughter play with the babies as well. When my daughter's friends come over, they are handed a baby to play with also. I am lucky because the job I have lets me take the babies to work so they get plenty of socialization there as well. My living room and weaning area are adjacent to each other so that the weaning cages and junior cages are in full view of us. This allows the babies to feel like they are a part of "our" flock. As they get older and are sturdier at perching, I put them on playpens to interact with each other under supervision.

Conclusion

A last few words of advise. When looking for potential breeder birds to purchase always take time to look at the feet of each bird. From experience I have found that if the bird's feet have an orange tinge to them the bird is probably getting old. A younger bird should have nice healthy flesh colored feet. Make it a point to take time to look at the color of the feet.

Remember to be consistent but adaptable. Interfere with the birds only when absolutely necessary. Don't continually change everything around. Give your pairs time to adjust. Once you have everything set up to your satisfaction "Leave the Birds Alone" and more importantly, "Be Patient." It will pay off. 