



Breeding the White-eared Conure

Pyrrhura leucotis

by Richard Cusick, Fallbrook, California

Why aren't more people keeping and breeding White-eared Conures? I ask this question out of frustration as much as curiosity because as a *Pyrrhura* fanatic I am having a tough time coming up with a good answer. It certainly couldn't be a problem with the bird itself as it is hard to imagine a more complete package. White-eared Conures are a combination of beauty, charm, intelligence, and seemingly endless playful energy. It couldn't be due to a lack of money or space because what bird lover really needs a bank account or a dining room?

The answer, it seems to me, must live somewhere in the question itself. More people would breed them if more people bred them. HUH? In other words, White-eareds are suffering from a lack of press. They are one species of conure that is relatively unknown, unappreciated, and insufficiently represented in U.S. breeding programs. The more direct exposure and information that breeders receive about this engaging, tiny bird with the giant personality, the more their popularity should grow.

In my opinion, of all the species of *Pyrrhura* conures currently available to U.S. aviculturists, the White-eared Conure is the hidden jewel of the group.

Subspecies

There are five recognized subspecies of the White-eared Conure, but only two of them *P. l. leucotis* and *P. l. griseipectus* have found their way into aviaries in the United States. Two other subspecies *P. l. emma* and *P. l. pfrimeri* have been introduced into European breeding programs in the last two years,

leaving one sub-species *P. l. auricularis* unaccounted for in captivity. As of the writing of this article, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service has approved a co-operative breeding program which will allow several lucky aviculturists, including myself, to import *P. l. emma* for the first time along with new bloodlines of *P. l. leucotis* from captive breeding programs in Europe and South America. Other species received USFWS approval as well including *P. p. roseifrons*, *P. p. lepida* and *P. e. egregia*. The approval of this program coupled with the imminent approval of several other *Pyrrhura* conure targeted breeding programs should make for an exciting start to the new millennium for all conure lovers.

In the wild, White-eareds live in widely distributed populations in both northern and eastern South America, represented both in Venezuela and Brazil. They are forest dwellers for the most part and seem most comfortable playing and feeding high in the forest canopy. They are strong, swift flyers, gregarious, and sometimes quite raucous. Their wild diet consists of seeds, fruits, nuts, berries, some insects, and their larvae. They are typically seen traveling in small flocks of between 10-20 birds and although most conures will interact with other species in the wild, White-eared Conures seem to be less interested in this and prefer the company of their own species almost exclusively. They are almost never spotted together with other local species such as Blue-throated *P. cruentata* or Red-eared Conures *P. boematotis*.

While both of the Venezuelan subspecies, *P. l. emma* and *P. l. auricularis*, are still common in the wild, the population of the three Brazilian sub-

species, *P. l. leucotis*, *P. l. griseipectus*, and *P. l. pfrimeri*, has declined rapidly over the past 15 years. They are now considered rare in most areas. This decline in population can be directly linked to the ongoing destruction of their habitat. This decline is one more good reason to add White-eareds to your shopping list in 2000.

Since so many have never seen a White-eared Conure and because there are four sub-species currently available in captivity, I feel it is important to include a short description of each sub-species. For those few who are already familiar with this information or those who couldn't be bothered with the differences between the sub-species (and you know who you are), you can skip the next 453 words and then continue reading.

Pyrrhura leucotis leucotis

Pyrrhura leucotis leucotis is found along the coast of Eastern Brazil, from Sao Paulo to Bahia. It is considered the nominate species and is a small (9"), high-strung gem. It is predominantly Green with a band of maroon above the cere. The beak is a greyish brown as is the eye-ring. The upper cheeks, nape and crown range from brown to reddish brown. They have a blue suffusion on the forecrown. The lower cheeks are blue which sometimes extends around to the lower nape. The ear coverts are an off-white. The upper chest has a barred appearance and is green with dull yellow-orange edges and blackish tips. There is a maroon patch in the center of the abdomen and maroon that extends from the lower back to the upper tail feathers. The shoulders are splashed with scarlet. The primary coverts are greenish blue with the primary flights themselves being blue. The tail feathers are maroon marked with green and the legs and feet are gray.

Pyrrhura leucotis griseipectus

Pyrrhura leucotis griseipectus is found only in the state of Ceara in north eastern Brazil. It is similar in appearance to *leucotis*, but the ear coverts are almost pure white and the feathers of the upper breast and sides of the neck are gray rather than green,

broadly marked with dull yellow orange tipped in brown. No blue on the forecrown. This sub-species is commonly referred to as the Brazilian Grey-breasted Conure.

Pyrrhura leucotis emma

Pyrrhura leucotis emma is found along the coastal strip of Venezuela from Miranda west to Yaracuy. In my opinion, this is the most impressive of the sub-species. *P. l. emma* is similar to *leucotis*, but with even broader margins of dull yellow orange on the upper breast and sides of the neck and much more extensive blue on the forecrown extending to the middle of the crown, nape and lower cheeks. This sub-species is referred to as the Blue-naped Conure, Salvadori's Conure or simply Emma's Conure.

Pyrrhura leucotis pfrimeri

Pyrrhura leucotis pfrimeri is found in a very restricted area around Santa

Maria de Taquatinga in the western region of the state of Goias, Brazil. Similar to *griseipectus*, but the forecrown and sides of head, including the ear coverts, are chestnut red. The throat is a dull shade of greenish blue with each feather edged in white. There is a dull blue suffusion on the crown and nape. Commonly called Pfrimer's Conure.

Pyrrhura leucotis auricularis

Pyrrhura leucotis auricularis is found in Monagas, Anzoategui and Sucre on the coast of Venezuela. This is the only sub-species not currently being captive bred in Europe or the US. Similar to *emma*, but with purer white and larger ear coverts. Also, the green plumage of the back and flanks is a deeper color with no hint of yellow.

From South to North America

So how did these White-eared Conures get from the forests of South America to the cages of North America? To the best of my knowledge, White-eared Conures fall into the "just appeared one day" category. Several specimens of *P. l. leucotis* were "introduced" illegally to the East coast of the United States in the mid to late 1980s. The exact number of birds will proba-

bly never be known.

These birds ended up in New York, Florida, and further west in the Chicago area. Some, not all, of these birds were eventually confiscated and placed in the care of Cornell University and/or the Bronx Zoo. These confiscated birds bred, produced, and the offspring were distributed to other zoological organizations including the San Diego Zoo and the Wild Animal Park in Southern California.

In 1995 when supply started to outweigh the demand from zoos, several birds became available legally to the general public. Eric Anthéunis (Cedar Hill Birds) of California acquired his first four pairs this way via the Bronx Zoo.

The only White-eared Conures imported legally into the country, as far as I know, were 12 specimens of *P. l. griseipectus* that were brought in via Europe by Richard Furzer of California in 1990 or 1991. Mr. Furzer has been successfully breeding from this group, holding back stock and setting up new pairs. His collection of White-eareds today is the biggest in the country at between 30 and 40 pairs (all *P. l. griseipectus*).

Why Set Up White-eareds?

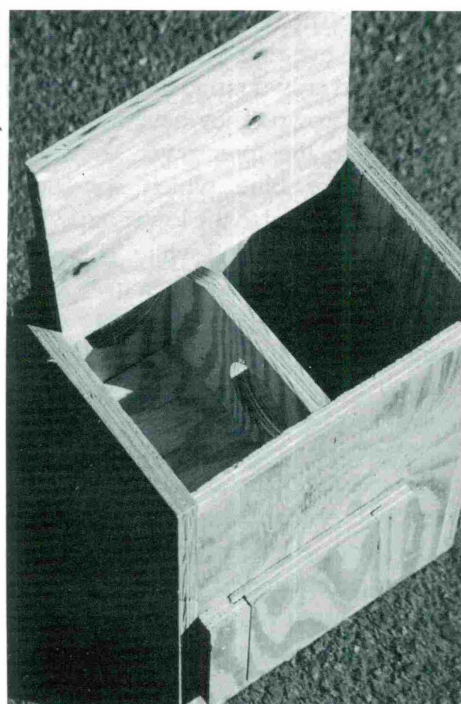
Mr. Furzer is as perplexed as I am by the dispassionate attitude of breeders towards this wonderful bird. We share the opinion that White-eareds are the equal of Painted Conures in terms of beauty and disposition.

Handfed White-ears also share the same likeable traits that we are charmed by in handfed Painteds. They are fearless, inquisitive, intelligent, and playful dictators. As long as you let them think it's their idea, nobody gets hurt.

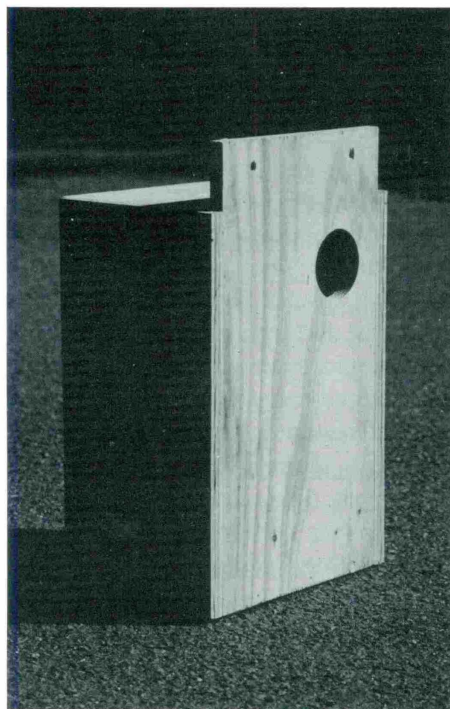
But if these two species are so similar, why should you (a frugal breeder) set up White-eareds when you probably own Painteds already? The best reason I can give you is probably the biggest difference between White-eareds and Painteds – White-eared Conures are very willing to breed in captivity.

With White-eared Conures you get all of the positive traits associated with Painted Conures without the years and years of breeding disappointment. Are

Photos by Richard Cusick



Note the upper "antechamber" from which the bird can sit and watch the world. For nesting and sleeping, it can duck through the interior hole and enter the lower chamber.



you sold yet?

Housing

If you are familiar with the care and breeding of other *Pyrrhura* species you should have no problem with White-eareds, but I will share with you what works for me.

Here in southern California, bird breeders are blessed with a climate that has few extremes. Therefore, I am able to keep my birds outside all year. Winters are mild and require occasional wind protection, but not heating. Although there are a few nights where the temperatures drop to the high 30s, the normal nighttime temperature range through the winter is 45-55 degrees with daytime temperatures in the 60s or 70s. Summers are equally temperate with a few hot (100°+) days in July, August, and September. In order to provide adequate wind and rain shelter for my Conures, yet allow free airflow and as much sun exposure as possible, I designed an open greenhouse facility for them.

The greenhouse is 70 feet long and 24 feet wide and has an arched top that is 12 feet from the ground at its highest point. The entire structure is built using 2.5 inch diameter aluminum pipe. The sides, front and back are 7' feet high and completely open. The arched top is covered in agricultural grade UV-friendly plastic sheeting and that is topped with 50% shade cloth. Using aluminum chain and S-hooks I suspended the 2 x 2 x 4 foot *Pyrrhura* cages side by side, so that the bottom of the cages are 5 feet from the ground. The number of cages (35 on each side, suspended side by side) keeps them stable. The cages are high enough so that the birds are always eye level or above. This affords each pair a sense of security as I move about feeding, cleaning water dishes or just observing.

The few hot spells we experience in southern California can be a danger to small, active birds like White-eareds. Even with adequate shade they can exhibit signs of heat stress, raising their wings and panting. Because of this I installed a continuous length of polyvinyl hose around the outside of the greenhouse that

connects to a garden valve hose bib. At the back of each cage I inserted an irrigation emitter into the hose that sprays an extremely fine mist. I turn this shower system on from time to time during the year, but when temperatures climb into the mid to high 90s I sometimes leave it running for six hours straight.

The way it is set up, the birds can choose to perch in the mist or move to the front of their cage to avoid it. Although White-eareds, like most conures, like nothing better than splashing around in their water dishes, they don't seem to enjoy the shower and almost always perch away from the emitters. They do, however, enjoy the lowered ambient temperature created by the combination of the mist and the dome roof of the greenhouse. Their increased activity and happy chatter let me know that this simple system works, even on the hottest of days.

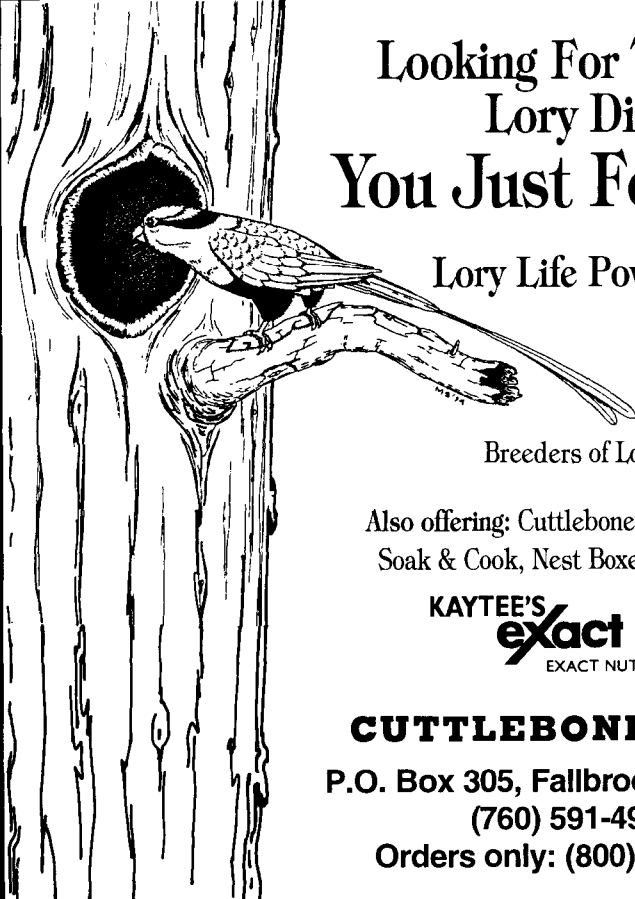
Because the cages are suspended, fallen seed and droppings are easy to rake, haul, and compost. Water dishes can be flushed with a high pressure

hose as needed in between thorough cleanings. Rodents scamper below the birds, but I have never seen any that were able to climb the slick aluminum poles that are the only access to the cages. This is one of the healthiest and easiest set-ups I could think of. It works for me and more importantly, the birds seem to be happy.

Diet

Proper nutrition is an essential part of any successful breeding program. As anyone knows from working with *Pyrrhura* conures, they will eat or at least shred anything that you put in front of them – so it is our responsibility to put nutritious things in front of them. I start with a good basic seed mix that includes a small amount of sunflower and peanuts; this mix is available at all times. I grow most of the fruits and vegetables that I use to supplement the seed mix and I try to rotate these daily to provide variety.

Apples, pears, figs, persimmons, oranges, pomegranates, corn, squash, carrots, radishes, chard, kale, and



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spinach along with hibiscus leaves and flowers are accepted and relished by my White-eareds.

Just before breeding season, I increase the amount of protein in their diet by offering a mixture of cooked beans and brown rice which is served on a slice of whole wheat bread. The bread makes an excellent edible plate.

You might want to use heavy ceramic bowls for the food and water. I do, now, but I began with #2 plastic dishes for my *Pyrrhuras*. The White-eareds, especially, seemed to like tipping these light-weight bowls over and hiding under them. The first couple of times this made me think that one of them had somehow escaped until the bowl started to slowly move across the bottom of the cage. Although I do believe they enjoyed scaring me, this prank sometimes left them with no food or water all day.

Breeding

One of the true tests of how comfortable your birds feel in the environment you provide for them is how well they breed. At this time I have seven pairs of White-eared Conures including five pairs of *P. l. griseipectus* and two pairs of *P. l. leucotis*. Of this group, three pairs were mature last season and all three pairs bred successfully. One more pair will reach maturity this season and I am hopeful they will breed as well. Most compatible pairs of White-eared Conures will start to breed at two years of age, typically producing smaller clutches than in their third, fourth or fifth season. I have never heard of younger birds of this species breeding.

Nest Boxes

Because *Pyrrhura* conures sleep in their nest boxes, I leave one attached to each enclosure all year. The nest box I use for *Pyrrhura* conures is made out of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch plywood and is 17 inches tall x 12 inches wide x 8.5 inches front to back. It has a 3 inch diameter entrance hole in the top right corner which leads into a small 4 inch wide antechamber. Once in this antechamber, the bird can sit and watch the outside world or proceed through another 3 inch diameter hole into the actual nesting/sleeping area. This antechamber serves two purposes. It cuts the actual nesting area in half and eliminates direct light, keeping the nesting area darker. Both of these, I believe, help the birds feel more secure in their box which can lead to improved breeding results.

Breeding Season

White-eared Conures do not seem to follow the normal breeding season of my other *Pyrrhuras*, but as I said, the birds are kept outdoors and the weather can affect each species differently. The breeding season for most of my *Pyrrhura* conures begins in January and lasts through June or July. The White-eareds generally start breeding when everyone else stops, beginning in August or September and continuing through December.

Courtship and Mating

Mating takes place after a couple of weeks of courtship involving nest box preparation, feeding each other and sometimes excited play which at times may resemble fighting. Actual mating may occur on a perch, but more like-

ly will happen on the floor of the cage or in the nest box. The male will sidle up to the hen who will assume a passive posture, flattening her body, dropping her wings, and arching her head back. The male will typically feed the hen and put one foot on her back while twisting his body and sliding his tail under hers. The male will sometimes continue feeding the hen during the act, which can last several minutes.

Clutch Size

Typical clutch sizes vary from 5-9 eggs with incubation beginning immediately and lasting 23 days. The hen will usually remain in the box from the moment the first egg is laid until the chicks are 2-3 weeks old. Fertility is usually excellent and a hatch rate of 90% is normal. If you pull babies to handfeed before two weeks of age or if you foster the eggs, you should see a second clutch within 20-30 days. If you leave the babies too long or let the parents fledge and wean them, one clutch is usually all you will get.

Fledging and Weaning

Young White-eareds will generally leave the nest box between 5-6 weeks after hatching and will be fed another two weeks by their parents. Weaning time can be up to a week shorter with handfed babies.

Reproductive Determination

One interesting story about clutch size, fertility, and reproductive determination took place two seasons back. I purchased a proven pair of White-eareds from a friend and took them home. I set them up and within two months observed the pair copulating. It wasn't long before the hen disappeared into the nest box and I knew that egg laying had started. I don't bother my birds by checking the box every day so I looked in once, saw an egg and left them alone.

As is my general practice, I waited until I knew there should be babies hatched (approx 30 days) and peeked into the box. There was the little hen, flattened out on the bottom of the box with her wings spread and she still couldn't cover all the eggs completely.

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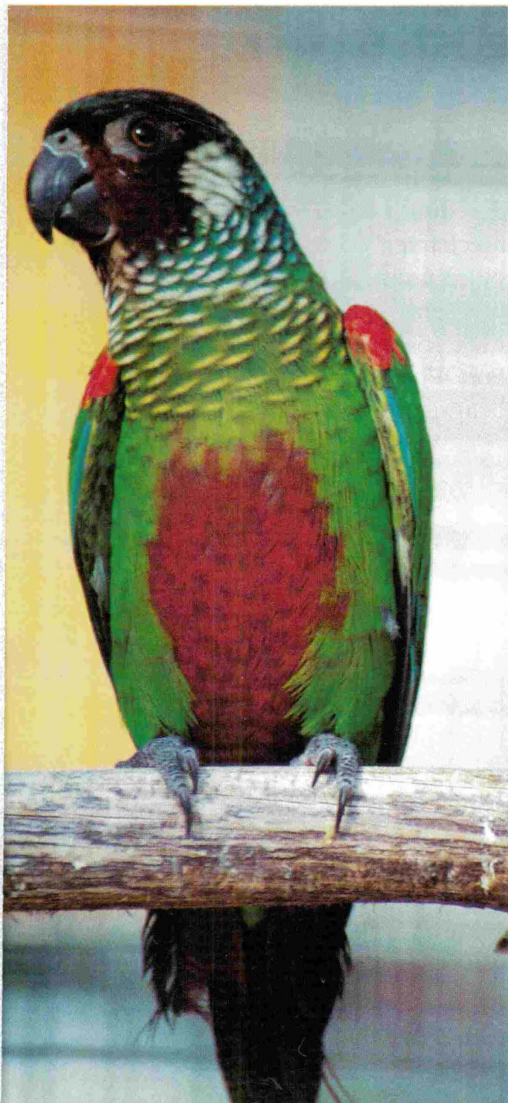
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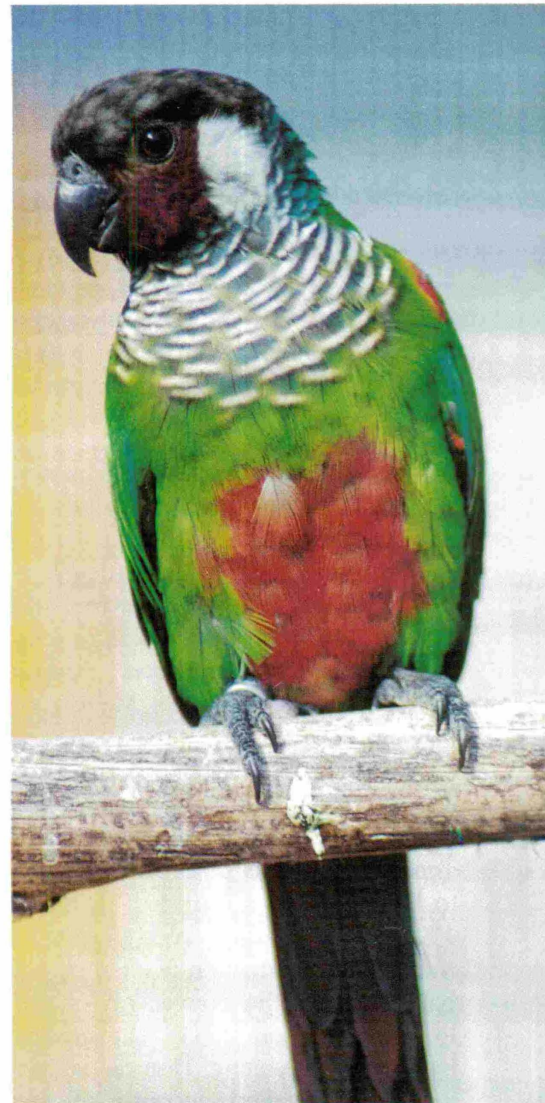


This Pyrrhura leucotis leucotis is one of the two subspecies of White-eared Conures found in American aviculture.

Realizing without knowing how many eggs there were that something seemed wrong, I gently moved one wing and then another counting 12 eggs. To her credit she stayed calm through the whole ordeal, 'but we weren't finished. I counted 12 eggs, but that was what I could count by moving her side to side. I knew there were more.

The thought ran through my head that this was another case of a "proven pair" of hens. I had seen them mating, but I have also seen two bonded hens go through the motions. So without much concern for the welfare of what I assumed must be infertile eggs, I gently picked up her chest. To my complete surprise there were three warm, tiny White-eared babies. This little girl had laid 15 eggs. I closed up the box and counted my fingers, which were all mostly there.

Over the next three weeks she hatched out a total of 12 babies. I helped her out by taking the oldest babies in for handfeeding, leaving her with the three youngest babies all the way through. Two of the 12 hatched babies were weak and died within days, but 10 survived the ordeal and so did their champ of a mother. It was the only clutch she laid that season, but I forgave her. She has since returned to a normal cycle and last year laid two clutches of seven eggs. I




Pyrrhura leucotis griseipectus, along with Pyrrhura l. leucotis, is held in American aviaries but doesn't seem to get enough attention.

still haven't figured out what caused this enormous clutch.

Conclusion

Today, I continue to be amazed by the beautiful White-eared Conure and all of our feathered friends. It's remarkable how much we've learned about them and how many questions still remain unanswered. So, why don't more people keep and breed White-eared Conures? Your guess is as good as mine.

I hope this article sheds some light on this wonderful species, answers a few questions about them and encourages you to discover more about this engaging, tiny bird with the giant personality. 



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