

First U.S. Breeding of the Rose-fronted (Painted) Conure?

Pyrrhura picta roseifrons

by: Richard Cusick, Fallbrook, California

Note: This may be a first U.S. breeding of *Pyrrhura picta roseifrons*. If any reader knows of an earlier breeding of this bird, please send complete information and verification to the AFA office.

Pyrrhura picta roseifrons, often referred to as the Rose-fronted Conure, is a sub-species of the Painted Conure. At 22 cm. or 8.5 in., the Painted Conure is the smallest member of the Conure group. Like all other sub-species of the Painted Conure, the Rose-fronted is predominantly green and the sexes are similar in appearance. Once mature, the forehead, forecrown, lores, and upper cheeks are scarlet. In some cases, this bright red can extend to the nape. Juveniles show only a faint blush of red, if any at all, in these areas, with an occasional scarlet freckle peeking through.

The plumage of the *roseifrons* throat and upper breast is brownish, edged with buff or off white, creating a scalloped appearance. There is a rosy tinge in the upper breast that is more prominent in some individuals than in others. The ear covert, periophthalmic ring, and cere are off white or buff colored. The carpal edge and under wing coverts are green, with some red at the bend of the wing. The maroon patch, both in the center of the abdomen and extending from the lower back into the upper tail feathers is much redder than in the nominate form (*Pyrrhura picta picta*). The outer webs of the primaries and the primary coverts are blue. The flanks and under tail coverts are olive and the wings are slightly lighter green

as well. The tail feathers are greenish at the base of their upper surface, turning maroon. The beak is grayish, while the legs and feet are grayish black.

This beautifully colored jewel is found only in northeastern Brazil, near the upper Jurua River and possibly northern Peru. The Rose-fronted Conure seems to be common within its limited range.

There are currently two co-operative breeding programs under the supervision of the USFWS. Both are approved to import a number of *Pyrrhura* species, including *Pyrrhura picta roseifrons*. It was as a member of one of these consortiums that I had the great opportunity to import 29 Rose-fronted Conures. After completing all of the necessary paperwork and agreeing to a deal with a breeder from the Netherlands, the 29 birds finally arrived in Los Angeles, CA on May, 18, 2000.

The birds were immediately transported to a quarantine station in San Ysidro, CA, where they spent the next 30 days. Because of the fine care the birds received in this station, all 29 birds made it through this ordeal in great shape.

On the 19th of June, I picked them up and brought them home. I was excited to see this species for the first time and couldn't wait to let them out of their boxes and into the quarantine cages I had set up for them. I'm sure they didn't like it, but after getting them into cages and making sure they all had food and water, I just stood and stared at them until it was too dark to make out

their shapes. They were more beautiful than I had imagined.

After another 60 day quarantine period, during which I re-sexed the birds, tested them for virus and simply watched their behavior, the birds I intended to keep were taken to their permanent breeding cages. Each pair was separated into its own 2'X 2'X 4' cage, hung side by side and suspended 4.5' above the ground under an aluminum pipe style greenhouse. The greenhouse is 70 feet long and houses several other other species of *Pyrrhura*. The roof of the greenhouse is rounded and covered with fiberglass sheeting and shade cloth.

The *roseifrons* pairs are separated with a visual barrier that blocks only the front half of each cage. This provides the birds privacy when eating or entering the nest box – which is hung on the front of each cage – but allows them to socialize and squabble with their neighbors at the back of each cage, which I feel is important behavior for a social, flock-type parrot. Behind each cage there is a mister that I turn on for long periods, during hot weather, to cool the environment or for their 15 minute shower time every other day.

The nestbox I use for all of my *Pyrrhura* Conures is 16" tall, 10" wide and 8" front to back. The boxes are built out of 3/4" plywood and the dimensions stated are outside dimensions. The entrance hole is 2.5" in diameter and is located at the top, right hand side of the box. Inside the entrance hole, there is a small antechamber and another 2.5" hole that the birds go through,

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down a ladder and into the nesting or sleeping area. Most *Pyrrhura* will sleep in the nesting box if one is provided, so I always attach a box right away. I feel that having this safe place to sleep or hide when frightened, helps in the adjustment process when birds are moved to a new location.

Regarding diet, anyone who has cared for *Pyrrhura* Conures will tell you they are feathered pigs and the Rose-crowned Conures are no exception. They are full of energy and are almost always moving, so don't be afraid to feed small amounts of peanuts, sunflower and safflower in your seed mix. Aside from a decent seed mix and fresh water, anything else that is offered will, at the very least, be torn to shreds. Rose-crowned Conures are very curious birds and will inspect anything new that is placed in their cage. I have fed the following and most have been relished by all: apple, pear, fig, persimmon, orange, carrot, broccoli, corn, squash, beans, brown rice, hard boiled egg, and whole wheat bread.

By the end of August, 2000 all of the pairs were set up and settling down. Every Rose-crowned Conure I imported was parent raised, so it took them a bit longer to get comfortable and most still keep a watchful eye on me when I'm around. They did get used to the routine though and around the first of the new year I began to notice several pairs acting differently. Individual pairs started spending quite a bit of the day in their nest boxes. When they were out of the box, they were



Mature breeding pair of Rose-fronted Conures.

more nervous and acted very aggressively towards their neighbors and me. Shavings were removed from certain boxes and thrown to the ground, these pairs were starting to eat more food. Their cuttlebone, untouched for months, was now being devoured.

I never did observe mating, but in early February, 2001 I heard what sounded like mating coming from inside one of the nestboxes. Egg laying began on the 16th of February. The female began sitting immediately and I did not see her come out of the box for almost six weeks. The male spent almost all day sitting in the box beside her, but did come out two or three times a day to eat and drink. Because I never saw her out of the box, I must assume that the male was feeding the hen.

On March 10, 2001, 23 days after the first egg was deposited in the nest box, what I believe to be

the first Rose-fronted Conure chick bred in the U.S. hatched. Three days later, a second chick hatched. Out of the five eggs laid in this first clutch, two chicks hatched and they were both hens. Within 30 days of the first chick hatching, there were three additional pairs with chicks and a total of 10 Rose-fronted babies (3 males, 7 females). There was an average of five eggs in each clutch and a 50% hatch rate (20 eggs, 10 chicks hatched). I allowed the chicks to remain with each pair until the oldest one was three weeks of age. Extra soft food was fed during this time, including soaked and sprouting seed, beans and brown rice, some egg, and whole wheat bread, which the pairs ate with abandon.

I found the Rose-fronteds to be attentive and devoted parents and when I did pull the chicks for hand feeding, they were all healthy, fat and alert. The average weight of the

chicks at three weeks of age was 65 grams. Of all the species I handled this season, the Rose-fronteds were my favorite by far. They are energetic, curious, playful, and friendly birds that always seemed hungry, were never difficult to feed, and weaned very easily. It took 53 days to completely wean the first two chicks, mostly because they were the first two, I played with them too much, and wanted to be certain they were eating on their own. However, the second group of eight babies was raised together and weaned almost a week earlier.

It was incredible to watch how quickly the young Rose-fronteds learned from each other. They developed almost a single minded approach to things. When one did something, they all did the same thing or tried. Once weaned, I put them outside into a 4'X 4'X 8' flight cage and even now, months later, the four birds that remain from the group still move in unison. As they

walk across the bottom of the cage to greet me, it is as if they are one big bird with four bobbing heads.

The oldest of these four birds is, at this writing, a little over nine months of age and she has molted in about 3/4 of her mature crimson head color. This process starts quickly (3-4 months) and they seem to change in appearance overnight. Not only do they molt in the bright red feathering on their heads, but their overall coloring brightens, and they acquire more red in the abdomen as they mature.

Today there are a total of 25 pairs of Rose-fronted Conures in the U.S., distributed among the members of the two co-operative breeding programs. This core stock must remain within the two groups. To date, 16 Rose-fronted Conure babies have been successfully raised. With care and some luck, production in 2002 should be much better.

If you are interested in working with this species, unrelated pairs are or

will soon be available. A studbook program has been set up by both groups and participation in it is mandatory. The studbooks are the best way to track the bloodlines, which not only helps strengthen the future of the species in the U.S., but helps each new breeder looking for unrelated stock to pair with their offspring.

Thanks to the dedication of the members of the two *Pyrrhura* co-operative breeding programs, managed by Rick Jordan and Judi Robben, someday every breeder who wants to work with this species will get the chance. I know for me, getting the chance to keep, care for, and breed the spectacular Rose-fronted Conure has been a tremendously rewarding experience.

If you are interested in learning more about the Rose-fronted (Painted) Conure, you can visit my website at:

www.outbackaviaries.com

You may email me directly at: **birdrep@yahoo.com** ➤

Photos by Richard Cusick



Group of juvenile Rose-fronted Conures at various ages.