

# Half-moon Conures – Small but Mighty

Photos and Text by Cheryl Burns, Colleyville, Texas

Half-moon conures are small birds with big attitudes. They are popular pets that can talk and learn some tricks. They are easy to keep as aviary and breeder birds. Hand-fed birds are quite adaptable to change and usually are appreciative of attention from their human caretakers.

Half-moons are one of the smallest *Aratinga* conure species at about 24 cm. (9 1/2 in) in length. Half-moons often are confused with Peach-fronted Conures (*Aratinga aurea*) which have solid black beaks and are of similar size. Half-moons also are known by the common names of Orange-fronted or Petz's Conure. The scientific name is *Aratinga canicularis*.

Half-moons come primarily from southwestern Mexico and range as far south as Costa Rica. There is some geographical variation divided into three races or subspecies. The nominate *Aratinga c. canicularis* is found in the southern-most range of the species, the subspecies or race of *Aratinga c. eburnirostrum* is found in the central part of the range, and the *Aratinga c. clarae* comes from the northern part of the range.

The two subspecies of Half-moons are more common in aviculture than the nominate species. The nominate species has a horn-colored beak on both the upper and lower mandibles. This is the most distinguishing feature. The orange band across the forehead is wide and touches the eye rings. I have not seen a photograph of the nominate species (even the one featured in the on-line Lexicon of Parrots) that doesn't look like a young *Aratinga c. eburnirostrum*. I would love to see a living, mature bird of the nominate species but have yet to find one.

The description of the *Aratinga c. eburnirostrum* is very similar to the nominate species. It has a broad orange stripe across the forehead. Some descriptions say that this is narrower than the nomi-

nate species. The upper mandible is horn-colored and the lower mandible has dark gray stripes on each side with the middle of the beak being horn-colored. Young birds have horn-colored upper and lower mandibles. The gray stripe will begin to appear on the lower mandibles as early as 12 weeks old and is completely colored by six months of age. In my opinion, this subspecies is the one most commonly found in aviculture.

The *Aratinga c. clarae* has the same beak coloring as *eburnirostrum*. The significant difference of this subspecies is that the orange stripe on the forehead is reduced to a very narrow stripe, sometimes not much more than a large dot in the middle of the forehead. Since I have owned half-moons, I have had many discussions with others on how to distinguish the two subspecies and have discovered that the difference of stripe width can be a matter of differing opinions. To make identification more challenging, the two subspecies have most likely been crossbred and the offspring exhibit traits of both. I often hear at bird marts that the bird with the narrow stripe is the female and the one with the wide stripe is the male - NOT SO!

All Half-moons tend to exhibit similar behaviors that are noted in Parrots of the World, the Atlas of Conures and the Lexicon of Parrots. In the wild, Half-moons often travel in large flocks and are said to be nomadic in the non-breeding season. They nest in the mounds of one species of tree termites (*Nasutitermes nigriceps*) with the geographic range of the birds matching exactly to the geographic range of the termites in the wild. The birds only use active termite mounds for nests and usually only one pair of birds will nest in each mound. It requires about a week for a pair to dig out the nest. The birds then leave the nest for about a week to allow the termites to seal the cavity.

Then it is ready for raising the family.

Half-moons still are commonly smuggled into the U.S. especially at the California and Texas borders. The smugglers will bleach the heads of these little birds and try to sell them as baby Double-yellow-headed Amazons. Smuggled birds that are confiscated are put up for auction since they usually cannot be returned to the wild. I know of a Texas breeder who purchased several *Aratinga c. clarae* in an auction of confiscated birds.

I ended up with Half-moons quite by accident. My friend and bird-sitter works in a veterinarian's office. She always has people giving her their unwanted pets and she then finds them homes. A lady asked her to take a pair of Halfmoon Conures and my friend decided to do so because the birds were not being kept properly. One thing led to another and I ended up with the birds at my house. The story the lady told of these birds was that she smuggled them from Mexico in her purse while they were still tiny chicks. She then hand fed them and raised them. Common sense told me that the birds were most likely from the same clutch, so I purchased a young male and female from a friend.

Both of the Half-moons talked, the female was the more talented. She would say "I love you" and "Let's go shopping!" along with a variety of other things. The female had plucked her chest feathers all out; the male was in perfect condition. I set the birds up with their new mates but eventually lost the female to the young male from mate aggression. Another pair of birds was too close and the male kept beating up on his mate because he could not get to the other birds. Since the female plucked, I thought she was plucking again and didn't realize what was happening until it was too late. Another entry into the book on lessons learned.

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In captivity, Half-moons are normally easy to keep. I have read that they are hard to breed in captivity but I have not found them difficult to breed. My pair has bred in a rather small cage, in various rooms of the house, and even shortly after moving to a friend's house for a time. Several people I know also have good success in breeding these birds in a variety of situations. My pair tends to produce two or three clutches of four babies a year, which is normal compared to others who are breeding this species. I recently removed my pair's nest box simply because I was tired of raising babies!

My Half-moons are very good parents. They like a plain square box about 8 x 10 x 8 inches. Both birds care for the babies. My hen often does not sit on her first egg much until the second egg is laid. Many clutches will have chicks hatch the same day because of this. She also is quick to leave the nest box any time someone enters the aviary. I have to be observant to notice when she is laying because she doesn't stay in the box like my other conures do when they have eggs. I usually notice her becoming even more aggressive and that is the key to watching for eggs.

In my opinion, hand-fed Half-moons can be very aggressive birds, especially in breeding situations. Even when they are not breeding, my Half-moon hen will fly directly out the door at feeding time and attack the first human flesh she can reach. Fortunately for my bird sitter, the attack bird normally reserves this behavior for those of us she loves and trusts the most.

The chicks develop quickly. The eyes are opening by two weeks of age and the feathers seem to develop faster than some of the larger conures. I typically leave the chicks in the nest until they are three or four weeks old. When removed at that age, they often scream at me like little banshees every time I feed them or look at them the first couple of days. After they settle down, they don't scream any more but do get very vocal at feeding time.

Elke Davis, ICA member from Corpus Christi, also breeds Half-moons.

She prefers to remove the chicks for hand feeding at about two weeks of age because they are more difficult to feed when they are older. I know that my babies do tend to eat slower at the older age. I have not found there to be a big difference in how well the babies eat at three or four weeks of age. I have often wondered if their little personalities might be different by removing them at two weeks and I may experiment with that on a future clutch. Elke says that her chicks act ferocious even at a very young age, but they are all bark and no bite. Mine also act tough at a young age but they do bite if they are threatened or don't want to be interrupted.

Some other breeders have told me that the Half-moons are more difficult to hand feed in general. I have found that in almost every clutch of babies, there is at least one bird that does not want to eat as well. I also have had a couple of young chicks die in the nest and it appeared that they weren't eating. I typically check my young chicks every day and these seemed completely healthy. I know the parents are good to feed their chicks, so I have wondered if even some of the young chicks don't have a good feeding response for the parents. I have since taken a baby with poor skin tone that appeared to not be eating well and gave it a couple of supplemental feedings. The chick responded well and grew up to be a healthy bird. Since breeding birds is building on experience, I now keep a close eye on the chicks to avoid losing one to this problem.

Most chicks wean by seven or eight weeks of age, depending on the personality of the clutch. The youngest age I have hand fed is 24 days. I remove the babies from the nest late in the evening after the parents have fed the chicks in preparation for the night (a tip I learned from Brent Andrus). They get their first hand feeding the next morning when they are good and hungry. At this age I feed the chicks three times a day. The amount fed at each feeding may be as little as five cc's or as much as 12 cc's. This is determined by how much the chick wants to

eat. If a chick eats less at a feeding, I watch the weight carefully and pay attention to how much it eats later. Usually this balances out through the day or is a sign that the chick doesn't need one of the daily feedings.

At an average of 37 days old, the feedings are reduced to twice a day. I determine this by how well the chicks eat at the mid-day feeding. When they eat only three or four cc's, it is time to cut back. I provide two feedings a day until the average age of 51 days. Again, the decision to cut back is determined on how the chicks eat at the morning feeding. I also begin providing weaning foods between the 37 and 51 days. The chicks usually wean very quickly after going to one feeding, with the average age to wean being 57 days.

Weaning foods are provided as soon as the chicks show interest in picking up things. I provide cereal (such as Cheerios or Chex), a weaning pellet or just small pellets. When the chicks are gnawing at the cereal-like foods, I start providing soft foods such as mixed veggies and pasta. This usually proves to be a huge hit. When the babies show more interest in the weaning foods in the mornings, it is a clear sign that they are close to going to only one feeding a day.

The chicks fledge at about six or seven weeks. After letting them fly about for a few days to get good balance, I typically clip the wings for my own sanity. The newly-flighted youngsters love to fly just out of reach and watch with glee as you get a step to reach them. Then they happily fly to the next high point and wait for you to play their game of "catch me if you can." Half-moons are excellent fliers and can be very agile. It is important to clip all of the flight feathers if you want to keep these little guys from flying all over the house.

I have found that handfed babies love human attention but typically are not cuddly birds. Pet Half-moons will sit on your shoulder or near you and be a companion everywhere you allow, but they don't seem to love to snuggle like some of the other conures. Hand-fed



*Here we see a young female Half-moon Conure about nine months old assisting in the care of her younger siblings who are four to five weeks old.*

babies will go wild if they are not handled consistently. I had a young bird that didn't sell and she was completely wild at six-months old. With a little work on trust, she learned to fly to our shoulders and would happily spend time with us that way. We never really got her to allow us to pet her and she definitely would not step up on our hands. Young Half-moons need to be put in separate cages and handled daily in order to remain tame.

Half-moons have a very "cocky" personality that seems to be the trait that appeals the most as pets. They don't realize that they are small birds and consider themselves to be the center of the universe.

Elke describes the personality perfectly on her web page. "I think the song about 'doing it my way' was written with the Half-moon in mind. Most of them have a mind of their own, will get in trouble on purpose, and just look at you like they are saying 'Well, what are you going to do about it?'"

Half-moons usually learn to talk well even at young ages and can learn many phrases as well as other household noises. I had one learn the squeak of the front door so well that I had to check it to see if it was the door or the bird. I have taught the hen of my breeding pair to fly to my hand for a sun-

flower seed with very little effort. (She also is a hand fed bird that went wild by the age of six months.)

I have read in more than one account that half-moons do not care to bathe. My pair is the exception to this. They will get absolutely soaking wet in a bowl of water or with a spray bottle. If I am in the room and they are able to fly to me, I am reminded not too subtly that I am spraying an inferior bird that should not be receiving the honors prior to the all-important Half-moon. I have noticed my Half-moons out bathing in the aviary even on chilly fall mornings. All of the babies I have raised also love the water.

Another trait that I have noticed with my birds and the babies I have raised is that the Half-moons have little interest in other species of conures or birds. I have had both a young Blue-crowned and a Dusky-headed Conure at the same time as young Half-moons. Even as babies, they do not show any interest in the other species. However, I have had baby Half-moons and an immature Half-moon hen at the same time. All of the birds were extremely interested in each other. The immature hen would even aggressively defend the baby she was with to keep me away.

Overall, the Half-moon makes a delightful pet bird. They are spunky, playful, and talkative. They are flexible and easy to keep in a variety of situations. Elke has found that many people who previously owned Half-moons are very dedicated to finding another if they lose their original bird. Since they are a small bird and are relatively inexpensive, they tend to make a good pet that won't require a lot of space.

Most of my observations are based on my one pair and their offspring. Since I only have a few chicks a year, I am able to spend more time recording information and experimenting with different methods. Hopefully, with what I have shared combined with the knowledge of several others, this species will be better understood in the future. It definitely deserves a place in modern aviculture. ❖



*Four, yes, four baby Half-moon Conures snuggled in a special bird hut. The babies are about six to seven weeks old*