

Golden Conure and the Endangered Species Act

As a result of the United States Endangered Species Act (ESA), interstate commerce (across state lines) of the Golden Conure is controlled by the United States Government. While many species of birds are endangered, federal permits are required only for certain species. There are several different permits available as a result of the ESA, but a captive-bred wildlife permit is the most common type issued to aviculturists interested in keeping and breeding an endangered species as defined by the ESA.

Although many conditions and regulations abound to individuals holding federal permits, the most notable condition states "Permittee may transfer authorized wildlife in interstate commerce under authority of this registration only if transactions are with persons holding valid captive-bred wildlife registrations covering the species involved." Unethical permit holders often assure prospective purchasers that no violation of federal law will be committed if a transaction is consummated within the state of the permit holder (i.e., if the purchaser travels to the state of the seller). It is true that intrastate sales or purchases are not controlled due to the separation of federal and state governments. However, simply traveling to the state of the permit holder is not considered intrastate commerce because the purchaser is not a legal resident of that state. Transactions such as these are clearly illegal.

Captive-bred wildlife permits are not issued to individuals interested in keeping a permitted species as a companion. Federal permits of this type are issued for the sole purpose of enhancement to the propagation and survival of the species through captive breeding.

Individuals interested in obtaining an application for a captive bred permit may obtain further information from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service in Washington, D. C. The application for a captive bred permit can also be downloaded from their website at www.fws.gov. ❖

Keeping and Breeding The Golden Conure

Nancy Speed, Benton, Mississippi

I consider it a genuine privilege to share my life with the Golden Conure (*Guaruba guarouba*). At the time I acquired my initial breeding collection, this distinctive parrot was commonly referred to as the Queen of Bavaria, or Queen, a designation I find difficult to set aside.

My acquisition a number of years ago of a group of these stunning parrots was only as a result of gentle persuasion. My friend and I had already finalized the details concerning my purchase of her other breeding parrots. "Oh, you have to take the Queens, too!" she announced as if the request was a mere afterthought. Due in part to my ignorance of the species, I had no interest in purchasing her flock of fifteen. Undaunted by my lack of enthusiasm, my friend recounted the many virtues of these unique parrots, convincing me I would never regret the purchase. Her prediction was correct.

Description

The Golden Conure is indeed distinctive, and surely one of the most beautiful parrots. It averages about 14 inches in length and has an average weight of about 250 grams. The body plumage of the adult is a breathtaking yellow that rivals the most perfectly colored lemon. The primary, secondary and major coverts are dark green. Feather quills are white, and a bare white ring surrounds its very kind and observant eye. The macaw-size upper and lower mandibles are horn colored with some bluish mottling occurring throughout, especially toward the tips. The tip of the upper mandible is dagger sharp. Legs and feet are pinkish with black mottling. The iris is brownish with an orange tint.

A juvenile Golden is readily identifiable by the appearance of numerous olive green feathers interspersed throughout the body. Juvenile feather quills are also dark green. Adult plumage is completely attained by the age of two. The amount of green marking a juvenile may possess is by coincidence. The juvenile also has a beguiling and innocent expression.

Range and Status

The Golden Conure is native to a very remote area in northeastern Brazil. Its range extends westward to the bank of the Madeira Rio, and as far east as the Gurupi. In the wild, it travels above the rain forest canopy and enjoys a varied diet. Preferred nesting sites are in hollows of high



Of course, one begins with babies like this in the nest. There are several ways one can carry on from this point in the effort to bring the babies to fledging.

trees. Deforestation of this parrot's habitat is taking place at an alarming rate.

Housing

My breeding collection of Golden Conures is housed in identical flights constructed from galvanized after welding, 14 gauge, 1 x 11/2" wire. The flights are six feet in length, 36" in width, and four feet in height. Rear perches are 1 PVC pipe; front perches are 2" x 2" fir lumber. Each pair is provided with two hanging toys constructed from scrap fir lumber. Lumber perches and toys are refurbished on a regular basis.

A distance of about 12" separates each of the flights. Privacy panels are hung closest to the nest box and cover about one-third of each flight. The privacy panels remain in place regardless of the level of breeding activity.

I have experimented with several nest box styles and find pairs prefer an inverted boot box, also called an "el" or "7" box, of at least 24 inches in depth, with the interior measuring about 10" x 10". Nest boxes are hung on the

front of flights for ease of servicing from the center aisle. Nest box medium consists of a mixture of very large fir chips and pine bark mulch. Metal nest boxes can be used if the nesting area is protected from sunlight. All nest boxes should be firmly secured to the flights.

The aviary housing all flights is constructed to allow exposure to naturally occurring weather conditions as temperatures permit. The outermost 36" of the metal roof panels are removed during the warm weather months to allow the birds access to sun and rain. When temperatures drop to below 45 degrees Fahrenheit, the roof panels are replaced and the building is secured with 6M plastic. A gas greenhouse heater, properly vented to the exterior, offers additional heat as needed to keep the interior above 45 degrees Fahrenheit. Full spectrum lighting is controlled by automatic timer when the roof panels are in place.

Seasonal feather chewing or picking usually occurs when the aviaries are prepared for cold temperatures. One or two of my adults pick habitually, regardless of environmental factors. The tendency to chew or pick is as prevalent in parent-fledged youngsters as it is in hand-reared youngsters.

Juveniles and other nonbreeding Golden are housed in like sized flights in close proximity without the presence of privacy panels.

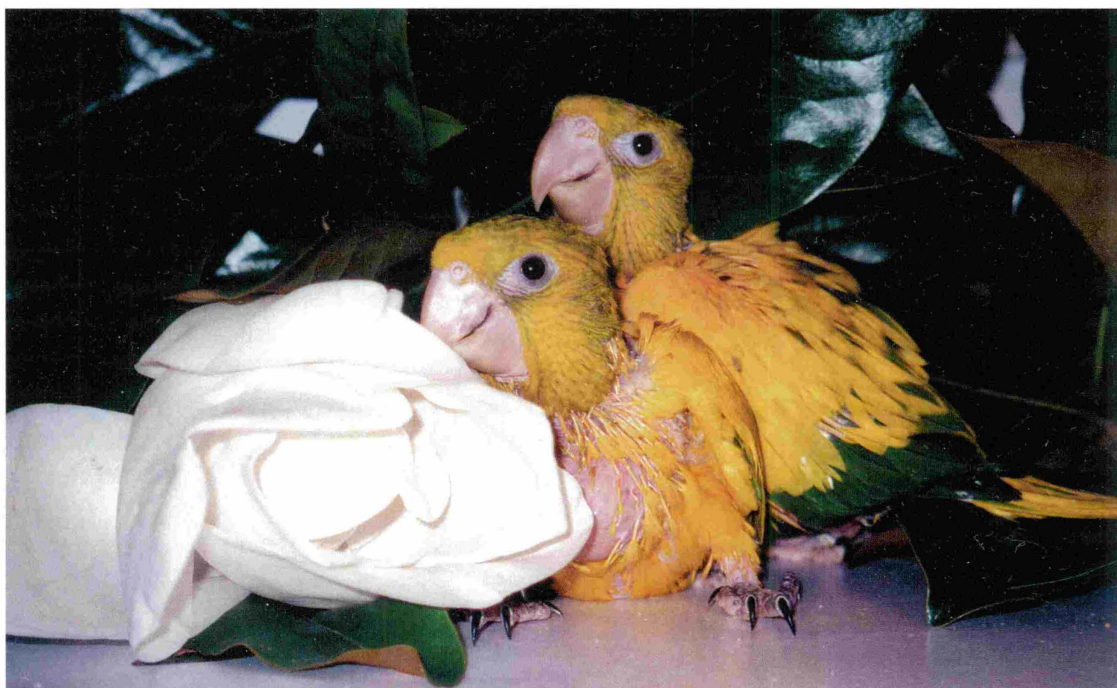
The Golden Conure has a very loud, metallic call that travels a great distance. In an aviary setting, a joyful group of 30 articulate individuals will cause eardrums to vibrate. Chicks begin vocalizing as adults by the time they are just a few weeks old. Vocalization among birds of this species seems to be an important part of their social structure.

Feeding

I have not found the Golden to be a particularly finicky parrot. Adults and juveniles are offered a high quality extruded

These babies have been pulled from the nest box before they reached fledging and are being handfed by their human "parent."

Handfed babies usually make excellent pets but if they are socialized, they can also make good breeders





A pair of harried parents just hanging out to escape the pesky chick they reared themselves.

You can see the youngster on the perch is begging. You also note he is not completely colored out yet.

These parents do an excellent job of producing parent-reared babies

diet (I use Hagen Tropicana) free choice. In a separate bowl, a mixture of sprouts, vegetables, fruits and pine nuts are offered six days per week. A quality seed mix is offered on Sunday. I consider sprouts and pine nuts two of the most important ingredients in the diet of Golden Conures held in captivity.

Captive Breeding

Once their needs are met, Golden Conures are prolific breeders. I am presently holding many F3 juveniles from

two bloodlines. My F2 stock began producing at age five. The earliest success reported has been age three, but I believe this to be a rarity.

Clutch sizes range from three to five eggs. The number of clutches per year varies but usually ranges from two to four. For the pairs I keep, my records indicate the length of their breeding season ranges the entire twelve months of the year. This is probably due in part to our relatively mild climate.

Things are calm and peaceful while this parent-fledged chick sits happily on the perch with his parents.



The number of clutches one pair may produce yearly is dependent upon many factors. Pairs which are not allowed to incubate and feed will often return to nest within a very short time. Pairs which are allowed to incubate and feed will rest for a longer period of time between clutches. Pairs which are allowed to fledge chicks may not return to nest for a year, especially if any juveniles are allowed to remain with the parent birds after weaning.

Golden Conures held for breeding are happiest when in the presence of other Golden Conures. Owning a single bonded pair of these highly social parrots does not guarantee reproductive success. In fact, I believe the highest rate of infertility occurs in single pair homes. The Golden Conure is by nature a very gregarious and social parrot with an intense need for interaction among others of its own species.

I believe it advisable to allow these very social parrots to live in family groups if accommodations are spacious, at least until mate selection is finalized. It is important that unpaired individuals be allowed to interact within these groups. I usually place a single male with two or three identifiable hens. Groups are so harmonious that it may take a couple of years for a pair to be noted. A true pair and the extra hens can continue sharing flight space even while eggs are being incubated. With my pairs, it is common practice to see all of the hens in the nest box during incubation. This can make it difficult to ascertain the true brooding hen. It is surmised that in the wild these extra singles also assist in feeding chicks. However, I have always removed adult singles from the flights of true pairs before hatch date. The brooding hen can be identified as the hen that most vigorously defends the nest box and surrounding territory. The unpaired hens also defend the nest box, but to a lesser degree.

Disparity among the ages does not seem to be a cause for concern when grouping Golden Conures. Two years ago I released two hand-reared males into a flight housing two parent-fledged hens. The hens were about six years of age and bonded to each other, but showed no animosity toward the two-year-old males. These hens have only recently shown any interest in bonding as mates with the males.

During this same period, I also introduced a one-year-old parent-fledged male to an unproven thirteen-year-old hen. The hen befriended the juvenile almost immediately, and nested the following year. Of course, fertility could not be expected in a one year old male. The hen has recently returned to nest, but I have little hope any eggs will show fertility. The young male does not display any of the protective behavior shown by my mature breeding males. Therefore, I assume no copulation between the pair is occurring.

Parent Rearing

For many years the rumor has circulated that Golden Conures demonstrate little or no parenting skills. I recall the first time I allowed one of my pairs the opportunity to incubate and feed a clutch of chicks. I told another breeder about

this exciting event. Her droll response was "A Queen that feeds its chicks? Never!" My personal experiences have proven that Golden Conures are usually devoted to their chicks. I consider it unfortunate that some who consider themselves aviculturists do not allow natural incubation when possible. Males and females share parental duties and defend the nest box and feeding area with a vengeance. When excited or agitated, they spread their wings and shake their heads, vocalizing loudly. It is true that nest box inspections are not well tolerated, and these inspections should certainly never be attempted while parents are in the box. I believe that most incidents of failure can be attributed to excessive invasions of privacy or other environmental factors.

I fully understand and appreciate the argument that every Golden Conure chick should be saved. However, it is critical that Golden Conures be given the opportunity to learn good parenting skills, and this can only be done by trial and error.

Two pair of my F2 Golden Conures have nested. With its first clutch, one pair fledged three chicks to weaning. The second pair fledged one chick to weaning with its first clutch. Both of these producing pairs were handfed and then released with other juveniles at weaning.

While chicks are in the nest, the adults are fed large quantities of fresh food twice daily. Golden chicks have enormous macaw-like lower mandibles.

Protruding fleshy pads are also present on the upper mandibles of juveniles. When touched, they trigger a vigorous feeding response. These very sensitive pads usually disappear within two years.

Feathered chicks also have a very strange odor. After catching my first whiff of a well feathered clutch of Golden in the nursery, I crinkled my nose and turned to the nursery help. "What is that smell?" I asked. After a complete investigation of the nursery, we began sniffing all the babies and realized the strong odor came from the chicks. Over the years I have come to love that pungent smell.

Parent reared chicks fledge the nest at about 12 weeks of age, but return to the nest box frequently, sometimes accompanied by the parents. Families also use the nest box for sleeping quarters. For this reason, I replace a soiled nest box with a refurbished one after all chicks have initially fledged.

The flight and tail feathers of parent fledged chicks often suffer from excessive parental preening. Groups of weaned juveniles, both hand-reared and parent-fledged, will also chew the tail feathers of each other.

Hand Rearing

The majority of Golden Conures I rear are parent fledged or parent started, but occasionally it is necessary to intervene if chicks are not receiving adequate parental care. Feeding this species from Day One can be a challenge for the inexperienced, and should not be attempted by those unfamiliar with their special needs. Once compromised,

chicks fed from Day One succumb to bacterial infections and stunting syndrome at an alarming pace.

My preferred hand feeding formula for Day One Golden Conures is Zupreem Embrace Plus. To one cup of dry formula, I add one-fourth cup of ground organic sunflower seed meat. Healthy chicks are vigorous feeders and always seem to be ravenous. Consequently, care must be taken not to stretch the crops.

Growth Rate

The growth chart illustrates the incomplete growth rate of four chicks reared from Day One. Hatch weights varied from 6.8 grams to 10.1 grams. Chicks 1, 2, and 3 are not weaned as of this writing. Chick 4 was reared at an earlier date and weights were not recorded after Day 33.

Initial weight gains in parent-started chicks are much more dramatic than those fed from Day One. Therefore, weight gains of parent-started chicks cannot fairly be used as a comparison for what may be considered appropriate in Day One chicks.

I vividly recall the anxiety I experienced years ago when I compared the weight of different species of chicks in my nursery to the weight charts prepared and published by various breeding facilities. The weight gains of the chicks I was feeding seemed meager in comparison to the weight gains of chicks provided in the published charts. I personally prefer to observe the appearance and demeanor of a particular chick in addition to reviewing weight gain. Healthy chicks are pink with plump feet and wings. If a neonate is gaining weight on a daily basis, and not showing any sign of stunting, the chick is most likely developing at a proper pace.

In the Nursery

The young Golden Conure has an extroverted and flexible personality. Its demeanor is almost always cheerful and engaging. Though this species can be mischievous, it is an open hearted

and trusting parrot. I am constantly amazed at its amicable attitude toward unfamiliar people and parrots.

I have yet to find a species in my nursery which the Golden Conure did not attempt to befriend. Due to its mild personality, it gets along especially well with a more strong-willed species, such as the Caique. The juvenile Golden has an intense desire to nurture and often attempts to feed other unweaned juveniles of all species in the nursery.

Family Groups

I have recently begun allowing certain pairs the opportunity to return to nest while a juvenile from a previous hatch remains a part of the family group. My first experience involved a Golden pair and one parent-fledged juvenile. The juvenile hatched March 6, 2002 and fledged at about 12 weeks of age. This pair returned to nest and produced four fertile eggs in September of 2002. Since I was unsure of how the juvenile would react to subsequent chicks, I removed the remaining three eggs after the first chick hatched on October 26, 2002.

Initial nest box inspections revealed the family group was thriving. Nest box inspections were then limited to every few days. Unfortunately, I discovered the chick dead on December 1, 2002. Its crop was full and I could find no external sign of trauma. The chick had emerging pin feathers and had been well nurtured. Since it was obvious the chick had been dead for a few days, I felt necropsy results would be compromised as a result of natural bacterial changes. With sadness, the chick was buried in our pet cemetery.

Nest Box Cameras

I recently installed an infrared camera in the nest box of the Golden pair that was allowed to return to nest while one of the pair's youngsters remained in the family group. As of this writing, I have recorded about 300 hours of activity.

It is fascinating and entertaining to observe the day-to-day activities of

this small family group. The adult pair copulates within the confines of the nest box. The unsexed year-old juvenile continues to solicit feeding from the parents as the trio interacts in the nest box. The juvenile rolls on its back with infantile jubilation while in the nest box as it inspects its toes and attempts to play with the adults. The hen patiently attempts to prepare the nesting medium for another clutch, and leaves the box when the juvenile's antics appear to become aggravating. At dusk, the trio snuggles together affectionately for a night of slumber.

I will present the results of this endeavor, including video footage, to the public at a later date.

Golden Conures as Companion Parrots

For some, mere exclusivity is reason enough to justify the purchase of a very rare parrot. Whether the species is suitable for the pet trade is often secondary to the issue. Though the Golden Conure is not well known in the companion parrot trade, this species can be delightful when the requirements regarding its care and feeding are appropriately addressed.

Golden Conures kept as companions should be afforded the same level of care as those kept in breeding situations. Due to their special needs, I would consider them to be a high maintenance parrot. They are gregarious, social parrots that must be treated as an integral part of a human family. Full of vim and vigor, they enjoy flying, climbing and playing with toys that are intricately designed. They are quite adept at removing buttons, earrings and other jewelry.

My favorite story involving the Golden Conure as a pet was told by Howard Gunther of The Birdbrain. Howard and Barbara love to cook and have a restaurant sized kitchen. Goldie, who is fully flighted, vanished while Barbara was in the kitchen preparing for a dinner party. Goldie was not in her usual perching areas. Howard and Barbara began calling her name, all the

while searching the house frantically. When they decided to search the kitchen again, movement in the large bowl of salad caught Howard's eye. When he called her name, Goldie popped up happily through a mountain of greens, oblivious to the entire incident.

The indiscriminate inbreeding of rare species is detrimental to the very small gene pool and does nothing to enhance the breed. Therefore, those who purchase very rare parrots must insist the seller also provide any data available regarding bloodlines.

Responsibility

Individuals interested in owning rare parrots also shoulder an additional responsibility, and that is one of heritage. In the United States, the gene pool for most endangered parrots is very limited. Responsible aviculturists track the lineage of every endangered parrot purchased, sold, or hatched, and strive to keep the gene pool diverse.

Conclusion

I find the major disadvantage to owning these extraordinary parrots is the reluctance to part with even one of the progeny that may be produced. Therefore, I would advise anyone thinking of keeping and breeding the Golden Conure to reserve at least three times the area believed necessary to house this magnificent species. ❖

The AFA office address and contact information is:

American Federation of Aviculture
P.O. Box 7312
N. Kansas City, Missouri 54116

Telephone
(816) 421-2473 (BIRD)

FAX
(816) 421-3214

Email
afaoffice@aol.com

