

# The Vinaceous Amazon

## *Amazona vinacea*

Nancy Speed, Benton, Mississippi  
Photos by Heather Shelton

"Their orange-red eyes gleam with uncontrollable defiance; yet they are not wicked, but gentle, and even old ones, which have been tamed by a shot in flight, soon become tame. In captivity they are extremely quiet, but cunning and teachable; yet they learn comparatively little, and do not even speak distinctly. They must, in this respect, take secondary rank among the Amazons."

K. Petermann, a German aviculturist, penned this description of the Vinaceous Amazon during the late 1800s in a book written by Dr. Karl Russ. Thankfully, the passage of time and the experience of dedicated aviculturists have proven this Amazon very worthy of keeping and breeding. The Vinaceous Amazon is neither defiant nor stupid, as intimated in *The Speaking Parrots*.

### Description

The Vinaceous Amazon is the only Amazon with a red maxillary beak, the tip of which is horn colored. The forehead, chin, and lores are also red. The exquisite erectile feathers on the back of the neck are green with a band of soft bluish-grey near the edge. The upper breast is a brilliant wine red color, and this color may extend down into the abdominal area. Feathers in the abdominal area also have a bluish green tint. The carpal edge of the wing and wing speculum are red. There is also a red patch near the base of the lateral tail feathers, with the primary color of the tail being green with a little yellow at the tip. The feet are grey. The iris is red. There are color variations of the Vinaceous which may be due to the area from which it originated. Some specimens lack the intense vinous coloring on the under parts of the body.

The immature Vinaceous will have less brilliant coloring on the breast. The iris of an immature bird is paler than that of an adult. The red in the maxillary beak will be confined to the base. The red in the forehead is also less pronounced. The carpal edge of the wing is yellow.

The natural call of the Vinaceous Amazon can be raucous and loud, especially in a group setting during late afternoon. When content and while preening, it often emits a distinctive and delightful "purring" sound.

### Range and Status

The Vinaceous Amazon is endemic to southeastern South America. It is most often found in the southeastern

part of Brazil, eastern Paraguay, and the northeastern part of Argentina. Major declines in populations of this parrot have occurred as a result of extensive deforestation. As deforestation occurs, the species' habitat becomes increasingly fragmented, making the populations more accessible and vulnerable to hunting (primarily for the illegal bird trade).

In the areas noted above, the Vinaceous resides in the tropical and subtropical mixed evergreen forest, and favors pine trees. Seasonal movements occur in this species, which may be related to food supply and breeding habits. It is generally found in small flocks and possibly breeds in loose colonies.

This parrot was never imported into the United States as regularly as some other Amazon species. As a result of the Endangered Species Act, interstate commerce of this parrot requires a federal permit. The population in the wild is estimated at below 2,500 birds and it is a CITES 1 listed species. Its status is considered endangered.

### Diet in Captivity

The diet for the Vinaceous Amazons I keep is similar to that of my other Amazon parrots. A high quality, extruded diet (I use Hagen Tropicana) is offered free choice. In a separate bowl, a mixture of raw green and orange vegetables, fruits, sprouted grey-stripe sunflower, and pine nuts is offered five mornings per week. Oranges are a favorite food of this parrot. A very small amount of seed is offered on Saturday. The extruded diet is fed exclusively on Sunday. It is interesting to note that on Monday morning all of my Amazon pairs are eager for fresh Tropicana and often prefer it first before turning to their fresh food.

### Breeding Experience

My experience in keeping and breeding the Vinaceous Amazon is limited, but has been successful. I obtained my year old, parent-fledged juveniles in November, 2000. These eight birds were extremely nervous, almost panic stricken, and very wary of humans. To ease their transition, I quarantined them exactly as they were reared while with the parent birds, regardless of the sex ratio.

The young Amazons were noticeably calmer by the spring of 2001, and I decided to relocate them to a breeding

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aviary. The location I chose offered the most privacy possible, but was also located quite a distance from my other Amazon pairs. The neighboring pairs of parrots are various species of Cockatoos and I did not know if that fact would hinder future breeding activity.

I house most species of Amazons in flights that are six feet in length, 36 inches in width and 4 feet in height. Rear perches are one-inch PVC pipe. Forward perches are 2 x 4 fir lumber. Each pair is provided two hanging toys constructed from scrap fir lumber. Perches and toys are refurbished on a regular basis. A distance of about 14 inches separates each flight, and side privacy panels are always in place. I usually make a practice of staggering the different species so that no two of the same species are residing immediately next to each other.

I am not an advocate of forced pairing while setting up breeding pairs. The eight Vinaceous had been within sight of each other since fledging and were comfortable with one another. While in quarantine, I made a note of the hens that gravitated toward certain males consistently. After checking bloodlines, I took this information into consideration when pairing them. The birds were then released into flights within close proximity to each other. One exciting fact concerning the breeding habits of the Vinaceous is that they are content to live in small colonies, even while nesting. For this reason, I chose not to hang privacy panels between any of their flights.

Nest boxes were provided in December of 2001. Most of my Amazon pairs prefer an inverted boot box, also known as a "7" box, with a minimum depth of 30 inches and with a nesting area of about 10 inches by 10 inches. Nesting medium consists of a mixture of very large fir chips (not shavings) and pine bark mulch. It is difficult to express the elation I felt when I discovered one pair showing an interest in nesting in February of 2002. Shortly thereafter, two other pair also went to nest. The fourth pair showed no interest in nesting.

Due to the ages of these birds, I had no real expectation that any pair would produce fertile eggs. The first pair to nest produced two clutches totaling eight eggs. None were fertile. The second pair produced one clutch of one egg. It was not fertile. The third pair produced three eggs. All were fertile. I desperately wanted to pull every egg for artificial incubation. However, I am firmly convinced that breeding pairs of all species should be given ample opportunity to incubate and feed. The hen was incubating well, and I could think of no plausible reason to pull the eggs for artificial incubation.

I kept nest box inspections to a minimum during incubation and hoped the hen's instincts would guide her to successfully brood and feed any chicks that might hatch. The first chick hatched on April 15, 2002 and I breathed a sigh of relief when I noted its full crop. The other chicks hatched on April 17 and 19, 2002. Once every day or so, I peeked

into the nest box to monitor their development. The parent birds were consuming huge quantities of vegetables, sprouts, fruit, and seed. The crops of the two oldest chicks were always packed. The crop of the third chick was rarely half full, but the chick did not seem to be distressed. As the two older chicks began to pin out, however, the youngest chick was unable to compete for food and began to exhibit signs of stunting. I happily removed him for hand rearing.

The parent birds continued to show excellent parenting skills. I have no doubt these skills were directly related to the fact that *they* were parent reared and allowed to socialize with their own kind as parrots. As the remaining two youngsters pinned out, the hen spent less time inside the nest box, which allowed me more latitude with inspections. The youngsters never failed to growl at me and display their splendid, emerging ruffs. They fledged the nest box before they were eight weeks old. Their size was almost identical to the parent birds, although their coloring was a little less vibrant. The parent birds continued to feed the youngsters after fledging.

After fledging, the juveniles raced to the rear of the flight when I approached. They were clearly terrified, but nonetheless growled ferociously and displayed their intimidating ruffs in unison at my appearance. The parent birds did not react to their display or their anxiety. After a few days, the youngsters became more comfortable outside the nest box and discontinued this practice. It is also conceivable that they stopped this behavior because the parent birds did not act in this manner. Observations from other parent-fledged species indicate that fledges eventually act or react in the same manner as the adults.

The chick I pulled for hand feeding blossomed into a sassy, blustery character that was a joy to rear. Vinnie, a male, has no fear of humans, and his personality is very different from his wild siblings. As his stunning colors emerged from the pinfeathers, his displaying intensified. He continues to take great pleasure in displaying his ruff to other parrots, as well as to humans. He has an outgoing and bold but gentle personality.

Vinnie's initial feathering revealed an excessive amount of stress bars. This is most likely a result of his being underfed and pushed aside by the larger siblings while in the nest. Two years later, his stature remains much thicker and heavier than the parent-reared juveniles. His coloring is more intense and seems to be unnatural when compared to the siblings. I can attribute this only to the hand feeding formula.

### **Inside the Nest Box**

Nest box cameras are an invaluable educational tool that enables an aviculturist to become more knowledgeable of the nesting habits of breeding pairs. In the winter of 2003 I installed a camera into the nest box of the proven pair and allowed the juveniles that fledged in 2002 to remain with





*Six well fed baby Vinaceous Amazons on the way to becoming beautiful adults. All birds in these pictures belong to the author.*



Photos by Nancy Speed

the parent birds. The hen went to nest in early March, 2003 and produced four fertile eggs.

The decision to allow juveniles to remain within a family unit at the beginning of another breeding season should never be made without thoughtful consideration, and certainly not without strict observation. Several years of allowing various species of Cockatoo to fledge chicks have shown that adult males will often attempt to drive away year old juveniles when the adult hen returns to nest. In one Moluccan pair, the male is very tolerant of a juvenile hen, but equally intolerant of a juvenile male.

My observations of several family units of the Golden Conure indicate that year old juveniles readily assist in the care and feeding of neonates. The Vinaceous is also considered a very social parrot and I was eager to learn if the behavior within a family unit resembled that of the Golden Conure.

As I began reviewing the hundreds of hours of recorded interaction taking place within the confines of the nest box, my focus rapidly changed from wanting to watch chicks hatch and grow, to observing the relationships within the family unit. Since I am very interested in the behavior of parrots kept for breeding, the anticipated hatching and growth rate of the chicks became the least important detail in my observations. There were several relationships apparent among these birds. The interaction between the adult male and adult female were very different from the interaction among the adult male and the 2002 juveniles. Likewise, the adult hen treated the juveniles in a dif-



*Vinnie, the rejected baby, thrived on the hand feeding formula. His emerging coloring clearly shows. His intimidating ruff gives way to a bold but gentle personality.*

ferent manner than she treated the adult male.

The two juveniles behaved as one might imagine juveniles of any species would behave. At times they barely tolerated each other and, while the hen incubated her eggs, seldom entered the nest box simultaneously. Although each juvenile attempted to steal and play with the eggs, neither attempted to incubate them. Neither juvenile



attempted to feed the hen. They respected the adult male and often appeared to be afraid of him if either was present when he entered the box.

As the hatch date for the 2003 chicks neared, the juveniles began entering the nest box more often and began to aggravate the hen in a more insistent manner. The hen also became much less tolerant of their presence. When a youngster climbed down the ladder to the nesting area she would calmly and purposely bite the juvenile's legs, encouraging it to exit quickly. It would have been educational to observe any interaction between the juveniles and neonates, but at this point I thought it prudent to remove the one-year-old juveniles.

When I removed the juveniles, I also removed two eggs for artificial incubation. I did not think it likely she would successfully fledge four chicks to weaning.

The first chick hatched two days later. I thought it interesting that the hen fed this chick less than one hour after hatch. The male showed interest in the chick, but the hen brooded tightly and refused to allow him access to it. He seemed content stealing the remaining egg. He never made any attempt to incubate it, and treated it more as a novelty than a treasure. After he left the box, the hen would carefully retrieve her egg and continue incubation. This behavior was repeated several times daily.

When I reviewed the footage of the second chick hatching four days later, I was pleasantly surprised by the hen's actions. Aviculturists have differing opinions con-



*An open wing displays the backside color pattern.*

*A group of young Vinaceous Amazons raised in the author's aviary display their unique coloring.*



Photos by Heather Shelton

cerning the behavior of a hen while a chick struggles to hatch. Some believe she is passive and simply waits for a chick to hatch. If it encounters any difficulty—so be it. Others believe a hen takes a proactive approach to hatching chicks, helping them along at appropriate intervals. It was very touching to watch this Vinaceous hen help her second chick out of the egg after it rotated and rid itself of the top half of the shell. At one point I could see the chick dangling in mid air as she gently lifted the bottom half of the shell which held the hatchling. I heard distinctive crunching sounds as she removed the shell from the chick. She then tucked the hatchling carefully beneath her breast.

The hen covered her two chicks tightly for several days. While she watched closely, the male was allowed to preen them six days after the first chick hatched. The male was not left alone with the chicks until Day 10. Although he never attempted to feed them, the male preened them vigorously, frequently without regard to technique. If he became too excited, the hen would place herself between the chicks and the male and divert his attention by soliciting grooming.

When the male left the nest box, he often walked over the chicks to reach the ladder. Squeals of surprise and protest were made by the chicks at his clumsiness, but he never gave any notice of their reaction. Alternatively, the hen always treated her chicks with reverence and affection. She was always able to reposition herself and her chicks without alarming them.

The chicks were fed during the night until Day 15. The hen continued to sleep with the chicks until Day 24. After they began to pin out she entered the box to feed and preen them, but left shortly thereafter. At this point the male began interacting and preening them on a more consistent basis.

Some disturbing footage from Day 40 to Day 45 revealed the chicks beginning to exhibit a great deal of fear toward the male. It was alarming to watch them cringe when he entered the box to groom them. He occasionally lunged at them from the ladder as they shrieked with terror.

I thought it very strange that all of this negative behavior simply vanished by Day 52. The chicks appeared to be very cheerful and relaxed and were no longer fearful of the male.

During this period of development, the feathered chicks also began displaying their emerging ruffs and occasionally challenged the male as he entered the nest box. The youngsters engaged in mock battles and flapped their wings furiously in preparation for fledging.

On Day 52 the oldest chick attempted to climb the interior ladder of the nest box. At this point I was concerned that they were being underfed. Every time I physically checked the nest box the chicks seemed empty. The hen did feed the chicks, but they continued to beg judiciously every time one of the adults entered the box. I surmised all of this behavior was directly related to the chicks' preparation for

fledging. It seemed they were motivated in part to leave the nest due to the lack of attention from the parent birds.

It took several days of practice before the chicks were proficient at climbing the nest box ladder. They spent much of each day on the upper platform and returned to the nesting chamber at night. These chicks finally fledged on or about Day 70 and continue to reside with the parent birds. As of May, 2004 she has not returned to nest.

### **Pairs Off Camera**

During March, 2003 a second pair of Vinaceous went to nest for the first time. This pair had three fertile eggs. Due to the nervous nature of the hen, I did not make a nest box inspection until seven days after the first chick hatched. Two chicks were thriving, but one had the very tip of a wing missing. Since this nest box did not have a camera, I have no idea what took place after these chicks hatched. I removed the chicks for hand feeding, although in retrospect I believe they were in no danger. Removal of a wing tip or a toe is not always a clear indication of aggression, especially when it involves first time parents.

In March, 2004 this pair returned to nest. One egg from a clutch of three was fertile. The pair fledged the chick to weaning. The juvenile continues to reside with the parent birds.

The two remaining pair returned to nest in early 2004 but the eggs from both were clear.

### **Hand Rearing**

The two eggs I pulled for artificial incubation in 2003 from the pair that had the nest box camera hatched without incident. They were reared with the two chicks I pulled from the pair that did not have a camera. On each chick's tenth day I compared the weight of the incubator chicks to the weight of the parent started chicks which were removed at seven days. I found a difference of about 15 grams. Three weeks later I resorted to using band numbers as a means of identification.

The chicks in the nursery developed much as those being parent reared. With the exception of the "fear factor," all of the behaviors observed on the camera monitor were also seen in the nursery. Naturally, there was a much higher degree of outside stimulus from humans and other young parrots. The weanling Vinaceous gravitated toward the Blue-fronted and Yellow-headed Amazons, but were also quite tolerant of youngsters of a different genus.

While in the nursery one of the parent-started chicks developed a runny nose, and received immediate veterinary care for what developed into a serious sinus infection. He received treatment that any avian veterinarian would consider appropriate for this youngster's symptoms and test screening results. A few weeks after treatment, I noticed he had stopped foraging for solid food and was content to stay on his play pen. I immediately called the vet and told him

of my suspicion. When the vet examined him we were both stunned – the weanling was totally blind.

The sinus infection returned six months later and was treated aggressively. Despite being restrained for injections, nasal flushes, and enduring surgery, Mr. Green Jeans remains a trusting and affectionate Vinaceous. He welcomes interaction with familiar people and talks well. Like the sighted Vinaceous, he displays his splendid ruff and plays with his favorite toys. He steps up when asked and, like any other Amazon, enjoys head scratches and ear rubs.

Mr. Green Jeans has adapted to his handicap and moves around comfortably in familiar surroundings. For maximum stimulation he lives in the “bird kitchen,” an area which actually is comprised of several rooms. The bird kitchen encompasses the day to day operations that take place for the adult breeding birds. Each morning we tune in to a talk radio station and he uses this as his barometer. When the radio is turned off, he knows the work day has ended.

### **As Companions**

The Vinaceous Amazon is not well represented in the companion parrot trade in the United States. My limited experience with the Vinaceous has shown this species to be a very intelligent, gentle bird with outstanding potential as a companion parrot. This species is very outgoing without being overly aggressive. The personality of the Vinaceous is kind and flexible, and its talking ability is as outstanding as that of the Yellow-headed Amazons.

### **The Future**

I encourage others drawn to the Amazon parrot to join the efforts of other dedicated aviculturists. Through responsible breeding, we can strive to increase the population of those parrots requiring a federal permit in the United States. Individuals interested in obtaining 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](http://www.fws.gov). The tenacity required to complete the application as required reflects on the true dedication of the interested applicant. I may be contacted at:

[www.ppatchparrots.com](http://www.ppatchparrots.com)

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### **Sources**

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