

the Bananaquit

By Michael Underwood
Holland, Michigan

The bananaquit (*Coereba flaveola*) is common from Mexico to northern Argentina. There are 35 subspecies that all differ slightly in coloration but the basic color scheme is that of a bird with a bright yellow breast, black wings and tail. There may also be black and gray on the head accented by two white superciliary stripes. Allen (Auk, 1905) reported the taking of a partial albino in 1905 in that "The yellow patches were present as in normal specimens but the rest of the plumage was whitish." On the island of Grenada there is a melanistic phase that has been determined by Wunderle (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Minnesota, 1980) to be a non sex-linked, single autosomal locus, with the black allele dominant to yellow. Although the coloration may be admired, the song could hardly be. It might even better be called a faint whining screech, though it is not loud enough to be offensive.

The bananaquit has long been valued by the natives of the West Indies as a cage bird. Scott (Auk, 1893) records that in 1893 it was being kept in cages; the escapees were causing classification ambiguities within the subspecies. And again in this century, Grosse (Wilson Bulletin, 1958) gives human trapping for pets as a predator on the island of Tobago.

This long interest in bananaquits as cage birds is encouraged by their general diet. In the wild they feed on nectar,



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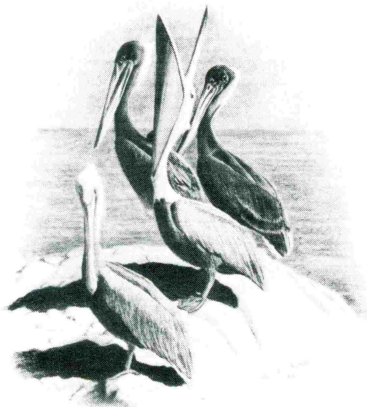
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fruit, and insects. First, the nectar is easily reproducible. There are many hummingbird formulae for nectar, so I will not repeat any here but one of the bananaquits' favorite is a simple one of sugar and water. On St. John USVI the tourists put out this formula in coconut shells for the birds. In the wild this formula is all right for a supplement but in captivity the birds should be given one of the more nutritive mixtures. Grosse tells

of one group of bananaquits that acquired the habit of sucking up the excess liqueur from off the corks in an open air bar. When my party was camped on St. John, we had bananaquits hopping from plate to plate sampling the various foodstuffs. This inquisitiveness is retained in the domestic state. Any food that I would put in the cage with my bananaquits had to be tried immediately. This behavior held true for the second food



CERTHIOLA BAHAMENSIS.

On Stone by C.J. Maynard.

19th century artist's impression of the bananaquit. Photograph by Charles S. St. Clair.

requirement too. The birds unhesitatingly tried all fruits but they liked the very soft and ripe ones best. Snow (Auk, 1971) has recorded them feeding on over 50 different types of flowers and 15 types of fruit so it is apparent that this is a natural trait. The last requirement, insects, is slightly more difficult to supply. Stomach analysis (Bowdish, 1903; Danforth, Auk, 1928 and 1930) has shown that they consume *Coleoptera*, *Hemiptera*, and *Diptera* is the wild state. In captivity they will eat many small insects with relish including the mealworm, which they will suck the insides out of, discarding the skin.

Other than feeding, housing is a major factor in keeping bananaquits. Since they are such active birds, they require an aviary rather than a cage. The aviary should be planted for best results. Bananaquits have been bred under these conditions. A look at the wild reproduction of the species serves to illustrate the potential ability of the bananaquit to increase in captivity: They have been known to breed in every month of the year; they are always building nests, the extra ones are used for roosting only; they will use a variety of material to build the nest with; and some pairs have been known to breed up to four times in one year (Struthers, Auk, 1923). Even in the wild, the presence of people near the nest site does not deter the bananaquit.

One example will serve to illustrate the point. Knowlton (Birds of the World, 1909) says "I have seen a pair busily engaged building a nest on a chandelier in the church (at Hillsborough) whilst divine service was being held and over five hundred persons were in the building. A pair built a nest and reared their young in a tethering chain hung up for sale in one of the shops." The nest is a dome shaped affair constructed of weeds, grasses, and rootlets. The nest is lined with cotton or weed down.

Once the nest is built, the three eggs are laid. They take 12 days to hatch and the babies fledge in 18 days. The young are fed by both parents. The females and young can be told apart from the males by lack of clarity in the facial marking or brightness in the yellow on the rump, but this varies considerably between the subspecies.

Bananaquits have many desirable traits. They are relatively abundant in their native lands, unlike many parrots, and they are easy to maintain, unlike many softbills. For the aviculturist they offer a challenge different from the hookbills and finches yet easier than the hummingbirds. ●

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ROSE BREASTED COCKATOOS, hand raised babies, June/July '82 hatch. Healthy, loveable, perfect feather, \$2000 each. Bill Wegner, 3 Ann St., New Paltz, NY 12561. phone (914) 255-1445

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SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, lovingly domestic raised, starting to talk, Militarys, Scarlet/military cross. Also Moluccan cockatoos, Umbrella cockatoo. Hatched June to August 1982. No shipping. Serious inquiries only. (714) 735-5985

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TRITON COCKATOO, hand-fed, very tame, talking. No shipping. \$3000 firm. Paul (714) 780-9021.

BIRD STANDS FOR PARROTS, floor or on cage tops, handcrafted in cedar and cypress. Also available are play stands for smaller birds. Name tags and signs plus wood toys. Send S.A.S.E. for brochure to: JACK'S WOODCRAFT, P.O. Box 16595, West Palm Beach, FL 33406.

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