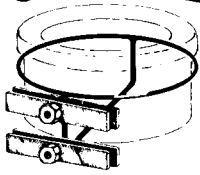


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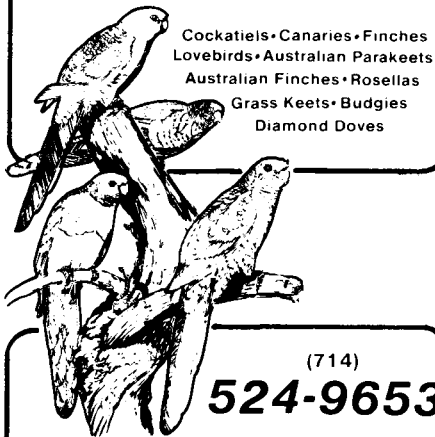
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Dwarf Macaws

By Candy Mills
Mission Hills, California

Within the genus *Ara* is a group of birds which is often overlooked by those who think of themselves as macaw lovers. These birds are often called "Dwarf Macaws." However this term is somewhat misleading to those who are unfamiliar with these birds since all are naturally occurring species and not developed minatures like teacup poodles.

Unlike the more well known members of the genus, dwarf macaws are quite small, ranging in size from twelve to eighteen inches. All are basically green birds with accents of color on the head, neck and/or shoulders. They are attractive birds with interesting personalities. Like all *Ara* macaws they have the lores and portions of the face unfeathered which differentiates even the smallest from the *Aratinga* conures. They are also monomorphic requiring surgical sexing to be sure of getting true pairs. The group is comprised of six species and five subspecies, though according to Forshaw two of the subspecies, *A. n. longipennis* and *A. s. castaneifrons* are doubtful. Beginning with the the smallest they are:

Hahn's macaw (*A. nobilis nobilis*)

The noble macaw (*A. nobilis cumanensis* and *A. nobilis longipennis*)

The yellow-collared macaw (*A. auracollis*)

Coulan's macaw (*A. coulani*)

The red-bellied macaw (*A. manilata*)

The severe macaw (*A. severa severa*

and *A. severa castaneifrons*)

Hahn's macaw is only about twelve inches in length, not much larger than a jenday or sun conure. There is a wash of blue on the crown and forehead. The bend of the wing, carpal edge and greater underwing coverts are scarlet. The bare facial area is white and quite small. The feet are grayish-black and both mandibles are black distinguishing it from the noble macaw. They are better proportioned than the noble macaw. Hahn's macaws are fairly quiet. Their vocalizations are not entirely unpleasant, having some variety unless the birds are disturbed.

The noble macaw is slightly larger, about thirteen inches. Though only about one inch longer, it has a much larger appearance since a greater proportion of its length is body. Most of the birds I have seen have more red on the shoulders than do Hahn's macaws. But the real distinguishing feature is the upper mandible which is white. Perhaps it is the white upper mandible which makes the noble macaw appear rather top heavy although in the birds I have seen the upper mandible is considerably wider than it is in Hahn's macaws. Unfortunately, I have found noble macaws to be a good deal noisier than Hahn's macaws. Their sound is very similiar to that of blue-crowned conures.

The yellow-collared macaw is perhaps the most striking of the group. It is

about sixteen inches in length. The forehead, crown are greenish black. This contrasts nicely with the bright yellow band on the nape which gives the bird its common name. The primaries are blue and the tail is maroon broadly tipped with blue. The feet are pink in adults and greyish-pink in immature birds. Both mandibles are black, the upper being tipped with a light horn color. Yellow-collared macaws are probably the easiest of the dwarf macaws to work with. Wild caught adult birds seem less nervous than those of other species and many pairs have nested readily. They are unfortunately one of the noisier birds in the group.

Illiger's macaw is somewhat rare in the United States. It is about the same size as the yellow-collared macaw, approximately sixteen and a half inches but is more heavily bodied, giving it a larger appearance. The crown is blue and the forehead is scarlet. There is a patch of red on the abdomen which is usually V-shaped. Both mandibles are black. The feet are pink with the nails being black. The naked facial skin is a pale yellow or creamy white. Illiger's macaws in the wild are a forest dwelling species. They are extremely susceptible to habitat destruction. Any disturbance at all in their habitat has an immediate effect on their populations. This has been a significant factor in the reduction of their range. Illiger's macaws have a captivating personality. They are extremely animated birds moving with sharp quick motions. They are, however, without a doubt the noisiest of all the dwarf macaws. Their vocabulary is greatly varied so that a single bird is tolerable, but putting two or more birds together can be unbearable.

Coulan's macaw is quite rare in captivity, coming from a small area in Peru and the extreme western edge of Brazil although they have been recorded occasionally in Bolivia. The entire head is blue, giving the bird the alternate name of the blue-headed macaw. This is the only dwarf macaw in which the facial skin is grey. The tail is maroon, broadly tipped with blue. The feet are pink. The mandibles are black with both being tipped with a light horn color. Most books list its size as approximately sixteen inches, however people to whom I spoke who have owned Coulan's macaws describe its size as equal to a large severe macaw, probably about eighteen inches. It was also described as being a very large chested bird similar to the red-bellied macaw. Some authorities feel that Coulan's macaw should be treated as a subspecies of Illiger's macaw. I personal-

ly have trouble seeing much resemblance from the representations available. Also, in the wild, Coulan's macaw is not a forest dwelling bird like Illiger's macaw. Therefore they are far less susceptible to habitat destruction. It has even been observed that where there is considerable destruction of forest near their range that their range has in fact extended. I spoke with one breeder who had owned a Coulan's macaw. He said, "To say that a Coulan's is a color variation of a Illiger's is like saying that a blue and gold is a color variation of a scarlet." He did say that one thing Coulan's macaw had in common with the Illiger's was that they both had a similar "vocabulary." He stated that he found his bird considerably quieter than his Illiger's and that it was a very shy bird.

The red-bellied macaw, which measures about eighteen inches, is considered by many to be the least attractive of the dwarf macaws. Its main distinguishing features are the small patch of maroon on the lower abdomen, the large yellow bare facial area and the quite small black beak. The red-bellied macaw's range in the wild is very closely related to a specific type of palm tree. Destruction of vast areas of this palm tree could greatly endanger the red-bellied macaw.

Though not brightly colored, a bird in good feather is very pretty. The chest has a lovely pearling effect, each feather being edged with a silvery greenish blue. Red-bellied macaws are described in many books as being very fond of bathing. I can safely say that, except for kakarikis, I have never seen birds that like to bathe so much. When my pair was in the living room, they would bathe easily three or four times a day, sometimes as late as midnight. Now that they are in a flight out of doors I find that I must keep at least one extra water dish in their flight, preferably one that is not easy to bath in, or else they would use all their water for bathing and have none left for drinking.

Red-bellied macaws also have a reputation for being very delicate. This seems to apply mostly to adult wild caught birds. Young birds which are imported seem to fare much better though they still seem to be somewhat delicate during acclimatization. Several people to whom I spoke felt that this is probably due to stress. One breeder said that two of his birds dropped dead off their perch when someone let the aviary door slam. I am inclined to think that stress may indeed be a great deal of the problem. My hen, upon being taken to the vet for a routine blood test, demonstrated yellow

stools and urates during the visit. I had not noticed this previously and could not understand how I had overlooked such an obvious symptom. A complete blood panel was drawn and I took the bird home. One half hour after the bird was home her stools had returned to green and white. The blood tests were all normal. The yellow stools and urates were apparently due solely to stress. Once the birds are established, however, they seem to do well. Breeders whom I know have wintered their birds outside all year round and have not run into any problems. However, one breeder did mention that his birds did not tolerate the cold well. Red-bellied macaws also seem to be quite prone to obesity. This may explain some of the problems in establishing them since until recent years their diet probably consisted almost entirely of sunflower seeds. This coupled with their great susceptibility to stress could easily account for their being difficult to establish. One advantage to the red-bellied macaw is that they are probably the quietest of the group with perhaps the exception of Coulan's macaw.

The severe macaw is easily recognized. It is the only dwarf macaw with feather lines decorating the bare facial skin. The forehead, cheek margins and chin are chestnut. The crown and flights are blue. The bend of the wing and lesser underwing coverts are red. The overall length is about eighteen inches. I have found wild caught severe macaws to be by far more nervous than any of the other dwarf macaws with perhaps the exception of the red-bellied macaw though they seem to be less susceptible to stress. Severe macaws are very noisy. Their vocabulary is limited to the usual macaw call and a sort of chortle they do occasionally when courting each other. The constant repetition of their normal call can be very annoying even to those who love dwarf macaws.

Dwarf macaws can be fed the usual variety of seed, including sunflower, safflower, buckwheat, millet and canary, though this should not be the mainstay of their diet. The majority of their diet, I feel, should be fruits and vegetables. Nuts may also be given. Peanuts, filberts or hazelnuts and almonds can usually be left in the shell though other varieties will probably need to be shelled. Whole wheat and corn bread will also be enjoyed. I have found that my birds will eat just about anything I give them as long as they are not allowed to gorge themselves on seed. The seed mixture I am using consists of safflower, a small amount of sunflower, wild bird mix,



Noble macaw (ara nobilis cumanensis). Notice the white upper mandible which distinguishes the noble from the Hahn's macaw (ara nobilis nobilis).

buckwheat and cracked corn. I had been adding a high protein dog chow, but I found that most of the smaller birds did not eat it. So now I am using a small amount of Calf-Manna instead. Each of my pairs is given only about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of seed mixture each day. They are, however, given considerable amounts of fruits and vegetables in addition to their seed. Just about any kind of fruit or vegetable is used, including corn on the cob, apple, squash, peas, spinach, kale, oranges, broccolli, chard, grapes, cucumber, almost anything in season.

Each day on top of the fruits and vegetables I sprinkle a powdered vitamin such as Avia or SuperPreen. This helps insure that the birds get all the amino acids, vitamins and minerals they require. Most dwarf macaws enjoy boiled chicken wings. And my Hahn's macaws seem to enjoy mild cheddar cheese, especially just prior to the breeding season.

Most pairs of dwarf macaws can be safely housed in $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 1" 16 gauge welded wire. And many can even be housed in $\frac{1}{2}$ " 19 gauge hardware cloth.

Pair of yellow-collared macaws (ara auricollis). Female is on the left.



However such enclosures should be inspected regularly for damage. Any wood used in construction should be protected, preferably by hardware cloth. My Illiger's macaws nearly ate a hole in their roof before I realized that aviary netting was not sufficient protection. Also double wiring between adjoining flights is recommended. I had been told that this was not necessary for dwarf macaws, but after my yellow-collared macaw hen, in ten minutes, ate the toes off three or four plum-headed parakeets I decided that double wiring was very necessary.

Most of my pairs are housed in 4' x 6' x 6' flights which are completely roofed to help absorb the noise. Three sides of the complex are plywood. The front and the top of the safety passage are wire to allow air circulation. In this complex the wire used for the flights is $\frac{1}{2}$ " hardware cloth. This structure has worked well for my birds with the exception of my severe macaws. They seem to need a much more open environment, such as an unroofed flight with little or no shelter. All my pairs roost in their nestboxes so this has not proven to be a problem in bad weather. There is a sheet of heavy gauge sheet metal over the top of the nestbox to keep out the rain.

The nestboxes I use for my dwarf macaws are L-shaped nestboxes. They come in three sizes: one foot, two feet, and three feet deep according to the size of the bird. I have been told that noble macaws prefer a deeper box, so I am offering mine a three foot box along with the one foot and the two foot deep boxes they were previously given. They go in all boxes but have not taken up nesting activities in any.

When breeding season begins there is a noticeable change in the attitude of my birds. All pairs become noisier than usual. They also become aggressive, some only vocally, others by attacking whenever possible. My pairs also consume great quantities of cuttlebone and mineral block just prior to nesting. This is easily seen since they do not eat it during the rest of the year. An interesting thing I have noticed with my Hahn's macaws is that just prior to going to nest the male plucks the upper area of his chest. He remains this way until the end of breeding season when he then allows his feathers to grow back for the duration of fall and winter. He then remains fully feathered until the next breeding season. I have spoken with another breeder of Hahn's macaws and he also has noticed this with his pair. Another breeder I spoke with had not noticed this characteristic but his pair of macaws has produced only infertile eggs.

The general attitude of the individual birds also seems to change just prior to nesting. Often, during breeding season, normally bold hens become more defensive, standing behind the male or scrambling to the nestbox hole. They allow the males to take whatever aggressive action is needed outside while the hens dive inside and protect the eggs or chicks.

Like all parrot eggs, the eggs of dwarf macaws are white, though they seem to be much larger than one could expect for birds their size. They are also more rounded than most eggs. Red-bellied

macaw eggs are exceptionally round, almost like a pingpong ball. Two to four eggs are usually layed although occasionally a clutch may consist of only a single egg. Incubation varies somewhat with climatic conditions but averages 24 days. Many pairs are double brooded and some even triple brooded if the chicks are pulled for handrearing at an early age.

Dwarf macaw chicks have a soft white down on hatching which is replaced by a short greyish down when they are about three weeks of age. Parent birds become very quiet when they have babies in the nest. Unlike conure babies, dwarf macaw babies are very quiet when they are in the nest. This is not true, however, when they are pulled for handrearing. My yellow-collared macaw chicks while being handfed made a very unusual sound almost always in unison. It was very similar to a group of small goats or a bunch of party horns. If handrearing, be prepared to feed the chicks until they are between three and a half and four months old.

Some pairs nest readily while others seem more difficult to get started. I have found Hahn's, yellow-collared and red-bellied macaws to be quite willing to go to nest. Both my yellow-collared and Hahn's macaws nested within nine months of the time they were set up for breeding. My red-bellied macaws layed eggs within three weeks of the time they were provided with a nestbox in their wrought iron cage in my living room. I feel that red-bellied macaws will prove to be very prolific since reports indicate that they are probably the only dwarf macaw that, in areas where there has been little or no habitat destruction, are probably increasing in numbers. Perhaps the reason they have not been bred until recently was diet related since they are so prone to obesity. My severe macaws, on the other hand, have been together for three years and have not advanced any further than occasionally feeding each other. Many breeders have found Illiger's macaws very willing to go to nest and quite prolific. One breeder of Illiger's told me that his birds do not go to nest until very late in the season, usually around June.

Handfed babies make delightful pets, though aviculturists working with the less readily available species should make a real effort to either retain a portion of their chicks or sell a portion to breeders in order to build a captive population for future breeding. When working with species which are still readily available it might be preferable to sell the majority of the chicks as pets, using the funds to



Pair of Illiger's macaws (*ara maracana*).
Female is nearest wire.

Photo by Candy Mills

purchase more wild caught breeding stock. This would relieve some of the pet trade pressures on imported populations and will also insure a greater diversity in the gene pool once imported birds are no longer available.

All in all, dwarf macaws are wonderful birds for the aviculturist. Each species has something special to offer. Smaller species such as the noble and Hahn's macaws require little space, many having bred in cages 2' x 3' x 4' or smaller. I have found the red-bellied macaw to be very quiet, rarely indulging in the usual sunrise/sunset vocalizations of other macaws. Yellow-collared, severe and noble macaws are for the time being still readily available, making it easy to obtain breeding stock. And Illiger's macaw though hard to obtain and probably the noisiest of the group has proved very prolific for many breeders. More people need to begin working with these birds and specializing in them, keeping in mind the long range goals of captive breeding.

Hopefully, with the help of the AFA Bird Registry and with the formation of the new Macaw Society, we will be able to make better use of our breeding stock, be able to find mates for unpaired birds of the rarer species and exchange information on breeding successes and failures so we can all learn to be more effective aviculturists.

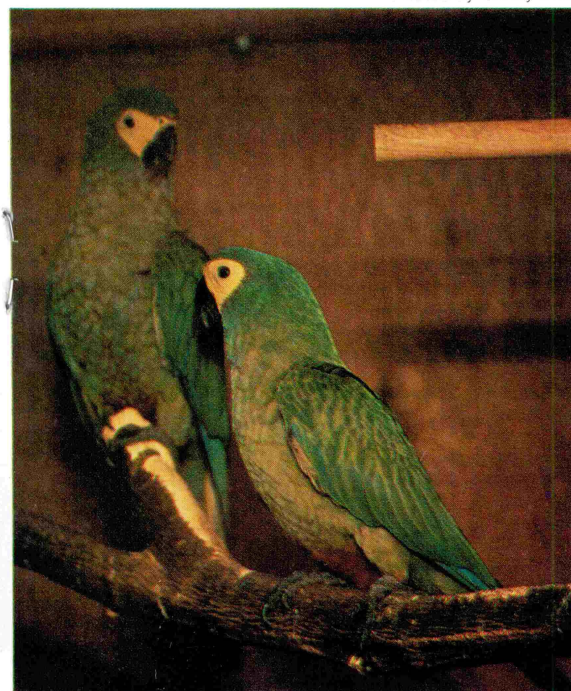
Jim Reid is forming a Macaw Society which will include all macaws, not just the larger species. If you are working with macaws in your breeding program or are just interested in these delightful birds, please consider joining the Macaw Society. Write or call: (702) 564-5559

Jim Reid 299 W. Basic Road
Henderson, Nevada 89015 ●



Pair of Hahn's macaws (*ara nobilis nobilis*).
Male, on the left has picked his chest feathers.

Photos by Candy Mills



Pair of red-bellied macaws (*ara manilata*).