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Caring for Pionus Parrots

by John Stoodley
Portsmouth, United Kingdom

The pionus is a small parrot from South America. There are varying opinions as to the number of separate species in this group, some authorities claim 8 and others 7, making the Massena a subspecies of the Tumultuosus. In my collection I have some 50 subjects, these are housed in pairs, some are breeding pairs, others young immature pairs.

Because of the overall poor climate in the U.K. all my aviaries are now covered and this I consider has contributed greatly to my breeding successes with both pionus and Amazon parrots. Each unit for the pionus has a minimum floor area of 55 square feet, these units could have been smaller but I prefer roomy flights for my birds. There is a shelter to the north side of the aviaries, where the birds feed and roost. These shelters are fitted to take red-ray lamps or heaters, which can be put in use if a bird is unwell. The walls are solid to help provide a measure of privacy for individual pairs. The concrete floors of the shelters, like the flights are slightly sloping to allow drainage of excess water.

Flights are graveled over the concrete base to a depth of several inches, the roof and fronts are glazed in horticultural glass, a coating of green shading can be applied if necessary for the summer and the front windows can be opened.

There is double wire between the flights—this is to prevent fighting between neighboring couples.

All drains are covered to prevent rats and stoats etc., entering the buildings. Small rodents are controlled with a rat varnish—happily we keep comparatively free of small vermin, i.e. mice.

A misting system has been installed throughout the aviaries. It provides humidity and keeps the birds in good feather. Of all my parrots the pionus thoroughly enjoys bathing. It is indeed a wonderful sight to see so many pairs displaying in the mist. As soon as the weather permits the system is in daily or twice daily action. In winter it is used perhaps only once a week.

To enable birds to consume sufficient food during the short dull days of winter, also to help bring them into breeding condition, the shelters are fitted with fluorescent strip lights. Before lighting was installed I found birds had gone to roost by 3 p.m. during the dark winter months and did not feed again

until after 9 a.m. the following day. I felt this was far too long between feeds and contributed to winter losses of valuable breeding stock. The lighting comes on at 4 a.m. in winter, creeping back to 2 a.m. as the breeding season approaches.

All my pionus have been educated to eat a wide variety of food. The diet provided includes gunga and soya beans, green peas, split peas, lentils and whole maize. These are soaked in cold water overnight and when strained are fed with the occasional addition of small quantities of cooked white fish, rabbit, or beef. A little dried complete dog chow is also added to the pulses [the aforementioned peas, beans etc.-ed.] but I consider dried pet foods to be dead foods, therefore, these are very sparingly given. During the breeding season and also when birds are moulting a very small amount of dried skimmed milk powder is added to the feed. Fresh vegetables, fruit and greens are given daily. These include turnip, carrot, celery, apple, berries, curly kale, leaf-beet, American land cress, and lucerne. Twice a week a tablespoon of fresh milk is eagerly taken by each bird. I feel it is far more beneficial for my birds to drink a little milk than it would be to give the milk in a mess of bread, for should the bread turn sour young birds can gas up. However, I have found no ill effects from turned milk, even when taken by very young chicks. I am also a great believer in the properties of yogurt and feed this to all my parrots in small amounts, including day old chicks. Greens such as cabbage and curly kale are liquidized in water and then strained to take out the unwanted fibre. The liquid is a favourite treat with both small and large parrots. Peanuts are always enjoyed, the kernels having been first heated in a cooker to kill off any harmful fungus. Sunflower seeds are fed to my breeding stock in very limited quantities. Chicks that I will be parting with are given larger quantities of sunflower seed, since some of these youngsters may be fed on little else once sold, therefore, they should be accustomed to this diet.

Nest boxes are left in situation all year, but it is necessary to cover entrance holes with strong metal until it is safe to allow pairs to start breeding. The metal is then replaced with thin wood, this is chewed off by the excited pair. Pionus, like most parrots, prefer to make their own ar-

rangements over size of nest entrance. If I neglect to cover my boxes with metal, my birds will try to breed all year round and I value my hens far too much to allow this to happen during winter. New arrivals and youngsters are given a choice of two nest boxes, one is a small box 8" x 8" x 20" which is hung on the solid wall of the shelter. The other is a natural hollow log of 4 or 5 ft.—this is situated in the flight. Wood chippings (not sawdust) are used as nesting material and when the hen has made her choice of nest, the unwanted one can be removed since hens will usually continue to use the same nests each season.

Most of my pionus have two rounds of eggs. I take the first clutch to incubate and hand raise the chicks, the second clutch I leave to the parents. There are up to 4 eggs in a clutch and they are incubated for 26 days.

The majority of my male pionus perch some way from the nest site, however, a few males will sit in the nest next to the hen and will continue to do so for a period after the chicks hatch. One or two other males sit just inside the entrance hole and this could prove a problem for hen or chicks on hot days.

Chicks are brooded by the hen day and night for the first few weeks. Once they begin to feather up the hen will help with the feeding, returning to brood at night and for short periods during the day, until they leave the nest at about 8 to 10 weeks.

BRONZE-WINGED PARROT (*P. chalcopterus*) was the first pionus to breed here for me, this was in 1973. The bronze-wing is a bird of strong colour. The main body plumage is navy blue, wings are beautifully marked in bronze, under wings are sky blue, and there is a pink and white patch on the throat. Under tail coverts are red, the bare eye patch is also red and as sexual interest diminishes each season the red eye patch loses some of its colour, fading to a pinkish skin colour. The eye colour is dark brown, the beak is pale yellow. Approximate lengths 11". Average egg weight 14.15 grams. There were 14 chicks raised here this season (1980) including 3rd generation chicks.

BLUE HEADED PARROT (*P. menstruus*) have bred here since 1975. My birds are of the larger race. These birds carry a far better and brighter blue helmet than the smaller races. The blue helmet covers the whole of the head, neck and upper breast. Ear coverts are dark, the eye too is dark. Body colour is mostly green, outer webs are blue, under tail coverts are red. The beak is dark. Approximate length 11". Average egg

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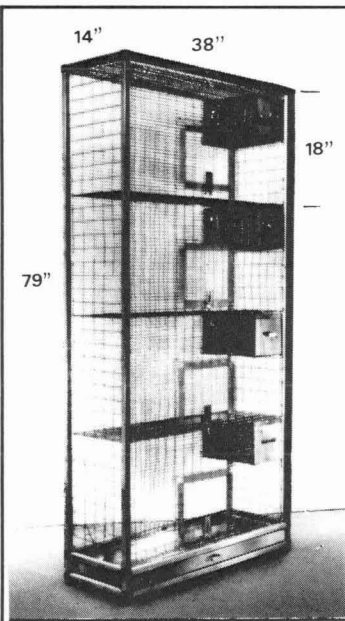
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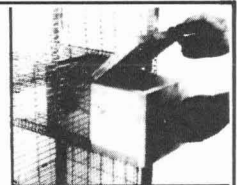
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weight 15.25 grams. Season 1980—8 chicks were raised including 2nd generation.

MAXIMILIAN PARROT (*P. maximiliani*) are represented in my collection by a single breeding pair. I am reluctant to make more aviaries available to this species since they are usually plentiful. The Maximilian or scaly-headed parrot could be said to be overall a green bird, but the white eye patch and dark head colour gives this bird a very smart appearance. There is a red and blue flush to the throat, wings are dull olive, the outer webs of the tail are blue, under tail coverts are red. Approximate length 11". Average egg weight 15.20 grams. My maximilians have bred many chicks since 1975 and for the 1980 season we had 4 chicks.

CORAL BILL PARROT (*P. sordidus sordidus*) have bred here since 1977. These birds, as the name implies, have a vivid coral coloured bill, the colour is somewhat lacking in newly imported stock. My Coral Bills are very like Maximilians in overall coloration except they lack the blue in the tail. Approximate length 11". Average egg weight 18.50 grams. For season 1980 there were only 4 chicks.

DUSKY PARROT (*P. fuscus*) at first sight this little parrot appears rather grey, but on closer inspection it is a bird of many colours, the head is greyish blue with dark ear coverts, the eye is also dark. Feathers on the breast are brown and buff with an overall pink effect. Wings are dark grey showing violet in good light. Under tail coverts are red. Approx-

imate length 9". Average egg weight 13.0 grams. Unfortunately my only breeding dusky hen died this fall, cause of death was old lesions of the lungs. Regretably this condition is found all too often in imported pionus. My hen raised chicks 3 years running and like all my pionus hens was an excellent mother. I have obtained 8 unsexed dusky chicks from a dealer and hope to make up a breeding pair or two from these.

WHITE CROWNED PARROT (*P. senilis*) have yet to be bred here. There are 6 birds in the collection, 2 pairs have been observed to mate on several occasions over the years and one hen is prepared to sit in the nesting log for long periods. This bird has been given eggs and newly hatched chicks, but will not accept the position of foster mother. Most of my pionus hens will foster young of other pionus species and also young Amazon chicks. The main head colour of the white crown is as one would imagine, very white on the crown, remainder of the head is blue. There is a pink flush on the throat. Wings are bronze, body colour green. Primaries are blue, under tail coverts red. Approximate length 9". Egg weight not recorded.

PLUM CROWN PARROT (*P. tumultuosus tumultuosus*) have bred here since 1977. The helmet, neck and chest is plum coloured, in breeding condition the colour is a rich dark beetroot. Body colour is green in various shades. The under tail coverts are red. Plum crown nestlings are most interesting—they become completely covered in a dense white woolly down and look very much like young penguins. They are totally unlike any other parrot chicks bred here. Approximate length 10". Average egg weight 15.40 grams. This season 12 chicks were raised.

If taken young, pionus make ideal cage pets. They can be made very tame. While not a good talking parrot they have many other endearing qualities. Aviary bred pionus chicks in my opinion cannot be surpassed, they are fully trustworthy, friendly to all and, truth to tell, I hate parting with my chicks each year.

The adult wild caught bird is a different ball game altogether. I have learned to my cost never to invite fellow aviculturists to visit me during the breeding season, April-September, for pionus like many aviary parrots become aggressive and outside disturbance can cause hens to abandon eggs or chicks. Having experienced this problem in macaws, Amazons and pionus we now have a closed season of 6 months each year.

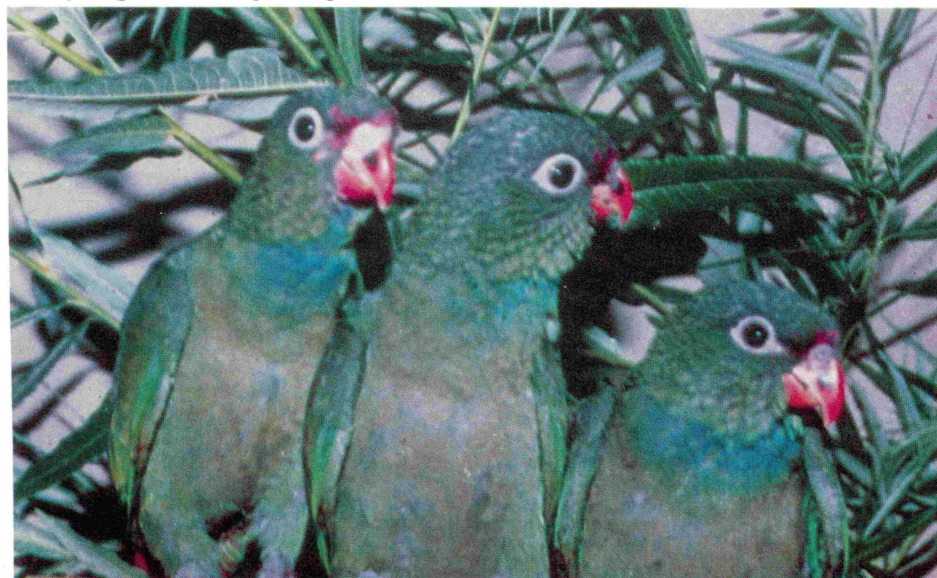
Other than assuring a measure of

Photos by John Stoodley



Bronze-wing pair—the female shows the beautiful bronze on her wings.

Three young coral-billed pionus parrots.





It is obvious how this blue-headed male got its name.

privacy during nesting time pionus are ideal subjects for the smaller establishment. I find them little noisier than the larger parakeets, they beed easily enough as 3 year olds and may even try at 2 years old.

It is pleasing to find one or two other aviculturists in the U.K. starting to take a serious interest in establishing pionus collections. I sincerely hope they find as much pleasure and interest as I have found in my collection. ●

coral-billed hen



Photos by John Stoodley



*female
Maximilian*

John and Pat Stoodley have written one of the best books ever on raising parrots. It is called *Parrot Production Incorporating Incubation*, published by Bezels Publications, Lovedean, Portsmouth, PO8 OSW, England. If you want to breed parrots and could have only one book on the subject, this is the one. Available in the U.S. through Tom Ireland, Lake Worth, FL. See ad on insert in this issue.

A pair of dusky pionus.

