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by Jack Clinton Eitniear
McAllen, Texas

Notes on two Aratinga Conures

After a long six hour drive, I arrived at my destination in a small mountain range off the Sierra Madre Occidental of eastern Mexico. Leaving the paved road, I began my ascent up a greatly overgrown backroad that would take me to the base of the rocky mountainside. From its termination at a small clearing, I climbed the vertical mountainside toting a backpack full of research equipment. After a twenty minute climb I arrived at my study site, a large cave which was the nesting site for over thirty green conures (*Aratinga holochlora*). For those who get upset when their pet conure screams in the kitchen you can imagine the thunder created from thirty flying screaming conures in an echoing cave! Studying this population will hopefully answer a number of questions regarding the species diet and social behavior.

Beginning with the courtship in June numerous trips are being made to the cave, with camera, tape recorder and notebook where interactions are dictated into a recorder and behavior patterns photographed. The climax of the annual program is the banding of the fledgling in September when the treacherous cave walls are climbed and the young identified with colored number bands. From such marking we can determine if the young remain in the area, how far they search for food and if they mate for life.

The green conure sometimes called the Mexican green parakeet is one of two frequently encountered *Aratinga* conures that live in Mexico and northern Central America. From west Mexico into northern Nicaragua the green conure is generally associated with the highland

plant associations although it does descend into lower elevation especially during the non-breeding season. Monroe, in his classic monogram on Honduran birds, mentions that this is the case in much of Honduras. I have also noted a larger population in the lower elevations during the fall in Mexico. Not restricted to the highlands the green conure is also abundant in the dry deciduous and thorn forest although more abundant along rivers than away from water. The species doesn't appear to thrive in the more moist tropical forest as it has not been recorded in Belize or in the tropical forest of Peten, Guatemala.

During a short observational period in September Walter Crawford of Raptor Rehabilitation and Propagation Project Inc. observed a flock of green conures being attacked by a pair of bat falcons (*Falco ruficularis*). It is not certain if the falcons were preying upon the conures or the numerous bats that shared the cave with the conures. It is, however, well documented that falcons and other birds of prey include conures and other parrots in their diet. In addition, snakes and man are also enemies of the conure.

Although not in great demand for pets conures are, never-the-less, kept for pets when nothing else is available. I recently purchased two green conures at a Customs auction. Both birds had yellow specks of colour in their head feathers, the tell-tale reminder of a popular Mexican trick whereby birds have their heads dyed yellow and are sold as yellowheaded Amazons to gullible tourists.

Little is known regarding the natural diet of the species although it has been given considerable blame for raiding corn crops. Young observed in the cave study site during September were being fed a small millet size seed, as discovered by the analysis of crops from young that fell from the cave walls and perished.

The green conure is documented to have nested in the holes made by woodpeckers in cypress trees and in termite mounds. Under certain conditions, such as my cave study site, the species will nest in a colony.

The smaller lowland relative of the green conure is the Astec or olive-throated conure (*Aratinga astec*). Occurring from the eastern coast of Mexico southward to western Panama it is a common species of lowland clearings and moist deciduous forest. Where the green conure has basically a green body coloration with a varying amount of red specks on the neck and head the Astec conure has an olive-brown throat and breast. Documented to nest in termite mounds,

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Photo by Steve McGehee

The author banding a fledgling green conure. From such studies we hope to document the diet and behavior of the species.

a captive colony in Jamaica (mentioned in Forshaw's popular *Parrots of the World*) laid a number of eggs that eventually hatched and produced young.

Both species can be observed foraging in certain areas where tropical forest and arid or mountainous areas adjoin. In such situations both species appear to mix

well with little aggressiveness.

Censuses taken throughout both species' ranges for a number of years as part of the annual Audubon Christmas Counts, show a slight decline in the population of both species. Likewise my discussions with people living in the species' ranges, and from birding tour



Photo by Jack Clinton-Eitnhear, McAllen, TX

*Termite mound nesting site for a pair of Astec conures (*Aratinga astec*). Nest was entered from the bottom right.*



Astec conure (also called olive-throated parakeet) in a tree on a forest border in Belize, Central America.

guides who have travelled through the species range for a number of years, also indicated that the populations are on the decline. Probably, we still have many more years in which to study these interesting conures and build up their captive populations. ●

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Mary Eitniew, Steve McGehee, Walter Crawford, and Richard Brewer for their assistance with my conure studies.

Photos by Jack Clinton-Eitniew, McAllen, TX



Two green conures kept as pets in a village in northeastern Mexico. Conures are seldom kept as pets when other psittacines are available.

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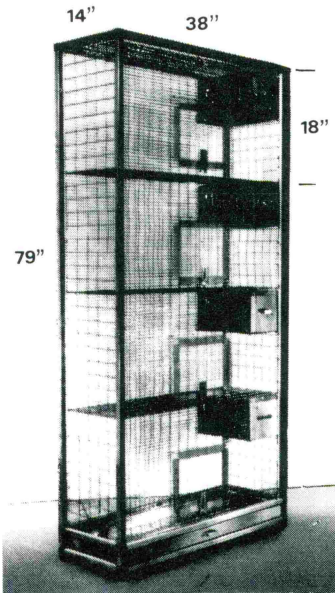
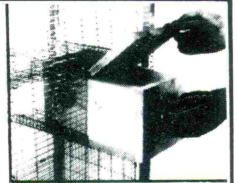
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