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First Captive Breeding of the Dusky Pionus

Pionus fuscus

by

Ramon P. Noegel & Greg A. Moss
Seffner, Florida

The *Pionus* family has long attracted the attention of exotic bird enthusiasts. The soft pastel coloring coupled with an active personality makes these birds a constant source of delight to all who see them in a collection. It has been my good fortune to have kept several species of *Pionus* off and on for ten years and to have on many occasions observed several species in their native habitats. In my opinion the dusky is one of the most beautifully colored of these small parrots.

Each of our original six were slightly different in color, some having a pinkish cast on the breast while others a more purple grey in this area. One *Pionus* authority visited us and said the sexes could be distinguished by the amount of white streaks on the cheeks and head. However, this was not borne out in our laproscopically sexed three pairs and was no doubt based only on a single egg laying specimen the person had in his collection.

In flight, these birds create a striking combination of blue, red, pink and white against their slate grey background color. Playful and inquisitive, they possess a very dark iris which keeps one from discerning what they might be feeling regarding human presence. The large, almost jet black eyes seem to be always sparkling with mischief.

The six we received were from a rather large shipment of approximately 100 of these birds that arrived in 1980. They sexed out four males and two hens but we were able to obtain another hen in place of one of the males thus giving us three pairs. Most recipients of this parrot have lost them due to stress. This was diagnosed as the cause of the death of one of our pairs. They arrived as young birds, fed well on a varied diet and appeared to adjust to their new environment. However, most of the aviculturists who have obtained the duskies have told me a similar tragic story of loss due to stress. We were fortunate in that our remaining two pairs seemed to thrive. The two that died within a year after receiving them were posted by two very knowledgeable avian veterinarians who found no major

disease and concluded cause of death to be stress.

One of the two remaining pairs nested in May of '82 producing five eggs. All were infertile except what we believe was the fifth egg which failed to hatch, the chick, however, being fully formed. Dead-in-the-shell is not uncommon in a hen's first attempt at hatching. Movement in the egg as the chick begins to pick will often cause an inexperienced hen to move off the egg at this crucial period. Hence it is best to surrogate new hens' eggs under a good proven foster mother. We have done this with macaws, hawkhead parrots, golden conures and Amazons. Once we had a pair of double yellow head Amazons hatch and rear a scarlet macaw until it was nine days old at which time it was removed and hand reared. It was very fat compared to macaw chicks reared by their natural parents. It grew up to be an extremely large scarlet. Hawk head and golden conure chicks do exceptionally well with sun and jenday conures as foster parents. However, in the case of the duskies we had no foster parents we felt suitable for the task to surrogate them under.

Several breeders of *Pionus* told us our nest boxes were too shallow, the dimensions being 10" x 10" x 16" in depth. However, from my in-the-field experience with various South American Psittiformes, a wide range of extremely different nesting cavities may be observed in any given species. Amazons, conures and *Pionus* will often nest in very cramped, shallow quarters and successfully rear a family. Bahaman Amazons on Abaco nest in the rock crevices due to lack of large trees with hollows; while on Great Inagua they nest in trees because there are adequate hollows. On Cayman Brac the Amazons nest in tree limbs so small, one's fist would fill the cavity. They often rear three chicks in such cavities. Jamaican Amazons nest in very shallow holes, some being no more than six inches in depth. Yellow napes on the western side of Central America nest in the calabassa tree which is a stunted tree with hollow limbs and trunk. Due to the cutting of virtually all timber and the

Indians' use of firewood, there are few trees left in this area. The napes have adapted to this tree which the Indians do not cut for firewood due to the poison smoke it emits. The red or orangethroated conure often nests in the inner walls of both active and dead volcanoes in Nicaragua and Honduras. These birds also nest in trees as well but seem to prefer the hot sun-struck lava rock of volcanoes for some reason. These colony nest sites may accommodate as many as fifty pairs in the various crevices on the eastern inner side of these craters where the afternoon sun strikes the entrances to the nests.

That many aviculturists go to great lengths to simulate logs, trees, etc. only reveals their lack of actual habitat experience. Parrots are the most adaptive of birds. This, no doubt, explains their wide range of existence. It is also obvious such adaptability does not take several generations. Cage pets will readily nest on the floor of their cage, in a dark corner of a closet, etc. My grandmother annually bred her single pair of budgies that nested in her sewing machine drawer. A well known pair of yellow napes breed indoors in a shoebox placed on the floor of the parrot cage they live in. This accomplishment is something to take note of as all of us can attest who have had to hand rear napes or pull the fertile eggs to keep them from being destroyed by the parent birds.

All this is said in order to clear the atmosphere of confusion so often raised by diehard aviculturists who set limitations on birds that are so very versatile in their adaptations. The fact is, we who keep exotic parrots really know so little about them. That they survive our setups and preconceived ideas is a tribute to their sturdiness and adaptability.

The 1983 season found the pair of duskies that nested in '82 with four fertile eggs. The first two were discovered April 28th and it is assumed laying occurred every other day though we did not check the nest on a daily basis. The second pair deposited an egg on May 1st. Again eggs were thought to have been laid every other day. Inspection on the tenth of May revealed four eggs in this nest. As both hens sat tight it was difficult to tell when the eggs began hatching.

On May 26th an inspection revealed the hen of pair one to have eaten three of her eggs. This act was no doubt triggered as the eggs began to hatch. The remaining egg was placed under the sec-



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Young dusky pionus babies (*Pionus fuscus*) reared by Ramon Noegel and Greg Moss. These are the first dusky babies ever raised in the United States and perhaps the first in the world.

ond pair that inspection revealed to have four eggs; three fertile and one infertile. The infertile egg was removed and replaced with the fertile egg from pair one. It might here be added that on the inspection date just mentioned one of pair two's eggs was picked and a lively chick could be heard inside. All four eggs hatched that week for inspection six days later gave us the happy sight of four thriving youngsters. The parents proved the best providers I've ever witnessed. The hen was seldom seen off the nest and the cock fed on anything placed in the feeder. Large quantities of soaked whole wheat bread, fruits, vegetables, seeds, scrambled egg, cheese and, of course, fresh corn on the cob were provided. It seems that he fed both the hen and the chicks as he was frequently in the box and we seldom saw her leave the nest. As a result of her protectiveness we seldom got a peek at the chicks.

The four young duskiens were pulled for handfeeding at two weeks of age and have continued to thrive and have been weaned now for about three

months. From the early pair bonds it would appear to be two pair but we will have to wait to have them sexed in a year or so. I have readily observed such early pair bonding in our captive bred Amazons. If kept in a group of ten or so young, as we do with our young *leucocephala*, faster pair bonds will emerge as early as October of the year they were hatched in. Most nesting of these Amazons occurs in April and May. Hatching occurs twenty-six to twenty-eight days after incubation commences. This means the young pair bond at about four months of age.

Due to our inexperience in breeding *Pionus* the dusky would appear to be an easily captive bred bird. It is hoped many others will wish to try as these birds are not overly common in aviculture and should be an enjoyable addition to any collection.

Contrary to common belief, A.A.J. (John) Stoodley of England has informed me he has not bred this bird but did accomplish a cross between a dusky hen and another species of the *Pionus* family. ●

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