

# Severe Macaws

*an overview of personality and breeding*

by Risa Teitler, Miami Springs, Florida  
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The Severe Macaw, also called the Chestnut-fronted Macaw (*Ara severa severa*), once inhabited a large range in South America. It has been recorded as far north as Panama and the Guianas, throughout the countries of Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, as well as portions of Brazil. The wild flocks were huge: many thousands of Severe Macaws were ultimately imported into the United States and other countries but only minimal attention was given this species by breeders. The great majority of Severs was sold as pets. "A cheap macaw" became available to fill the insatiable appetite of prospective parrot owners.

Today, this macaw has become one of the most sought after of the miniature macaw species. While their numbers have declined dramatically, the cost has risen sharply. I acquired a pair of Severe Macaws in the early



Severe Macaw at four months of age, bred by Risa Teitler.

1970s. My original goal was to tame and resell the two birds as pets. I have since learned to appreciate them for their extraordinary personalities and incredible aptitudes. The Severe Macaw is both physically and mentally agile. After a quarantine period, during which this new pair of birds was kept totally isolated from the rest of my flock, I began the process of taming them.

I chose these birds from a group of approximately 200 newly imported Severs. I used the same criteria in selecting these two birds as always: overall condition of the plumage, clearness of the eyes, cleanliness of the nostrils and the vent, good weight (referring to the amount of flesh on the breast), condition of the skin on the legs and feet, and so forth. It was impossible to judge the trainability of the two by observing them with the rest of the flock, for the activity in

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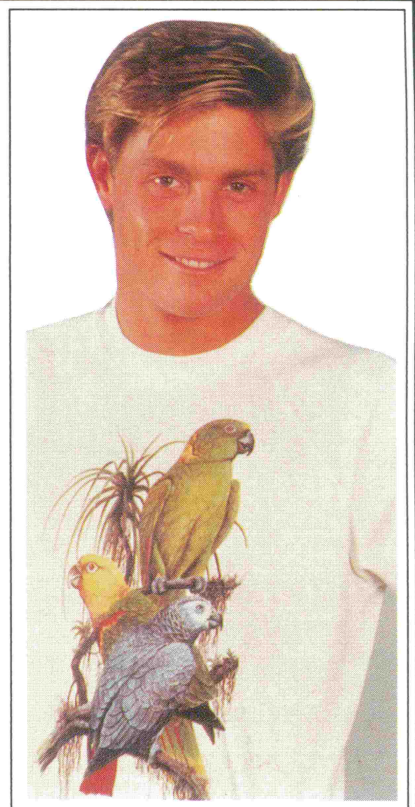
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the flight cage was tremendous and the birds rarely came to rest for more than a few seconds at a time. It is fair to say that the Severe Macaw is an active bird, one that responds to all manner of stimuli and one that rarely sits still.

One of the two birds (which has turned out to be male) was tamed easily, learning to sit on my hand, arm, shoulder, and on an open bird stand in a relatively short time, with a minimum of lesson time. He was a fine specimen with a good disposition and would remain on the open perch for extended periods of liberty outside the cage even though the other Severe remained caged in the same room. (I always conduct taming lessons with one bird at a time, even if two birds are being tamed simultaneously.) He never learned to accept being touched on the head or back and would squawk loudly whenever I attempted to pet him. He was not an aggressive bird, however, and never attempted to bite me.

In direct contrast, the other Severe

(which is now known to be female) was extremely resistant to my attempts to tame her. I could not bring myself to sell her as a pet bird, and in the early 1970s few people were interested in buying these birds for breeding. She began as an aggressive bird and remains so today. When working on initial taming with this Severe, caution was always necessary. She would jump up and try to bite whenever she was approached. She learned to sit on a training stick and on the open bird stand, but was never content to remain there. Sitting on the arm or shoulder was a lesson she strongly resisted. After a time, I decided to hold her back for someone who wanted to breed Severes and, as a result, I kept the tamed male bird as a companion for the wild, unruly hen.

Despite her resistance to taming, I found this wild bird to have great charm. Her developing relationship with the tame male didn't seem to affect her original decision to have nothing at all to do with socialization. The two birds seemed to be a natural pair, although neither had been surgically sexed. As they matured to breeding age, I decided to set them up in the bird house, where they could reproduce if that was their aim. Several seasons passed by, and the Severes chewed up one nestbox after another. This pair has a penchant for chewing wood exceeded only by the cockatoos and the larger macaws that I have kept.

By the time I set them up with a nestbox they were unable to destroy, the species had become rather scarce. Scarcity often makes a species more desirable and so I was keen to see them breed successfully. The behavior of the pair during breeding is interesting.

The first year that eggs were laid was disappointing. More than a dozen were produced, but none hatched. With no live chicks in the nest after a full 32 days of incubation, I opened the eggs to examine the contents. The first eggs seemed to be infertile, but the succeeding eggs had fully developed dead-in-shell chicks. This discovery completely unnerved me. First, I repeated the basic lab work on the parents that had been conducted at the start of the season, to check for the presence of bacteria and/or fungi. The lab work revealed nothing out of the ordinary. I considered the possibility that I had two birds who were psittacosis carriers (although none of

the other birds exposed to them had shown any signs of the disease). The Severes had been in my flock for several years before I set them to nest. But I also considered the breeding environment as a possible cause for the dead-in-shell chicks.



Florida is hot and humid. Could the bird house climate have been a factor which resulted in the dead-in-shell chicks? Between clutches, I had an overhead, electric ventilator installed in my bird house. This proved to be the missing piece to the puzzle. The next clutch of eggs was laid in May 1988. This was approximately the hottest time of the year in Florida. Only July and August are worse. The pair laid three eggs and hatched all three! It is interesting to note that I had been keeping these birds for over a decade before their first successful breeding, although common sense dictated that they would have produced earlier had they been set up properly.

The Severes incubated their eggs for 23 days. The eggs were laid two days apart and hatched two days apart. The parents took excellent care of the chicks. They were fiercely defensive of the nestbox and their cage. Whenever I opened the cage door to feed them, it was necessary to arm myself with a training stick and, as time progressed, a net, in order to keep them from attacking. They would leap out of the nest whenever a noise outside the cage disturbed them. Both parents were fierce but, true to form, the female exceeded her mate in aggressive behavior. When this pair is not breeding, they are much more passive, and never attack when their cage is tended. It is also interesting to note that the two birds were much more aggressive towards me than they were to my helper who tends the birds three days a week.

### Changes in Behavior During Breeding


As already mentioned, the pair of Severes became decidedly more aggressive when engaged in active breeding. Other behaviors were observed as well. The chewing fetish that these birds always displayed (destroying even the hardest wood perches with no difficulty) reached its highest pitch as the pair incubated their eggs. Only when brooding the young did this overdeveloped chewing behavior abate. When the chicks were taken from the nest, the chewing increased again. Neither bird has

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ever chewed or plucked its feathers. All of the chewing is directed at the perches and nestbox. I always provide fresh branches for my birds to chew, and the Severes attack their supplies of fresh branches with gusto! The hibiscus flowers, pollen and bark, as well as the fresh leaves and live green wood are chewed ravenously whenever introduced. The Severes do not appear to eat the fresh branches, but chew them into bits of wood.

The birds are ritualistic in their expression of language. The two rolling voices scream at the late afternoon light in harmony. One bird always joins the other in noise making and I've observed them speaking solo only when separated. If one is in the nest and the other out, as the cage is tended, one will scream in protest, however, when the two Severes are out together, they vocalize in unison.

The diet of the birds has improved over the years. Initially, they ate only sunflower seeds. I feed all my flock a diet that is rich in fresh fruit and vegetables. The Severes have learned to eat most of the fruit and vegetables offered, and their choices of foods altered dramatically when they hatched their first chicks. Their consumption of fresh, raw corn rose greatly when the chicks hatched. They refused grated carrot (which is fed to all the flock every day), and began eating grapes and dark green celery in large quantities. Their intake of hard seed continued, but the sunflower seeds were ignored, while the smaller safflower and millet and oats were consumed. They ignored their peanuts, which were usually the first item eaten on a day that they are not rearing young. They ate the fresh green leaves of romaine and endive sparingly, but ate as much apple as I provided. Once all three chicks had hatched it was necessary to feed the pair three times a day: once in early morning, once at midday and, again, two hours before sundown.

The egg shells were not removed from the nestbox, but were chewed up and strewn throughout the nesting material. The parents lined the box with quantities of feather down and many larger feathers.

The chicks were removed from the nestboxes and hand-fed from a fairly early age. The pair was free to produce a second clutch by the end of May. A second clutch was laid by mid-June. The time that had elapsed between the first and second clutch was just nine weeks.

The second clutch contained two eggs, and this time the parents were allowed to raise the chicks to three weeks of age before they were taken for hand-feeding. Cultures run on the chicks after they were taken from the nest revealed only normal flora. All of the chicks have been strong and healthy and have developed into wonderful specimens. One was exceptionally large, all were beautifully feathered.

The chicks have differed greatly in personality: a reflection of their parents no doubt. The one bird I have kept for myself has turned out to be a really fine talker. The first words were spoken at just three to four months of age. The voice quality is excellent. To date, the chick has learned several words and is always eager to talk and play. This Severe has an outgoing personality and is constantly trying to get my attention. When handled, this youngster (now close to a year old) loves to roll over on her back and wrestle. She has been determined to be female via surgical sexing. She flashes her eyes and talks whenever she makes eye contact with me. Although nippy, she does not bite aggressively. In stature, this was the smallest chick of the five reared.

In contrast, the other chicks were large and larger. They were tough and, as soon as they were close to weaning, began biting and assuming defensive postures. These birds were so different from the little hen, I can only assume that the personality of the Severe Macaw is determined in large part by genetic disposition.

My experience with the Severe Macaws has been exciting and educational. The dead-in-shell problem, solved with an adjustment in the breeding facility, was one high point. The tremendous diversity of personality from chick to chick, as well as that discovered in the two original wild-caught birds, leads me to believe that the Severe Macaw is every bit as complex and intelligent as the larger species of macaws.

The smaller size of the Severe Macaw makes it easier to keep as a pet than the large macaws and the birds that I have had over the past few years have been very healthy.

It is now the start of a new breeding season and already the pair seems ready to raise more chicks. They are actively working the nestbox, lining it with feathers and daring me to bother them whenever I tend the cage. ●

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