

Captive propagation of Cracids

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The avian family Cracidae is generally recognized as being comprised of two basic groups, one consisting of guans and chachalacas, the other containing curassows. Taxonomists further separate the latter group into three or four genera. The genus *Crax* is composed of seven species, all of which possess bushy crests. Pauxi contains the two helmeted varieties while Mitu, the razor-bills, entails three species. The fourth (not recognized by some as a separate genus), *Nothocrax*, consists of one species, the Nocturnal Curassow.



Black Currasow (*Crax alector*)



Nocturnal Currasow (*Nothocrax urumutum*)

Cracids are essentially medium to large gallinaceous birds that inhabit tropical forests from Mexico to central South America. Recently, however, the deforestation in underdeveloped countries has placed noticeable pressures upon the natural cracid populations. These agricultural and industrial movements, plus the constant hunting pressures by locals, have put the curassow in a rather precarious situation. Since time appears to be of the essence, it is important that an effort be made to establish and maintain viable captive breeding populations of the various cracid species. Although domestication of these birds was attempted and failed, it is still possible to rear a few birds each year from a good breeding pair. Therefore, further attention by the aviculturist is necessary, if this goal is to be attained.

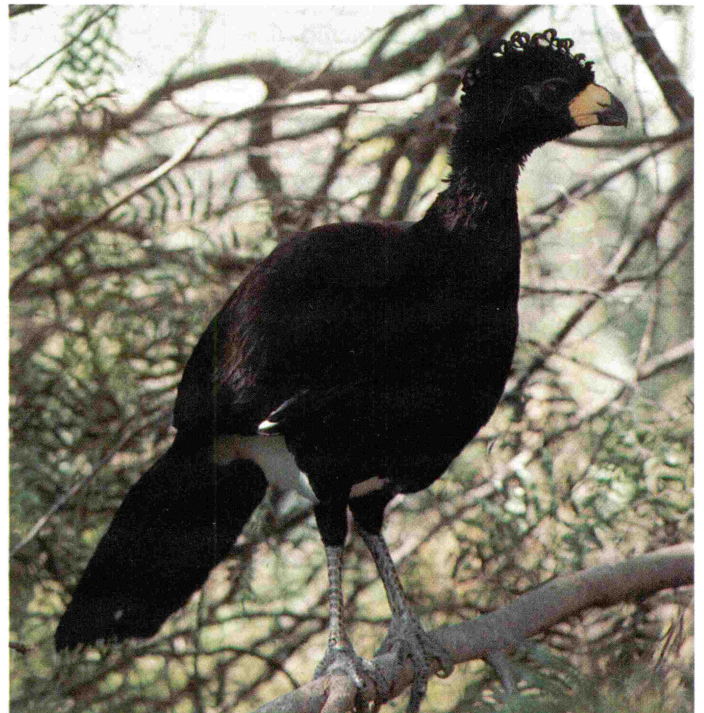
For the past 22 years, the author has been fortunate enough to possess nine species of curassow and has successfully propagated seven of these, totalling over 300 progeny. The following techniques have proven effective in the propagation of these birds.

The cracid aviaries vary from 10 to 12 feet in height. Even though these birds are perchers and feel more at ease when off the ground, these heights seem adequate. Ground space dimensions range in size from 10 x 20 feet to 16 x 36 feet. All of the aviaries are of wood frame construction with 1" wire poultry netting stretched over the frames. Various types of trees



Bare-face Currasow, female (*Crax fasciolata*)

are planted in each aviary and they are allowed to grow through the wire top, thus forming a canopy. These trees include: *Vitex* (*Vitex agnus-castus*), *Mimosa* (*Albizia julibrissin*), *Mulberry* (*Morus alba*), *Brazilian Pepper* (*Schinus terebinthi folius*), *California Pepper* (*Schinus molle*), and fruit trees, such as apricot, plum, peach, quince and fig. Natural vegeta-



Bare-face Currasow, male (*Crax fasciolata*)

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tion is the only form of shelter available since the southern Arizona climate seldom falls below freezing. The floor of each unit is composed of natural soil that is cultivated each fall and replanted with a mixture of rye grass, oats and barley. This provides available greens on which the birds can graze from October through June. Although curassows are not heavy grazers, they will occasionally do so, and I feel that the presence of grass is beneficial as it attracts insects which are readily eaten. The area in which the aviaries are located is also flooded to a depth of 8" every two weeks during the summer and once a month during the winter. This periodic flooding helps reduce the number of disease-causing agents by leaching the contaminants into the soil.

The sex ratio per aviary is one male to one to four females. Each enclosure is equipped with two to four nesting sites, depending upon the number of females. The nests consist of boxes constructed of 1" x 12" lumber. Their dimensions are 24" square by 12" deep. Smaller boxes 8 x 6 x 6 inches deep are used for guans and chachalacas. Other materials such as wicker baskets and wash tubs

have been tried, but the birds seem to prefer wooden boxes. The nest boxes are positioned at various heights in the trees and along limbs that are used for perching. Experience has shown that the highest nest is the most often used. Nesting materials consist of leaves and straw.

Shortly after the eggs are laid, they are collected and placed under a broody chicken hen of sufficient size. It has been the author's experience that fertility and hatchability decrease more rapidly in curassow eggs than in most others. Since the normal clutch size consists of two eggs, it is imperative that incubation commence within one to two days of the laying date. The incubation period lasts 29 to 32 days and the chicks can usually be heard within the shell three days before hatching. Pipping usually begins at one spot, and this area will remain broken for approximately 12 to 24 hours. When the chick turns in the shell and the actual hatching begins, it takes no longer than two to three hours for the chick to emerge.

Cracid chicks are well-feathered upon hatching. They will perch almost immediately, even when only one or two hours old. This perching

instinct should be encouraged so that crooked toes may be avoided. Natural tree limbs of small diameter should be supplied all cracid chicks. When they are 12 hours old, the chicks, accompanied by the broody hen, are placed in a brooder unit. A brooder measures 36" wide by 48" long by 24" high. Each is equipped with a heat lamp and perches of various sizes. The young birds remain in these brooders until three weeks of age. At that time, the chicks and their surrogate mothers are transferred to rearing pens (4 x 12 x 8 feet high) where they will remain until maturity.

The adults are fed a basic composition of two-thirds poultry crumbles and one-third mixed grain (milo, wheat and oats). Every other day this mixture is supplemented with hard-boiled egg and chopped horsemeat; and, twice a week, chopped apples and bananas are offered. Mealworms are added during the breeding season, February to July. It should also be noted that apricot and plum trees are planted in the aviaries, thus offering additional fruit during the spring. The immature curassows are basically fed the same diet. Since the chicks are usually eager eaters, there is little problem starting them on mealworms and hard-boiled egg; however, the supplementation with mealworms and meat is regulated for birds two weeks of age and older. The control of protein consumption minimizes the occurrence of leg abnormalities.

Cracids are quite hardy and accounts of 20 year old breeding birds are not uncommon. The one major deterrent to keeping curassows is their sensitivity to the cold. They suffer greatly when exposed to sub-freezing temperatures. In harsh winter areas, cracids must be provided with heated shelters or frozen toes will result virtually overnight.

In the 22 years I have been propagating cracids, I have thoroughly enjoyed them — indeed, they have become one of my favorite groups of birds.

Cracids are tame, easy to care for, not extremely difficult to propagate and delightful, interesting aviary specimens. Since they are rapidly diminishing in their native habitats, it is hoped more zoologists and aviculturists will concern themselves with the establishment of viable captive cracid populations. ●

Editor's Note: This article was first published at a cracid meeting in South America, circa 1981.

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