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emerald toucanet

by Jerry Jennings



photos by Jerry Jennings

The Emerald Toucanet (*Aulacorhynchus prasinus*) is one of the smallest members of the family Rhamphastidae, approximately 12-14 inches in length. It is almost entirely green with the exception of a small maroon patch on the rump, a white patch just below the eye, and the reddish-brown tipped tail feathers. The beak is two toned – yellow upper mandible and maroon-brown lower mandible. Sexes are nearly alike, distinguished only by bill length. The female has a short, nearly straight bill measuring approximately 2½ inches in length, whereas the male's bill is approximately one inch longer and is slightly decurved. The female at Walnut Acres has a bluish green breast as opposed to the male's green.

The Emerald Toucanet inhabits the sub-tropical cloud forests and wooded foothills of mountainous southern Mexico, Central America and the Andes of Venezuela, Columbia, Ecuador, and Peru from an elevation of 4000' to 8000'. It is a close relative of the Crimson-rumped Toucanet (*A. haematopygus*) which has been bred in captivity a number of generations (Watchbird, Vol II, No. 2, April 1975).

The Emerald Toucanet occurs in small flocks during the non-breeding season. During the breeding season individuals pair off to nest in tree cavities, most frequently the nests of large and medium-sized woodpeckers. The Emerald will take over both abandoned and active nests, driving the current occupants away. They then may slightly widen the entrance hole, as they begin to lay their clutch of three to four white eggs.

Both male and female take part in incubation during the day, though only the female incubates at night. Young remain in the nest approximately six weeks and are brooded by the hen at night. They are fed a diet of berries, fruit containing undigestible pits or seeds, insects, and the eggs and young of other birds. Emerald Toucanets are known to be great nest robbers.

Emerald Toucanets are not frequently seen in captivity, especially in private collections. Approximately 16 months ago I was able to acquire a true pair, which are set up in an aviary measuring 16' x 16' x 9'. They are fed a diet of Gaines dry dog kibble, fruit cocktail (rinsed and drained), diced fresh Papaya, and fresh water containing Headstart

Emerald Toucanet, hen on left, male on right.



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Towards the end of May 1977 a nest log, provided by Dale Thompson, measuring six feet in length and one foot in diameter was placed in the rear of the flight. Within two weeks the pair were observed entering and leaving the nest log, which has been occupied previously by woodpeckers at the Los Angeles Zoo (Mr. Thompson had loaned his log to the zoo during his employment at that facility.)

Approximately three weeks after the birds were first seen in the nest, faint noises began to emanate from the nest cavity. Five days thereafter the noises ceased and it was presumed the young had perished. The adults were not observed near the nest again until mid-July, when a second nest was begun. (It is not known exactly when these birds began to lay, incubate, or feed young since the nest cannot be inspected short of destroying the log entirely.)

As with the first nest, noises could be heard in the log about two and a half weeks after the parents were first observed entering and leaving the nest. Initially it appeared there were two or three young in the cavity, however, after one week only one distinct voice could be heard. This voice grew louder and stronger over the next three weeks, when it also

ceased. Upon removal from the nest, this youngster measured approximately eight inches in length. Both wing and tail feathers had appeared and were approximately one half inch in length. The bill had reached a length of one inch.

During the first nest only the diet mentioned earlier was provided. Whereas this is sufficient for the adults, it apparently was not for the young. An attempt was made to inspect the nest using a mirror and flashlight on the fifth day after hatching. This disturbance also probably contributed to the lack of success, since the fifth day was the last day the young were definitely known to have been alive.

During the second nest, the birds were not disturbed. Further, the diet was supplemented with the addition of pinkies (newborn rats) as soon as it was apparent the eggs had hatched. Pinkies were fed at the rate of four per day — two in the morning and two in the afternoon, and were consumed within twenty minutes after they were placed in the aviary. On the last day the young bird was alive only the morning ration of pinkies had been provided. The following morning a double ration was offered, however, when the pinkies had not been consumed by mid-afternoon the nest was examined and emptied.

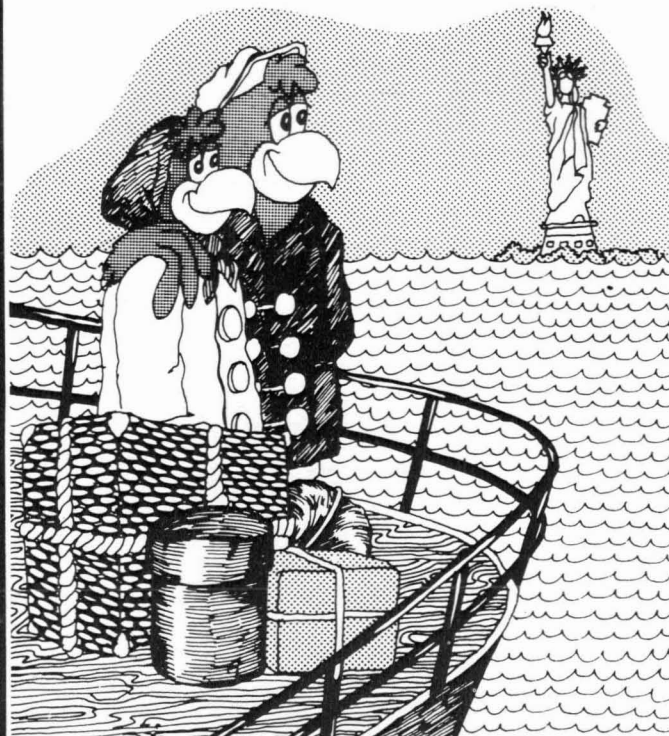


Hen at entrance of nest.

Although the results of these two nests were not successful, they do indicate that these birds can be bred in captivity. It also demonstrates that the experiences of other successes, most notably at the Los Angeles Zoo, can be repeated through duplication of the conditions contributing to those successes.

Continuing efforts will be made to breed the Emerald Toucanet at Walnut Acres. An effort will be made to further supplement the diet with small eggs, and a second pair of Emeralds hopefully will be added to the breeding program prior to the 1978 season. ■

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