

PIONUS PARROTS

One of Aviculture's Most Underrated Treasures

By Margrethe Warden



PHOTO BY SL BROWN / Maximilian Pionus (*P. maximiliani*)

Pionus parrots are one of the most underrated treasures found in aviculture today. They are medium sized, short tailed birds that hail from Central and South America. There are five species commonly found in the United States. They are the Blue-headed (*Pionus menstruus*), White-capped (*P. senilis*), Maximilian (*P. maximiliani*), Dusky (*P. fuscus*) and Bronze-winged (*P. chalcopterus*). There is a small population of Coral-billed Pionus (*P. sordidus*) but they are not well established in aviculture. Also not well established in the United States is the Plum-crowned Pionus (*P. tumultuosus*). The one species not represented in the United States is the White-headed Pionus (*P. seniloides*).

There are some who consider this bird to be a subspecies of the Plum-crowned rather than a separate species. In this article it will be addressed as a separate species. All pionus species are listed on Appendix II of CITES.

Pionus parrots have a distinctive flight with deep, stiff wing beats. These wing movements remain mostly below the body. These stocky birds are easily recognized by their trademark red vent feathers and noticeably notched upper mandibles. Pionus parrots do not have the overtly flashy coloring of many popular macaws and conures. They have subtle yet splendid coloring that is best appreciated in good lighting. They are not sexually dimorphic. These charming birds seem to have gained popularity in the last decade or two as more people are recognizing both their beauty and delightful qualities as companions.

One of the most popular and probably the most recognizable pionus species in this country is the Blue-headed Pionus, *Pionus menstruus*. It is a medium-sized parrot, 10 to 11 inches or 28 cm long, weighing an average of 260 grams. It is primarily



Adult Plum-crowned Pionus (*P. tumultuosus*)



PHOTO BY MARK MOORE / Blue-headed Pionus (*P. menstruus*)

a green bird with dark ear coverts and a deep blue, sometimes almost electric blue, head and neck. Juveniles have similar coloring but with much less blue. The neck and throat feathers are pink or red at the base, with this color often showing through. If the bright blue head was not distinctive enough, they also have a reddish patch on either side of the dark colored upper mandible. In addition to the nominate species, *P.m. menstruus*, there are two documented subspecies; however, only one, *P.m. rubrigularis*, is present (in small numbers) in American aviculture. It is slightly smaller than the nominate and the red coloration on the neck is more pronounced. Blue-headed Pionus are native to forests in the lower elevations in Central and South America, ranging from Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, through eastern Ecuador, Peru and into Brazil where they can be seen at the clay licks alongside the macaws. They are extremely common throughout their vast range and are also well represented in American aviculture where they are one of the most commonly kept pionus species.

After the Blue-headed Pionus, the White-capped or White-crowned Pionus, *P. senilis*, is probably the second most recognizable and commonly kept species. White-capped Pionus are one of the smaller members of the genus at about 26 cm (nine inches) in length and weighing around 220–230 grams. The White-capped Pionus is primarily a green bird with a white forehead along with white on the throat. The shades of green vary from lighter on the abdomen to darker on the breast and back. The beak is yellow or pale colored. These birds can be found in Central America from northern Mexico down into Panama. They prefer to inhabit forested areas and can often be seen flying about in large, noisy flocks. They are popular in the pet trade due in part to their availability and their price, which is generally lower

than that of other pionus species.

The Maximilian's Pionus or Scaly-headed Parrot, *P. maximiliani*, is one of the larger pionus parrots and another frequently kept species in the United States. Its natural range overlaps somewhat with that of the Blue-headed Pionus. It is about 11 inches or 28 cm long and weighs in the neighborhood of 275–280 grams. The plumage has varying shades of green with purple on the throat and breast. The head feathers are edged with grey, giving it a “scaly” appearance, especially at a distance. They are known for their pleasant temperament and willingness to adapt to a new environment.

The Bronze-winged Pionus, *P. chalcopterus*, is native to South America, ranging through western Colombia and Peru and into Ecuador. They are slightly larger than the White-capped at about 10 inches or 25 cm in length and weighing 265–275 grams. The plumage is striking and less green than that of other pionus species. The body is a bluish-purple, the throat white and the back is green, washed with bronze. These birds are delightful to keep but often seem to be very cautious and reserved until they are comfortable with their environment. Although popular in the United States as both aviary birds and companions, there is limited genetic diversity in the captive population due to the fact that only a small number of them were imported into the United States. Outside of the United States, they do not appear to be well established in aviculture.

The Dusky Pionus, *P. fuscus*, is the smallest pionus, sporting plumage that is varying shades of grey, violet, blue and pink. The feathers around the ear coverts are white, giving this bird a falcon-like appearance. The feet and eye ring are grey, and the beak is dark at the tip but light on the sides. At nine inches or 24 cm in length and weighing 210–220 grams, the Dusky Pionus is



PHOTO BY ARMANDO MEJIA / White-headed Pionus (*P. seniloides*)

similar in size to the White-capped Pionus. It is native to Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana and the northern part of Brazil. It is quite common in its natural habitat but only moderately common in American aviculture. They are charming little birds and enjoy being part of a human family. They are not difficult to breed and are even willing to breed under unusual circumstances. One individual was able to successfully breed a pair using a large parrot cage located in her bedroom. The pair successfully raised several clutches and not only tolerated human intrusion but also allowed her to co-parent the chicks.

The Coral-billed Pionus, *P. sordidus*, is the largest of the pionus parrots and can be found ranging from northern Venezuela and parts of Colombia into Ecuador, eastern Peru and in northern Bolivia. Although they are not listed as critically endangered, they are not as common in the wild as other Pionus species. In many aspects, its plumage is similar to that of the Maximilian's

Pionus with an olive green body and blue-purple band across the throat and neck. As the common name suggests, its distinguishing feature is the red or coral colored beak. Coral-billed Pionus are every bit as charming as the other pionus parrot species but are not well established in aviculture in the United States. There is only a small population of breeding pairs but they do occasionally turn up in the pet trade.

The Plum-crowned Pionus, *P. tumultuosus*, is a lovely bird. Its most distinctive characteristic is its deep red head feathers. The base of these feathers is white which shows through, giving the face a speckled appearance similar to the White-headed Pionus. This species does exist in tiny numbers (fewer than two dozen) in American aviculture; however, those dedicated to working with this difficult species have been unable to establish a sustainable population. They are particularly vulnerable to fungal infections such as aspergillosis—apparently more so than the other species.



PHOTO BY JACKIE LINK / White-capped Pionus (*P. senilis*)

The Plum-crowned habitat is the mountainous regions of Peru and Bolivia. A habitat in higher elevations is a factor that likely contributes to its vulnerability to fungal infections. In addition, another challenge of breeding them in the United States is that the few offspring produced have mostly been males, making it nearly impossible to set up new pairs. Sadly, it seems highly unlikely, even through cooperative breeding efforts, that this species will ever become established in U.S. aviculture.

The White-headed Pionus, *P. seniloides*, does not appear in U.S. aviculture and is considered uncommon in its native range. Its habitat is in forests in higher altitudes in the mountainous areas of Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia. This bird has a green body and the head feathers are white pink on the head, giving it a speckled appearance similar to the Plum-crowned.

Little is known about the natural diets of pionus parrots and there has been almost no research on the subject. Mauro Galatti studied Maximilian's Pionus and published his findings in 1993. The Pionus Parrot Research Foundation was created and additional field research using Bronze-winged and Coral-billed Pionus was attempted in the Mindo Valley of Ecuador; however,

at this time the research has not been completed. In captivity, the typical pionus diet should be rich in fresh vegetables, fruits and sprouted seeds. In addition, a high-quality seed mix can be offered. While pionus can also be fed commercial pelleted food, this should not be a large portion of the diet, since these birds seem to do better on a diet that is fairly low in protein and fat. Many pionus who are fed pellets as a large percentage of the diet often develop problems with elevated uric acid and ultimately, visceral gout. They can be more sedentary than other parrots, so watch those calories! Pionus tend to have good appetites, enjoy a varied diet and will usually easily adapt readily to new foods and diet changes. Fresh foods and sprouts can cause these birds to plunge head first into the food bowl and not come out until most of it is gone.

Pionus parrots have adapted well to life in captivity and are relatively easy to breed. For most pairs, a typical nest box, either grandfather style or L-shaped, will work. For Coral-billed Pionus, Z-shaped boxes have produced better results than the standard shapes. Pionus pairs can be housed in cages at least four feet deep but if space permits, larger flights should be used. There can be problems with mate aggression, particularly on the part of the hen. I had a pair of Maximilian's Pionus that raised at least one clutch together before the hen turned on the male and nearly killed him. After separating them for several months, I clipped the hen's wing feathers and reintroduced them. Within moments she became aggressive and the male was removed before he could be injured again. Other breeders have reported similar incidents with other species as well.

A typical clutch has two to four eggs and incubation lasts 25 to 27 days. Most species fledge in nine to 10 weeks, although White-capped Pionus may fledge as early as eight weeks of age. In aviculture, Pionus are notoriously stubborn about weaning. They are known for their loud and persistent begging call that can continue long after weaning, often expressing hunger or insecurity. Many breeders find their chicks are not ready to go to new homes until they are several months old. And, even then, stressors such as going to a new location may cause them to revert to one or two feedings a day until they adjust to the changes.

Many Pionus will seem almost tentative in new surroundings or even to changes in their environment. Although they are quite adaptable, Pionus seem to take a little longer to adjust than many other species. Once in their home, Pionus parrots as a whole tend to be more independent and less demanding of their owners than other parrots. They are often content to be in the same room with their human flock without a constant need to be held and cuddled. While their apparent lack of interest in being handled might be frustrating to a few, it is this independent nature that makes them ideal pets for many working owners. Pionus are not as loud as many other parrots. This is not to say Pionus cannot get loud because they most certainly can; however, they don't seem to generate the decibels, duration or the



PHOTO BY MARK MOORE / Dusky Pionus (*P. fuscus*)

frequency that many other parrots are known for. In addition, they can be moderately good talkers. When stressed, upset or uncertain, Pionus often “wheeze.” This can be quite unsettling to the new owner but it will pass once the bird has had an opportunity to calm down. The wheezing sound is typical and is not

an indication of illness.

Pionus are not the most active birds but they do enjoy hanging, climbing and playing. They need cages that are at least wide enough for the bird to completely outstretch its wings and not touch the sides at all. Toys are a must. They like to chew and they enjoy such challenges as untying knots or taking apart puzzle toys. In addition to the cage, play stands or trees are perfect for entertaining them.

Pionus are susceptible to the same diseases as other parrots such as PDD, polyoma, gout, infections, psittacosis and beak and feather disease. They are not especially prone to becoming neurotic and only occasionally resort to feather plucking. They seem to be closely related to Amazons and they do tend to exhibit similar hormonal behaviors, especially the males, when they become sexually mature. Their body language is typically easy to interpret, so managing the hormonal pionus is not all that difficult. In another similarity to Amazons, Pionus parrots have a noticeable sweet, musky odor about them that most owners find quite endearing. And on the topic of endearing qualities, most Pionus lovers will say that these birds have the most beautiful eyes of all the parrots. They are deep, dark, liquid brown, surrounded by a bare eye ring.

If you are thinking about adding a bird to your flock, consider a Pionus parrot. They are reasonably priced, not hard to locate and will provide you with excellent companionship for many years.

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