



BOTANIC GARDEN OF SAO PAULO PHOTO BY DADEROT
(BACKGROUND IMAGE)



'GOLDEN MACAWS' A 10-YEAR JOURNEY

*Story by Lyrae Perry and Mark Moore
Photography by Mark Moore*

What do you do when something so incredible happens with your pet birds that it changes your life forever? This is exactly the question Gary Redden and his family had to answer 10 years ago, when he found strange-looking baby birds in the nest box of his pet Blue and Gold Macaws, Mickey and Minnie. This was the beginning of a decade of commitment for the Reddens as they worked to establish the “golden macaw” in captivity.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Gary Redden was always interested in birds. He lived on a dairy farm as a boy and kept chickens and peacocks. Gary's interest in birds continued to grow and after being married, he acquired a pair of Zebra finches. Birds were a hobby for Gary and his family, as they enjoyed watching and listening to the birds in their aviaries. Raising

birds is a challenge and a thrill when you are successful, no matter what species you choose. And like so many of us, their collection just kept growing. There was no way to foretell the legacy Gary's interest in aviculture would create.

In 1992 Gary's wife Lynn gave him two baby Blue & Gold macaws as a birthday gift. These were their first large parrots and were named Mickey and Minnie. By 1996, the pair was three and a half years of age and laid their first clutch of eggs. Mickey and Minnie produced one to two clutches per year for the next three years. Minnie typically lays four to five eggs per clutch, and in the early years it was nearly always five eggs. Gary and Lynn sold a few of the offspring and kept some to set up more breeding pairs for the future.

Rat snakes are a particular problem in Texas, and the snakes are very good at scaling walls, wire and trees, getting into nests to swallow eggs, babies and small birds. Certain times of the year are worse than others. It pays to be vigilant about checking nest boxes and getting the eggs out before the snakes get a chance at them. Gary



routinely pulls eggs for incubation and raises chicks from Day One.

The year 2000 marked the fourth breeding season for Mickey and Minnie. Conditions seemed right and safe enough for allowing the birds to have a turn at hatching and raising some chicks. Minnie laid three eggs and was incubating during the summer of 2000. The Reddens didn't know it then, but this little hobby was on the brink of changing their lives forever and it would send shock waves across the globe.

Gary went out to check the nest box and noticed that two of the three the chicks in the box did not look "right." For starters the skin was too pale and the eyes looked unusual. He immediately pulled the chicks and took them into the house for hand rearing and to check them over carefully.

All three chicks were brooded together in the same box and fed the same hand-feeding formula. The two unusual babies seemed to be growing at the same pace as the normal chick. They appeared healthy in all respects except that the skin, feet nails and beaks were white.

The first clue to solving the mystery of these first pale chicks was when the eyes opened. The eyes were deep red in color. As the feathers began to open, the chest feathers were a deep yellow-gold like

the normal chick. The head, tail and body feathers wings were a pale yellow. Obviously a mutation, but what kind? Knowing these mutation chicks were unusual and probably very valuable, the Reddens contacted various aviculturists to ask about the genetics, special needs of mutations, potential for selling and long term breeding ideas. They wanted to consider all the options before making any rash decisions. It wasn't long before the news of these fantastic birds spread like wildfire across the internet and the world. Everyone was talking about the "golden macaws" from Texas.

Gary worked for the Dallas Zoo's bird department, a job he truly enjoyed because he was surrounded by like-minded people. Soon realizing that his avicultural hobby was suddenly going to require more time than he had available, he made a decision to leave his job and manage his hobby full time. This was the first of many sacrifices that he'd have to make in order to be successful with the golden macaws. His little hobby evolved into a full-time career, as these macaws became the focus of Gary's passion.

AFA INTERVIEW WITH GARY REDDEN

AFA: What type of diet do you feed your birds?

GARY REDDEN: We feed a pelleted diet that we have milled.





We also supplement with seasonal fruits and vegetables and occasional treats like native pecans or black walnuts from our own trees. Some established birds have a seed diet as we haven't been able to convert them to the pelleted feed, so we offer both. All birds get a limited amount of seed.

AFA: How much and what time do you feed per pair, per day?

GR: Free choice, but we try to only put out what they will eat in one day. I feed in the mornings every day. My birds are in large cages and are full flighted, so they get lots of exercise.

AFA: Do you feed special items or vitamins to your breeders?

GR: I call them banana splits, where I split my bananas lengthwise and sprinkle them with Vionate. They gobble these up like treats.

AFA: Do you worm your birds or treat them for disease prophylactically on a regular schedule?

GR: No, only as needed.

AFA: Do you keep your birds inside or outside year round? If outside, what problems do the elements present and how do you deal with them?

GR: Our birds are all kept outside, however most have shelters of some type. Predators like hawks, raccoons, snakes, etc. are big problems. We arrange perching so that birds are not against outside walls. Feeding stations are covered and we try to make them predator-proof. North walls are blocked in some way, and all cages are partially covered for shade and protection. We try to keep pens

BENEFITS OF USING DUMMY EGGS

One year I had pulled the first egg of a clutch for incubation and replaced it in the nest with a dummy egg. I knew the hen would be laying the next day, and so I went out to pull that egg and replace it with a dummy egg also. I noticed the hen was not in the box when I got to the aviary, and when I opened the nest box there was a big rat snake inside. The snake had eaten the dummy egg! I'm pretty sure it ate the egg she'd laid that day, too. It was very disappointing to lose one egg, but at least the rat snake didn't get them all.

near trees, etc, for natural cooling. During extreme cold weather, like when it stays below freezing for several days, additional heat sources are provided. Nest barrels are given extra bedding for insulation.

AFA: What type of cage or aviary set up do you have for your breeder birds?

GR: We have a hodge-podge collection of pens that we have repurposed or built. All cages are as large as possible.

AFA: What are the dimensions of the typical cage or aviary?

GR: Minimum of flight length of 25–35 feet, and at least eight foot in height—taller is better. Pens are built to fit the area. We have one great big, very tall pen that I call the circus tent because that is what it is shaped like. The “teenage” macaws go in there because



it gives them lots of flying room. Sometimes they quarrel and bite each other's tail feathers—they do act like human teenagers.

AFA: What type of nest box do you use?

GR: I prefer 55-gallon plastic barrels with an offset hole towards the top. They must have ventilation and drainage holes. They are easy to obtain, and easy to clean.

AFA: What type of nest material do you use?

GR: Pine shavings—large ones preferred

AFA: What type of perches do you provide?

GR: I use natural branch perching, and replace these as needed. I will put extra limbs in there if the birds seem to be chewing on it more. Mostly I use cedar and Bois d'arc for perching. For browse material, I use more supple material like elm.

AFA: Are your flights or nest boxes hung in a particular direction, or is there anything you do that might be different or unusual

with your next boxes?

GR: I never put nest boxes in the sunlight, and always facing away from predominant rain. I try to make sure that nest boxes are somewhat sheltered, but never in the sunlight is the most important thing. If possible, the opening is away from direct line of sight.

AFA: When does the normal breeding season start and end?

GR: Blue and Golds usually lay about April or May until September, depending on the weather.

AFA: How often do you check your nest boxes for eggs during breeding season?

GR: I watch the birds for their behavior and check the nest boxes as needed. Sometimes daily when they have started their clutch of eggs.

AFA: How often do you check on the eggs?

GR: I pull the eggs as soon as they are laid, replacing with

dummy eggs, to protect from losses due to rat snakes.

AFA: Do you ever foster eggs under other birds?

GR: No, we artificially incubate all the eggs.

AFA: What type of incubator do you use?

GR: I use a small Grumbach for incubating eggs. An older modified GQF (Georgia Quail Farms) wooden incubator is used as a hatcher.

AFA: What temperature do you incubate and hatch the eggs?

GR: Incubation temperature is 99.1 to 99.3 degrees F. The hatcher is set at 99.0 degrees F, with all the humidity we can provide.

AFA: Have you noticed any size differences in your mutations as compared to the normal wild type?

GR: No

AFA: What obstacles / failures / mistakes / accidents / setbacks have you encountered with your birds?

GR: We have had all of those things occur. Problems with vets, freak accidents, losing the original breeder male for no apparent reason, limited number of mutation female breeder birds, etc. It seemed like I would take two steps forward and one step back. After 20 years of raising birds, I feel like I have seen it all.

AFA: Have you noticed a difference in maturation rate and fertility in your domestically raised babies?

GR: No, I don't think so because our first golden macaw bred at the age of four years old.

AFA: Please describe differences in health you've encountered with your macaws.

GR: We have tried to watch the golden macaws very carefully, especially their eyesight in the bright Texas sun. We haven't noticed any differences in health or vision, but we've had more crooked beaks than in normal birds.

AFA: Do normally colored birds immediately accept the visual mutations?

GR: The normal colored birds don't seem to even notice the color mutations as being different. They mix just fine all together. Some individual birds appear to have different personalities and be more aggressive, but it can be the golden macaws, as well as the normal colored birds.

AFA: What do you see happening with your breeding program in the next 10 years?

GR: In about one to two years it will be time to pass the responsibility on to someone else. I am ready to downsize and go back to being a hobby breeder, keeping a few special pairs to enjoy.

AFA: Do you have anything you'd like to share or add that would be helpful to the reader that we've not covered so far?

GR: I would like to share that for the first time, we allowed a pair to keep their last clutch and raise the chicks themselves. They successfully hatched and raised one golden chick, so we now have one parent fledged golden macaw. We don't know the sex of this chick yet. It fledged 11-29-10.

AFA: How would you do things differently or compensate for

the problems you encountered?

GR: If I did this again, I think I would not try to do this all myself. This was a big undertaking, and required so much time and care. If I had split these birds up, and had other breeders assist me, it might have made it easier and made my wife happier.

AFA: Thank you for sharing your time and updating us on your beautiful golden macaws.

CONCLUSION

Gary tells us that since the appearance of the first golden chicks, and because of the rarity of this mutation and potential hazards, all eggs are pulled and artificially incubated, leaving little to chance. According to his wife, Gary never leaves the house anymore, and is always surrounded by more work that needs to be done maintaining the birds and aviaries. After 20 years of keeping birds, Gary often reminisces over the trials and tribulations he has experienced. He remembers mistakes made, accidents that have happened, and decisions that could have been made otherwise. But when he looks at the golden macaws, he says he feels it has all been worthwhile.

When asked what personal impact this occurrence has had on his life, his answer was: "both a positive and a negative." He says the benefits are that he has been given new, challenging goals as an aviculturist. By this he means that his mission was to determine the genetic inheritance mode of this new mutation and generate a pure line. He has enjoyed this unexpected development as it has unfolded; just waiting to see what hatches from the next egg is exciting. On the negative side, it has required an unparalleled time commitment that has created personal strife. He finds himself unable to travel with his family as he used to, and he had to give up a job that he enjoyed. He did manage to attend his daughter's wedding and he wishes to thank Debbie from the Dallas Zoo for sharing her home and expertise, granting him the time away to do so.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Today Gary is surrounded by his golden macaws, proof that his dedication and hard work haven't been in vain. Ten years after the first glance at a golden macaw chick, he has finally established a mature visual pair. This pair produced offspring in fall 2010. Also, for the first time in this journey, Gary has achieved yet another one of his goals; his first parent-reared mutation macaw fledged from the nest box. This was certainly a proud moment for a man who has worked so long and hard toward such ends.

As I toured the aviaries with Gary and Lynn, I could plainly see the pride in their faces as they showed me the 14 golden macaws, grouped by age in separate flights. The cage with juvenile birds learning to fly and interact with other Blue and Golds was an awe-inspiring sight. I am thankful to Gary and his wife for allowing me to see what could be some of the most beautiful birds in the world. ~Mark Moore