

# GOLDEN CONURES



PHOTO BY SHANE HANCOCK/Baby Golden Conure chicks

*By Nancy Speed*

The Golden Conure (*Guaruba guarouba*) is known throughout the world for its unique beauty and delightful personality. It is known by many names in different localities—the Yellow Macaw, the Yellow Conure, the Ararajuba, the Golden Parakeet and the Queen of Bavaria Conure.

Although the Golden Conure was previously included in the genus *Aratinga*, many who have kept and studied the habits of this lovely parrot over a number of years suspected the classification was incorrect. Genetic analysis in the early 2000s proved that the Golden Conure is more closely related to the Red-shouldered Macaw (*Diopsittaca nobilis*); therefore, it was reclassified to the monotypic genus *Guaruba* which is considered the sister genus to *Diopsittaca*.

## Description

The Golden Conure is indeed distinctive in appearance, behavior and vocalization. It averages about 14 inches in length and has an average weight of about 300 grams. The body plumage of the adult is a breathtaking yellow that rivals the most perfectly colored lemon. The primary, secondary and major coverts are dark green. Feather quills are white and a bare white ring



ARCHIVE PHOTO BY NANCY SPEED/A newly hatched Golden Conure chick

surrounds its very kind and observant eye. The macaw-sized beak is horn colored with some bluish mottling occurring throughout, especially toward the tips. The tip of the upper beak is dagger sharp. Legs and feet are pinkish with black mottling. The iris is brownish with an orange tint.

Juveniles are clearly identifiable by the appearance of numerous olive green feathers interspersed throughout the body. Juvenile feather quills are dark green. The amount of green markings





PHOTO COURTESY OF WORLD PARROT TRUST/Golden Conures forage in Brazil.

a juvenile may possess is random—no two are colored alike. Adult plumage is almost always completely attained by the age of two. The juvenile has a beguiling and innocent expression and is also easily identified by its seemingly immature behavior in a flock containing mature birds.

### Range, Habits and Status

The Golden Conure is native to a very remote area in northeastern Brazil. The World Parrot Trust, through its Golden Conure Survival Fund, has funded several studies of the Golden Conure, the most recent being done in 2006 and 2007 by Thiago Orsi Laranjeiras. His lengthy observations indicate the bird is known in approximately 70 localities in five Brazilian states, most of which are in the State of Pará. It is also distributed across east-central Amazonia, from northern Rondônia to western Maranhão, always south of the Amazon River and east of the Madeira.

Laranjeiras noted that Golden Conures flock, feed and nest communally. Groups forage in the canopy of the primary and secondary forest and spend much of the day at feeding sites. He observed them eating from 11 different types of trees and, depending upon the tree, the birds consumed fruit pulp,

skin and seeds. The murucí trees (*Byrsonima ssp*) appear to be a favored and important food resource. The birds also use this opportunity to socialize, allopreen and play before returning to their roosting site as a group. Preferred nesting sites seem to be in open, degraded areas near patches of intact forest.

The main threat in the wild continues to be the deforestation of the Amazon. The construction of the Tucuruí Dam, which flooded approximately 888 square miles of rainforest, had a significant negative impact upon the Golden Conure and as many as 294 species of other indigenous birds.

These extensive studies may well have a tremendous impact on the future survival of the Golden Conure in the wild. Thankfully, there are protected areas that shelter populations, including the Amazonia and Jamanxim National Parks, Tapajós, Itaituba, Trairão and Caixuanã National Forests and the Gurupi Biological Reserve. These protected areas represent the best hope for survival of the Golden Conure. It is obvious more field studies are needed to plan for the future.

### In Captivity

I have kept and studied these birds for more than 15 years. My





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collection has grown to nearly 100 birds. The live in a dormitory-type outdoor aviaries with complete protection from predators. The flights are constructed from galvanized after welding, 14-gauge, 1" x 1½" wire. Wire with an opening larger than 1½" is not recommended because wings are easily trapped in such a large opening. The flights are six feet in length, 36" in width, and four feet in height. I have experimented housing large juvenile groups (10+ birds) in significantly larger flights. Several nest boxes and feeding stations were provided but the youngsters seemed stressed and generally unhappy. Within six months each of them resorted to feather mutilation. After returning them to the six foot long flights in smaller groupings of four, their feather condition returned to normal.

Rear perches are 1" PVC pipe (the rear perch is exposed to the elements) and front perches are 2" x 2" fir lumber. Each pair is provided with two hanging toys constructed from scrap fir lumber. Juvenile groups are also provided with a swing about 24-inch width to accommodate at least 4 individuals. This species is not a voracious chewer but lumber perches and toys are refurbished on a regular basis.

A distance of about 12" separates each of the flights. I use sheet metal as privacy panels and they are hung closest to the nest box and cover about one-third of each flight. The privacy panels remain in place regardless of the level of breeding activity.

Privacy panels are not used on flights housing juvenile groups and other non-breeding birds.

I have experimented with several nest box styles and find pairs prefer an inverted boot box, also called an "el" or "7" box, of at least 24" in depth (30" is better), with the interior measuring about 10" x 10". Because the rear of the flight is open to the elements, nest boxes are hung on the front of flights and are serviced from the center aisle. Nest box substrate consists of a mixture of very large fir chips. Metal nest boxes can be used if the nesting area is protected from sunlight. All nest boxes should be

safely anchored to the flights rather than just hung loosely. This can be done by drilling a small hole in the box and threading a piece of tie wire through it and twist tying it with pliers to the flight.

Golden Conures use their nest boxes all year. Juvenile groups should also have the security of a nest box. Boot boxes of any depth suit their needs well.

Each aviary housing all flights is constructed to allow exposure to naturally occurring weather conditions as temperatures permit. The outermost 36" of the metal roof panels are removed during the warm weather months to allow the birds access to sun and rain. When temperatures drop to below 45° F, the roof panels are replaced and the building is secured with 6M plastic. A propane gas greenhouse heater, properly vented to the exterior, offers additional heat as needed to keep the interior above 45° F. Full spectrum lighting is controlled by automatic timer when the roof panels are in place. This is a very labor intensive set up but has worked well for me over the years.

The Golden Conure has a very loud, metallic call that travels a great distance. In an aviary setting, a joyful group of 30 articulate individuals will cause eardrums to vibrate. Chicks begin vocalizing as adults by the time they are just a few weeks old. Vocalization among them seems to be an important part of their social structure. They chatter much more frequently than the average flock of parrots.

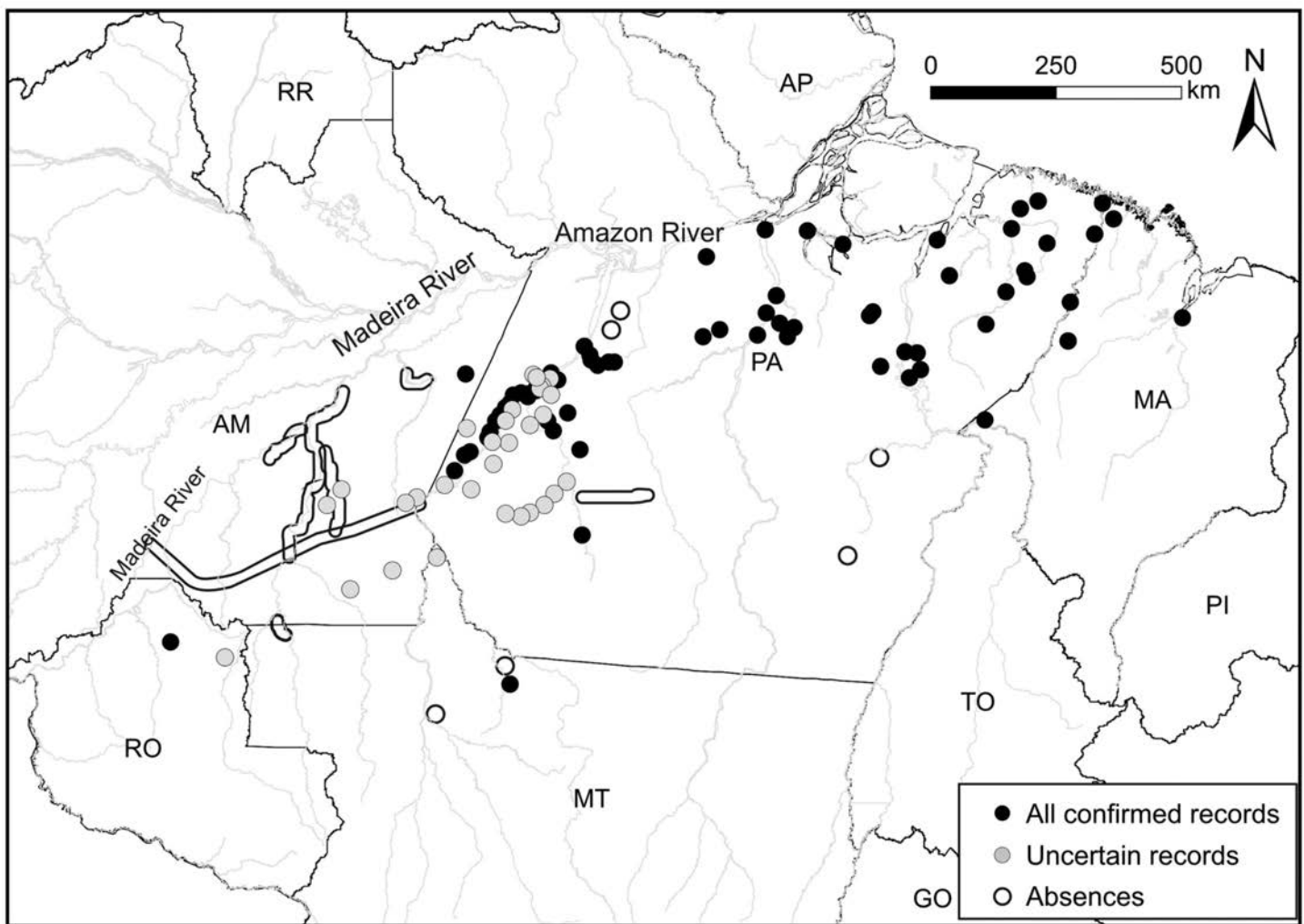
Feather destruction of the Golden Conure is a valid concern. Seasonal feather destruction in my flock usually occurs when the aviaries are prepared for cold temperatures. A few of my adults pick habitually, regardless of environmental factors. Some destroy feathers one season and not the next. Juveniles chew the feather ends of their clutch mates. Parents often overpreen the feathers of youngsters being parent-reared. I have reared many birds in the last 15 years and have found the tendency toward feather destruction is as prevalent in parent-fledged youngsters as it is in hand-reared youngsters. The least amount of feather destruction I have seen occurs in flights housing groups of hens.

## Feeding

I have not found Golden Conures to be particularly finicky parrots. Adults and juveniles are offered a high quality extruded diet (I use Hagen Tropicana free choice). In a separate bowl, I offer



## Distribution of Golden Conures in South America, courtesy of World Parrot Trust



a mixture of sprouted sunflower seeds, raw carrot, uncooked corn and butter peas, apple and orange. Each pair also gets about a tablespoon of unshelled pine nuts each day. A quality seed mix is fed on Sunday and sunflower seed is favored.

Hagen Tropimix is offered as a first weaning food to juveniles in the nursery. These chicks are very inquisitive and using a mix containing different shapes, sizes and textures is very helpful to the weaning process. As soon as they begin experimenting with solid food, I begin offering unshelled pine nuts. I find it amazing that the youngsters immediately know how to crack and eat these very hard nuts. Fresh food is also introduced and I usually include grapes in this mixture.

### Captive Breeding

Golden Conures held for breeding are most successful when in the presence of other Golden Conures. Owning a single bonded pair of these highly social parrots does not guarantee reproductive success. In fact, I believe the highest rate of infertility occurs in single pair homes. The Golden Conure is by nature a very gregarious and social parrot with an intense need for interaction among others of its own species.

They generally begin nesting between three and four years

of age, and can be prolific producers. Incubation length is from 27–28 days. Clutch sizes range from three to five eggs. Chicks weigh from 7 to 9 grams at hatch. The number of clutches per year varies but is usually limited to one or two. I also own mature pairs that have never nested. My breeding season usually begins in late December and ends in May. In 2011 one pair nested in August and this was a very unusual occurrence. I was not aware they had eggs until the chicks hatched.

The number of clutches one pair may produce yearly is dependent upon many factors. Pairs that destroy eggs or are not allowed to incubate and feed will often return to nest within a very short time. Pairs that are allowed to incubate and feed will rest for a longer period of time between clutches. Pairs that are allowed to fledge chicks may not return to nest for a year or two, especially if any juveniles are allowed to remain with the parent birds for an extended time after weaning.

Although there is no documented proof from field observations in the wild, it was surmised that juvenile Golden Conures within a family group might help rear the next year's chicks. This is absolutely correct! In early 2002 I began recording the nest box activities of several pairs. One pair had a youngster from the previous year's hatch. It was exciting to watch the juvenile (a

hen) in the nest box. She showed interest in the eggs but never attempted to incubate them when the adult hen was out of the box. When the first chick was just a few days old, the juvenile began preening and feeding the tiny chick. Since then, I routinely allow at least one juvenile to remain with the parents for at least two years. One pair has kept its first chick since its hatch in 2001 (also a hen). She has helped rear numerous clutches and has not attempted to nest or bond as a mate to the paired male.

I believe it advisable to allow these very social parrots to live in family groups if accommodations are spacious, at least until mate selection is finalized. It is important that unpaired individuals be allowed to interact within these groups. I usually place a single male with two or three identifiable hens. Groups are so harmonious that it may take many months for a pair to be noted. A true pair and the extra hens can continue sharing flight space even while eggs are being incubated. With my pairs, it is common practice to see all of the hens in the nest box during incubation. This can make it difficult to ascertain the true brooding hen. It is surmised that in the wild these extra singles also assist in feeding chick; however, I have always removed adult singles from the flights of true pairs before hatch date. The brooding hen can be identified as the hen that most vigorously defends the nest box and surrounding territory. The unpaired hens also defend the nest box, but to a lesser degree.

It is fascinating and entertaining to observe the day-to-day

activities of a producing family group. The adult pair often copulates within the confines of the nest box. Some juveniles will continue to solicit feeding from the parents as they interact in the nest box. Nest box recordings show one juvenile rolling on its back with infantile jubilation while in the nest box as it inspected its toes and attempted to play with the adults. The hen patiently attempted to prepare the nesting material for another clutch and left the box when the juvenile's antics became aggravating. At dusk, the trio snuggled together affectionately for a night of slumber.

Disparity among the ages or method of rearing does not seem to be a cause for concern when grouping Golden Conures. I have placed mature hens with immature males. I have paired hand-reared birds with parent-fledged birds.

### Parent Rearing

For many years Golden Conures were thought to have little or no parenting skills. This is simply not true. I recall the first time I allowed one of my pairs the opportunity to incubate and feed a clutch of chicks. I told another breeder about this exciting event and her droll response was "A queen that feeds its chicks? Never!"

My personal experiences have proven that Golden Conures are usually devoted to their chicks. Males do not assist in incubation but share parental duties and defend the nest box and feeding area with a vengeance. When excited or agitated, they spread



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their wings and shake their heads, vocalizing loudly. It is true that nest box inspections are not well tolerated and these inspections should certainly never be attempted while parents are in the box. I believe most incidents of failure can be attributed to excessive invasions of privacy or other environmental factors.

I must point out; however, that not every parent-fledged chick will successfully incubate eggs or feed chicks when it reaches maturity and goes to nest. In the same vein, it is inaccurate to assume hand-reared chicks will never mature to become good parents. I have many mature pairs that were hand reared from day one who are very good parents. I have also seen parent fledged pairs fail in their initial attempts at incubation and rearing. I believe it is critical that these birds be given the opportunity to learn good parenting skills and sometimes this can only be done by trial and error.

While chicks are in the nest, the adults are fed fresh food, sunflower seed and pine nuts at least twice daily. The chicks have enormous macaw-like beaks that match their enormous appetites. Protruding fleshy pads are also present on the upper mandibles of juveniles. When touched, they trigger a vigorous feeding response. These very sensitive pads usually disappear within two years. The chicks grow at a very rapid rate. If there are more than three chicks it is often necessary to take any younger ones for hand-rearing. If they begin exhibiting signs of stunting, they will succumb quickly. By day 34, the wings are well pinned. By

day 40, the parents begin feeding from the ladder to the upper chamber of the nest box to prevent being mobbed. By day 55, chicks begin attempts to climb the ladder. They usually fledge by day 88. Fledged chicks return to the nest box frequently and families also use the nest box for sleeping quarters. For this reason, I replace a soiled nest box with a refurbished one after all chicks have initially fledged.

Feathered chicks have a very strange odor. After catching my first whiff of a well-feathered clutch in the nursery, I crinkled my nose and turned to my helper. "What is that smell?" I asked. After a complete investigation of the nursery, we began sniffing all the babies and realized the strong odor came from the chicks. Over the years I have come to love that pungent smell. As mentioned earlier, the flight and tail feathers of parent-fledged chicks often suffer from excessive parental preening. Groups of weaned juveniles, both hand-reared and parent-fledged, will also chew the tail feathers of one another. Photographs from field observations also show juveniles with imperfect feathers.

### Hand-rearing in the Nursery

Sometimes it is necessary to intervene if chicks are not receiving adequate parental care. The brooding and hand-feeding requirements of the Golden Conure from day one are similar to those of the Caique and Hawk-headed Parrot. Feeding this species from day one can be a challenge for those not familiar with

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their dietary requirements. If compromised, chicks fed from day one succumb to bacterial infections and stunting syndrome at an alarming pace. Proper hydration during the first week is crucial to satisfactory development.

I begin with a high quality commercially prepared hand-feeding formula with a fat content of at least 13 percent. For optimum development, Golden Conures require a higher caloric intake than that provided in prepared formulas. I begin adding macadamia nut oil to my formula on the fourth day. The amount of oil added depends upon the amount of formula mixed at the time of feeding. I do not use peanut butter or sucrose-based products, but others who feed hard to rear species from day one report good success with these products.

Healthy chicks are vigorous feeders and always seem to be ravenous. Consequently, care must be taken not to stretch the crops. Crop bras can be easily crafted from the top portion of toddler socks if the crop becomes stretched.

Initial weight gains in parent-started chicks can be much more dramatic than those fed from day one. As a result, weight gains of chicks started by the parent birds cannot fairly be used as a comparison for what may be considered appropriate in chicks fed from day one. Parent-started chicks weigh more than 20 grams at day 7, over 60 grams at day 12 and by day 24 exceed 150 grams. By day 40, weights easily exceed 280 grams.

I personally prefer to observe the appearance and demeanor of

a particular chick in addition to reviewing weight gain. Healthy neonates are pink with plump feet and wings and are almost shiny. Their eye slits are located in the middle of the orbit. If a neonate is gaining weight on a daily basis and not showing any sign of stunting, it is most likely developing at a proper pace. Even after all these years, I weigh all Day 1 chicks until they are at least three weeks old or begin to show weight gain at an accelerated pace.

The young Golden Conure has an extroverted and flexible personality. Its demeanor is almost always cheerful and engaging. Though this species can be mischievous, it is an open hearted and trusting parrot. I am constantly amazed at its amicable attitude toward unfamiliar people and parrots.

I have yet to find a species in my nursery which the Golden Conure did not attempt to befriend. Due to its mild personality, it gets along especially well with a more strong-willed species, such as the caique. The juvenile has an intense desire to nurture and often attempts to feed other unweaned juveniles of all species in the nursery.

### In the Pet Trade

Over the last 10 years, the Golden Conure has become well known as a delightful and engaging pet. I would consider the Golden Conure to be a high-maintenance parrot. They are gregarious, highly social birds that thrive on interaction and must be treated as an integral part of a human



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family. They are rarely in a bad mood. Full of vim and vigor, they enjoy flying, climbing and playing with toys that are intricately designed. They are quite adept at removing buttons, earrings and other jewelry.

I asked three friends to tell me their experiences with their pet Golden Conures.

Alice Dorman enjoys her two Golden Conures. She is constantly entertained by Isabeaux's clownish antics and speech tidbits. He asks, "what's going on?" and "what's wrong?" at appropriate times and consistently tells the barking dogs to "shut up!" He calls "Mister, Mister, Mister" when that particular dog goes into the bird room to eat off the floor. Alice swears Isabeaux has a Scottish accent. She recently added a juvenile male Golden Conure that was injured in the nest box and cannot fly. Isabeaux accepted Romeo immediately and neither seem to notice that Romeo cannot fly. Alice believes the innocence, trust and elegance of the Golden Conure sets them apart from other species.

June Diciocco is a former Golden Conure breeder. She weaned Midas as a chick and they have a very close relationship. Midas learned at an early age to throw his toys off the top of his cage to get her attention. He lives in June's home office and she said, "He loves to compute with me." She never realized Midas could talk until a friend visited and, knowing June is hard of hearing, said, "Midas is saying 'I love you.'" He has picked up several other words since then. Midas sits on her shoulder while she works and they play catch with his toys, laugh and enjoy visits from friends. Midas is friendly toward everyone and is a very well rounded bird.

Jill Bell also owns two Golden Conures and she finds them to be a real delight. She said, "Because they enjoy closeness with each other, they extend it to us as well." During the day, they enjoy a large aviary setting with a persnickety African Grey and a Bare-eyed Cockatoo and, though they mostly "hang together" they happily interact with the other parrots. Jill said, "The Golden Conure never fails to give my heart a good turn."

## Conclusion

The Golden Conure is listed on Appendix I of CITES and interstate movement is controlled by the United States government. Since the gene pool for this species is very limited, responsible breeding of this species may involve the need for a captive bred permit in order to sell and to purchase unrelated birds.

Individuals interested in obtaining an application for a captive bred permit may obtain information from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service in Washington, D.C. The application for a captive bred permit can also be downloaded from their website at [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov). The application process is involved and time consuming, but permits are usually granted within six months.

I find the major disadvantage to owning these extraordinary



parrots is the reluctance to part with even one of the progeny. I would advise anyone thinking of keeping and breeding the Golden Conure to reserve at least three times the area believed necessary to house this magnificent species.

*Nancy Speed is the president of The American Federation of Aviculture, Inc. In August 2011, she was awarded a Silver AVY Award, Category 1, for "Most Progress With an Individual Species" for her work with the Golden Conure. She is also founder of the Golden Conure Society, an affiliated specialty organization of the AFA. She may be contacted at [nancyspeed@att.net](mailto:nancyspeed@att.net).*

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## 2012 AFA Super 8 Raffle Ticket

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- Name \_\_\_\_\_  Flat-screen television donated by anonymous  Pearl and diamond ring donated by Pat Chinnici  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  "Long-tailed Parakeets" donated by Garmini Rathnavira  Surveillance system & monitor multiple donors  
City, State, ZIP \_\_\_\_\_  \$1,000 Cash Card donated by Brent W. Gattis  Brinsea incubator donated by Brinsea  
Telephone \_\_\_\_\_  \$1,000 of AviTech product donated by AviTech  Surround sound system multiple donors

#### American Federation of Aviculture, Inc.

PO Box 91717 • Austin, TX 78709 • (512) 585-9800 • www.AFABirds.org  
Drawing chairman reserves the right to add or remove any prize. Winners do not need to be present. Winners must claim prizes within 30 days after notification. Unclaimed or unwanted prizes will be sold with the proceeds going to AFA. Donations: 12 tickets for \$20 or 1 ticket for \$2. Void where prohibited by law.

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# AFA 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention

August 15–18, 2012

Omni Colonnades • 9821 Colonnade Blvd. • San Antonio, TX 78230

Reservations: 210-691-8888 • www.omnihotels.com



Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Member #: \_\_\_\_\_ e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ Cell: ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

Club Delegate or name of AFA office held: \_\_\_\_\_ Check here if you have special needs: \_\_\_\_\_

Qty	Description	AMOUNT	TOTAL
	Special registration for House of Delegates Includes Banquet: _____ Vegetarian _____ Nonvegetarian		
	Full registration (AFA Member, adult) Includes Banquet: _____ Vegetarian _____ Nonvegetarian		
	Full registration (child) Banquet: _____ Vegetarian _____ Nonvegetarian		
	Full registration (Non-member) Includes Banquet: _____ Vegetarian _____ Nonvegetarian		
	Daily registration: _____ Thursday _____ Friday _____ Saturday		
	Wednesday off-site zoo trip		
	Extra banquet ticket _____ (enter quantity) _____ Vegetarian _____ Nonvegetarian		
	Conventions proceedings CD		
	T-shirt Enter quantity: _____ M _____ L _____ XL _____ XXL		
	Polo shirt Enter quantity: _____ M _____ L _____ XL _____ XXL		
	AFA Membership Membership level: _____		

**Include check payable to AFA or provide credit card information below.** **TOTAL: \$** \_\_\_\_\_

Name as it appears on card: \_\_\_\_\_

Credit card #: \_\_\_\_\_ (circle one) MC Visa AmEx V-code: \_\_\_\_\_

Expiration date: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

### Registration

**House of Delegates registration includes** lectures, exhibits, specialty meetings, and a banquet ticket. One copy of Convention Proceedings is included if HOD meeting is attended. **Full registration includes** lectures, exhibits, specialty meetings, and a banquet ticket. **Daily registration includes** lectures, exhibits, and specialty meetings for a specific day only.

### Refunds

Full refund if postmarked on or before June 17. Fifty percent refund if postmarked on or before **July 1**. All refund requests must be in writing and mailed or e-mailed to the address below. **Super Early** and **Early Bird** registration **MUST** be postmarked by **June 18**.

### Hotel information

The convention will be held at the San Mateo Marriott. Accommodations are NOT included in registration fees. Call 1-800-556-8924 for reservations. Mention AFA when making reservations to secure convention rates of \$99 per night for single/double occupancy.

All minors attending the Convention must be accompanied at all times by a registered adult participant. AFA is not responsible for minors who attend the Convention without proper adult supervision.	Early Bird Rates		Normal Rates	
	AFA Member	Non-member	AFA Member	Non-member
Special registration fee for House of Delegates	\$200		\$220	
Full registration	\$225	\$255	\$265	\$295
Daily registration (per day)			\$75	\$75
Children 16 and younger, when accompanied by an adult (banquet and offsite trip additional)			\$85	\$110
Wednesday offsite trip to San Antonio Zoo				\$55
Extra banquet ticket (each), indicate (V)egetarian or (N)onvegetarian				\$50
<b>Convention Proceedings CD</b> Pre-convention: \$10 / At convention: \$12				
<b>T-shirts / Polo shirts</b> , sizes M–XXL, to be picked up at the convention: T-shirts: \$25 / Polo shirts: \$35				
<b>If you are not yet a member, join now for full privileges!</b> Individual: \$40 Family: \$45 Supporting: \$75 Commercial: \$125				

**SEND COMPLETED FORM & PAYMENT TO: AFA Convention ★ P.O. Box 14923 ★ Humble, TX 77338**

e-mail: Convention@afabirds.org Telephone: (281) 217-0614 *Duplicate this form as necessary. Use only one form per person.*