

## Victoria Crowned Pigeons, (*Goura victoria*)

# 'My Childhood Dream Come True'

By Daniel Ray Almaguer,  
featured 2012 AFA Convention speaker

The crowned pigeons are the largest pigeons in the world from northern Papua New Guinea. They are threatened in the wild and in accessible areas of Papua New Guinea crowned pigeons have been exterminated. Papua New Guinea is only one tenth the size of Australia and only one twenty-fifth the size of North America and has 740 of species of birds. The Victoria Crowned Pigeon has distinctive white tips on the crest feathers which looks very elegant with a contrast of blue and purple chest feathers. In 1845 the Victoria Crowned Pigeon was named after Queen Victoria. Crowned Pigeon males and females look alike, therefore DNA sexing or surgically sexing is the only means of identifying sexes.

The Rotterdam Zoo European Studbook studies have recorded that Victoria Crowned Pigeons live from 35 years or longer in captivity. They also recorded the average age of first reproductions of females in captivity is around 5 years but they are capable of laying their first egg at age of 1.5–2 years. The oldest crowned pigeon to have clutched was over 26 years old. The average age of successful breeding is about 5.5 years old. This study could explain the many failed attempts to hatch and parent rear squabs in captivity if under the age of 5.5 years old. The European Studbook also showed European zoo populations of crowned pigeons had more eggs hatched from June–September in captivity. In the wild they nest during the dry season which is June–September and this is the end of rainy season. In captivity crowned pigeons breed all year around.

I first saw my first Victoria Crowned Pigeons on exhibit at San Antonio Zoo at age 7. After this encounter it was a childhood dream to work with the *Goura victoria* as a bird keeper. I remember meeting Bird Keeper David McKelvey several times during my San Antonio Zoo visits. He could vocally imitate several zoo bird species and he could call them. I recall seeing David on the "Johnny Carson Show" with live birds on television. From first grade school to high school my bird collection started with chickens, pheasants, doves, peafowl and finally day old white rheas from Dr. John Chatfield in the early 1980's. Most recently my private collection included exotic doves and softbills.

I got a job as a Disney Animal Kingdom Bird Keeper in Asia Aviary for this was the beginning of fulfilling my childhood dream. The Asia Aviary has 129 bird species in a one-acre, 80-foot-tall, planted outdoor enclosure. This job taught me the importance of record-keeping, daily diet preparation, keeping inventory of every single bird daily, and general avian husbandry. The collection has several species of fruit pigeons, softbills and gamebirds.



Years later I had an opportunity to purchase a surplus parent raised male *Goura victoria* from a U.S. zoo. My references included the late Dr. William A. Burnham of the Peregrine Fund and D. Grenville Roles author of "Rare Pheasants of the World" and former Disney Animal Kingdom Bird Curator of Birds. When all the paperwork was done my Victoria Crowned Pigeon arrived to Florida and was stunning.

I purchased my first male Victoria Crowned Pigeon and my journey began.

My male Victoria Crowned Pigeon needed a mate and with the help of well known Joe & Judy Passantino they introduced me to another crowned pigeon breeder John C. Voris. I flew to California to purchase my female and watched Voris hand-rear Victoria Crowned Pigeon squabs for about a ten days. These three individuals have and always will be my mentors in breeding Victoria Crowned Pigeons for they are the experts in the private sector of aviculture with many successful breedings. John and I talked weekly for years after my first purchase about our beloved Victoria Crowned Pigeons. After a month long quarantine of my new female Victoria Crowned Pigeon was ready to see the male pigeon. Luckily the male crowned pigeon was very excited to meet the female welcoming her with his booming up and down tail ritual. It would be a natural characteristic for the male to want to protect his territory but in my case the female was welcomed. Make sure to keep a sharp eye on new bird mate introductions to see if there is any fighting or aggression that could harm either bird.

I feed my Victoria Crowned Pigeons diced fruit which include cantaloupe melon, papaya, red delicious apples, pear, raisins, red grapes and blueberries in moderation. We use Pigeons-Dove seed mix by (Manna Pro) is half of their daily diet which consists of milo, wheat, Canadian field peas, white millet and mineral oil. I also use the Mazuri softbill pellets soaked in water, drained and





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**Size comparison of New Guinea  
and the continental United States**

New Guinea 786,000 km<sup>2</sup> (9.7%)  
United States 8,080,464.25 km<sup>2</sup>

There are three species of crowned pigeons. These are the Victoria Crowned Pigeon (*Goura victoria*) from the north side of New Guinea, the Scheepmaker's Crowned

(*Goura scheepmakeri*) from the South side of New Guinea, the Common (Blue) Crowned Pigeon (*Goura cristata*) from the west of New Guinea.

served in a separate bowl. It is important to supply grit and fresh clean water daily. Superworms (*Zophobas morio*) are a favorite for the crowned pigeons and fed in moderation. Feeding time is early morning and a second feeding in the late afternoon with a smaller portion than the first feeding. Diet is very important to *Goura victoria* and some will like certain foods more than the others so keep a close eye on eating habits of each bird.

The most common ailment in crowned pigeons is the infection caused by parasites. It is a good idea to have an annual worming schedule to help control any possible worms. Contact your nearest avian vet to ensure you have a medication ready to control any parasite problems before they happen. Most medications are administered by the weight of the bird so do not try to mix it without consulting an avian vet.

Crowned pigeons require a roomy enclosure in a large planted aviary where they are best kept by themselves. They spend most of their time on the ground and any smaller species are not recommended in their aviary. They can use a powerful wing to slap and this could prove deadly to a smaller birds. Aggression towards their keepers is a common trait of this species and particularly in hand-raised individuals. Aviaries should have a range of high or low perches as well as small and large. In the wild of Papua New Guinea they roost in tall trees in the rainforest but spend most of the time foraging on forest floor. Plants enhance your aviary setting and some open space is also necessary for they are ground dwellers most of the time. The flooring can be with

some concrete, soil or sand but be careful with any small gravel for they love to swallow small stones. They do need some gravel to aid in digestion so gravel in moderation is okay. Provide an area with a roof to keep them out of the rain especially over the nesting area.

Breeding Victoria Crowned Pigeons has not been an easy task even with many zoos today. My new pair of crowned pigeons bonded very quickly and nest building began shortly after the wicker nest basket was introduced to them. The nest making process is a vital part of the pair bonding in Victoria Crowned Pigeons. If the nest is not where the crowned pigeons like it, move the nest to another part of the aviary. For instance, if they are carrying sticks to another side of the aviary then place the nesting basket where the pair wants the nest. The male passes each stick to female to place just in the right place of the nesting basket and he preens the female in the nest. Copulation takes place several times a day. The ritual begins with the male and female doing a courtship dance which involves shaking their heads where they encircle each other. She lowers her body and the male mounts her, he dismounts making a loud booming sound like a drum. They both bump each other's chest and encircle each one more time with a loud grunt from both.

It was only six weeks together the first egg was laid. The first time few times the parents would not incubate for the full 30 days and the male was always the one not to return to incubation. Not every egg will be fertile especially if a young pair for



fertility is higher during certain months. Two of my successful *Goura victoria* births were in September. The incubation period is 30 days and the pipping begins at day 28. Their favorite pass time is preening themselves or their mates while incubating the single egg on the nest.

During the incubation of the egg or young squab, the parents should never leave the nest unattended, for this a possible sign of early abandonment. If longer than a feeding break, the pigeon egg should be placed into an incubator immediately. The incubator should be set at 99.5F and turned daily except after pipping. The squabs are born pink but on day two the skin is a dark gray color and they grow very quickly. Within days, the pinfeathers start to grow on the young squabs's body, especially the wings. By day 30, the chick can walk around with parents on the aviary floor and is fed several months until fledged. The juvenile is a miniature edition of the adult, but dark in color for the first year. Parts that will be purple appear more brown and feathers on the wing patch appear dull grey. I have had chicks start eating at 30 days, with Mazuri Softbill Pellets soaked in warm water.

Keeping crowned pigeons in captivity is the only way known to maintain some endangered species in reasonable numbers. My goal in life is to educate the world about the habitat loss in Papua New Guinea. All three species of crowned pigeons are getting closer to being extinct and without education, it is sure to happen. My next dream is to study Victoria Crowned Pigeons in



the wild for understanding the diet could help us with them in captivity. Let's save the Victoria Crowned Pigeons in captivity to share with all to enjoy in the future. I will see you in San Antonio.

*Daniel Ray Almaguer is a private aviculturist born and raised in Gonzales, Texas. For the past 20 years, Almaguer has lived in Central Florida. Almaguer brings over 40 years experience breeding birds and specializes in Victoria Crowned Pigeons, *Goura victoria*. At age seven, during a trip to the San Antonio Zoo, Almaguer first discovered his love and fascination for the *Goura victoria* from Papua, New Guinea. It was his childhood dream to someday work with this species.*

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