

Honoring the 38th anniversary of the American Federation of Aviculture



With the help of Mark Moore and Brent W. Gattis, this flag was flown over the United States Capitol on Aug. 18, 2012, during AFA's annual convention. It was one of the many fine items offered in the silent auction, and was shipped to the lucky winner, Amy Baker.



Photos this page by Mark Moore

Green-winged Macaws

History and Aviculture in the United States

By Rick Jordan



Photo by Mark Moore

Second only to the Hyacinth macaw and the occasional Buffon's macaw in size and weight, the Green-winged macaw (*Ara chloroptera*) is a large parrot, often exceeding two pounds. The name "Green-winged macaw" is somewhat of a misnomer as there are several species of macaws that have green plumage on the wings. Even though there is a broad patch of green on the secondary wing coverts, the same can be said of many of the variations of the scarlet macaws. In Green-wings the overall plumage color is dark red (darker than Scarlet macaws) with a band of green on the back of the wings overlapping a band of light blue. The flight feathers are dark, cobalt blue. The feet are dark grey and nails are black. This species is not dimorphic, therefore the males and females are identical in appearance.

The facial patch of skin is white with five or more lines of red feathers surrounding the eyes, and the beak is predominantly horn colored on the upper mandible and black on the lower. This is one area where differentiation between Scarlet macaws

and Green-wings is easier to identify. Scarlet macaws do not have visible feather lines on the facial skin, Green-winged macaws do. All hybrids between either of these species to other macaws will have some semblance of feather lines on the face, making differentiation between “pure” Scarlets and macaw hybrids easier.

Green-winged macaws have a huge natural range in the wild. They can be found from southern Panama, southward into central South America. There does not appear to be any differences in size or plumage between birds throughout the range and no subspecies are recognized. In the wild, Green-winged macaw population numbers are holding their own. The IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red Data List of Threatened Species lists this species as “least concern”; all parrot species seem to be trending downward, probably due to habitat destruction and loss of natural food supplies. In the past, trapping for the international live-bird trade was a factor contributing to these downward trends as well. For the time being the status of the Green-winged macaw appears to be stable and thankfully it is well represented in captivity around the world.

The Green-winged macaw became very popular in U. S. aviculture during the import years of the 1980s. Thousands of specimens of this species were imported from Guyana and Surinam during this decade mainly because many of the other range countries did not allow export of their native birds. But not all of the birds being exported from Guyana and Surinam were actually captured there. At this time in history a large illicit bird trade existed in South America and birds that were otherwise prohibited from being exported to the United States (then the largest importer of birds in the world) were often transported into countries where paperwork for export could be obtained. So it is very possible that Green-winged macaws from Brazil were exported through another country to the United States. Keep in mind this is not a reflection on the breeders or pet stores in the United States that purchased birds from import stations, as, for the most part, these consumers were not aware of the suspect activities that were rife in the live bird trade at the time. It was virtually impossible to track the original capture of wild birds back to the exact location where they were collected. This is one of the factors that led the United States to pass the Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992.

During the years of mass wild-bird importation, breeders took an interest in this species due to its bright colors, large size, and apparent ability to mimic human voice. But Green-winged macaws did not prove to be the easiest of birds to breed in captivity and early attempts to breed them often ended in failure. It seems that many pairs, although seemingly very compatible, did not breed. Of the reported pairs not breeding, many claimed their birds never even approached the nestbox. Since wild-caught birds were available as replacements, it was common to find “bonded” pairs of this species for sale when breeders became frustrated and sold them before they settled in to breed.



Photos by Shane Hancock (this page, following page)

With so many pairs being moved or sold before they bred, the rumors of their difficulty of breeding became commonplace. Thus the search for the “secret” to breeding Green-winged macaws began. Those who were successful claimed the secret was to supply more nuts or higher fat foods in the diet while others swore their pairs savored more fruits and vegetables. Some breeders were convinced their successes were due to a strategic placement of the nestbox on the cage. But the truth was that some were successful using vertical nestboxes and others were successful with horizontal nests. In other words, there didn’t seem to be a secret at all; each pair had its very own set of necessities and preferences, and often it was just a matter of patience, after all, most of the early pairs were wild-caught parrots and certainly needed some time to adjust to a captive life.

One useful “trick”, if you will, evolved during this time period and to date has helped breeders of many other species as well. This practice, still used today, is useful with pairs that do not pay attention to the nest box. The trick is to place thin wooden covers or doors over the entrance holes of the nests (they can be glued or nailed into place). These covers serve to block the pair





Mark Moore / Macaw chick completes the hatching process with just a little assistance

out of the nest. Covers should have a very small hole drilled in the middle to entice the birds to begin enlarging the entrance. This apparently intrigues some pairs to investigate and often they end up chewing or working the box together. For whatever reason, maybe the bonding that takes place between the pair during the enlargement of the nest entrance, or some needed extra time for maturity, this little trick seems to get many difficult pairs into breeding condition. The good news is that, at least with Green-winged macaws, it is common that once you get them to breed, they become fairly consistent breeders and will often nest regularly.

The Breeding Habitat and Environment

Wild-caught macaws are very different than captive hatched or reared birds and their environments may require some additional considerations. Wild birds often need more privacy and a place in the cage where they can “get away” from the keeper or humans that may be nearby. For this reason many aviculturists prefer to place the nesting box on the far end of the cage, away from the feeding station. This can also simulate a foraging situation where the birds must go out and seek food. Wild parrots should never feel surrounded. Give these birds a chance to settle in to their surroundings, and never allow people or pets near

both ends of the cage at the same time.

Captive-bred Green-winged macaws may not be quite so shy. In fact, some will allow human interaction and may even accept a scratch of the head once in a while. But caution is in order when breeding any domestically produced macaws. Once the hormones begin to flow that stimulate breeding behavior, the keeper may find they are no longer in the loop, and they may take a serious bite. Tame parrots set up for breeding can be unpredictable and should be afforded their privacy as well.

Cages for all captive macaws, wild-caught or captive-bred, should provide the needed space to roost, feed, nest, and also allow for short flights. Although some pairs of macaws will nest in smaller “pet bird cages”, they still must be allowed to flap and stretch their wings regularly. There seems to be a correlation between regular exercise and fertility. If pairs are laying infertile eggs repeatedly, longer cages may be a good idea. The standard set-up using suspended cages should be no shorter than eight to ten feet in length, and should measure at least four feet in width and height. Perches should be placed as far apart as possible to encourage flights between them. Flight cages are preferable and should be longer, as long as all other security considerations have been taken into account. Flight cages out of doors will also require predator control for the safety of the birds.

Although it is very true that captive parrots get used to almost any environment eventually, it is still a good idea to provide breeding birds with privacy. Many husbandry issues are easily solved by simply giving birds’ privacy and security. Some birds simply do not like being housed close to other birds or pets, while others do not seem to be bothered at all. Each pair, or even each bird, may react differently. It is important to observe the behavior of your birds and adjust their environment accordingly.

Egg Laying, Hatching and Chick Rearing

If all goes well, and the birds have settled into their environment, they should go to nest before too long. The general rule for mature birds is to wait at least two years (two breeding seasons) before making any changes to pairs or giving up hope for breeding success. Young birds may take longer. Remember that sexual maturity in larger species ranges from four to six years and if birds are subjected to “human interaction” on a daily basis, it could take even longer before they begin to breed.

The first sign that nesting may take place is new found interest



in the nest box. This means the pair may chew the wood, or they may rearrange the nesting material or even toss it all out onto the ground. There is no set breeding season for captive macaws but most will begin to show some interest in the nest-box in spring or summer. Birds housed indoors may adjust to a totally different breeding cycle depending on lighting, humidity, or ambient room temperatures.

Green-winged macaws usually lay three to five eggs in a clutch, the usual being three. Pairs can become very protective of the nest and will cause physical harm to the keeper if they try to interfere in the nesting process. It is wise to block the parent birds out of the nest before trying to candle eggs or view chicks in the box. This will prevent harm to the keeper or to eggs or young nest-

lings. Displaced aggression is a condition where the parent birds become so angry over the interruption that they no longer know what or who they are striking at. They may accidentally break eggs or kill chicks during these aggressive acts. Always take precautions when inspecting the nest or candling eggs, even if the birds are partially tame when they are not breeding.

The incubation period for this species is twenty-six days.



Photo by Mark Moore and Lyrae Perry

Some eggs “seem” to take a day or two longer but this is probably due more to incubation than physiology. Eggs usually pip on day twenty-four or twenty-five and will push their way from the shell by day twenty-six. Newly hatched Green-winged macaws are covered in very light pink down, almost white. The chicks may have a sore looking muscle on the back of the neck depending on how hard they had to pushing during the hatch, and on how high the humidity levels were during incubation. This muscle will return to a normal size and color after about a week.

Provide the parent birds with plenty of nutritious foods when they have chicks in the nestbox. Fresh corn on the cob, some greens, peas, carrots, and possibly steamed sweat potato will probably be accepted first. Also add nuts and seeds to the diet and allow the parents to choose what they want to feed. Chicks will grow very rapidly if being fed by the parents and by day eighteen or twenty will require a leg band (it is responsible to

leg band all captive hatched chicks, even those that are parent reared). A size 18 stainless steel leg band is recommended. Aluminum bands may not be strong enough for Green-wings and the identifying code and numbers can be easily worn off in time.

Hand rearing Green-winged macaw chicks is usually not too challenging. One important thing to keep in mind is you must use a formula designed for macaws and other South American species. Cockatoo formulas are too low in fat but can be adjusted by adding peanut butter, coconut oil, or some other source of fat. Stunting or slow growth is common with Green-winged macaw chicks that are hand-reared from day one (from hatch). It is more likely a matter of not getting sufficient amounts of formula through them than the actual fat content, but higher fat formulas do perform better. Dehydration is also a concern and formulas should not be fed too thick.

From day one make sure to fill the chick’s crop whenever it

is empty from the previous feeding. Do not allow the crop to remain empty for even short periods of time or you may experience stunting or slowed growth. Keep chicks warm for the first two weeks adjusting the brooding temperatures down to a high room temperature by the time they begin to develop feather “spots” and the down feathers have disappeared.

Chicks grow rapidly and should reach or exceed adult weight and begin weaning by the time they are fourteen to sixteen weeks of age. Weaning may take several months. Be sure not to cut formula feeding too fast causing dramatic weight loss. Monitor weights of young adults and make sure they do not lose more than 20% of their highest weight during rearing. A note of caution is in order here. Despite the reports that young macaws stay with the family unit for a year or two, this is not an indication that baby macaws should be hand-fed with commercial formulas until they are a year of age. These formulas are enriched with vitamins and minerals to make growth rapid; they are not a daily staple for adult birds and must be discontinued before they cause serious physical damage. Over supplementation of vitamins can cause kidney failure and death. Consult with an avian veterinarian if there are any questions about this.

Signs of growth or husbandry issues to watch for in the nursery:

1. Panting or dark red skin color—brooding temperatures are too high
2. Huddling or slow digestion—Check to make sure heat is

sufficient

3. Crooked beak growth—formula is not sufficient. Nutrients are off or too much water has been added to the mixture. Thicken formula or change to a higher fat brand.
4. Feathers growing in black or mottled—formula proteins not correct.
5. Feet or toes malformed or crooked—brooding buckets too small or formula is nutritionally deficient.
6. Eyes opening too high on head—stunting or slowed growth. Try to increase food intake.
7. Slow or static crop—potential bacterial or fungal problem. See a veterinarian.

Summary

Although the green-winged macaw is stable in the wild and is well represented in captivity in the United States, it is important to maintain future stocks and viable genetics through managed breeding. Zoos and private aviculturists must continue to breed and replenish the captive gene pool if any species of parrots are to survive the future; a future where human existence will take priority over habitat preservation. The pet trade in the United States is a valuable stockpile of genetics of many species of parrots and other birds now being pushed toward extinction in the wild. Someday that pet parrot sitting in someone’s living room may be a last hope for an entire species.

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Identify This Chick

Several members guessed that the chick featured in *Watchbird*, Vol. XXXIX Nos. 2&3 was a toucan, when it was an image of a Green Aracari chick (*Pteroglossus viridis*), presented by Jason Crean.

The species is named for the green feathers covering its back. Males' crowns are black, while females' are reddish-brown.

Its diet consists mostly of fruit, including the fruits of Cecropia trees and the palm *Oenocarpus bacaba*. The serrated edges of the Green Aracari's large bill help the bird to grip and gather fruit. Insects are also an occasional part of the diet, giving the birds protein.

Breeding occurs from February to June. It nests in tree cavities, producing two–four white eggs. The parents cooperate in rearing their young.

In captivity it is the most frequently bred member of the toucan family and is the most popular as a tame hand-fed pet. It requires a large cage and enrichment to prevent boredom due to its active nature, and a high-fruit diet. When all these requirements are met it is an affectionate companion for many years.

John Bornemann correctly identified the baby chick in the photo. Congratulations!

Look for additional baby bird pictures received by our membership for you to



Photos by Jason Crean

identify in the future. To submit a photo, please contact the AFA *Watchbird* editor at afawatchbird@afabirds.org

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