

Breeding the South American Red-capped Parrot

(*Pionopsitta pileata*)

by Tom Ireland
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The red-capped parrot (*Pionopsitta pileata*) is extremely rare in captivity. Also known as the pileated parrot, it is totally distinct from, and should not be confused with, the more familiar Australian red-capped or pileated parakeet (*Purpureicephalus spurius*).

The range of this very attractive and unique neotropical species is southeast Brazil from southern Bahia south to Rio Grande do Sul, eastern Paraguay, and northeastern Argentina in Misiones.

The red-capped parrot is a forest bird and, like so many species associated with this type of habitat, has suffered greatly from loss of habitat, through widespread land clearing and increased urban development. Their numbers have dwindled alarmingly in certain portions of their range and, as a result, they are listed on Appendix I of CITES (status: ENDANGERED).

The average length of the red-capped parrot is nine inches (22 cm). Mature birds are sexually dimorphic. Adult males are basically green with a bright red forehead which extends over most of the crown and part of the lores. There is also a narrow line running below the eye with some shading of red in the cheek patches. The bend of the wing and primary coverts are blue — outer tail feathers mostly blue. The mature female is similar in coloration but lacks the red head. Immature plumage is similar to adults, however, the red forehead is less pronounced on young males. Youngsters can be easily sexed while still in the nest once pin feathers on the forehead mature.

Unfortunately, this species suffers high mortality during importation, presumably from stress-caused viral, bacterial and fungal problems.

The first U.S. breeding occurred in California, by Jean Hessler, 1976. At Tuwana Aviaries (in Florida), we tried unsuccessfully to acquire specimens of the red-capped parrot for a number of years. It was not until 1978 that we were able to obtain a single pair. That year a total of 100 were imported. Of these, approximately 40 birds were lost during quarantine and the surviving birds were

distributed by the importer to a number of different breeding facilities. The alarming death rate unfortunately continued until only twelve individuals from this consignment remained. The following year, these few surviving birds were donated to the Research Institute for Avian Medicine, Nutrition and Reproduction; Greg Harrison, D.V.M., Lake Worth, Florida. Under his care, five males and three females were eventually stabilized and a breeding program was initiated. Over the next seven years their numbers gradually increased to approximately 30 individuals. In 1984 we were able to purchase this entire group from Dr. Harrison. These were added to our breeding group which, by this time, consisted of our original pair and four of their offspring.

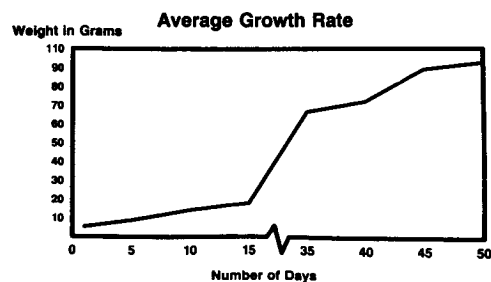
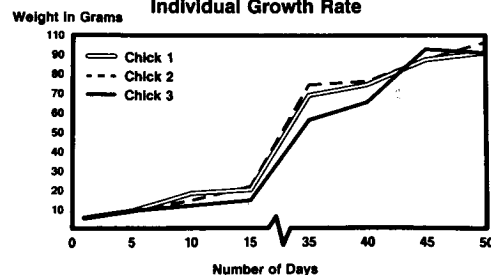
We have experienced better success in pairing our specimens if we place them in colonies and let them choose their own mates. Forced pairing is seldom successful. An interesting characteristic of the red-capped parrot is that the males actively sing during the pair bonding process (singing is a continual flow of soft chattering vocali-

zation). Once the birds have obviously paired, they are then placed in individual breeding units.

The primary breeding season for our birds has been from late June to early July with an average clutch size of five eggs. Incubation is 21 to 24 days. And, as already mentioned, the males continuously sing during the courting period. Typical of most neotropical parrots, he approaches from the side and copulation occurs with the male keeping one foot on the perch. During the nesting period, both male and female work the nest box vigorously. Housing the pairs close together seems to promote infectious breeding behavior: one pair begins breeding activity and then activity moves in both directions from that pair down the line until all pairs have laid. During the breeding season both males and females threaten anyone walking through the aviaries by lowering their heads, spreading their wings and puffing the body similar to *Aratinga* and *Pyrrhura* conures. While in the nest, the female is fed by the male, although she does venture out several times a day to exercise.

Red-capped chicks are very similar in appearance to those of other South American psittacines. At hatching, they are covered sparsely with whisks of long, white down. There is, however, one characteristic that differs greatly. In most species of South American parrots (*Ara*, *Pionus*, *Amazona*, *Aratinga* and *Pyrrhura*), the ear opening is closed for up to one month after hatching. In red-caps, the ear slit is open at time of hatching.

Pileated Parrot Chicks
(*Pionopsitta pileata*)
Individual Growth Rate



The chicks grow rapidly as can be seen in the accompanying graph. Usually their second down is developing by 17 days, eyes open at 15 days, and you start weaning at 42 to 45 days. Weaning can last as long as eight weeks, depending on the individual.

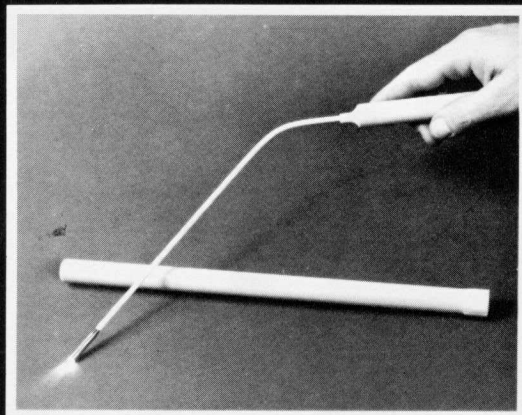
Our birds are fed our basic dry seed mixture consisting of sunflower seed, safflower, buckwheat, canary, oats, millet, milo, cracked corn and wheat. In addition to the seed mix, we also feed a bread mixture daily which consists of whole wheat bread crumbs with grated carrot and chopped endive. Vitamin and mineral supplements are added to the bread mixture as needed. During the breeding season we also furnish the birds with corn on the cob daily along with lots of fresh fruit, vegetables and high protein chows.

While the red-capped parrot is reportedly holding its own in certain portions of its range, we cannot afford to become complacent in our efforts to firmly establish these birds in captivity. Individuals and institutions currently keeping or breeding this species need to arrange for future exchanges of birds for unrelated blood lines to establish a sound gene pool. If this species is to be maintained successfully over multiple generations in aviculture, we must be extremely conscientious in this effort. Additionally, we need to work to establish breeding programs at a number of locations to avoid disease or a natural disaster from wiping out a significant portion of the existing captive breeding stock.

We are currently close banding all of our offspring and urge other breeders of this species to do the same, so that accurate records or identification of all pairs can be maintained. We are successfully using modified cockatiel bands. Research and investigation into ways to decrease the stress factor on these birds during transportation needs to be initiated. Only after accomplishing this objective should anyone consider the importation of more of these delicate birds from their countries of origin. For this reason, the limited number of specimens currently existing in this country could easily be the only foundation stock ever available for establishing this species in aviculture in the U.S. Fortunately, captive-bred red-caps are apparently less delicate than imported stock. And, as with the majority of other psittacines, captive-bred specimens appear to be somewhat more prolific breeders.

Our efforts with this species have been both challenging and rewarding. ●

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