

Arizona Seed Crackers Society Halfmoon Conure Breeding Consortium

by Gary Clifton
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What makes the ASCS Halfmoon Project unique isn't the structure of the consortium nor the species being bred. Indeed, the pet trade almost regards Halfmoons as a junk species, and the zoological community has had great successes in organizing group efforts based on the consortium concept. What sets the ASCS project apart is that this appears to be the first time a small, local bird club has taken on a project of this magnitude. The project is intended to maintain a viable, genetically diverse population of Halfmoon Conures in captivity over a minimum period of 50 years. During this period we hope to supply surplus birds for the pet trade and interested aviculturists who wish to work with this species outside of the closed population under consortium management. In spite of numerous "interesting challenges" that have included both avian TB and macaw wasting syndrome, in just over a year the project has gone from brainstorming sessions to producing its first offspring.

Probably the best place to begin is with a bit of background on ASCS, then answering the obvious questions of "Why Halfmoon conures?" and "What's a consortium?" Arizona Seed Crackers Society is a small, local bird club that meets monthly in Mesa, Arizona. The membership is around 100, consisting primarily of "backyard" breeders who take aviculture seriously even though it isn't a major part of their income. ASCS does care about conservation and, as a club, began to feel the need to "do something" ourselves rather than simply raising money for someone

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else to throw at the problem.

Some things were obvious from the beginning. No one in the club is a competent field biologist, few if any members could afford to travel out of the country to do field work, but most members had experience raising small hookbills. A long-term breeding program seemed the ideal choice as something ASCS could do that would utilize the experience and abilities of its members. The only role models we could find were the AFA Red Siskin project and the AAZPA Cuban Amazon Consortium. We borrowed heavily from the Cuban Consortium in structuring our group and how it would operate, then began the task of determining a species to be the subject of our efforts. We finally settled on the Halfmoon Conure *Aratinga canicularis clarae*.

We considered a number of factors in choosing the Halfmoon Conure, particularly the *A.c. clarae* subspecies as our subject. We wanted a species that was common enough to be available, yet rare enough to have an uncertain future in American aviculture. We did *not* limit our consideration to those species immediately challenged by dire threats in the wild. Price of initial stock was also a consideration as we were and still are operating with limited funds. Obviously the cheaper the bird, the more we could afford. We felt it mandatory to select a species that at least some members had direct experience with breeding, just as we felt the selected species must be one with which we stood a reasonable chance of successful breedings. We felt we had to choose a species that would allow as many members as possible to participate, that is we ruled out anything with unusual dietary or maintenance requirements as well as particularly loud species. Many of our participants, for instance, could not accommodate a breeding pair or pairs of large macaws without seriously offending the neighbors.

We contemplated African finch species, Gold-capped Conures, Red-throated Conures, Sierra Parakeets, parrotlets, Goffin's Cockatoos and a few other suggestions, but finally determined the Halfmoon Conure came closest to meeting our requirements. We felt we didn't have sufficient experience nor interest among our membership to work with the finches, nor enough room and money for cockatoos. Some of the

parrotlets appeared to be at least barely established, others unobtainable. Several of our members had experience with Halfmoon Conures, and a few still worked with the species. We also noticed a few more things about Halfmoons. They have lost popularity in the pet trade, being displaced by more colorful and more glamorous species such as suns and jendays.

Halfmoons are also a popular species with the smugglers; there are usually a number of Halfmoons available at auctions when USDA sells confiscated birds. An examination of the literature from years gone by revealed the Halfmoon's popularity when huge numbers were legally imported from Mexico, and most authors were quick to praise the species' pet qualities. When Mexico halted exportation, other inexpensive species were imported to fill the void in demand but few aviculturists took an interest in breeding Halfmoons. The result has been a steady decline as the years have gone by. The ASCS Consortium has found that price averages around \$100.00 per bird, and that stock is available periodically if one is willing to hunt for it.

While *A.c. clarae* doesn't appear to be facing serious threats in the wild at this time, no one knows what the future holds. In captivity, we feel our consortium will be the determining factor that ensures long-term survival of this species in the U.S. Once we have obtained enough founder stock and generated enough first generation pairs to bring our total population up to a stable size, we expect to generate surplus birds yearly. We expect to sell this surplus into the pet trade to help fill a market demand that is currently being met, at least in part, by smuggled birds.

Having covered a little background on ASCS and "why Halfmoons?" the next areas to address are "What is a consortium?" and "How can other groups start one?" A consortium is basically a cooperative group effort towards a common goal. In the case of the ASCS Halfmoon Project, the Consortium is a little bit like a corporation wholly owed by the club and operated as an independent subsidiary.

ASCS owns the initial founder stock and the Consortium, the Consortium owns half the progeny. The Consortium is operated and managed by its participants rather than the ASCS Board of Directors. Participants elect

a management group who makes decisions regarding the operations of the project. All birds in the population are under the direct control of the management group, though participants are free to do as they wish with their share of the offspring. This is perhaps the most critical issue to the successful management of a captive population. The *population* must be group owned rather than being a collection of privately owned birds.

This collective ownership is the only way to ensure against the loss of potentially valuable bloodlines because a participant loses interest or faces an economic emergency and decides to sell some breeding stock. Too, consortium ownership in some cases may be the only way to ensure that necessary record keeping and banding requirements are met. Keeping a studbook is usually not a top priority for a commercial breeder, but it is of paramount importance to managing a closed population. While a private aviculturist tends to think in terms of managing his pairs, or his flock of birds, the Consortium manages a *population* of a particular species. The Consortium manages the population of a species to achieve long-term genetic diversity, while a commercial breeder manages his flock around economic factors in an effort to make a profit. There is certainly nothing wrong with making a profit and, indeed, a consortium could, with enough breeding successes, generate enough income to operate at a profit. Profits aren't considered a goal of the Consortium, however, some bloodlines that aren't prolific enough to justify remaining in a commercial breeder's operation may still be valuable to the consortium goal of maintaining genetic diversity.

In ASCS, participants in the Consortium elect a management group, which is similar to a board of directors. The management group includes a studbook keeper who is responsible for record keeping and recommending matings within the population, as well as a coordinator or chairman to oversee the entire operation. The Consortium pays for initial stock, veterinary care and necropsies while the individual participants bear the cost of day to day housing, feeding, and so on. Viable offspring from each pair are distributed evenly between the consortium and the participant on an every-other-bird basis

wherein the consortium gets the first, third, fifth, etc., bird from each pair while the participant keeps the second, fourth, sixth, etc. Counting is of viable offspring per pair rather than per clutch. All progeny, whether the participants' share or the Consortium share, are closed-banded and recorded in the studbook. The population is distributed among as many facilities/locations as possible to minimize the risk of losses due to disease epidemic or natural disaster.

Establishing a club-owned consortium isn't particularly difficult, though it does require a fair amount of time and work, and definitely requires a strong degree of commitment. The first step is to determine whether or not the commitment and interest are present and, if so, how much money is available. By this time someone should be acting as a committee chair or in some similar capacity to oversee the project and get it started. The second step is to select a species, based on the members' interests and experience as well as financial limitations, availability of the species, and needs of the species. There is little or no need to establish a consortium of this type for cockatiels or budgies, for instance. At the other extreme, probably few clubs have the financial means to establish a large enough founding stock of unrelated Queen of Bavaria Conures or Hyacinth Macaws. The key is to select a species that at least some members have experience breeding, and that is scarce enough to need help yet common enough that a sufficient founding stock can be obtained. It is also pointless to select a species that is difficult or impossible to breed in captivity, since without breeding results it is only a matter of time until there is no longer any population to manage. At the other extreme, if a species is unusually easy to breed, it may already be secure in captivity, the wild, or both. There is no easy formula or pat answer to fall back on, every decision is a matter of balancing various needs.

After a species has been selected, a review committee needs to be established to look over applications for participation, to determine who will get founding stock, who will get offspring etc., and to weed out any totally undesirable candidates. The goal of this committee should be to place birds with the most qualified applicants first, but to also approve

as many applicants as possible for participation. Ideally, there should always be more approved applicants than there are birds to be distributed. Having 20 pairs of birds and 25 approved participants is great, having 200 pairs and ten participants could be a problem if all ten participants can't each house 20 pairs.

When the structure for the consortium has been approved and applications have been accepted and reviewed, it is time to start obtaining birds through donations or purchase. As birds are obtained they should be recorded in the studbook and any unbanded birds should be banded or implanted immediately. All other factors being the same, birds should be distributed on a first-come first-served basis among the qualified applicants. The group of applicants who are interested but perhaps need to gain more experience before receiving breeding pairs should be given every opportunity to gain experience through learning from other participants, through the development of a propagation manual, and by receiving progeny. While young birds obviously won't provide breeding experience, this is a good way for less experienced participants to learn about and gain experience with the species before trying to breed them. When ASCS started this Consortium, of some 20 applications received, none were refused, four were placed on a list to receive progeny and the rest were approved to receive founder stock.

We presently have ten pairs of birds distributed, but we have room already to house more. Our plan is to start with 16 pairs of unrelated birds, then rapidly build to a total population of approximately 100 pairs in the next generation. Once we stabilize the population at that size, progeny will be surplusd out of the program as it is replaced with siblings from the following year's breeding. In this way, we hope to stretch a generation from one to two years to a period of 10 years or longer. This also provides additional time to maintain a balance among the offspring so that one or two bloodlines do not become grossly over-represented in the population.

Copies of the ASCS Consortium Agreement and helpful suggestions are available free from ASCS for those clubs or other interested groups contemplating formation of similar projects. ●

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