

The Ariel Toucan – beyond the first generation

by Jerry Jennings
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Breeding toucans has been a hit and miss proposition with only a handful of aviculturists pursuing any coordinated effort with vigor. It is quite unfortunate since toucans are large, attractive, and entertaining birds that make wonderful subjects for exhibition in zoos (you can actually find them in a large, planted flight), backyard aviaries, and they can be tamed through training or handfeeding and are thus suitable as pets. They are very intelligent, hardy, and friendly.

Why then, are so few people working with these birds? Perhaps this should change, and hopefully so, since the importation of toucans has

ended. With that in mind, what toucans are available and which ones are good breeders? All of the species of large, black toucans have been bred in captivity, but only a few have done so beyond the first generation. The champion in that competition is the Ariel Toucan *Ramphastos vitellinus ariel*, a subspecies of the Channel-billed *Ramphastos vitellinus vitellinus*.

The Ariel toucan was first bred in captivity by this author in 1978. It has not been imported since 1983, and there are only a few pairs in the U.S., perhaps as many as 20, of which half are in zoos and the balance in private collections. There are undoubtedly

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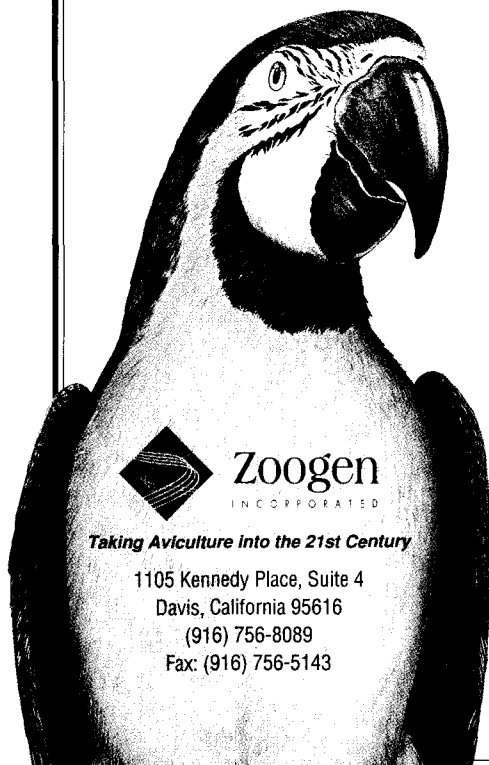
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Breeding pair of Ariel Toucans at the author's breeding facility. The male of this pair is seventeen years old.



The back side of the spacious aviary is a solid wall as are the side panels. The permanent roof provides additional protection. This pair makes good use of their palm log nest.

more in private hands, but no information exists on their whereabouts. Those that are kept as pets should be placed in breeding situations for the sake of the gene pool.

While the number of Ariels in captivity is small, their saving grace lies in their apparent penchant for reproduction. All the pairs of which I have heard have eventually reproduced

with one exception. Some have been prodigious in their output of offspring, the virtual Zebra Finch of toucans.

Ariel Toucans are one of 12 large, black toucans of the genus *Ramphastos*. Ariels are endemic to Brazil, found in central Brazil from the lower Amazon River south and along the coast almost to Uruguay. They inhabit lowland rainforest to an elevation of

about 500 meters, where they forage on a wide variety of forest fruits and insects. As with all other species of *Ramphastids*, Ariels utilize hollows in both living and dead trees for nest sites, wherein they lay approximately three to five elliptical white eggs. Incubation lasts approximately 16 days, at which time the young hatch naked and eyes closed. They look more akin to pteradactyls than toucans; however, after three weeks they begin to resemble their lineage as feather tracts form, eyes begin to open and the bill elongates into a recognizable shape. By the age of seven weeks they are fully feathered and peering out of the nest. They are fully fledged a few days thereafter and eating on their own by 60 days of age.

Young Ariels raised by their parents in captivity will be very calm on fledging, but will develop a nervous behavior after a few weeks. Caution should be exercised not to frighten them by sudden approaches to their aviary. Surprises will cause them to "flee" and crash into the aviary wire, where they are liable to damage the tips of their beaks. Eventually (six months or more) they will calm down and be more tractable. They may be removed from their parents after three months and must be removed before the parents return to nesting, else the father may injure or kill the offspring.

Ariels are probably sexually mature at two years of age, however, most of the successful breedings of captive reared birds have occurred at age three or four. They are easily paired and rarely fight with their mates. Observation of the birds upon introduction is advised at least for the first day. If no aggression occurs within that time frame, none is likely.

Ariels are not only fecund, but long lived as well. The original Ariel male that gave me a first breeding in 1978 was acquired in 1976 as an adult and it is now on eggs, 16 years after it was acquired. It has bred every year since 1978—a total of 14 years!

There are a number of species of toucans that come close to the Ariel, most notably the Keel-billed, along with several species of toucanettes and aracarais. With the great demand for toucans both as aviary birds and as pets, it will be a great loss if more interest on the part of aviculturists is not devoted to this magnificent family. ●