

Blue-crowned Conures

may steal your heart

by Gordon Hackett, M.D.
Elterwood, California

Have you had your heart set on a miniature macaw but thought they were a little beyond your budget? If so, why don't you give some thought to a "look alike"? I'm thinking of the Blue-crowned Conure *Aratinga acuticaudata*. For a number of years,



Photo by Gordon Hackett, M.D.

Blue-crowned Conures can be as curious as any other conure, shown here eating a cabbage bloom.



The author and one of his hand-fed Blue-crowned Conure babies. Gordon Hackett's conures are kept in 30 x 30 inch cages, 4 to 6 feet long with a boot protecting the food and water dishes from droppings and the nestbox just above for easy access.

I've enjoyed these friendly parrots and, indeed, many folks think of them as very similar in appearance to the miniature macaws. They have nearly the same size and conformation and, with their long tail and general overall conformation, they may just fit your needs.

As for appearance, they are green parrots and, at first, may seem a little ordinary compared to some of their flashier "cousins." They have a rather dull blue forehead, crown, lores and ear coverts, a horn colored upper

mandible with grayish tip and the lower mandible is black. The creamy peri-ophthalmic ring and pale red iris gives a distinctive touch. The under-surface of the tail has a pleasing reddish-brown, olive-bronze coloration; this same color extends to the under wing coverts. The under surface of the flight feathers is olive-bronze. Their length is 37 cm.

Blue-crowns come from South America. They range from eastern Columbia, northern Venezuela, southward through Brazil, Paraguay, Uru-



Photos by Nancy Vigran



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guay and into Argentina. They thrive in the savanna country as well as in the heavily forested areas. In the wild they feed on a varied diet from bushes and trees. This includes buds, berries, nuts and fruit. They are opportunistic and will raid the local farmers' fields and orchards as well.

In the past, there was heavy importation of many members of the conure family, but this has changed with recent legislation. It appears that a number of those commonly seen in the pet trade in times past will be dropping out. I've been interested in the Psittacidae family and its various genera for over 10 years and have, at present in my aviary, 12 different species of conures ranging from the small Painted Conure *Pyrrhura picta* to the large Patagonian *Cyanoliseus patagonus*.

However, the purpose of this article is to interest some of you in keeping this particular member of the family alive and available. I've found that the Blue-crowned makes a very friendly, affectionate and playful pet when handfed. It will mimic and talk some, and though it has a rather raucous cry at times, it can be forgiven in view of its other more interesting and endearing ways.

As far as care and breeding is concerned, these parrots adapt well. I'm a firm believer in having suspended cages, primarily because they are more sanitary and the birds do not pick up possible infections from soil on the bottom. I make my own cages using 1 x 1 inch 14 gauge galvanized welded wire. They are 30 x 30 inches in diameter and will vary from four to six feet in length. On the front of the cage I fashion an extension at the bottom, measuring 12 x 12 inches the width of the cage. This is where the food and water dishes are placed to keep from getting droppings mixed in the food and water. Above this shelf I place the nest box. I make the boxes out of 3/4 inch exterior grade plywood. They measure 15 inches long by 12 inches high by 11 inches wide. An inspection opening is on the back; on the top right-hand side sits a 6 x 6 x 6 inch box with a 3 inch entrance. This allows the birds to enter and go downward into the nest proper without jumping directly on the eggs. Pine shavings are used for nesting material. I also put in several pieces of pine wood for "chewing."

This gives them a diversion that may keep them from chewing up the box.

In the aviary I set the cages side by side on a metal railing, about 36 to 40 inches above the ground. A sheet metal divider is placed between to give some privacy at the nest area. I have a perch at both ends thus giving the birds exercise as they can fly back and forth. The building is essentially open all around and open to the weather and since we live in the Central California Valley (an orange growing area next to the foothills of the Sierra) we do experience occasional freezes. It's amazing but they seem to tolerate the cold without any ill effects. I do leave the nest boxes in place the year around, thus giving them a place to "hang out" in cold weather. On the other hand, summers can be very hot. To counteract the heat and add moisture, I use "mistlers" connected to a time clock that comes on for five minutes every hour during the hot part of the day.

In our area, nesting begins any time from March through June, the hen laying two to three eggs. For handfeeding, I prefer "pulling" the babies at three weeks; by that time they are well established and present little trouble, and won't need such frequent feedings. I've found no difference in their bonding to humans, starting this late.

Basic food for the parents is a racing pigeon mix which contains several kinds of peas, plus corn, red wheat and safflower. To this we add pinto beans and rice. It is soaked in a crock-pot and cooked overnight, then served with chopped greens from our garden. When in season, we will add from our orchard, oranges, apples and plums. During the colder months, we give cracked walnuts; they love to pick out the meat. We very seldom use any sunflower seeds.

The handfeeding formula that we are using is "Pretty Bird," and it works well for us. These birds love to bathe year round, so they should have a container large enough. Even in the coldest months, it's common to see them getting out of the dish sopping wet.

Hopefully, after this little introduction, I may have piqued your interest enough to set up a pair of these "look alikes" and see for yourself how much more entertaining and enriched your life could become. ●

* Position open — contact regional vice president if interested

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