



Spectacled Parrotlets are rare in captivity with about 18 to 20 pairs in the United States. Sexually dimorphic, the male shows brilliant blue-violet plumage on the wings, rump and encircling the eyes.



Breeding Spectacled Parrotlets

(*Forpus conspicillatus*)

by Sandee L. and Robert W. Molenda
The Parrotlet Ranch, Santa Cruz, California

Of the seven species of parrotlets in the genus *Forpus*, the Spectacled Parrotlets *Forpus conspicillatus* are certainly the most brilliantly colored. Being less than five inches in length and weighing approximately 25 grams, they are also one of the smallest. As with all *Forpus* parrotlets,

they are sexually dimorphic and can be sexed around three weeks of age.

The males are predominantly emerald-green with magnificent blue-violet plumage on the wings, rump and a ring of feathers completely encircling the eye. This eye ring resembles the appearance of glasses

or spectacles, giving them their name. The females are lighter green with yellow feathers between the eyes above the nostrils. They have no blue coloring but have a ring of emerald green feathers around the eye. In the wild, they are found in eastern Panama as well as northern and central Columbia. In addition, there are at least two known subspecies of Spectacled Parrotlets.

The *Forpus conspicillatus metae* male has a brighter yellow head, cheeks and under parts and the eye ring is reduced to a thin line of blue-violet feathers above the eye. The female's general plumage is much more yellow than in the nominate species. They range from the eastern Andes of central Columbia to western Venezuela.

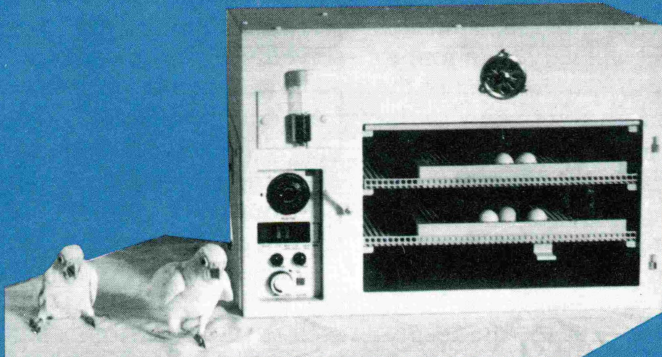
In *Forpus conspicillatus caucae*, both the males and females have a heavy, large beak. Although the males have lighter blue-violet on the wings, rump and eye ring than the nominate species, the females' plumage is the same. They are native to southwestern Columbia.

Another *Forpus* parrotlet found in the Patia valley of Columbia was named *Forpus conspicillatus palle-scens*. Since no specimens exist in museums nor has any description ever been published, there is dispute as to whether it is a true subspecies or was confused with *Forpus conspicillatus caucae*.

Until late 1992, these birds had never been imported in the United States. On January 14, 1993, we

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received three pairs of domestically-bred Spectacled Parrotlets from Belgium. As it turned out, the "pairs" consisted of one true pair, two males and a pair of Green-rumped, subspecies *viridissimus*. Needless to say, we were very disappointed.

The birds were placed in quarantine for 60 days. After several days of adjustment, they began eating everything in sight. Their basic diet consists of various fruits, vegetables, greens and a safflower-based large hookbill mix with sunflower and hemp seed fed both dry and sprouted along with egg food. Brown, white and wild rice, cooked regular and sweet potatoes, whole wheat bread, cooked pasta, soaked monkey chow, cooked chicken, tofu and beans are alternated throughout the week. Vitamins and calcium supplement are sprinkled on the soft foods. In addition, millet spray, pellets, Petamine, mineral block and cuttlebone are always available. The hens will often devour massive amounts of cuttlebone when coming into breeding condition. It is not unusual for a female to eat an eight-inch cuttlebone a week for several weeks just prior to laying. They also receive water which is purified through a biological filtration system.

On April 1, 1993, the birds were moved into a breeding cage in the aviary. The entire aviary is contained within an air-filtered room under Vitalites which are on 14 hours a day. The cages are wooden two-foot by two-foot cubes with one-inch by one-half

inch welded wire fronts and bottoms. Parrotlets breed better when they can hear but not see one another otherwise territorial disputes often erupt between pairs. A lovebird-size nest box filled with untreated pine shavings was placed on the front of the cage. This allows the birds to see only the inside of the cage when looking out of the box and gives them a feeling of security. Additionally, two manzanita perches were installed in each cage.

On September 4th, the male began investigating the nest box. In checking the box on the 7th we discovered they had made a shallow depression in the shavings in one corner. The hen began to gradually spend more time in the box. By October 2nd, the hen's abdomen was swollen and she only exited the box to defecate. Except when feeding the female, the male stayed outside. The first of six eggs was laid on October 5th and she continued laying every other day until October 15th. She alone incubated the clutch. Although she did permit the male to occupy the box at night, he stayed in a corner opposite from the eggs. Unfortunately, none of the eggs were fertile. They were removed on October 28th and the nest box was replaced. A soft pine perch was also placed in the cage.

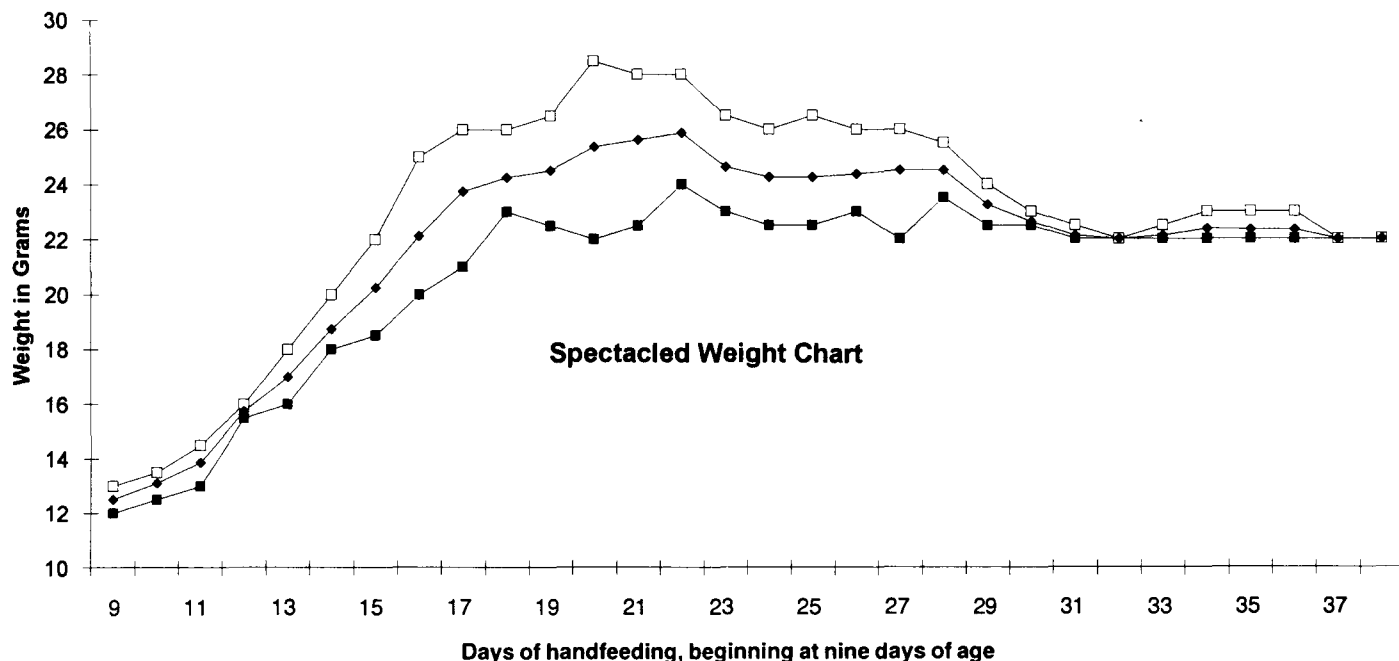
The pair immediately began investigating the new box and by November 2nd, the hen was spending most of the day arranging shavings. The male's breeding behavior was differ-

ent this time. Much to our dismay, he began plucking his mate's head. Then he suddenly started chewing up the pine perch at an incredible rate. After a week or so, he was spending the day in the box with the female. At night, he was curled right up against her. We held our breaths and hoped that this time they would get it right.

The first egg was laid on November 12th and the hen continued to lay every other day until the 18th for a total of four eggs. As with most female parrotlets, she sat tightly on the eggs as soon as the first one was laid. On the 16th, the first egg candled fertile. By the 22nd, all the eggs in the clutch were determined to be fertile.

On December 2nd, 1993, the first baby Spectacled hatched. After only a few hours, I could hear him begging to be fed and he was loud! This is no small feat for a bird less than an inch in length and too small to be weighed on a gram scale. Although Green-rumped babies are often heard begging when they are a few days old, I had never heard a baby so young with such a strong voice. Each of the three remaining eggs hatched after a 20-day incubation period.

The first baby was pulled for handfeeding on December 11th. His eyes were almost fully open. He was closed-banded with a budgie-size leg band and a record was made of his weight, hatch date and parent identification number. He was then placed in a brooder at 89°F and fed every four hours beginning at 6:00 a.m. until





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11:00 p.m. Babies continued to be pulled with the removal of the last baby on December 18th. The parents' box was removed so they could rest. They began to molt in the middle of January.

All of the babies were kept in one brooder and never interacted with babies from any other species. They were weighed and recorded every morning prior to the first feeding. Refer to the accompanying weight chart.

Pin feathers began to emerge when the birds were two weeks old. Within a few days, we could distinguish the blue feathers on the wings of the males. By the time they were three weeks old, it was evident we had three males and a female. Unlike young male Pacific Parrotlets, the male Spectacleds only had a few blue feathers on the rump. After their first molt, however, the brilliant violet-blue feathering became quite prominent on the rump. Mexican, Blue-wingeds and one subspecies of Green-rumped also obtain their color on the rumps after molting.

Since our birds are registered in the studbook sponsored by the International Parrotlet Society, we contacted the studbook coordinator who arranged for us to trade offspring with several other breeders. We planned to keep the young female and pair her with a male from a different bloodline. Arrangements were made to trade our three males for two females and one male in mid January. This would allow us to pair our two single males as well as obtain an unrelated male for our baby female.

Tragedy struck on January 7th. The birds had been fed at 6:00 a.m. and everyone looked fine. Their weights

were taken and nothing unusual was noticed when they were handled. Two hours later, the first Spectacled to hatch was dead. He was almost five weeks old and still being fed four times a day. Horrified, the remaining babies were rushed to the veterinarian and the dead male was brought in for necropsy. Gram stains were done, cultures were taken, tests were done to identify yeasts and parasites but everything came back negative. Even the necropsy results performed at the University of California at Davis were inconclusive.

The remaining babies continued to gain weight but had little interest in food. Other species of parrotlets are well into the weaning process by four weeks of age but the Spectacleds refused to even nibble on millet spray. After a few more days of no progress, we took them in again and had them retested. Once again, nothing was found. They were beautiful, healthy-looking birds. They just refused to eat on their own. We, of course, continued to feed them four times a day.

On January 11th, I left for Florida with the two remaining males and single female who were just barely beginning to eat on their own. I fed them on the diaper changing table in the bathroom of the Dallas/Fort Worth airport in between flights. Of course, I wiped the table down with Wavecide first. Once in Florida, they continued to be fed three times a day. The morning of the 16th, we met to exchange birds. After warning everyone they would have to continue to feed their new babies, I ended up returning to California with the youngest male. He insisted on being fed until he was eight weeks old. Suddenly, one morning he refused food



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and began eating everything in sight. Hallelujah!

I have spoken with four other breeders who have been successful in producing Spectacleds. One, who did not handfeed, found his first baby dead in the aviary shortly after weaning. Another, who did handfeed, also lost a baby during weaning as we did. Two other breeders, who did not lose any birds, reported Spectacleds took much longer to wean than other parrotlets. There was another breeder, however, who has had several successful clutches from two different pairs, whose babies reportedly weaned at the "normal" age of six weeks.

As of December 1993, 19 pairs and several single males of Spectacled Parrotlets had been registered in the International Parrotlet Society studbook. Of these, six different breeder bands as well as two different groups of unbanded birds have been identified. As of this writing, our first pair is preparing to go to nest again and a second has begun investigating their box. Other breeders are also reporting double and triple clutches in their pairs.

Even with the small numbers of birds currently available, there is great hope for the future of Spectacled Parrotlets in American aviculture. All the elements for continued generations are being utilized. Most of these birds are being bred by experienced aviculturists who have been successful with other species of parrotlets. These breeders are willing to work with one another in a cooperative breeding program to maximize the genetic diversity and minimize inbreeding. They are also willing to sacrifice financial gain on these birds as well as to incur expensive shipping and transportation costs to achieve their goals. The Spectacled studbook is exceptionally well-organized and well-managed. Finally, and most importantly, the birds themselves are willing and able to reproduce very quickly if provided with the correct environment. We all have felt the impact of the import ban on birds. We must continue to share our knowledge and skills if aviculture is going to continue for future generations. These tiny parrots are succeeding against the odds and are setting an example from which something can be learned by everyone. ●

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