

The Four and a Half Inch Giants of the Parrot World

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Parrotlets — the description that most people seem to catch on to is a full-sized Amazon parrot shrunk down to four and a half inches. In a nutshell that's what these unique little guys are. There are several species available in the United States. The two most common are the Pacific (also called the Celestial) and the Green-rumped. Also available, but not in such numbers are the Mexican (also referred to as Turquoise-rumped) and the Blue-winged. Spectacled, Sclater's and Yellow-faced are very rare, if available at all, in the United States. All are small, all are mostly green with size ranging from four and a half up to five and one eighth inches.

I have kept (or been kept by, depending on your viewpoint) Green-rumped Parrotlets for seven years. I started with imported pairs because "back then" I couldn't find any parrotlets, much less domestic, available in the central part of the U.S. The original home of Green-rumped is the northeast portion of South America. This fact is important in taking care of the birds. In the wild, they don't have much variation in seasons or food supply. Their range also overlaps with several other species of parrotlets. As mother nature intended, there seems to be little, if any, hybridization in the wild. In captivity, however, different species can successfully breed with each other. Since we are controlling their lives, including partners for breeding, it is important that we make *sure* that pairs are set up consisting of the same species. With a type of bird not that well known, there can be confusion. Please research before breeding any bird so that you know you're conserving the gene pool for later aviculturists.

In keeping with that thought, let's describe the Green-rumped Parrotlet so you can identify it. Body length is 12 cm (around 4-1/2 to 4-3/4 inches); the body is a clear green. Males have true blue on their wings, but is placed so that you either have to see them fly or handle their wings to appreciate what a beautiful blue it is. The females do not have the blue on the wing, but

the green is basically the same color and she has a yellow wash above her beak. The beak is horn colored with no gray. Sex can be determined as early as the first set of pinfeathers on the wings. With a little practice, you can even sex the babies before the feathers open. The blue is such an incredible blue, it can be differentiated from green while the feathers are still in the pin stage.

Green-rumped Parrotlets make wonderful pets. They are small, quiet,

eat almost anything, can learn to talk and are happy playing alone or with their people. Caging requirements are simple. Use a narrow bar spacing cage, and, as with any bird, purchase the largest you can afford and will work in your home. Include toys, things to chew up and enough clear space for some flight. These guys both fly and climb in their cages. Do not plan on including parrotlets in a mixed aviary. They can be ferocious towards their own kind and there are



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stories of larger birds mysteriously dying while the sweet little parrotlets looked soooo innocent. But, they were the guilty party. Plan on one bird or pair per cage. I've never had mate aggression result in any more than a vocal quarrel. There is a strong pair bond. It is possible to re-match birds, but I would try to avoid it if at all possible.

When feeding, think Amazon, not budgie. Pellets are highly recommended. If your bird won't touch pellets, try another kind. I had to try three kinds before I found one that my birds go nuts for. Cuttlebone is appreciated both for the calcium and it counts as "something to chew-up." Seed can be fed in moderation, more for the beak activity of hulling them than for the limited nutrition your bird will receive. Keep fresh water at all times and daily provide an assortment of soft foods. The younger the bird, the more accepting it will be of new foods, especially if allowed to join you at your dinner. After all, what you're eating must be better than what's in the bird dish. If you have an older bird, or "one that won't touch anything but seed", keep trying. When converting any bird to a new diet, please watch carefully. The idea is to improve the nutrition of your bird, not to starve it into desperation.

When clipping the wings, start with the outermost six primaries. After clipping those, check that he can't gain altitude. If the bird is able to fly up, clip a few more until his flight ability consists of a gentle glide. Be sure you do *both* wings so the gentle glide is even, not a frantic spiraling flight into walls or furniture.

Breeding must be done in individual cages. There could (probably would)

be fights to the death if more than one pair is caged together. Breeding in a flight (for Green-rumped), even with one pair per flight is not very successful. It's too entertaining, too much area to explore and, more importantly, to play in. A cage about 18" square seems to be the optimum size with a budgie-sized nest box attached to the outside. I personally like the kind of box with a side-slide door. The hen will enlarge herself by about three times to cover her eggs when you want to check them. With the side-slide, you can reach in, pick up her tail, peek at the eggs, all without actually moving her out of her brooding position.

One year of age is early enough to set up pairs for breeding. Earlier than that and the hen's system is not mature enough to handle the stress of laying, brooding and feeding. Be patient, let both birds finish their "teens" before burdening them with offspring. The male will serenade his mate with a pretty little song. Even during mating, including the spats that sometimes occur, parrotlets are quieter than a budgie. He will feed her and, if all goes well, eventually mate with her. This may go on for months before she's ready to lay her eggs. Some hens will also lay soon after "working" their nest box. Then there's some who sit and sit and sit in the nest box before the first egg is laid. I figure that we're both very relieved to finally see that first egg! A clutch normally ranges from four to six eggs. She will usually lay an egg a day until her clutch is complete and will start setting tight at least by the second or third egg. Average incubation takes 18 days. Notice through all this I use those misleading terms of "normally",

"usually" and "average". I have one hen I could set a calendar by and then I have an older imported hen that throws all averages out the window. She lays every other day and it takes her 22 days for the first baby to hatch. I don't know if it's her age or if she's just more relaxed than the other hens. Whatever, it works for her. She has beautiful babies.

I pull babies to be handfed between 10 and 14 days. It depends on how many babies and if there's an age difference (which happens sometimes if an egg in the middle of the clutch didn't hatch). I band with closed bands, budgie size. The babies wean at about six weeks. This has ranged, for me, from five and a half weeks up to seven weeks. Rather than the timing being decided by an individual baby, each clutch seems to have its own timetable. I let the babies decide when they're ready.

After complete weaning, the next step my babies go through depends upon their future. If it is to be a pet, I separate it from its clutch-mates, put it in its own cage and put that cage in the busiest room of my house. It gets the same assortment of foods that my other birds get and a good dose of whatever my family eats (except for the junk food). It gets used to my husband, two kids, the dog barking, TV noises, the telephone ringing and all the other things that happen in our lives. This technique seems to work very well. The stimuli prepares the bird well to enter a pet situation.

The birds that will go into a breeding situation are also brought into the "busy room", but for a much shorter period. Then they are moved into the bird room, preferably with the bird that will eventually be their mate, but if I can't set them up at that time, I like to leave them with clutch mate or mates for awhile in the bird room. This is where they learn how to be a parrotlet. Now come the lessons that I can't teach such as how to court a mate, how to scold your neighbor and just getting to join in all the "flock" noisemaking and general activities. This also seems to work very well for me. My handfed babies are still happy to see me and come over to hang on the side of the cage to "converse". But, when it's time to start a family, they can go through all the steps necessary for breeding, because they have lived with the "flock." ●

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