

# Patagonian Conures

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The Patagonian Conure *Cyanoliseus patagonus* is the only member of its genus. It is the largest member of the conure family with a subspecies being 53 cm. (20 in.) from forehead to tip of tail. There are three types of Patagonians: the Lesser, Greater and Andean. The main differences between them are size, the extent of yellow and red on their abdomen, and the amount of white on the upper breast.

The general color of the Patagonian is a dark brownish olive with the breast having a grayish cast. The upper breast has a white streak starting at the shoulders reaching towards the center like a necklace. The Greater Patagonian has the most complete necklace. The center of the abdomen and the inner thighs are orange-red and surrounding this red patch is yellow. The primary flights and coverts are blue. The beak is black and the irises nearly white in the adult bird. Young birds are slightly smaller and have a gray iris and horn colored upper beak. There is a bare white area surrounding the eye.

They are still found in northern and central Argentina and some parts of central Chile. Their numbers have been declining due to construction in their areas (most notably the recent building of a dam which flooded a major nesting area), being killed by farmers who see them as pests, and the robbing of nests (chicks are considered a delicacy). Patagonian Conures have received the nicknames "cliff dwelling parrot" and "burrowing parrot" due to their choice of nesting sites high in bare cliffs in which they raise their young in deep tunnels.

Patagonians have long been maligned as the carriers of the Pacheco's virus. The advent of a vaccine to prevent Pacheco's and proof that many South American parrots are potential carriers has brought this beauty into a new popularity. Their substantial size, reasonable price, and lively personality makes them very desirable as pets. Patagonians have the tendency to be noisy, though most people will forgive them since they are also good talkers.

In 1985, a Patagonian Conure in a Gainesville, Florida pet store glared down at me with a hawk-like posture and I was hooked. Diablo was my first conure and is the best half of my tenth pair of Patagonians. It wasn't until the spring of 1987 that we found our first pair. They had been sold quite a few times before we came along and we were told that Patagonians were hard to breed. We were sent home with the birds and a grandfather clock-style box. It was after purchasing a second pair that we read up on them and decided to try something different. Based on our reading, a vertical box made no sense so we turned it on its side. We set up the two pairs side by side in cages that were 3' x 3' x 2' high. These were placed against one side of our barn with plywood covering half of each cage for shade and shelter. Three months later (August), we had two babies from our first pair. They laid two eggs and hatched them after 25 days of incubation. The parents fed them well with seed, cornbread, fruit and hard boiled eggs until they were taken for handrearing at ages 14 and 12 days old.

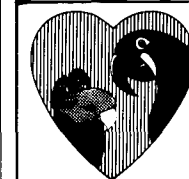
The following year, both pairs nested in May within a week of each other. The first pair successfully hatched and fed three babies in their first clutch. Three weeks after the babies were taken, they laid three eggs which also hatched and were taken for handrearing. Pair number two gave us two chicks. Our first pair continues to produce two clutches each year, whereas number two has only one. Both pairs now lay and hatch three or four eggs per clutch.

In 1990, we purchased two additional pairs which were set up in stacked cages. Those pairs did not produce while set up in that fashion. In 1991, we traded a baby macaw for three more pairs and some other conures. After eight months of no interest in nesting, we decided to have them all resexed. The 1990 pairs were pairs but the other six were all males. I was able to trade only one male for a female so after buying four hens I had five new pairs.

Due to our lack of success with the 1990 pairs, we decided to let them all choose their own mates. I had recently heard a person tell how he marked his birds and then observed them to see who had chosen whom. We proceeded to mark each hen with a number and each male with a letter. Just our luck, *they molted*. At that time (October of 1992), we had never heard of colony breeding conures in captivity but since they nest in colonies in the wild, we had to try it. We put two 4' x 4' x 8' long cages side by side and cut holes in them so that the birds could easily go into either cage. On the outside we put up ten boxes near the top and at the same height. In January, while arranging to purchase other conures, I spoke with a well-known and respected conure breeder who expressed concern and doubt regarding my little experiment. We were both shocked when three of the seven pairs laid in February. There was another reason for all the surprise; Patagonians "normally" lay in the late spring and early summer. (In 1993, only one pair remembered to wait until May.) Fear and doubt made me pull the first clutches of eggs one week before hatching. Exhaustion made me leave the second clutches. All the eggs hatched and were fed by the parents without incident. A fourth pair laid fertile eggs which died in the shell just prior to hatching.

I will probably never know if colony breeding is viable over time. My personal belief is that it is. We removed two of the producing pairs in November, hoping that less competition would make the others produce, and we are now relocating to New Mexico where we will not have room for a colony. The two pairs that were in the colony are now beside each other and feeding babies. The third pair is feeding babies within the colony.

Nine of the pairs in our aviary are wild-caught. Although we rarely see them or hear them, we do hear them on moonlit nights. Our aviary has very large skylights, one of which is directly over the colony cage. On



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*Patagonian Conures do not belong to the Aratinga genus. They are separated within their own genus. A very large conure, the Patagonian is an excellent choice for both the aviculturist and the pet owner.*



*This photo shows a successful colony of breeding Patagonian Conures. Note the height and conformation of the nest boxes.*

nights when the moon is nearly full, they are very active and fairly noisy. None of the other conures seem to have this habit. Recently I began to leave the aviary dimly lit at night, and have heard the Patagonians feeding their babies far into the night. All of our pairs spend a lot of time in their boxes. The wild-caught pairs hide their heads in a corner while I am checking their boxes, whereas Diabolo and Victoria, who were handreared, attack us. They will both back up to the far end of the box and charge. Last year this resulted in broken eggs.

We had a "bumper crop" in 1993 of 30 babies, and it was very enlightening. Patagonian babies weigh 10 grams at hatching. Babies fed from day one weigh an average of 20 grams at five days, 40 grams at 10 days, 107 grams at 15 days, 150 grams at 20 days, 200 grams at 25 days, and 300 grams at 35 days. The few I weaned had very small gains until seven weeks, then slowly lost weight until weaning within a range of 240 to 280 grams between the ages of 8 and 11 weeks. A parent-started baby weighed 90 grams at 10 days, and stayed 40 to

50 grams ahead until it was sold at 25 days of age.

Patagonian babies are noisy. When they are two-thirds empty, they begin "beeping" and stomping their feet, then after feeding, take a long time to settle down and go to sleep. When they are quiet, they're great. Usually they quiet down after weaning. They sleep on their backs a lot. I can't count the number of times when I have heard, "Oh, Sandi, one of your babies is dead." A tap on the brooder or cage and an eye will pop open. More often than not, they just go back to sleep as if never disturbed.

As the babies feather out, I recommend separating them. This is not so much to prevent wildness as to protect their feathers. They enjoy rough and tumble play so much it's hard to separate them but if you want them to have tails and smooth feathers, you should. I also suggest teaching the step up command at a young age. I'm in the habit of picking them up bodily and cuddling the babies at my chest. Last year I did not teach them to step up and, to this day, some of my babies still refuse to step up on a hand. They must be scooped up or grabbed around the wings. They will lie in a hand, cuddle and accept petting anywhere but act like a mule when presented with a hand. Properly trained, you can't beat a Patagonian. They talk pretty well, love to cuddle, and entertain themselves with toys when you're busy.

Due to their reputation for carrying Pacheco's disease, Patagonians (and many other conures) have been largely ignored by breeders. Many birds have also been killed after being blamed for outbreaks of Pacheco's disease. The number of birds imported was huge; how many remain is a mystery. We now know how to contain Pacheco's through vaccinations, sanitation, and keeping potential carriers separately. If all else fails, the drug Acyclovir can be used during an outbreak. Armed with knowledge and good management skills, there is no reason for such wonderful birds to be shunned as both pets and breeders. Unlike many other conures, there are adequate numbers of wild-caught founding stock in the United States. By keeping good records and avoiding inbreeding, we should have these beautiful birds for many generations to come. ●