

# Captivating Caiques

By Tom Marshall  
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**C** **Two Species**  
aiques (pronounced kah-EEKS) comprise a small group of the 138 living types of parrots found today in South America. Geographically, it appears that the mighty Amazon River or its tributaries serve to separate the Black-headed Caique *Pionites melanocephala*

in the north from the White-bellied Caique *P. leucogaster* in the south. The Black-headed Caique was imported in greater numbers into the United States. These birds probably came out of Guyana, in northern South America, for the most part, although their habitat extends into Venezuela, southern Columbia,

eastern Ecuador and northeastern Peru. A large part of the White-bellied's range is in Brazil, which did not allow exportation of its wildlife well before the Wild Bird Conservation Act (1992).

Rosemary Low, noted British aviculturist and author, believes that both types of caiques should be treated as conspecific--as one species--and that perhaps their differences in color indicate geographic variations of the same bird. She points out that the White-bellied, when very young, has a black crown similar to the Black-headed Caiques. As the birds mature, however, the White-bellied Caique develops a bright apricot-colored head, while the Black-headed retains its characteristic markings. To complicate matters even further, there are subspecies within each species with subtle differences in color. The nominate race of the White-bellied Caiques has green thighs, while the subspecies, more readily available in U.S. collections, has yellow thighs. The distinctions among the Black-headed Caiques are more subtle and also involve the thighs. Some more yellow, others more orange.

Caiques are the only parrots, excluding cockatoos, of course, that have white breasts. Caiques also seem to have the most erect posture of all the parrots, a factor that contributes to their alert appearance. Lories are not found in South America, but if one parrot fills that niche in the New World, many could agree that caiques do so convincingly. These birds move like lories, jumping more than climbing, and they are certainly as acrobatic.

Like lories, caiques really enjoy eating fruit. Many successful breeders will provide them with nectar mixes, which they seem to relish. Unlike lories, however, caiques are extremely poor flyers. This factor certainly could contribute to isolating population pockets of caiques thereby allowing for the evolution of specific color variations, which have proven adaptive to particular environmental pressures. Their attempts at flying give the impression that it is a somewhat difficult activity and the execution



Handfed youngsters make very good pets and are trainable, but, if they are not handled consistently, can be quite headstrong when they mature.



Both the Black-headed and the White-bellied Caiques are very captivating as juveniles. Excluding the total white cockatoos, the caiques are the only parrots that have white breasts.

Photos by Tom Marshall

of any in-air maneuverability virtually impossible.

Many ornithologists see a relationship between this genus and some conures, based on the bone structure of their skulls. However, my subjective observations lead me to consider that they might be closely related to the Hawk-headed Parrot *Derophtus accipitrinus*. Hawkheads and caiques populate the same area of northern South America; they have identical coloration on their backs, and they have very similar vocalization patterns.

### Personality

Many people believe that caiques are at their best in aviaries; they are sociable, playful and very amusing to watch. When tamed, however, they make fascinating and affectionate pets, and can be kept singly or with a companion of the same species.

Several adjectives have been used to describe these parrots (which should not discourage anyone who likes parrots with strong, marked personalities): stubborn, tenacious and headstrong. All six of my domestically raised caiques, of both species, show little fear and are immediately at the aviary door ready to come out when I attempt to change their food and water dishes. Each pair wants to get on me or reach a neighboring pair of caiques to investigate. If by chance they fall to the floor outside of their flights, they come over to me expecting that I will retrieve them from this vulnerable location, so they can get on with their explorations of people or birds.

Those interested in behavior study should find the actions of caiques absorbing. They are playful and they appreciate all sorts of toys. They love to swing from one foot and to hold onto the cage with their backs up against the rungs, feet dangling. Give a caique a twig from a fruit tree, and watch the bird strip the branch of bark and rub its body catlike against the twig. My first caique used a dog chain hanging from the top of his cage to accomplish the same thing. He would hold the loose end in his one foot so that it was over his back and rub himself as a human might with a back scratcher.

Caiques are capable of some shrill, whistling shrieks, but these are limited when you have only one bird, and they are not as grating as some conures sounds. A single caique muttering clicks and yaps is not likely to be too noisy.

### Breeding

Breeding success with caiques is limited, but it certainly has improved since the advent of surgical sexing. Caiques were first bred in the United States in 1932. Former AFA president, Tom Ireland in Lake Worth, Florida, had some of the earlier successes with both species. Ireland bred White-bellied Caiques in colonies of four and Black-headed Caiques as single pairs, housed in adjacent flights. He raised 17 youngsters in 1985, from about six pairs. I have read of Black-headed Caiques breeding in colony setups and White-bellieds breeding as single pairs, as well. What does seem to be constant, however, is that multiple pairs within sight and sound of each other serve to stimulate breeding.

In 1971, George Smith, a well-known English veterinarian, aviculturist and author, was the first individual to breed caiques in England. In a letter to me in 1979, Dr. Smith recounted his examination of 50 caiques of known sex. He believes it is impossible to determine their sex by beak size or shape or by any other visual means. Sexual behavior is also an unreliable indicator of true gender, because often two males or two females will adopt "pair" behavior. He has observed, however, that only males "crow"—they hold their wings out to the side slightly above the head while they utter a high-pitched "toot."


Dr. Smith also experimented with his caiques by playing a tape recording of their own vocalizations. Both sexes "mob"—scream and get visibly agitated—at tape recordings of themselves, demonstrating the potential aggressiveness of the species. Dr. Smith noticed that the males crowed during these frenzies and in general seemed more ag-

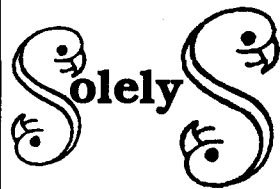
gressive than the hens. If you plan to put mature caiques together, especially if their sexes are not known, watch them carefully to ensure their compatibility. There have been reports of an odd caique in the company of a group of caiques being killed or severely injured, but this can be true of other species of birds as well.

Breeding successes with caiques are becoming more frequent as individuals realize that these birds are not overly abundant in captivity and there will be no more imports. Pairs have nested in various settings, but if supply is to keep up with growing demand, avicultural specialists will have to keep the kind of records that will allow future breeders of caiques to know the optimal conditions for maximum production.

Clutch size is usually two or three eggs, but fertile clutches of four eggs have been recorded. Incubation usually lasts 23 days, and the young fledge at two months.

Caiques are great little birds with big personalities, and they deserve considerably more attention from breeders. They are not prolific, but they will breed and should provide sufficient challenges and rewards for serious aviculturists. A tame caique, certainly a hand-reared one, is rivaled by few parrots. It is animated and affectionate.

I would like to start a specialty group devoted to breeding caiques and promoting them as pets and as birds worthy of conservation and research efforts. If you would be willing to participate, please write me at 229 North King Street, Leesburg, VA 22075. I would be willing to edit a newsletter, "Caique Connection" to keep each other informed on developments in the husbandry of our favorite birds. 



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