

# The Golden Conure: More Precious Than Gold

by Dave Followill  
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First described by Rosemary Low in *Endangered Parrots* as a conure more precious than gold (Low, 1984), the Queen of Bavaria's or Golden Conure *Aratinga guarouba* deserves its reputation. Of all the parrots, none is more brilliantly clad, more raucous in behavior, or more endearing in its personality. In today's market, a breeding pair of the Queen of Bavaria's Conure is literally worth its weight in gold.

The Golden Conure evokes many emotions in the aviculturist, but the first reaction is usually awe, followed quickly by a lasting reverence. This is a parrot in the truest sense. The broad head and beak lend the imposing appearance of a macaw. A long, tapered tail balances this otherwise top heavy bird and gives it an overall regal appearance. The rich golden yellow plumage of the body and tail are in-striking contrast to the dark green primary flights. If they had nothing more to offer than good looks, this conure would be among the most desirable of all companion or aviary birds. Beyond this, Golden Conures are cherished for their rarity, their endangered status, and their captivating nature.

The Golden Conure is a bird worth the waiting, the planning, the paperwork, and the expense, rewarding the breeder far beyond normal expectations. Rarely does an aviculturist have an

opportunity to work with a bird that is both a joy to manage and a deserving conservation project. *Aratinga guarouba* is seriously endangered in the wild by loss of its native habitat in the Amazon rain forest, and relatively few exist in captivity to ensure their long-term survival. The sense of pride and satisfaction that comes from successfully breeding these birds is immeasurable.

The great surprise to most who are fortunate enough to know these birds is not their obvious beauty, but their engaging personalities. A handfed Golden Conure will exhibit an unusual trust in its keeper. Young Golden Conures enjoy handling to the extent that most will lie totally relaxed on their backs in your hand. Fortunately, they love each other even more than people and will usually be seen in close contact, whether they are playing, preening, mock fighting, or roosting. This high degree of socialization is a natural adaptation, as they are communal breeders.

From a practical point of view, Golden Conures possess all of the qualities necessary to ensure an unending demand. In addition, they have a high market value coupled with a moderate size. Larger birds have greater requirements for space, food, cleaning, and all of the other factors that limit the number of birds one can care for properly.

Golden Conures are unlike other conures to

the extent that it has been proposed they be given their own genus (*Guarouba guarouba*) taxinomically. Because of their massive head and mandible, many people feel that Golden Conures more closely resemble macaws than conures. In their behavior and facial expression, if not their size, they bear a strong resemblance to the Hyacinth Macaw. Golden Conures share the gentle behavior and ease of handling that is typical of many larger parrots with massive beaks. Although their conformation more closely resembles a macaw, their call and the interspersed green in the yellow plumage of immature Golden Conures are characteristic of a conure. The yellow plumage is softer and generally longer than that of comparably sized conures or macaws. The inevitable conclusion is that this parrot is a unique treasure.

## Health Considerations

Golden Conures are very hardy birds and they appear to be as resistant to disease as other conures. They are, of course, susceptible to the viruses and infectious diseases that plague other parrots; however, they do not suffer from any species-specific ailments. The captive U.S. population of Golden Conures has been relatively free of disease problems.

It has been reported that Golden Conure chicks require constant hand-feeding to avoid stunting, a condition of underdevelopment usually associated with malnourishment. I have not found this to be the case. In the absence of an infection, Golden Conure chicks develop rapidly and require no more attention than those of any other parrot species. I believe that the poor immune response of some Golden chicks is responsible for these reports.

My experience in rearing Golden Conures has been exclusively with artificially incubated eggs. Although productivity is enhanced, the chicks do not receive the advantage of antigens from the crop milk of the hen. A few of these chicks are weakened by bacterial infections during the first week, but even these will thrive with no noticeable loss in development once the initial problem is resolved. In all cases of slow growth, I have found the chicks to respond to antibiotic or fungal drug therapy. (Cultures and sensitivity tests are invaluable in diagnosis of these problems in all parrot species.)

I am aware of very few losses of adult Golden Conures due to disease. Of the 12 original breeders held at Followill Aviaries,

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and over 60 Goldenes reared to independence, only one has died. On necropsy, that bird was found to have suffered an internal injury.

Longevity appears to be on a par with other parrot species. The *Golden Conure International Studbook* lists wild-caught individuals that lived approximately 40 years in captivity (Lieberman, 1993). Although available statistics are very limited, Goldenes exhibit every indication of sharing the typical conure hardiness, and can be expected to be long-lived.

### Reproduction

The majority of captive bred Golden Conures are descended from a small number of the original wild-caught birds that make up the founder stock. The first difficulty encountered in breeding Goldenes, then, is to secure breeding stock that is not the result of inbreeding. The next difficulty is to avoid inbreeding in your own stock.

Analysis of the Golden Conure Studbook indicates that Goldenes do not breed as readily as some more commonly kept birds. In my experience, however, they have no unusual breeding requirements, and can be quite prolific. Many pairs will produce three clutches in a year (or more if eggs are pulled for incubation). I have found them to be dependable breeders, an observation that is supported by Studbook records. Breeding pairs will usually produce every year. Of our six original pairs, three have produced each year after the first success and the other three have produced infertile eggs, with breeding attempts each year. All produce multiple clutches.

The normal clutch size is three to six eggs. Goldenes are indeterminate layers, in that they will continue to lay eggs in an attempt to complete a clutch if eggs are pulled for incubation. As many as 10 to 12 eggs may be laid, but I have found only the first six or seven may be fertile, indicating that copulation ceases as egg laying begins. Golden Conures have proven to be seasonal breeders when housed outdoors in colder climates (Hayward, 1982). Indoors, however, they will breed at any time during the year.

Most of our breeders were of uncertain age when we acquired them, but there are reports of Golden Conures breeding under two years of age. Fecundity records in the Studbook indicate reproduction from two through

25 years of age. As with other parrots, age is probably not as significant as compatibility or the mutual stimulation of courtship behavior. Veterinarians experienced in surgical sexing have verified that age is not synonymous with sexual maturity.

Compatibility may be a more important factor with Golden Conures than with related species. Specifically, a pair that is mismatched in level of aggression may produce infertile eggs even though both birds are mature. This problem does not seem to occur in pairs that are established at a young age. Potential mates should be carefully evaluated and evenly matched so that one bird will not dominate the other.

Golden Conures are highly social birds. They have successfully bred in colony flights, and are known to breed communally in the wild. A number of hens may lay in the same nest cavity, with feeding duties shared by the entire group (Forshaw, 1989, Silva, 1989). This behavior is rare if not unique among the larger parrots. It supports the theory that these birds will breed most readily in the company of their own species, as is the case with most other conures. With Goldenes, however, there are no rules. Some single pairs have also proven to be prolific.

### The Drawbacks

Golden Conures have two annoying traits that counterbalance their charm. They have a voice designed to penetrate

the rain forest, and young Goldenes have a habit of chewing each other's tail and flight feathers. The voice is only unpleasant at close range and is not used as often as that of many other parrots.

The feather chewing trait can be frustrating to the proud new owner, but the birds usually outgrow the habit and allow the damaged plumage to be replaced by new feathers. I believe young Goldenes need to be allowed to interact with each other for future breeding success. It is best to keep clutch mates together and accept the ragged plumage of some of the young birds.

Feather plucking is a more serious problem that is attributed to Goldenes, but is far less prevalent than the chewing behavior discussed above. Chronic feather pluckers should be avoided, as this habit may be very difficult to break.

### Status

The range of the Golden Conure is restricted to north-eastern Brazil, south of the Amazon River, from the west bank of the Rio Tapajos, Para and east to north-western Maranhao. The Golden Conure prefers the hilly upland areas of terra firma, rather than varzea, or flooded forest. They are pressured by habitat loss, predation, hunting, and trapping. Timber operations, gold mining, colonization, cattle ranching, highways, railroad construction, and hydroelectric projects have had a combined disastrous effect on their rain forest habitat (Forshaw,

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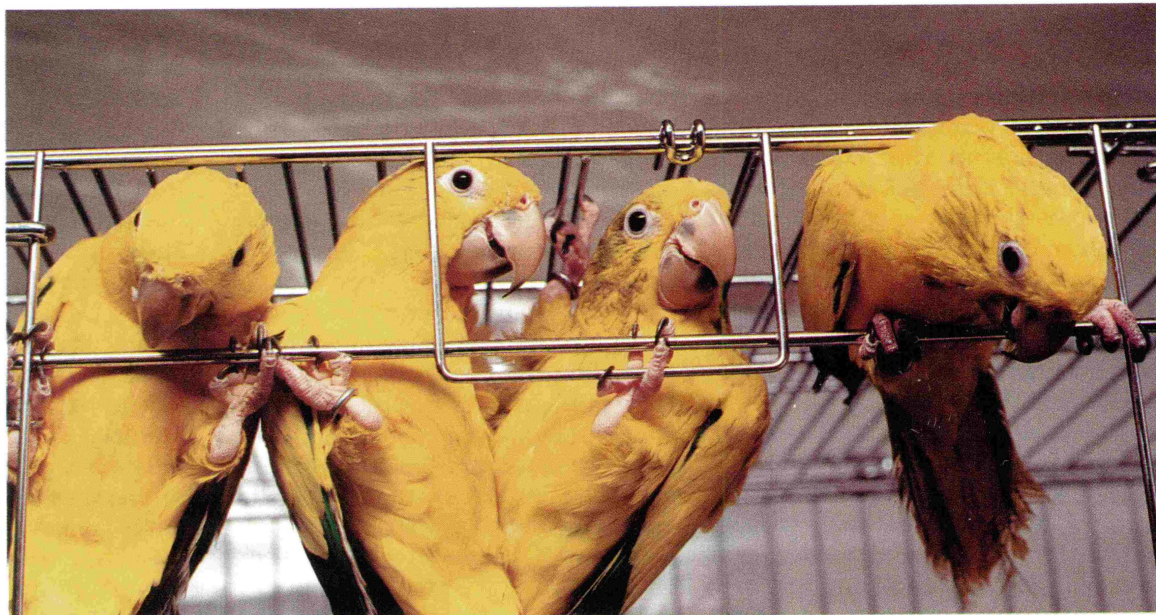
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1989, Low, 1984, Silva, 1989).

As a whole, the species *Aratinga guarouba* is not believed to be in imminent danger of extinction; however, it is critically endangered in the eastern portion of its range, where no forest reserves exist. Its decline there has been so rapid and widespread, that extinction is predicted in all of the region east of the Rio Tocantins by the year 2000 (Hayward, 1982).

Although their status in the wild is no cause for optimism, Goldens are established in aviculture, where their desirability should assure a continued existence. Only recently have Golden Conures become commonly available to private breeders. They are available

in small numbers today, as a result of breeding success in both institutions and private collections. Except for those specimens that are not suitable for breeding, Goldens should not be kept as pets until their numbers are increased. Due to their rarity, Goldens still command high prices and buyers are often scrutinized as carefully as are the birds

#### Permit Requirements


Unlike many endangered parrots, Golden Conures are protected by both CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) and the U.S. Endangered Species Act. CITES permits are required only for import to or export from the U.S. An Interstate

Commerce Permit (one time only) or a Captive Bred Wildlife (CBW) Registration is required by both parties (shipper and receiver) to move Goldens across state lines if compensation is involved. The permit is required even if the buyer picks up the birds in person. No permit is required if both parties live in the same state.

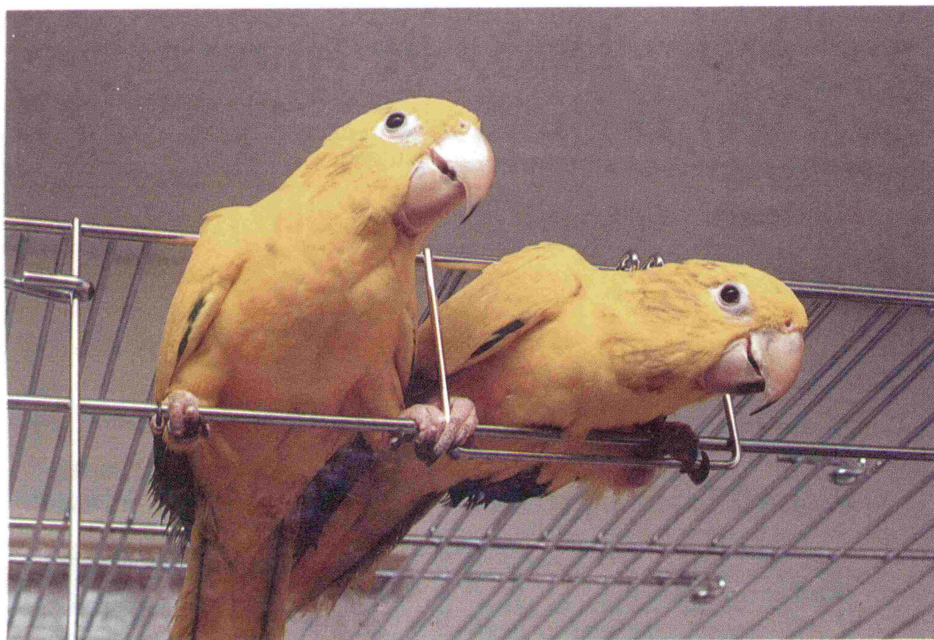
Permits are issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Office of Management Authority in Arlington, Virginia. Detailed information and permit applications may be requested by phone [(800) 358-2104]. The fee is \$25 for the CBW Registration, which will generally be issued for a 4-year period. Although information is requested on expertise and experience with related species, knowledge, planning, and available resources may compensate for a lack of experience. You must demonstrate a worthy purpose, such as long term captive propagation, and the knowledge and ability to provide for the needs of these important birds.

Although the permit requirements for Golden Conures are an annoyance, they are insignificant in contrast to the rewards of keeping and breeding this enchanting parrot.

#### References

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Photos by Dave Followill



The Golden Conure is a CITES 1 and a ESA (U.S. endangered species) bird. It is often referred to as the Queen of Bavaria Conure.

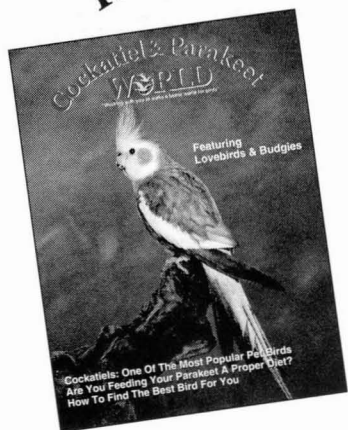


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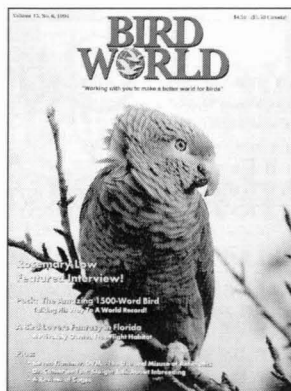
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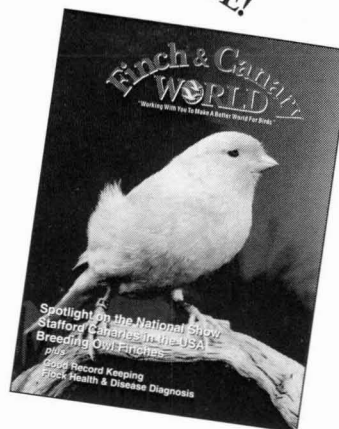


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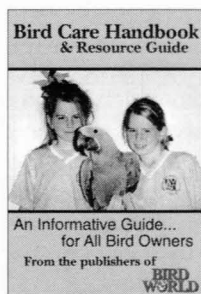
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