

EPPA Gazette – Winter 2006/2007

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Cover photo: Ara, the Blue and Gold Macaw and Cricket, the Greenwing Macaw. They belong to Alex and Gloria M.



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Meetings: are held on the last Wednesdays of each month at the Muttart Conservatory, except June, July and December. They start at 6:45 pm.

Past Event Reports

September's Meeting: The parrot of the month was Lucy, a Maroon-bellied Conure, who belongs to Jessie and Quentin. We watched a video on birds for the activity.

October's Meeting: The parrot of the month was Bello, a Bare-eyed Cockatoo, who belongs to Brian and Irene G., and Carol gave a presentation about new parrot products she learned about at a trade show in Las Vegas.



Left:
Bello, the
Bare-
eyed
Cockatoo

Cage Bird Show: The Northern Alberta Cage Bird society held their annual show October 14 & 15th at the Sands Hotel. We were invited to have an information table there and the parrots were a big hit. Many thanks to everyone who helped out and brought parrots! The below photo is of a baby Military Macaw Marie and Dwayne brought to the show.



November's Meeting: The parrot of the month was Ruby, a White-bellied Caique who belongs to Carol. We also had a toy-making session.



Above: Ruby, the White-bellied Caique.

Thank you! To everyone who has brought their parrots to our meetings, to Carol for her presentation, and to Petra, Louise and David for organizing the toy making session.

December: Instead of a regular meeting, we had a Christmas party at Beijing Beijing. We had many nice door prizes, donated by Pete S., Carol M., and Hagen pet products.

Upcoming Events

Pet Expo: This year's pet expo will be held on January 27th and 28th (a Saturday and Sunday) at the Northlands AgriCom. We will be having an information table and will need people to help out with things like selling memberships and of course, we will need people to bring their parrots. The hours are from 10

am to **6:30 pm** on the 27th and 10 am to 5 pm on the 28th. You would not need to stay the whole time. If you can help out, please let Louise know at louise.walden@shaw.ca or 466-7273. The club will reimburse you for parking and there will be a loading area close to the doors so you won't have to carry your parrot a long distance in the cold.

January Meeting: January's meeting will be at the usual time and place (6:45 pm at the Muttart Conservatory – 9626 96A Street) on January 31st. The parrot of the month and activity are TBA.



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Left: A Twenty-eight Parrot (*Barnardius zonarius semitorquatus*) photographed at the Calgary Zoo.

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The Struggle for Dominance: Fact or Fiction?

A Bird's Eye View

By: S.G. Friedman, PhD, Utah, and
Bobbi Brinker, Ohio

Published in Original Flying
Machine, Issue 6:May/June 2001

(Dr. Friedman has given me
permission to reprint her articles. –
ed)

In the field of psychology, an important distinction is made between *behaviors* and *constructs*. In this context, a behavior describes *what* a bird is doing and is defined as something that can be observed and measured. We can see and count the number of times a bird flies off a perch, and we can hear and clock how long a bird screams. Alternatively, a construct is an idea or theory about the mental processes inside an individual that explains *why* or *how* they behave as they do. As such, a construct cannot be observed or measured directly. These explanatory theories are “constructed,” that is, inferred from the outward behaviors we can observe and measure with our senses. You can't touch or measure a bird's dominance, per se, but you can measure how often he bites you when you try to get him off the top of his cage. Height dominance, cage dominance, food dominance, and flock dominance are all examples of many commonly discussed constructs assumed to explain companion parrot behavior.

Admittedly, specialized lingo like “constructs” can be a major turnoff, but sometimes these concepts are so clarifying that it's worth the effort to ponder them. The distinction between behaviors and constructs is part of a larger framework for understanding

behavior that is relevant to those of us living with companion parrots. Of course, our goal is always the same: To better interpret why our birds behave the way they do and identify what can be done to decrease the problems they encounter living with us.

Can't Live With `Em or Without `Em

Constructs are useful. When we observe what appears to be a related set or class of behaviors, it is both efficient and compelling to synthesize them according to some unifying process. For example, it is much more succinct to say that a bird is exhibiting “nesting behaviors” than it is to describe each of the behaviors that comprise this construct. It could take hours to describe the specific individual behaviors of Irene Pepperberg's amazing bird Alex, when what we really want to convey is that this bird is very “intelligent.” Birds are loving, fearful, athletic, zany, all constructs that allow us to convey important information to one another with single words.

But for all their apparent usefulness, constructs present serious obstacles to the pursuit of understanding behavior (human and parrot alike). The first problem is with the very choice of a label that, like a picture, can convey a thousand words– and emotions. Labels evoke powerful impressions about the value of what they describe. These impressions predispose us – no, prejudice us – to interpret behavior in very positive or negative ways. For example, some people describe cockatoo behavior as deliciously cuddly, while others describe the same behavior as overly needy. Are greys cold or independent? Are these good or bad things? Should we try to change or accept them?

The second problem with thinking in terms of constructs rather than

observable behaviors is verifiability. Since they describe intangible mental processes that are neither directly observable nor quantifiable it's hard to know, for any given construct, if we are dealing with an explanatory truth or an explanatory fiction. For example, when a bird bites you from the top of his cage, is he exhibiting height dominance, fear, or simple annoyance at being removed or interrupted? How can you tell? As you can see, it is a huge and precarious leap of logic, not science, to jump from observable behaviors to interpreted constructs and there is no surefire way to control the accuracy of the landing.

Finally, the third problem with constructs is that they are tightly bound by our own genetic, cultural, and personal perspective: The Human Perspective. For most of us, thinking outside the proverbial "box" to truly understand a child, spouse, or friend is tough enough. Thinking outside ones own taxonomic class, from *Homo sapiens* to *Aves*, is an extraordinary challenge. Trying to increase our understanding of birds by drawing constructs from the well of human experience is fraught with problems. On the one hand, parrots need all the humanity we can muster in order to thrive in our homes. On the other hand, our uniquely human perspective too often leads us to respond and intervene in inappropriate or even harmful ways. For example, it is not uncommon for new parrot owners to punish their bird for biting when he was merely leading with his beak.

Origins of the Dominance Theory

Within the companion parrot community, it is a commonly held belief that our birds behave from an inherent need to dominate their human flock, that is, to be king of the tree. Many people have described pet parrots as control freaks with authority complexes that are looking for our submissive reactions in

order to win the struggle for dominance. It is the glib repetition of this idea, not research, which has given it status as the most proffered explanation for our birds' noncompliant behaviors.

Strangely, this interpretation of the dominance construct persists in spite of the lack of corroborating evidence from ornithologists, field biologists and wild bird behaviorists who are studying wild parrots. Apparently, in their natural habitat there are no alpha parrots or straight-line hierarchies. Contention between parrots appears to be relatively uncommon and brief with unpredictable outcomes that change with the wind. Life in the wild is simply not as neat as we in the companion world would have it. It is also worth noting that, just like the rest of us, biologists must discipline themselves to resist the allure of going beyond observable behaviors into the realm of explanatory fictions. The history of science is strewn with such errors of interpretation in all fields of study.

It seems that the main basis of the dominance construct applied to companion parrots is the projection of our own domineering behavior. We are, after all, proficient controllers, and the dominance construct is a strikingly human interpretation of what our birds are thinking when they simply decline to step up. It is not without a certain logic; it has a certain utility, but does it lead to the best practices with our companion birds?

Clearly, simple logic and utility is not enough. To advance our understanding of our birds we will need to bring on board the multidisciplinary knowledge of many different fields of study. This was not easily accomplished in the past. However, such a strategy is more possible now than ever before.

So What?

Given that constructs are merely theories about what underlies behavior, it is reasonable to wonder what all this fuss is about. However, the way in which we respond to our birds is strongly influenced by our assumptions about what makes them tick. Interpreting our birds' noncompliant behavior as a struggle for dominance leads us to naturally respond by picking up the gauntlet, clamping down and meeting the challenge with counter-dominance. How would our responses differ if we interpreted our birds' refusal to our requests as fear or bird-appropriate self-centeredness or annoyance at our frequent imposition? Misunderstanding what motivates behavior results in missed teaching opportunities and decreases the likelihood that we will respond with appropriate, effective or humane interventions. Perhaps this point can be made clearer with this silly story from our own more familiar human turf:

We know some poor parents whose 3-year old daughter refused to brush her teeth. Every night, when told it was time to go to bed, she ran up the ladder and hid in the farthest corner of the top bunk bed. One night, when her mother stretched up to grab her, the girl bit her! Well, that was the final straw. The parents could not reward such a challenge or show submission to this willful child who had apparently assumed that her height advantage on the top bunk bed made her the dominant person in the house! So, they took back control assertively and busted her to a futon in the basement. She would never be higher than her parents again. The girl still refuses to brush her

teeth but she bites less often now ...

Consider this: When you want to move your bird from his play top to his cage, are you trying to dominate him or do you simply have a different location for him in mind? How is this different than your bird's intention when he declines the offer?

The Point

The point of this article is not to suggest that parrots should be allowed to bite, scream, flee from our hands, or interact with only one person in the family. To be a successful companion, a bird should exhibit none of these behaviors, most of time. Neither is the point to suggest that dominant behavior is completely absent in our captive parrots. At issue here is how best to achieve a repertoire of good companion behavior with our pet birds.

Over the years, there have been many recommended strategies to decrease assumed dominance in pet parrots. For example, to control height dominance, lower your bird's perches to no higher than eye level of the shortest person in the house; to break cage dominance, don't pull your finger away when your bird is biting it; and, to nip flock dominance in the bud, never hold your bird higher than your heart. All of these strategies may have an effect on a bird's behavior but they are neither necessary nor desirable for the long run. More importantly, they do not represent best practices, regardless of what motivates our birds.

Counting both the authors' pet flocks combined, we own nine pet parrots ranging in age from 1 to 13 years old. Represented in these two flocks are Congo and Timneh greys, *Psittacus erithacus erithacus* and *P.e. timenh*, a Severe Macaw, *Ara severa*, an Alexandrine Parakeet, *Psittacula*

eupatria, an Umbrella Cockatoo, *Cacatura alba*, a Budgie, *Melopsittacus undaulatus*, and a lovebird, *Agopornis*. None of them refuse to come down off their cage tops and all of them can be nuzzled and kissed on tiptoe by all family members including two children. We continue to work with some of the younger birds to better express their dissatisfaction with their voices and not their beaks, and we continue to expand their confidence to interact pleasantly with all friends and strangers. None of this was accomplished overnight; all of this was accomplished in the complete absence of domination and force.

Insights and Strategies

The act and art of great teaching is largely the result of great observation and communication skills. With every interaction, both you and your bird are communicating to one another your personal wants, needs and boundaries. The goal is to use this communication to get the desired behavior by controlling the teaching sequences, not the bird. Consider changing your attitude from demanding compliance to being “blown away” by their willingness to cooperate! Don’t lose the feeling of awe that brought you to parrot ownership in the first place.

To devise specific strategies, focus on specific behaviors more than constructs. Insights about the inner workings of our parrots’ minds are a luxury, not a necessity, for successful teaching. Analyze the antecedents, that is, the events that occur right before your bird misbehaves and consider how they might be changed to facilitate cooperation. Carefully consider the consequences that follow each specific behavior and arrange them to reward the desired actions not the undesirable ones.

Let’s follow one example. Many of us have been frustrated by our bird’s refusal to step onto our hands from high perches or cage tops. We expect that a bird should comply because from our point of view there is nothing to fear and nothing to avoid. As with our friends’ daughter aloft on the top bunk, there are lots of good reasons why your bird should come down but apparently he doesn’t think so. Ask yourself, what is the goal: getting him off his cage at any cost or being the person he *wants* to come to? Depending on your goal, you will devise different strategies. Of course, we suggest that the goal should always be to avoid force, and facilitate and reward cooperation.

One mistake bird owners frequently make is asking for too much too soon. Don’t lose sight of the fact that stepping up when you “reeeeally” don’t want to is asking a lot of anyone. Arrange a teaching environment such that your bird is given frequent opportunities to practice complying with your request. Reward each and every act of cooperation. Ask him to step up often just to say “Hello good bird!” and set him down again to continue whatever he was doing. In this way he will look forward to stepping onto your hand as it signals attention without a cost. If the immediate consequence for stepping up is always being returned to his cage, your bird will be less willing to step up in the future. This is a way to inadvertently punish your bird for complying. When you do need to put your bird in his cage, allow sufficient time in your schedule to first reward him with a minute or two of attention or a treat for stepping onto your hand.

Program success by facilitating good behavior, that is, pave the way for cooperation. For example, make sure that you make requests at reasonable times, not while he’s deeply engaged in playing or eating. Ensure that being

inside his cage is a desirable place to be by providing adequate space, toys and sufficient out of cage time. With thoughtful attention to these antecedents and positive consequences your bird will soon choose to be on your hand, and stepping up at your request will become a habit. This is the time to expect your bird to step up from cage tops and high perches, even though he may have other things in mind.

Conclusion

We may never know what mental processes underlie our parrots' observable behaviors. From the human perspective, any resistance is easily misinterpreted as a struggle for dominance. Depending on our understanding about what motivates birds to behave in particular ways, one naturally chooses some strategies and ignores others. We believe that the quest for dominance is rarely an accurate description of what motivates a companion parrot's negative behavior. Regardless, the intervention strategies typically associated with this interpretation are themselves so domineering as to be senselessly damaging to the relationship you wish to have with your bird. Too often, the processes thought to underlie behavior are solely in the eye of the beholder. When this is the case, we move farther away from facilitating our parrots' companionability when we should be moving closer to a bird's eye view.

The authors wish to express their gratitude to Martha Hatch Balph, Ph.D., and Steve Martin for generously sharing their insights about bird behavior.

Note: More of Dr. Friedman's articles can be found at <http://www.thegabrielfoundation.org/HTML/friedman.htm>

Parrot Resources

Magazines for pet bird owners:

1. **Bird Talk** (monthly, about all pet birds), **Birds USA** (annual, introduction to owning pet birds), & **Wild Bird** (wild birds and bird watching).

Website:

<http://www.birdchannel.com/>

2. **Parrots** magazine (monthly, about wild and pet parrots, based out of the UK).

Website: <http://www.parrotmag.com/>

Phone: (978) 246-0209

3. **Companion Parrot Quarterly** (quarterly, or biannually, about pet parrots)

Website:

<http://www.companionparrot.com/>

Phone: 970-278-0233

4. **Good Bird Magazine** (Quarterly, about training birds, and bird behavior. Covers all types of pet birds).

Website:

<http://www.goodbirdinc.com/>

Phone: 512-423-7734

General Parrot Websites:

<http://www.parrotparrot.com>

(General parrot site, with a focus on lovebirds).

<http://www.featherpicking.com/>

(Resources for owners of parrots who pluck or barber their feathers).

Meet the Conures!

By: Jessie Zgurski

The term “conure” refers to a large group of elegant South American parrots with long, tapered tails. This is a highly varied group of parrots which range in size from only 25 cm long (Black-capped Conures, *Pyrrhura rupicola*) to 49 cm long (the Greater Patagonian Conure, *Cyanoliseus patagonus byroni*).

There are several conure genera (scientific groups), with *Aratinga* and *Pyrrhura* being the largest. These two genera contain some of the most popular small and medium parrot species.

Pyrrhura Conures

The genus *Pyrrhura* contains sixteen species of small, dark green parrots, although only about half of these are seen as pets. The most common species are the Green-cheeked Conure (*P. molinae*) and the Maroon-bellied Conure (*P. frontalis*). Both are about the size of a cockatiel, and are dark green with light brown chests, blue flight feathers, long, wedge-shaped tails and white eye rings. They can be difficult to tell apart. The names of these two conures don't really give away their differences, since both species have maroon-coloured bellies. The differences can be seen by checking out the bird's tails and heads. A Green-cheeked Conure's tail will be solid maroon, whereas a Maroon-bellied Conure's will be maroon on the bottom and light olive-green tipped with brownish red on the top. The top of a Green-cheek Conure's head will be a dark greyish colour, while the top of a Maroon-bellied Conure's head will be green.

Several other *Pyrrhura* species can also

be found in the pet trade and like the Maroon-bellied and Green-cheeked Conures, they are small birds that have dark green wings and backs. Most also have a red or maroon tail. This trait gives this group of birds their name - the genus name *Pyrrhura* comes from the Greek terms “pyrros” and “auro,” which mean “fire” and “tail,” respectively. Other *Pyrrhuras* seen as pets include the Black-capped Conure (*P. rupicola*), the Pearly Conure (*P. perlata lepida*), the Crimson-bellied Conure (*P. perlata perlata*), the Painted Conure (*P. picta*), the White-eared Conure (*P. leucotis*) and the Fiery-shouldered Conure (*P. egregia*).



Above: Lucy, the author's Maroon-bellied Conure.

As a whole, conures have a reputation for being very noisy birds. However, while the small *Pyrrhura* conures can also produce shrill calls, they are not as loud as the calls produced by their bigger, brighter cousins in the *Aratinga* genus. This makes *Pyrrhura* conures a suitable choice of parrot for most living situations, including apartments.

Pyrrhura conures are not exceptional talkers and most that learn to use human speech only say up to 10 to 20 or so words, although a few exceptionally gifted individuals exist. Lucy has a low, robotic speaking voice that's hard to understand and she does not talk much, although she does a convincing imitation of a squeaky rodent wheel. However, some Maroon bellies

chat non-stop in a quiet, raspy voice, so whether or not a *Pyrrhura* conure says much seems to depend on the individual bird's personality.

The *Aratinga* Conures

There are 23 members of this genus. Members of the genus *Aratinga* are larger, brighter, and louder than the *Pyrrhura* conures. Below are descriptions of the most common ones:

1. The Sun Conure and Relatives

The most popular conures in this group include the Sun (*A. solstitialis*), Jenday (*A. jandaya*), and Gold-capped (*A. auricapilla*) Conures. These parrots are all about thirty cm long and have some bright red, orange, and/or yellow feathers, combined with bright green ones. Sun conures have the least amount of green on the body and wings. Overall, their plumage is dominated by bright orange and yellow feathers, with some red ones on the face, and green and blue ones on the wings. The upper side of the tail is olive and blue and the underside is blackish. Jenday conures are similar, but their wings are entirely green. Gold-capped Conures are primarily green, with blue flight feathers, and gold colouring on the undersides of the wing, the belly and the head.



Above: Sun Conures Reba and Buddy, who belong to Dorothy F. They are both graceful dancers.

Sun, Jenday, and Gold-capped conures all have very shrill, loud voices that they like to use frequently. Generally, they are not known for their talking ability, but some do learn to say a few words. They are, however, very active, clever, and playful birds that learn quickly. Their stunning looks and friendly personalities have made them quite popular in the parrot world.



Above: Jenday Conure chicks bred by Marie and Dwayne.

2. The Blue-crowned Conure

The Blue-crowned Conure (*A. acuticaudata*) is a large bird (38 cm long) and is green with a blue head and reddish colouring on the underside of the tail. These are often noisy, chatty birds, and many Blue-crowns become excellent talkers. The main parrot character in the film, *Paulie*, is a Blue-crowned Conure. Fourteen Blue-crowned conures were used to play the part of Paulie, and each one was trained to respond to about fifty commands and hand signals. A few animatronic birds were used as well.

3. The Green Red Heads

The Cherry-headed Conure, (*A. erythogenys*, also called the Red-masked Conure), has become more well-known recently because these are the birds featured in the book and film, "*The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill.*" A small flock of these birds, which are

native to western Ecuador and northwest Peru, lives around Telegraph Hill in San Francisco, and Mark Bittner managed to befriend several of them and his experiences are documented in the above mentioned film. A few Mitred (*A. mitrata*) and Blue-crowned Conures also live(d) amongst the flock of Cherry-headed Conures. A few Mitred-Cherry-headed Conure hybrids also live wild around Telegraph Hill. Other feral flocks of Cherry-headed Conures can be found in southern California and Florida.

Cherry-headed Conures are bright green with red heads. They also have some red on the bend of the wings. There are several other similar species, all with green bodies and red heads, which include the Mitred Conure, the Finsch's Conure (*A. finschi*) and the Wagler's or Red-fronted Conure (*A. wagleri*).

The Finsch's Conure is the smallest member of the group, at 28 cm long, followed by the Cherry-headed Conure, which is ~33 cm long. The Wagler's and Mitred Conures are large parrots at 36 or 38 cm long, respectively. The Cherry-headed Conure's mask is solid red and the Mitred Conure's red mask will be broken and flecked at the edges.

Wagler's and Finsch's Conures both have a small patch of red between the eyes, but where the adult Wagler's red patch will reach past its eye ring, the red patch on the adult Finsch's will not.

All of these red-headed green conures can easily be mistaken for the primarily green White-eyed Conure (*A. leucophthalmus*) as juveniles. They do not develop their red heads until they are about six months old.

Cherry-headed, Finsch's, Wagler's, Mitred, and White-eyed Conures are generally vocal birds and some learn to speak well, but others don't. If

socialized and well-trained, many can make very friendly, sociable companions. They are active and busy birds and most need plenty of wooden toys to satisfy their instinct to chew.



Above: Young Mitred Conure (top bird), adult Mitred Conure (bottom left), Wagler's Conure (bottom middle), Cherry-headed Conure (bottom right).

4. The Peach and Orange-fronted Conures.

One of the smallest *Aratinga* species, the Peach-fronted Conure (*A. aurea*), is also a common pet. These little conures are 26 cm long and are beautiful green birds with a patch of peach feathers above the cere, and blue feathers between the orange patch and the eyes. Peach fronts are very similar to Orange-fronted Conures (*A. canicularis*). The two can be differentiated by their beaks – Peach-fronted Conures have black beaks and Orange-fronted Conures have horn-coloured beaks. The Half-moon and Petz's Conures are subspecies (geographic variants) of the Orange-fronted Conure. Peach- and Orange-fronted Conures can have shrill

voices, but they are amongst the quieter of the *Aratinga* Conures.



Above: Peach-fronted Conures, with a Pacific Parrotlet. Picture from Linda & Vic L.'s website.

5. The Dusky Conure

Another one of the quieter of the *Aratinga* species is the Dusky Conure (*A. weddellii*). These conures are primarily green, with pale yellowish feathers on the belly and brownish-grey feathers tipped with blue on the head. The outer webs of the primary and secondary feathers are blue. These are generally very sweet, friendly parrots.

6. The Nanday Conure

The Nanday Conure (*A. nenday*) was previously placed in its own genus, *Nandayus*. However, genetic studies indicate that it is closely related to the other *Aratinga* conures. They can also interbreed with other *Aratinga* conures. Some breeders will cross Nanday and Sun Conures to produce "Nansun" conures, although hybridizing parrot species is a very controversial practice in aviculture.

These beautiful birds are green with a black face, a blue upper chest, blue flight feathers and red legs. They have loud, shrill voices and are not always the best talkers. However, their good looks, friendly temperaments and playful natures have made them popular pets.



Above: Thorin, the Nanday Conure, who belongs to Michelle F.

7. Other Conure Genera

While the *Pyrrhura* and *Aratinga* genera of conures are the largest, a few other genera exist, each with only one or two members. One example is the genus *Cyanoliseus*, which contains one species, the Patagonian Conure, *C. patagonus*. These are large (45 cm long) conures that live in central Chile, northern and central Argentina and southern Uruguay. They are largely olive green in colour with yellow and red feathers on the belly. They are one of the loudest of all parrots, but can make friendly, engaging pets for those who do not mind the noise. Some Patagonians will choose one or a few people to bond closely with and many can speak well.

In the wild, Patagonian Conures will nest in the side of tall cliffs. This has earned them two alternative common names: The Cliff-dwelling Parrot and the Burrowing Parrot.

The genus *Enicognathus* contains two of the more unusual conure species, and neither is commonly seen as a pet. The Austral Conure (*E. ferrugineus*) has the most southerly range of any parrot species. They live in the forests of southern Chile and Argentina and are able to survive the very cold, harsh winters there. Slender-billed Conures (*E. leptorhynchus*) live in central Chile

and have a very long upper mandible that they use to dig up roots and puncture large fruits, so they can get the seeds.



Above: Slender-billed Conure (left), Austral Conure (right).

Conure Care

1. Feeding a Conure

Most wild conures are generalists, meaning that they will eat a wide variety of seeds, grains, fruit pulp, leaf buds, flowers, sprouts, parts of conifer cones, insect galls, and insects. Many will also eat domestic crops. Wild *Pyrrhura* species have been seen eating leaves, which is unusual for a parrot, as most will only eat leaf buds and not the mature leaves, which are difficult to digest.

Much like their wild counterparts, pet conures appreciate and thrive on a varied diet. Conures that were weaned onto a varied diet are very likely to accept a wide variety of foods. So, when looking for a young conure to buy, pick one that was weaned onto a pelleted diet supplemented with fresh foods.

A good brand of parrot pellet can make a great base for a conure's diet. Parrot pellets contain a suitable balance of carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins and minerals for a parrot. However, the addition of healthy fresh foods will also enrich a conure's life and offer it additional nutrients and antioxidants not found in the pellets. A mix of 75% pellets and 25% fresh food is often recommended by vets, and most parrots will do very well on such a diet, although a higher proportion of fresh food can be offered if it's chosen wisely.

Lucy eats a diet composed of about 50 to 65% pellets (RoudyBush and Harrison's brand), with the rest composed of "human food" including whole grains such as quinoa, brown rice or bulgur, plus fruit, vegetables, nuts (including pine nuts), seeds, and lentils. The fruit and vegetable portion of her diet leans heavily towards dark green or orange ones like bell peppers (Lucy's favorite!), mango, sweet potato, carrot, broccoli, and dandelion leaves because of their high vitamin A content. She also adores fresh raspberries (straight from the backyard), corn, snap peas, prickly pear fruits, grapes (seeds included), and bits of apple. Feeding her a balanced diet is no problem, as she will eat nearly anything. In fact, she is as bad as our dogs when it comes to begging for food, since bobs her head rapidly (a begging gesture) at anyone she sees eating. Many conures who eat "people food" will beg like this. Lucy is generally given her fresh food during dinner time, so she doesn't feel left out. She's quite a messy eater (like most conures are) and tosses a lot of food to the floor, so of course our smaller dog, Pharaoh, loves to hang out under her playstand.

2. Housing a Conure

Conures are generally very active birds with a lot of energy! As a result, they need relatively large-sized cages for

their size. For example, *Pyrhura* conures are about the size of a cockatiel, but I have noticed that most cockatiel cages are a bit small for them. A cage intended for a slightly larger bird is best, as long as the bar spacing is appropriate. Of course, the cage must be outfitted with a variety of perches and toys. When looking for a conure cage, choose one that will allow the parrot enough room to move around in and flap her wings after it has been fitted with several perches (at least three), about three toys, and food and water dishes.

Lucy's cage contains wood perches, a rope perch, and a cement perch. Her toys include a large bundle of twigs and some branches for her to chew on, some peacock feathers for her to preen and destroy, and a ladder. She also has a box of various store-bought toys I rotate in and out of her cage. Most conures seem to enjoy chewing twigs and taking the bark off of larger branches, so I generally recommend plenty of clean, non-toxic, unsprayed branches as an enrichment item for them. Many large conures are perfectly capable of reducing large branches to toothpicks.

A play stand is also an excellent item for a conure owner to purchase or build, as having one will give the owner a place to put the conure when she is out of the cage but not perching on the owner. Being out on the play stand also gives the parrot a change of scenery from the usual cage she is in. I bought Lucy's play stand at a pet shop, but one can also be made out of natural branches. Lucy's play stand has a spot for food and water bowls, and hooks that toys can be hung from. Beside the spot her play stand is usually located hangs a very large, coiled rope she loves to climb and swing on. Conures are very acrobatic parrots, so they often appreciate the opportunity to play on

ropes or swings. Many of them also love to play on their backs, but Lucy does not.

3. Bath and Sleep Time

Most conures enjoy bathing, and Lucy seems to have a bath in her rather large water dish almost daily, as evidenced by the fact that she, and the papers on her cage's bottom, are usually soaked when I go to check them upon arriving home from work. I also frequently offer her a large, shallow container of water for her to bathe in while she is out of her cage.

A bathing container for a conure should be big enough for the bird to get right into, and the water should be relatively shallow - about an inch or so deep will do; maybe a bit less for a small bird that has never tried a bath before, and a little more for a large conure such as a Patagonian. The conure will likely splash the water around with her head and wings so she gets wet all over. Most conures prefer to bathe in a tub of water over receiving a shower, but some may appreciate a shower. Lucy seems to hate being sprayed, so I do not shower her as I do my other parrots.



Above: Lucy, the Maroon-bellied Conure, takes a bath.

While they love to play and socialize, pet conures also need plenty of quiet time to sleep. About 10-12 hours each night is needed, and most will also appreciate the chance to have an

afternoon nap. Many of them enjoy sleeping in cloth huts, which is fine as long as the bird doesn't start treating it as a nest area. I offered one of these to Lucy after seeing another conure sleeping in one, but I eventually took it away since she ignored it for many months. Always check cloth sleeping huts frequently to be sure that there are no loose threads that the parrot could get his toes stuck in.



Above: Patagonian Conures.

Conure Behaviour

Among the most gregarious parrots I have ever met are several conures. These parrots, if treated gently and with affection, can be very sociable. When handled frequently from a young age by a number of people, most will not become "one-person birds" that attack all but the favored person. Of course, every parrot is an individual, and some conures do have a favourite person they try to protect from others. Lucy is not a one-person bird, as she will step up nicely for almost anyone she meets... most of the time. She is also quite affectionate and allows me to preen the feathers on her head. Conures often

enjoy receiving physical affection from their owners, particularly in the form of head scratches.

Lucy also enjoys sitting on my shoulder while I type or read. However, when she gets bored of that, she climbs down and often starts to peck at the computer mouse or keyboard or shred papers. When she does this I calmly put her on her play stand where she can play with something more appropriate. Most conures love to chew and shred paper, and get into things they shouldn't. For their safety, supervision is needed when a conure is out of her cage. These clever parrots are very curious and may go exploring and create mischief or hurt themselves when not being watched.

The most common problem faced by owners of these parrots is likely nippiness. It is certainly not an unsolvable problem by any means and most conures that are taught commands like "step up" using kind, positive techniques are easily to handle. Conures in general are not overly aggressive, but potential owners should be willing to work around any nippiness that could occur. Luckily, Lucy rarely nips, and has never broken my skin. Overall, she is very good natured. Her body language generally lets me know if she's likely to nip which helps me avoid being bitten. This is true for most parrots in general – animals rarely bite or act aggressively without warning. The key is to learn to interpret the animal's body language. For example, if Lucy is standing upright with her nape feathers erect, I wait for her to relax before picking her up. When on her cage or play stand, she also sometimes does what I call the "conure strut," where she slowly struts back and forth while striking at the air with her beak. This little display basically means, "Back off!" Once she stops strutting, she's again safe to pick up. She was quite cage territorial when I got her, so I had

to wait for her to come out on her own before asking her to step up, although she now allows me to place my hand in her cage with no problems.

Good "Starter" Birds

Many general books and websites on parrots comment that *Pyrrhura* conures can make excellent pets for first-time parrot owners. They do have many characteristics that make this true - they fit into almost any living situation because of their small size and relatively quiet voices, they are easy to train, and they are generally friendly. However, do not let their "starter bird" status fool you into thinking that these are low-maintenance pets, as they are not. I like to think of them as tiny macaws, which isn't too far off, as the conures and macaws are closely related. A *Pyrrhura* conure kept as a pet will need as much attention and care as many of the larger birds.

The larger *Aratinga* conures can be a bit more expensive to keep than the *Pyrrhura* conures because of their need for larger toys and cages. Some are also unsuitable for apartments because of their voices, but this depends on the individual bird.

Conclusion

I would recommend a conure as a pet to anyone who is interested in having an active, friendly bird with a lot of personality and who doesn't mind keeping a high maintenance pet and putting up with a bit of noise. My own conure, Lucy, is a lot of work, but has made a wonderful addition to the family with her sweet-natured temperament.

Note: The conure paintings were done by William T. Cooper and are from *Parrots of the World* by Joseph Forshaw.

Further Reading

Watkins, Anne C. 2004. *The Conure Handbook* Barron's Educational Series Inc., Hauppauge, New York, USA.

Gypsy, the Gold-capped Conure (*Aratinga auricapilla*)

By: Linda Loerzi, Safe Haven Aviary, <http://members.shaw.ca/safehaven/>

Gypsy is a Gold-cap Conure with such a loving personality - she loves to nestle in your neck and to have her stomach rubbed. We have recently done a DNA test on Gypsy to confirm her gender but have not had the results returned to us yet.

Gypsy is a little bigger than a Sun Conure. The body is mostly green with a beautiful red under the wings and her tail feathers have some navy on them. The face has red directly above the cere and a bright orange behind that. The breast feathers are a red and green mix.

Her approximate length is 11 to 13 inches in length. Gypsy does not stand still long enough to get the length. The average lifespan of a Gold-capped Conure is 20 to 30 years.

Gypsy loves food. Like many conures who like to pick and choose their food, Gypsy just loves food. She loves to take a bath in her water dish even though she is offered a bathing unit for the cage. Gypsy also loves a water spritz and we recently got a water mist from Carol and this is just the craze for all the

birds that did not like getting wet before.

Gypsy has a plastic fetish. Anything plastic is gone immediately as she will chew through it just like we are eating toast; GONE in no time. She chews wood. Between playtime and chewing keeps most of the day going for Gypsy.

Gypsy is a love and a good companion for us and fits in nicely into our household.



Conure Trivia

The United States was once home to a species of conure, the Carolina Parakeet. This parrot, which was bright green with a yellow and red head, was widespread across the eastern United States. The last known specimen died at the Cincinnati Zoo in 1918. The last Carolina Parakeet spent time living with the last known Passenger Pigeon, which died in 1914.

Some *Pyrrhura* conures may be cooperative breeders in the wild. Young conures have been observed feeding the young of an older pair; it is possible that juvenile conures stay with their parents for a year to help raise another generation of siblings and learn parenting skills.

“Conure” is a word used primarily by aviculturalists and pet owners. In many scientific publications and birding books, they are referred to as “parakeets.”

Member Classifieds/Ads

Deb Brown has **Pearly Conures** ready for new homes. Hatched now and will be ready to go late Feb. - early March will be **Maroon-bellied Conures**. Please check out Deb's website to read the profiles written on living with a conure. www.sweetietweeties.com. I also have many wonderful **Lovies**, one female **parrotlet** and two wonderful gray **Indian Ringnecks** looking for homes. **Contact Deb at 973-3267.**

Carol Murphy has **White-bellied Caiques** weaned and ready for new homes. Also being handfed at this time are **Black-capped Caiques**. They will be ready end of February - early March. You can contact **Carol at 475-6723.**

Marie (780-688-2120) has two **military macaw babies** left (\$2000 each). She also has green baby **Quakers** (\$250 each). The Quakers will be ready in March. Coming up are budgies, cockatiels and lovebirds. All Marie's babies are hand fed and extremely well socialized. They can be seen on her web site at www.aparrot4u.com. **Click on D&M Aviaries.**

Sonia can baby sit small parrots for short time periods. Birds will need to be picked up and dropped off. Located at the north end of Edmonton, near the Namao center. Free if food is provided. Sonia_k@shaw.ca

Four parakeet flight cages for sale - \$100.00, can make a deal for all. No stands. Trolleys and custom play gyms are also for sale. The trolley creates extra space to put the food under the cage. A bird-sitting service is also available - Contact **Lin (486-3868)** for more information.

Contact **David & Louise (466-7273)** for **bird sitting services**. We have extra cages so you don't have to bring cages – just the birds and some of their toys. Complimentary toe and wing clipping provided.



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Thanks to everyone who contributed to this newsletter by submitting photos or stories! I hope to do the next newsletter for March. If you have ads or other things you'd like to submit, please Email them to jzgurski@ualberta.ca or give me a call at 406-7446.

Additionally, if you have any ideas for guest speakers/activities for club meetings, or if you'd like your parrot to be "parrot of the month," or if you'd like to give a presentation related to some aspect of parrot care, please let Louise know @ louise.walden@shaw.ca.

Finally, don't forget that we have a good selection of parrot books and DVDs/videos in our library. These are listed on the club website, eppa.ca. Contact Petra at pkh@telus.net to request a book and she can bring it to the next meeting.