

Pionus Parrots - a complete guide

weights of Pionus parrots that I have included in the text of this book. The scientific director of the Loro Parque Foundation, Dr. David Waugh immeasurably helped me to better understand the birds in my care better and provided advice and help whenever asked. My Assistant Curator of birds, Mr. Pedro Martin, put in long hours year after year with the bird collection to ensure a constant level of close attention and observation that contributed to the success achieved during this period. Apart from my many colleagues at Loro Parque between 1994-1998, I would also especially like to thank the following.

Mr. Wolfgang Kiessling (Loro Parque, Spain) and Mr. Antonio de Dios (Philippines) both allowed me the opportunity to work with the birds of their collections. These two collections are the largest captive collections in the world and it has been this experience that has given me so much enjoyment and insight into the lives of Parrots in captivity. I would like to thank them both for the opportunities that they allowed me. Mr. Povl Jorgensen from Denmark has been another friend who has helped and encouraged me in recent years, he contributed photographs to be considered for this book and has made himself available whenever I have needed advice. Mr. Jorgensen is a member of the Advisory board for the Loro Parque Foundation and I

would like to take this opportunity to thank him for his advice, encouragement and support in recent years.

Mrs Ana Sosa has perhaps spent more time studying Pionus parrots in the wild than anyone else known to me. I am extremely grateful that she supplied me with extracts from her dissertation that summarised some 15 years of field-work on Amazonian parrot species, including Pionus parrots.

Jacqueline & Gabriel Prin in France have for many years translated my articles about parrots into French language so that they could be published in the excellent magazine "Les Oiseaux". During the writing of this book they were kind enough to supply me with the correct French Language names for the Pionus species. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them. Finally, Mr. Silvio Mattacchione, who has waited patiently for this book for several years and who completed the publication process much quicker than I managed to complete the text. I would like to repeat my thanks to everyone mentioned above.

INTRODUCTION

Pionus parrots have been kept, either as pets or as aviary birds, for many decades in aviculture. Some of the earliest records of Pionus parrots being kept in captivity stretch back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet throughout much of this time as aviculture slowly developed from menagerie collections into a serious past time, The Pionus parrots have remained for many years as being largely overlooked by the majority of aviculturists. During the 1980's onwards, there was a positive explosion of interest in the keeping and breeding of parrots, and during this period the techniques for captive breeding success to be achieved jumped forward in their effectiveness leading to wide spread breeding of many species. The genus of Pionus was still not widely kept and appreciated until a number of aviculturists in North America and Europe began to take a special and concentrated interest in the birds of this genus.

At the forefront of making the Pionus parrots well known and established in

captivity was Mr. John Stoodley, an English aviculturist who achieved unparalleled success with the parrots from both the genera of *Pionus* and *Amazona*. While the Pionus parrots have not had quite the same amount of following as the larger and more charismatic Amazon parrots have had in aviculture, the Pionus parrots have never-the-less become well established in aviculture with a dedicated number of specialist breeders concentrating upon them. There has even been the creation of a specialist avicultural group "the Pionus Breeders Association" to cater to those that follow a strong interest in the long-term management of these birds in captivity.

The standard avicultural reference book on Pionus species "Pionus Parrots" written by John & Pat

Stoodley was printed in 1984. Now 16 years after this book was printed, it is rarely available and in the years since, no other significant book has been written on the subject of Pionus



Pair of Dusky Pionus. Copyright John Stoodley

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parrots. This current book has been written through the encouragement of John Stoodley and also Dr Susan Clubb who wrote the healthcare chapter for John Stoodley's Pionus Parrots book in 1984. Once again, Dr Clubb has been kind enough to write the healthcare chapter for this new book.

This book is being written as a husbandry guide for the many hundreds of Pionus parrots that are kept in captivity. It is beyond the boundaries of this book to discuss in great detail the natural history of Pionus parrots in the wild, but instead I have sort to review what is known about the natural history of Pionus parrots and consider how this effects their needs in captivity. In fact, Pionus parrots are a largely under studied group of parrots in the wild except for the efforts of a few neo-tropical ornithologists. There are certainly large areas of knowledge that are lacking in regards to the natural history of these birds. I believe that aviculture has a fundamental responsibility to support ornithological study for two reasons. First, to better understand the biological needs of birds kept in aviculture; and secondly to ensure that wild populations continue to survive into future generations. The appendices of this book contain contact details for a number of organisations concerned with the conservation of parrots and other birds. I would urge

every aviculturist that owns birds in captivity to consider how they might help support conservation work for birds in the wild. If each person who keeps a pet bird, chooses to assist the funding of conservation work in their own individual way, then many small donations can become an enormous potential to learn more about parrots in the wild and how their future can be safe guarded.

As a husbandry guide I hope this book will be useful and will help encourage a greater interest in this wonderful genus of parrots that are so suited to aviculture.

*Roger G Sweeney, July, 2000
Barbados, West Indies.*



The Dusky Pionus. Copyright John Stoodley

The relationship between Pionus parrots and their close relatives

Pionus parrots are small to medium sized, slightly stocky birds from the neo-tropics. They are distinguished from their closest relatives by several physical features that include their large eyes with an exposed area of periophthalmic skin, short tails, and a triangular patch of red feathers around their vent region. They also have a distinctive smell, although this is not strong or particularly unpleasant in nature. Perhaps the most distinctive behavioural feature of the Pionus parrots is the habit for making a wheezing, panting noise when excited or scared, this noise when heard for the first time by a new owner can be very concerning until the aviculturist can recognise this as a normal sound. The genus of *Pionus* is closely related to several other neo-tropical parrot genera, with the most well know relatives being the larger Amazon parrots (Genus *Amazona*). Also closely related are the parrots of the genus *Pionopsitta* and the mono-typic Short-tailed Parrot *Graydidascalus brachyurus*.

The genus of *Pionus* as described in this book contains eight species. There is some debate that two of these species (The Plum-crowned Pionus and the White-headed Pionus)

may be con-specific. In some reference texts the genus may appear with seven full species and the Plum-crowned Pionus will be identified as a sub-species of the White-headed Pionus *Pionus seniloides tumultuosus*.

The Blue-headed Pionus *Pionus menstruus*

Alternative English common names:
Blue-headed Parrot

German name: Schwarzohrpapagei

Dutch name: Zwartoortpionus,
Blauwkoppionus

Spanish name: Loro de cabeza azul

French name: Pionus à tête bleue

Size and weight: Length 28cm in the nominate sub-species, Average body weight measured from seven individuals of the nominate sub-species at Loro Parque produced an average weight of 265grams, with no significant difference between the male and female birds in the sample.

Description: The main body plumage is green. The head and upper breast are deep blue, with the base of feathers in the neck being red. The ear-coverts are black, which provides this species with the common names in German and Dutch of being described as the "Black-eared Pionus". The tail is mainly green, with



A young pair of Blue headed Pionus. Copyright John Stoodley

the under-tail coverts being red. The exposed skin of the periophthalmic ring is grey. The bill is blackish, with red patches on the sides of the upper mandible. Iris coloration is brown and the feet are grey. Immature birds vary noticeable from the adults by the head being greenish-blue with a red frontal band and the iris is a darker brown colour. Three sub-species have been described, the description above is that of the nominate sub-species *Pionus menstruus menstruus*. The other two sub-species vary as follows;

Pionus menstruus rubrigularis is slightly smaller than the nominate description, measuring 27cm in length. The green body plumage is

slightly darker than that of the nominate description and the blue coloration over the head is paler and less intense. The red marking on the base of neck feathers is stronger and more noticeable than for the nominate sub-species.

Pionus menstruus reichenowi is smaller than the other two described sub-species, measuring 26cm in length. The coloration varies from the nominate description by having a far deeper blue coloration over the head and neck. The green plumage over much of the body also marked with blue, giving these birds a very distinctive bluish appearance compared to the other two sub-species. The bill is also noticeable lighter in coloration,



The nest box may need periodic cleaning while chicks are being reared, Shown are two Plum-crowned Pionus chicks reared at Loro Parque in 1997 that were temporarily removed from the nest box while it was cleaned. Copyright Roger Sweeney

then working together on enlarging and preparing the cavity that they have chosen. This period of preparation normally ensures that both birds become increasingly sexually excited as the nest site nears completion and that both birds are in peak breeding condition by the time that they are ready to breed. In captivity, where aviary birds are usually less active and receive less mental stimulation than would be the case for wild birds, the aviculturist needs to try and adapt the breeding behaviour of the birds to ensure that both partners are ready to breed at the same time. The removal of the nest box during the winter, and its return in late spring

can be one of a series of steps that the aviculturist can take to try and bring the pair into breeding condition just before the main breeding season.

Husbandry during the breeding season

As mentioned under the previous heading, the aviculturist needs to try and ensure that both birds that comprise the breeding pair come into breeding condition at the same time. The placement of the nest box is obviously a strong stimulation for the birds, particularly if the interior of the

box contains a deep layer of large wood shavings that require the birds to chew the medium down to create a suitable scrape in which to lay their eggs. Many Aviculturists also partially block the entrance of the nest box with thin plywood board that can be easily chewed away by the parrots to further excite them in the process of preparing the nest box ready for the breeding season. As much joint work that the birds have to undertake to prepare their nest can greatly increase the synchronicity of their breeding cycles. Other methods of stimulating the birds as they approach the breeding season can be an increase in the protein and water content of the diet. Plenty of fresh salad and the use of a pellet food with a slightly higher level of protein for the breeding season, these are good stimulates to bring the birds into condition.

Once there are either eggs or chicks present inside the nest box then feeding, watering and maintenance of the breeding aviary should be undertaken in the quickest and least disturbing manner possible. All necessary activities should be carried out during the morning feeding routine, at a time when the birds are used to the aviary being entered to present the morning food. The birds will be expecting human presence and will be less disturbed by the aviculturists at this time.

The importance of availability of food during the rearing of chicks is obvious. This does not mean that excessively large amounts of food should be provided in the aviary as this could lead to over-selective feeding by the parents, which could be detrimental to the chicks' healthy development. Providing to excessive an amount of food can also lead to waste and an unwanted increase in attention from native birds and rodents.

Potential problems and solutions

While most Pionus parrots prove to be good parents in captivity, problems can sometimes arise and below are a few of the commoner problems that may occur, with some suggestions for finding solutions to the problem in question.

Aggression between the pair

Generally a clear sign that the two birds are not compatible, or that the birds are not entering the breeding cycles at the same time. If the birds are clearly incompatible throughout the year then for the commoner species the aviculturist should not risk this situation being prolonged. The birds should be separated and paired to new partners. In the case of incompatible pairs of rarer species, where few potential mates are avail-