

Raising Crimson Bellied Conures

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The beautiful and colorful crimson bellied conure (*P. perlata perlata*) has captured the conure aficionado's heart in the U.S. Beauty-wise, they are like the "sun conure" of the *Pyrrhura* family. Temperament-wise, they also remind me of a sun in Py feathers. When I am weaning youngsters, it is a very natural grouping to put crimson bellied and sun conures in the same flight. They get along great!

For small aviculturists who have a one or more pairs of *Pyrrhura* conures, the crimson bellied is a good choice for small aviaries. When handfed, crimson bellied conures are a very friendly and affectionate bird with an expressive personality that make them a wonderful pet.



Environment

The decision to raise crimson bellied in a bird room, in a separate aviary (outdoor or indoor/outdoor), or in the family room, can mean the difference in successful raising of babies and enjoyment of parrotkeeping's fruitful and emotional rewards, or failure because of environmental or temperament factors. Comparing several *Pyrrhura* species that I have raised (green cheek, roseifrons painted, black capped, white eared, and crimson bellied), success seems to be more determined by individuals in the pair than in the species. Some individuals are more high strung, even though they may be very tame, and predicting success in an environmentally busy area may be fraught with complications which stem from instinctual behaviors, one of the most significant of which is displaced aggression (towards mate, eggs, or chicks).

No matter how ideal we try to make the set-up, there will be exceptions to the rule, but several factors should be considered to optimize the mating and successful nesting season for crimson bellied conures. While they may not be quite as "scrappy" as the green cheeked, for example, they still exhibit what I call a "Py strut", by which they delineate their territory, which they will defend with defensive and aggressive actions.

Minimizing pair stress is important, in that a "challenged environment" can bring out aggressive behaviors that may get out of hand, resulting in plucking or "herding" mates (sometimes with injuries); cracking, eating, or destroying eggs; and killing or mutilating chicks. I have rarely had parents desert the nest and not feed babies, though with a large clutch and a first-time pair, the youngest may not get enough to thrive normally.

Because some breeding pairs are not very human-oriented and may be stressed by frequent handling or nearby activity, pairs with this temperament should have their own areas, with larger flights because they don't get out as often, and with privacy from human "living" areas. Those pairs that enjoy human activity may be in the living room, but they should have a



private corner, because they may be disturbed by evening noisy flock activity or in particular, by human gatherings, as they usually do not recognize strangers as part of their “safe” flock.

Territory and Flight—Although some aviculturists subscribe to what I call “pressure cooking” pairs by putting them in smaller flights for breeding and larger flights in the off-season, I prefer to keep mine in larger flights at all times, or in medium flights with time out regularly to fly in a large area (for the tame pairs). This allows them to establish territory and get comfortable in their flight area, as they would in the wild. Does this maximize production? There are mixed opinions on that, but for me, a reasonable production with relatively unstressed birds is most important. There are several sizes of perches in the flight, including one near the nestbox entrance; at least two colorful hanging toys in the flight, with one near the nestbox, so the male can interact with it while “guarding” the nest; and a water bowl in the bottom of the flight, so that the birds can not only drink, but also bathe. The female will get her breast feathers wet and humidify the nesting area and eggs with this, so I prefer the little extra trouble of a water bowl (placed so that it is not under any perch) to automatic watering systems. Adequate lighting (full spectrum or daylight) is also important to the birds’ well-being and production.

Feathered neighbors and visual barriers—Many species are sensitive to their neighbors, rather like people. A quiet person probably doesn’t appreciate a super-noisy neighbor. Same thing with birds. And in the case of pairs set up for breeding, noisy neighbors can mean no eggs, infertile eggs, broken or eaten eggs, killed or maimed or deserted chicks—not exactly a pleasant scenario! For many species, sight barriers are necessary for less stressful breeding, and I provide those for my crimson bellied. I usually hang a thin piece of plywood or opaque acrylic in between two cages for a visual barrier. In cases where there is an obvious personality conflict between (usually) two males, I will even locate their flights in different parts of the aviary. *I have had crimson bellied eat chicks as they hatched because they were agitated by another pair in the next cage—even though they couldn’t see them, they could hear them!*

Nestboxes—In my experience, crimson bellied conures do best in dark nestboxes, e.g., tall grandfather or bootboxes, where the entrance does not face the main light, and with an inspection door towards the bottom of the grandfather, or at the boot tip end. My preference is a grandfather box about 24” tall, with 6” x 8” inside bottom. I use about 2” of aspen shavings in the bottom, and if there have been insect issues in the area, I will sprinkle a light coating of 5% Sevin dust mixed with diatomaceous earth on the floor of the nestbox below the shavings. If the air is very dry, I may mist the shavings once I hand-press them into the nestbox, though the birds themselves will regulate humidity to a great extent through use of the water bowl.



Although many conures will “self-regulate” as to breeding, e.g., two clutches per season, just as many will not, and managing the breeding behavior so that they do not overproduce is important. In those pairs where I know they will go a third time (or more), I will remove the nestbox, and replace it with an open-fronted sleepbox (which faces day lighting). That way, they have a place to sleep, but nesting is not encouraged.

Inspections/intrusions—I give my breeding pairs in the nestbox as much privacy and freedom from intrusion as I can. Different pairs are tolerant to different extents to nestbox inspections. The key is to know your pairs, and that only comes with experience with them,

unless you have a good background on them when you bought them. Even then, a change in environment can bring about a change in behaviors. A formerly proven and producing pair can refuse to even lay for a year or more in a new environment!

Some husbandry finesses or very changed environments require for a judgment call, which becomes better with experience and knowing your pairs—when to monitor nestlings closely and when to just let the parents do their job. No one can make that call for another—just advise what they might do in that case. It's tragic to



make a decision to check and have a parent bird kill a chick right in front of you, but it's also tragic to not check and have parent birds not feeding or mutilating chicks, when you could have seen a problem and removed the chicks. We don't always in our own lives make the best decisions, no matter how much life experience we have, nor should we expect perfection in our birdkeeping. We do the best we can and realize that nature sometimes throws us a nasty curve.

In addition, often a young pair, no matter what species, must be carefully watched because of potential issues with their first clutch:

- (1) infertility (because the parents haven't "gotten it right" or they are out of sync with each other in reproductive timing);
- (2) small hatch (because they may be nervous and either not feed or mishandle or they may not incubate well); or
- (3) normal hatch (because they may feed only the oldest, or not give the youngest enough).

I have had all of these scenarios occur in the past, as have most other breeders!

Diet

Breeding pairs get extra calcium *before* they start the breeding season, so that the hen can build up her reserves for egg-laying. My pairs have a mineral block and piece of cuttlebone (and their preferences vary for these) in their flights. In addition, I will either sprinkle an avian-formulated calcium supplement with Vitamin D3 (the "sunshine" vitamin, which assists in calcium utilization by the body), such as CalciCare, on soft foods two or three times a week, or put a few drops of liquid calcium supplement, such as Calcium Plus, in their drinking water. Since hens use calcium reserves out of their own bones if they are deficient, health problems with the hen or with soft-shelled eggs can result if sufficient utilizable calcium levels are not maintained.

During incubation, I provide a good diet of germinated seeds (sunflower hearts, lentils, quinoa, etc.), chopped veggies and fruits, pellets, and seed mix, with plenty of fresh water. When the parents are feeding chicks, I add extra fresh and nutritious soft foods that are easy for them to take to the chicks, and I check that food at least 3 times per day, as they will go through a bowl of fresh foods quickly when the chicks are growing.

Handfeeding

I try to leave chicks in with the parents as long as practicable, realizing that if I take them when they are a bit older, I must consider the brooder environment more carefully and spend extra time with them in the first few day's adjustment period. It is usually more stressful for a

3+ week old chick to adjust, for example, than for a 10-day or even 2 week old chick to adjust. Older chicks (whose eyes are open and trying to focus) are more aware of their environments and more used to the dark coziness of the nestbox and ministering of the parents, so it may take them longer to accept a new environment and caregiver.

On the whole, I have found that crimson bellied babies are easy to feed. For at least the first few days, I will feed them in a *dimly lit* area, because bright lights tend to startle them (particularly if older when pulled to handfeed), and they can be resistant to feeding if they are stressed/frightened. I feed with a syringe, formula medium-textured (like baby applesauce), and very warm. Typically, they will be on four feedings a day of 10 to 12ccs per feeding until they are ingesting solid foods well enough to be less enthusiastic at feeding time, at which point I will eliminate a feeding—usually the third one, because I give thawed frozen veggies in the afternoon, which they eagerly devour once they taste them.

Weaning Cages and Environment

The weaning cage is often a smaller cage than the flight cage that they will ultimately occupy, although it is big enough for them to move around in and explore, climb, flap, and even take very short flights across, up, and down.

My typical baby flight cage is about 32"W x 22"D x 36H, for up to 6 babies. They can fly across that size and learn to maneuver, so that when they are out flying in a room, they seem to control themselves better.

I have hanging toys in the cages and different diameter perches at various levels, but allowing wing flap room. Until they are eating weaning food well, I don't put foot toys in the bottom, as I want them to play with the food rather than plastic pieces. Once they are in the larger flight cages, however, they also have small foot toys in the bottom, as well as hanging toys and swings. They dearly love foot toys and wiffle balls.



Food, food, everywhere! I have bowls in the floor of the cage and in suspended bowls near favorite “hang-out” perches (as I determine those). Soft food gets changed or replenished at least twice a day, and the “dry” food (small pellets and seed mixes) gets changed and replenished as necessary. I start with crumbled “bird bread” and a combination of hulled millet, quinoa, and steel-cut oats. I also sprinkle over the soft foods (sprouts, chopped veggies, fruit) an egg food like Higgins Proteen 25 or Quicko, and I include small pieces of leafy veggies and fruit for food and play.

Overcoming Fledgling Food Rejection—When the chicks have started flying, they will often be more interested in flying rather than eating formula. They will still need the formula, because they are not eating near enough food on their own to maintain their weight. I will let them fly first and work up an appetite. If they are mainly resisting being in the feeding tub, I will feed them on top of the cages (where they land after flying around). It's a less contained mess, and they will get it on their faces and chests, but they will often eat several cc's that way. I can catch them up after they've exercised and clean them up. Crimson bellied (similar

to suns) are little piglets when it comes to food—they will greedily gulp a few mouthfuls of formula once they've worked up an appetite.

Formula Treats—All of my handfed birds, including breeders, know what a “formula treat” is—they are my *moochers*. I can go around with a syringe of formula and give each a beakful, and it's greedily gobbled. I have found that this can reinforce the “tie” to me as a provider with them (keying back to handfeeding days), so that they stay “tamer,” even without intense hands-on. This also makes it easier to give medications if I need to do that.

Handling and Socializing—I cuddle and kiss on the chicks from the time I start handfeeding them. I am careful to cradle them and not grab in a hurry, and to reassure them with a soft voice and whistles. For example, crimson bellied conures make tiny “clicking” sounds, as well as prolonged whistles, and they respond to those. I am *casual* with my babies, rather than formally teaching them to “step up”—they usually do when they are ready. I hold them, “maul them” in my hands, including turning on their backs, tickling their tummies and under their wings, and rubbing their beaks on the sides between forefinger and thumb (which seems to be reassuring and soothing to them).



Independence—Like most species, crimson bellied will go through an independence stage during their first year, varying in intensity, whether it's around weaning time, or post-weaning. That is natural, and how one deals with it can determine the successful development of that behavior into a satisfactory companion bird or not. I sometimes keep certain chicks well beyond weaning when I feel they need to “work through” a stage, because I am concerned that particularly a novice owner may not be able to work through the phase well. The idea that one must get a just-weaned chick as the best companion is just not true, in my experience. Think about it. If an experienced aviculturist has worked through an “flighty” stage with

a chick, what a benefit to the new owner! Birds are long-lived and adaptable, and there is rarely a chick “too old” to adapt to a new home. What's more important is matching species and personality with the intended new owner and home.

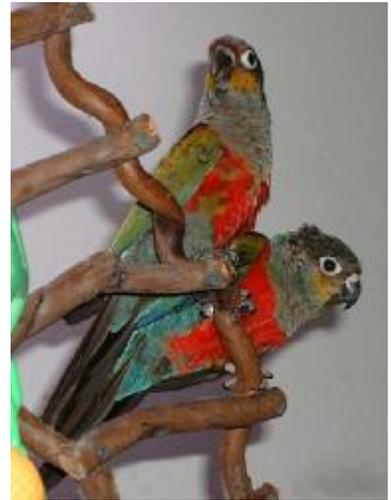
Clipping Flight Feathers—All of my chicks are flight-fledged and usually will not have their flight feathers trimmed until shortly before they go to a new pet home. An exception to this is if a baby is going through a really flighty or independent stage where it could be dangerous for it to startle or it is difficult to retrieve, in which case I will do a very modified baby trim so that the youngster is slowed down somewhat. The reason for the trimming before going to a new home is so that they have a chance to get used to the new home and new owners, and to prevent startling and flying into a door or window (because it's a new environment), and so that the new owner will have some degree of control.

I trim only enough feathers to prevent upward and fast flight, as I feel it's important that birds retain some flying ability. Whether a bird stays trimmed depends on whether it's safe in the new home, i.e., whether other animals or children might make a trimmed (or flighted) bird a problem. Crimson bellied are heavier bodied than green cheeked (for example), so I will not clip quite as many flight feathers on them.

“Co-Parenting” or “Supportive Parenting”

Charley and Chloe (C&C) are a 2005 pair of Crimson Bellied Conures that I kept from that year’s hatch because of their exceptional personalities, and because in the back of my mind, I thought I’d try with them what I’ve done with my sun conures—“co-parenting”—or maybe a better term is “supportive parenting.”

This method is more interactive with the parents while they are handfeeding chicks in the nest. Unless one has a parent pair that is very tolerant (and many are NOT), handling the chicks enough in the nest to ensure they will be tame can be difficult. This method is usually be more labor-intensive than just taking a clutch and handfeeding from a young age, as you have to deal with the protectiveness of the parent birds in addition to the handling of the chicks.



Because C&C were so tame—easily stepped up out of the cage and interacted with me—I was a bit concerned with how they would deal with a clutch, and even though they had a nestbox, I thought they might wait another season because of the hustle and bustle of my family room (with a pair of young, vocal sun conures right next door to them). Not to worry—they seem unperturbed by the activities. They bred in the privacy of their 24” tall grandfather nestbox (like many Pys do), and Chloe laid 5 eggs, four of which were fertile and hatched. Of course, when other birds were out in the evenings, in typical territorial behavior, Charley, in particular, would ruff up his neck feathers and warn others away.

When they went out of the nestbox, I’d slide the door up and check babies. They did not rush back in nervously, but rather, they sat on the perch just outside the nestbox opening and peered in to watch what I was doing.

With this first clutch, as is not uncommon, they fed the oldest, most vocal babies first and most. The third baby was adequately fed, but not stuffed like the oldest two, and the youngest (which was actually hatched from the 5th egg laid) was 4 days behind #3, and was marginally fed. I wound up supplementing a couple of times a day to keep him up with the others. Since I was handfeeding another clutch anyway, it was not much extra work.

When I pulled the babies for handfeeding (just under 4 weeks old), they were very used to my handling, and C&C, within a day, went back to stepping up, snuggling, and flying around the room, as they had done pre-babies. If I hadn’t known they’d been parents, I would not have been clued in by their behavior.



Since I really didn’t want them to go back to nest this season, I replaced their nestbox with an open-fronted sleepbox, which they adapted to easily. I have started doing this with my conures when I want to end the season, or someone will get enthusiastic about going back to nest in the middle of the summer!

Crimson bellied conures are very personable and affectionate, and it was a wonderful experience being able to support C&C in their first parenting effort! This is part and parcel of what makes raising birds so gratifying and worthwhile.