

# Those Wonderful Conures!

A few FAQs... brought to you by

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## In a Nutshell

*Personality?* Straightforward and "on" much of the time.

*Outgoing?* Usually. These are big birds in little bird feathers.

*Affectionate?* Often. They let you know they want to be with you for kissing and cuddling.

*Quiet?* Depends! Aratingas, not particularly; Pyrrhuras, relatively speaking.

*Colorful?* Yes! What's your favorite color?

## Where do they come from?

Conures are birds of the Americas and can be found in South America, as well as Costa Rica and Panama in Central America, depending on which of the species they are. They are forest dwellers for the most part and seem most comfortable playing and feeding high in the forest canopy. They are strong, swift flyers, are gregarious, and sometimes quite raucous. Their wild diet consists of seeds, fruits, nuts, berries, some insects and their larvae.

## What is their life span?

A life span of 25 to 35 years is possible; however, in captivity, it is usually much less, due primarily to hazards in the environment.



## What do they look like?

Conures are small, colorful parrots that range in size from 8.5" to 12" (Pyrrhuras), and from 9" to 14" (Aratingas), from head to tip of tail, depending on which of the species they are. Common characteristics are a broad bill notched in the upper mandible, a long graduated tail, a naked cere, and a ring of bare skin around each eye. Their basic color is a shade of green, and they may have a multicolor of flashy splashes of red, white, blue, or yellow. There are a good many color mutations developing, particularly in the green cheek conure, with catchy, colorful names such as "pineapple."

## What's their personality like? Are they good companions?

The conure can be described having an "attitude." A big bird in a little bird body, they are typically outgoing and adventuresome, curious and playful, unmindful that they may be tackling a much larger creature than they are. They are territorial and will not hesitate to try to run a larger bird (or dog or cat) out of their territory, sometimes with disastrous results to themselves! They are usually very tactile, craving bodily contact from their favorite person, and often treating the human body as their own private playground, from burrowing in hair, to ducking under a shirt.

Conures can be excellent companions, affectionate (and demanding), quiet or noisy, and entertaining to watch, as they acrobat around a cage or home, dangle upside down, and “attack” a toy. As with other parrot species, a handfed bird that has been properly socialized can be a devoted and wonderful companion. They need have contact with their “flock,” be it one person or a family, on a daily basis, and even when put in a “flock” of other conures, handfed conures, when brought back into the home, will often become tame and friendly again.



### **Do they talk? Are they loud?**

Conures are very expressive of their emotions with their own body language and vocalizations—their main forté is their personality. You can usually understand what they're feeling by observation and interaction.

Some do talk, particularly members of the Aratinga family (e.g., blue crown and dusky), but most say only a few words, and their voices tend to be “quacky” and petite as they are. They pick up certain expressions, like a kissing sound, and will repeat it for your attention. The Aratinga conures are louder than the Pyrrhuras, and certain of the Aratingas can be particularly loud (e.g., mitred, blue crown, and sun).



### **What are potential behavior problems?**

Similar to ALL hookbills (parrots), conures can develop negative behaviors, such as excessive screaming, manic activities, biting, and (rarely) feather-picking. Biting, as a consequence of not having the interaction rules established (if they're not in a hormonal mode), is probably the most common problem encountered with a companion conure. Because they often have an “attitude,” and since they are territorial, they may resent other humans or pets, and appropriate behavior modifications need to be made, such as wing clipping and learning to step-up and step-down. In contemplating the purchase of any parrot, you need to do your homework and learn about parrots in general, and the species you are considering in particular, so that you can interact in the best possible manner for the happiness and richest relationship for both of you. Since these guys bond strongly, you don't want to have to be passing them on to another home if you can avoid it—they depend on you, and they are your responsibility.

### **Is a handfed baby always friendly? Do they bite?**

Generally, handfed conures are friendly if they are properly socialized. Even when they exchange one situation for another, they will usually adjust pretty quickly, if handled with sensitivity and respect for their personal space for a time. You woo them over with positive interaction—a gentle “getting-to-know-you” period. All parrots bite at some time—whether they're going through the “teething” period after weaning, the testing period at adolescence, or when they're upset (frightened, angry, or hormonal). Sometimes just learning to read their body language and give them space will work. There are proven techniques for modifying unacceptable behavior.



### **Is it better to have one or more conures?**

Birds are naturally “flock” creatures, so if you have a single bird, you should provide a rich environment to prevent boredom and undesirable behavior. Many parrots are in single-bird households, and adjust fine. Generally, conures are possessive of their person and may maintain a better relationship

with you if they are not paired. However, since they must have interaction and touching, if you can't give that daily, then keeping two birds (of the same sex if you are not breeding) may be best. You can keep similar size birds in the same cage so long as they are compatible, or in nearby cages if there's a question about one intimidating or possibly injuring the other.

### What type of cage and environment do they need?

Conures need as large a cage as your space and budget allows—minimum 24" square for the smallest conures, and 1/2" bar spacing (Pyrrhuras and small Aratingas), and minimum 24"x24"x30" to 3/4" bar spacing (medium to larger Aratingas). Perches should be of various sizes and shapes to allow some variety for your bird's feet. Sufficient toys (even some that you can switch out from time to time) will provide amusement and exercise. Educate yourself on which toys are safe and which ones aren't. The handmade toys are inexpensive and great, but they can also be hazardous (like rope that will untwine, wind around a foot or a neck, and cut off circulation or breath). They love bells, but be sure they're bird-safe bells (no jingle bells or lead clappers). Conures are active, intelligent birds, and like inquisitive children, need stimuli in their



environment to channel excess energy into fun, "lively" activities. These guys love a good bath or shower, and you can mist them with plain water, or provide a "bathing bowl" in their cage. They want to be "where the action is," do their cage and play areas need to be where their human family is. Since these are typically active birds, sufficient out-of-the-cage time is very important, through cage-top playgyms or play tree. They also need a good night's sleep, so if your home is active until all hours, give them a quiet space in a corner to sack out. I find that conures like a sleep-box or sleep-tent, but if you use the latter, check often for loose threads and chewing of material. Sometimes covering their cage at night will provide privacy for them, but just as often, as long as something is going on around them, they will stay alert and watchful.

### What do they eat?

Depending on what they're fed from the time they are small, conures love most fruits and vegetables and should have them regularly. A good maintenance pellet, high quality seeds, and if possible, sprouted seeds (sunflower, etc.), will provide the rest of the diet. Cooked rice/bean mixes and birdie cornbreads are other good foods. Healthy table food in moderation is fine, but no caffeine (coffee, chocolate), very salty or sweet foods, or avocados. A cuttlebone or mineral block is suggested for additional calcium. No grit is required, but fresh water is a must. Because conures are active and "mouthy," like a human toddler, they will taste just about anything. Many household plants can be toxic, so you'll need to learn what's safe and what's not and control their environment.



### What about grooming and vet visits?

Conures are exceptionally strong flyers—miniature jet planes. For their safety, their wings should be clipped to prevent accidents or escapes, but have a pro do it or show you how, so that you don't clip too short (where they "fall like a rock" and can crack their beak or sternum), or too long (so they can get

going and fly into a plate-glass window or out the door). Because of their streamlined build, it's more common to have a bird fly better than you thought they could, rather than the opposite. Depending on the bird, I like to trim the first 3 primary flight feathers (just below the coverts), but may do as many as 6 if the bird's attitude and/or environment indicates. Nails should be trimmed as necessary (a separate concrete perch helps). Only in rare instances does a beak need trimming, and that should be done by an avian professional only—the beak has many nerve endings and is very sensitive. A yearly check with your avian vet is recommended. Learn to recognize signs of illness and how to contact your avian vet quickly.



### What's my commitment going to be?

Most parrots are fairly long-lived, and therefore a strong commitment on the part of the person buying the bird is required. It's not quite as easy caring for an exotic bird as it is a dog or cat. If you are new to birds, please do your homework before bringing home your new companion bird. Conures have very special personalities and require attention every day. Because most of them are "touchy-feely," if they are alone in a cage, it is cruel to leave them untouched. If they are ignored, they can develop undesirable behaviors such as screaming and plucking. Your extra effort for these feathered angels will not go unrewarded, however. You will have many years with a very special companion!

### What are the species in the United States? How much do they cost?

There are many species of conures, both *Aratinga* and *Pyrrhura*, but not all are available in the U.S. or as pets—some are rare or endangered and should currently only be with responsible conservation breeders. The on-line Lexicon of Parrots (<http://www.arndt-verlag.com/conures.htm>) has pictures and brief descriptions of most conures. Because of their popularity, there have also been several books written on conures and what they're like as companion birds. Prices range from \$150 up. Expect to pay considerably more for some species, and a small fortune for rare species.



### Are there differences in species temperament?

There are mannerisms common to all conures, but there are also variations in temperament among species and among individuals. Some are more laid-back and some are more hyper. Some are louder and some are quieter. Some are more outgoing and some are shy. Do your homework to see what fits with your expectations and lifestyle. If you're contemplating getting a bird from a breeder, that breeder should be able to tell you what that bird is likely to be like as a companion.

### Where's the best place to find a conure?

There are several sources—large and small pet stores, bird marts, large and small breeders. In my opinion, ideally, the bird will come from a small breeder or store, and you will be able to find out about the bird's background and personality, as well as have ongoing support for questions.

*"Some say they don't believe that Angels can be seen or heard.*

*What a shame such blindness, what a pity such deafness, when the Song of Songs abounds and heaven's flyers are all around, only thinly disguised ... as birds." (author unknown)*