

Conures

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Natural History

Conures are a diverse group of small to medium size birds spanning multiple genera. These are New World parrots, native to Central and South America. There are more than 40 species of conures that vary in size, color, and behavior. Common characteristics include long tails and small but powerful beak. While there are many species of conure, not all are common in captivity. The green cheeked conure (*Pyrrhura molinae*) is the most commonly kept, along with the sun conure (*Aratinga solstitialis*). Aviculturists tend to divide conures into the genera *Aratinga* (includes Nanday, sun, and jenday conures), *Pyrrhura* (includes green-cheeked, maroon-bellied, black-capped, and crimson-bellied conures), *Psittacara* (includes cherry-headed conures), and *Eupsittula* (includes half-moon conures). Other species such as the blue-crowned, Patagonian, or yellow-eared conures are in their own single genera. One of the only species of native parrots of North America was the now extinct Carolina parakeet, which is considered a conure species.

Characteristics and Behavior

Due to the diverse nature of this group, it can be difficult to classify common behaviors and characteristics. In general, members of the *Aratinga* genus are considered to be like “mini macaws” due to their colorful plumage and boisterous personalities. Species like the sun conure tend to be very noisy and demanding. Conversely, members of the *Pyrrhura* genus tend to have more subdued coloration and are often quieter and more affectionate than some other genera of conure. Conures can learn a few words and phrases but are not known for their speech capabilities. Like all parrots, conures are intelligent, vocal, and prone to destructive behaviors if not given proper mental and physical stimulation.

Lifespan

Up to 20-25 years is average, 35-40 has been reported.

Adult Size

Varies by species; 10-20 inches is common. Smaller conures such as green-cheeks generally range from 60-80 grams, while sun conures average around 120 grams. Lesser patagonian conures can reach 240-310 grams.

Housing

Conures are active birds and need large cages; as large as possible should be provided. Larger species will need a larger enclosure, but in general a 36"x24"x24" is considered minimum. At a minimum, birds should be able to fully extend their wings and not damage their feathers on the ceiling or sides. They should be able to fly in a horizontal plane from perch to perch. A recommended minimum for birds is 3x their wingspan in length and width, and 4-5x their wingspan in height. The smaller the cage, the more out of cage time a bird will need. Bars should be no more than $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ " apart to allow climbing. Cages that are constructed or painted with lead, zinc, galvanized metal, or other heavy metals can be very toxic for birds and should be avoided.

Numerous perches of varying size should be provided throughout the enclosure at different heights. Avoid sandpaper perches as these can be very hard on the feet. Different types of toys and enrichment items should be provided and rotated. Toys can be store bought or homemade but need to be bird-safe. Cardboard, wood, and shreddable materials are popular with birds. No bedding is needed for birds but if it is used, avoid cedar and pine as these can cause respiratory irritation. Mirrors are not recommended as they can encourage inappropriate reproductive behavior and egg laying. Food and water dishes should be ceramic and kept clean. Comfortable room temperature (70-80F) is sufficient for conures.

Feeding

Wild conures are frugivores and granivores, meaning they eat a variety of fruits, seeds, and nuts. Analysis of stomach contents has shown that they also eat blossoms, plant buds, fruit pits, insects, and even human crops. In captivity, a balanced pelleted diet is recommended. Seed diets are fatty and lack important vitamins that can lead to deficiencies, as they do not contain the same nutrients and variety as the type of wild seed diet that parrots consume. Birds on seed diets commonly have beak overgrowth, liver issues, and may be overweight. A balanced pelleted diet should comprise the majority (at least 60%) of a parrot's diet. 20-25% of their diet should be fresh vegetables, and 5-10% fresh fruits. A maximum of 5% of the bird's diet can include treats for training such as commercial treats, dried fruit, macadamia nuts, pasta, eggs, walnuts, cashews, seed-based treats, or brown rice. It is recommended to encourage foraging behavior rather than have captive parrots eat from bowls. Recommended

brands for bird food include Lafeber, Harrison's, Zupreem, and Roudybush. Pelleted diets with seeds or dried fruits mixed in are not recommended as parrots will pick out the tastier, less healthy pieces.

Appropriate vegetables: Peppers, squash, cooked beans, broccoli, zucchini, pumpkin, peas, leafy greens, sprouts, cauliflower, and celery.

Appropriate fruits: Apple, banana, strawberries, grapes, melon, pineapple, berries, oranges, peaches, pears.

Water

Fresh water should always be available.

Sexing

DNA sexing is required to definitively determine the sex of a conure.

Handling

Most conure species are very amenable to handling and will seek out attention from their human companions. They generally form strong bonds with their humans. Birds move their keel (breastbone) in and out to breathe, so it is important to never squeeze a bird as this can disrupt airflow. Practice asking birds to voluntarily step up onto fingers and hands to make handling easier. Handling sessions should be positive and low stress. Many birds can be desensitized to handling by offering their favorite treat. Parrots often enjoy sitting on their owner's shoulder. Birds are fragile and can be very sensitive to rough handling. Handling a bird roughly can cause bruising, bone fractures, and even death.

Grooming

Birds need their nails trimmed once or twice per month. Start with early desensitization to the nail trimmers as this is a common source of stress for birds and their owners. Birds with beak deformities may need corrective trimming from a veterinarian. It is recommended to not trim a bird's wings, as this is a very good source of exercise and enrichment. If a bird needs its wings trimmed for safety reasons, this should also be done by your veterinarian to ensure the trim is done safely. Never have a young bird's wings trimmed as this can cause significant behavioral issues.

Enrichment

All parrots need extensive enrichment to remain mentally and physically healthy. In the wild, parrots spend the majority of their time foraging. This should be replicated in captivity by providing food in puzzle feeders or in hidden areas so the bird has to work for their food. These puzzles can be homemade or purchased. Birds that have never had to work for their food may need simple puzzles to start, such as a box full of crumpled paper. Conures are known to be quite playful and intelligent, so they generally enjoy activities with their owners.

Another excellent source of enrichment for birds is training. Parrots are very intelligent and can learn different kinds of tricks. Training is not only important for teaching a bird husbandry behaviors (such as stepping up, accepting grooming, etc) but it is also fun! Get creative, and always use positive reinforcement to ensure the bird is having fun. Birds should also have numerous toys always available in their cage. These toys should be rotated to prevent them from becoming boring. Birds enjoy shredding things, including cardboard, finger traps, and paper. Parrots are social and need social interaction from other birds and/or their human companions on a daily basis.

Zoonosis

Parrots can carry a disease called psittacosis, which can cause serious respiratory symptoms in humans. This disease is spread in respiratory secretions. Birds may be asymptomatic shedders.

Health

Birds are very adept at hiding illness so it can be difficult to know if a bird is sick until they are very sick. Parrots are prone to vitamin A deficiency, liver disease, obesity, and reproductive issues, particularly when kept on seed diets. Only pet your bird on the head, as this is considered friendly behavior, whereas petting them elsewhere on their body can cause inappropriate reproductive behavior. Covering birds at night for a total of 12 hours of darkness can also help prevent egg binding and inappropriate reproductive behaviors. Heavy metal toxicity is also being found more frequently in pet parrots. Previously, it was thought that it was normal to have bits of metal in a parrot's GI tract. However, newer research suggests that these metal pieces are actually causing chronic, low level heavy metal poisoning. It is not completely clear what the sources of these metals are, but may include household items or even bird cages, toys, and some low quality foods. These heavy metals are not present in quantities high enough to be a common problem for humans, but birds are very small and very sensitive to lead, zinc, and other heavy metals.

Signs of illness in parrots include drooping wings, ruffled feathers, tail bobbing, sitting at the bottom of the cage, feather loss, loss of appetite, abnormal droppings, and eye/nose discharge. Yearly wellness exams and blood work are recommended for parrots to ensure they are healthy.

Sources and Further Reading:

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