

Pyrrhura Conure Basics
(Green Cheeked, Maroon Bellied, Painted, Black Capped, Pearly, etc.)
by Marcia Welch, 2002

Origin: South America, with one species (Hoffman's) from Central America. Primarily rainforest birds, they have been observed in pairs, small family groups, and quite large flocks.

Physical Characteristics: 9-12 inches long. The species commonly kept as companion birds range in weight between 75 and 90 grams.

General Characteristics: Tend to be busy, inquisitive, playful, and cuddly when in the mood. Be prepared for them to investigate everything, and get their little beaks into trouble whenever possible! They definitely have a large bird personality packed into a small body. Since they have no idea they're small, they can be aggressive toward other birds, regardless of size difference. They are extremely smart, and consistent use of the "Up", "Down", "No", and "O.K." commands are essential. Both sexes can make very good family birds, as they don't have a strong tendency to become bonded to one person, but they must be socialized properly and handled regularly by each family member. Nippiness can be a problem, if they're not patterned to good behavior by use of the aforementioned commands. This tendency to nip can be controlled to a great extent just by paying close attention to the bird when picking it up and handling it – make eye contact, say the bird's name or talk to it for a few seconds, and then reach for it with a decisive hand and the "Up" command.

Noise and Talking Ability: These small conures are much quieter than their larger cousins, with most vocalizations being a soft buzzing sound, low whistles, squeaks, and miscellaneous chatter. They do have a sharp, staccato "*aack-aack-aack*" alarm call, which is used only when they're startled, and when determined to get your attention they can be quite persistently yappy, but the noise level usually doesn't approach that of even a cockatiel. Both sexes can talk, but each individual bird will be different in ability. Some never say a word (like our green cheeks), and some speak many words and phrases clearly and with cognition (like their siblings from a different clutch).

Diet: These birds are usually hearty eaters and prefer variety in their diet. Try small to medium hookbill pellets, cockatiel or smaller bird quality seed mix, fresh veggies and fruits (especially the dark green, red and orange varieties), and cooked mixes. Nuts (not peanuts) are a good addition as well, with unsalted almonds and pistachios probably being the best nutritional choices.

Caging: As large as possible, with bar spacing no greater than 5/8-inch. Our two green cheeks have a 24x24x36 Amazon cage, and they use it all! Unfortunately, the larger cages normally have bar spacing that's too wide, but if necessary, most manufacturers can do a custom order. Perches should be of varying sizes and textures to avoid pressure sores on the feet (bumblefoot) which can be very serious. Conures often enjoy a cozy bed to sleep in at night, like a Hide-n-Sleep tent, or an appropriate size can covered in soft cloth which can be fastened near the top of the cage. The bed should be removed during the day to prevent unwanted nesting behavior, which can translate to aggressive cage territoriality.

Toys: As is the case with all birds, toys are an absolute necessity, not a luxury. Each bird will have their particular favorites, in terms of textures or colors, but here are some things to try. Soft wood (untreated, milled pine) that is easy to chew, vegetable tanned leather, natural sisal or cotton rope, bells (NOT the jingle bell type as these can trap toes or beaks), plastic beads, paper, and cotton fabric. You should have a good selection of toys, so that several can be in the cage, with lots more "waiting in the wings" for their turn to be rotated into the cage. Toys should be changed at least weekly to keep your bird interested.

Interesting Behaviors: Conures are somewhat famous for their fondness of sleeping on their backs, especially when young. This is guaranteed to get your attention (as well as give you an adrenaline jolt!) until you get used to it, since they look quite dead at first glance. These birds can be excellent acrobats, and finding them hanging by one toe from the top of the cage or from a toy isn't uncommon. It's always a wise idea to make sure they're not actually stuck, however, as that can happen, too! Our green cheeks' mode of locomotion when on the floor is good for a laugh, as they alternate between running and hopping like a wind-up toy. The head-on view is especially hilarious when you're down on their level! When really frightened by something, whether in or on the cage, I've found that our birds will fly down instead of up – in effect "hitting the deck", rather hard sometimes. Then they stay very still and don't make a sound until they feel the danger has passed.

Grooming: Trim toenails and wings as needed. Before you attempt this yourself, have an experienced bird groomer or avian vet show you the proper technique. Be aware that these guys are very light bodied, aerodynamic birds, and can usually fly some distance even with clipped wings. They should never be taken outside without a carrier or a bird harness and leash (if they will wear one). A normal beak should ABSOLUTELY NEVER be trimmed. If the bird has a beak deformity, it should only be corrected by an avian vet with experience in beak reshaping, as the beak has major blood and nerve supply, and if improperly done is not only extremely painful, but can cause permanent psychological trauma. Bathing should be done at least twice a week, and more often if possible, using plain water only. You may not need to do this much, though, as most conures love the water (I think they're related to ducks somewhere along the line) and will usually take their own baths in their water dish – a LOT!

Common Hazards: Fumes emitted from overheated nonstick (Teflon) coating on cookware, appliances, and dozens of other household items will kill your bird in minutes. Tobacco smoke is extremely harmful, as are fumes from cleaning products, nail polish, glue, perfume, hair spray, kerosene heaters, self-cleaning ovens, paint, etc. If you can detect an odor, don't use that product around your bird! Other pets can attack and kill your bird in seconds, even if they are only "playing", and the same holds true for unsupervised children. Birds wandering on the floor or on furniture can be easily stepped or sat upon. Ingested toxins from plants, foods, and endless other sources can be deadly. In short, birds can be harmed in any number of ways that are not always obvious, and you will need to be constantly aware of where they are and what they are doing. Use common sense, and if in doubt about whether an item or situation is safe, better to err on the side of caution!

Resources: Many of the bird books available were published many years ago and contain very outdated, and sometimes downright bad, information. One current book specifically on conures is: "Guide to Happy, Healthy Pets – The Conure" by Julie Rach, published by Howell Book House. Two other books, which are excellent for general information on all parrots, are: "Guide to Companion Parrot Behavior" by Mattie Sue Athan, published by Barron's, and Sally Blanchard's "Companion Parrot Handbook". A subscription to Bird Talk Magazine (www.birdtalk.com) is also a good idea. The Pyrrhura Breeders Association has interesting pictures and info on their website, and there is a link to it at www.upatsix.com under Avian Associations. Since this sheet barely scratches the surface of what you will need to know to provide committed, responsible care for your conure's lifetime, please take advantage of the resources listed here, and never stop learning!