

The Conure





Chapter 1

What Is a Conure?

Conures are New World parrots, which means they are native to the Americas. They were first found throughout Latin America, from Mexico through the islands of the Caribbean to southern Chile. The largest conure is the Patagonian conure, which is about seventeen and a half inches long, and the smallest is the painted conure, which is eight and a half inches long from the top of his head to the tip of his tail.

Conures' native environments include a wide variety of climates and terrains, from savannahs to tropical forests and cooler mountain areas. They are peaceful birds who live in large flocks. Conures' nesting sites in the wild range from niches carved into sandstone cliffs to tree cavities.

Some species, such as the red throat, olive throat, Cuban, and peach front, nest in active termite mounds or termite nests in trees. To do this, the birds break into the termite mound with their beaks and dig a tunnel and a nesting chamber. This effort takes them about a week, after which they leave the nest alone for a week so the termites can seal off the nest from the rest of the mound. The birds then return and set up housekeeping.

In the wild, conures eat a variety of foods, including grass seeds, fruits, cactus, berries, nuts, flowers, insects, and grains. They can also do damage to cultivated crops, which makes them unpopular with farmers in their native habitats.



The First Documented Conures

Conures were first described in literature in 1724 by Jean Baptiste Labat, a French priest who spent thirteen years as a missionary in the colonies of the West Indies. While there, he also studied and documented many of the native species of plants and animals he saw. Labat described and drew pictures of a species of bird he called *Aratinga labati* on the island of Guadaloupe. Some naturalists believe this green parrot with a few red head feathers may have been a captive Cuban conure (*Aratinga euops*), or he may be a now-extinct species.

Conures began to be imported into Europe and the United States more than a hundred years ago, and a few species, such as the green conure, were being bred in the United States in the mid-1930s. Unfortunately, at the time most people believed it was easier to go into the jungle and capture wild birds, rather than setting up the birds they had in breeding colonies. With habitat destruction and the increased demand for birds in the pet trade, this situation had to change.

Domestic Breeding Begins

The brightly colored sun and jenday conures spurred aviculturists into breeding conures on a large scale. The sun conure was first imported into the United States in the 1960s, and these birds were routinely bred in captivity by the



There are many conure species. This is a jenday conure on the left with two gold crown babies.

What's in a Name?

The conure's common name comes from the old scientific name for the genus conures belong to: *Conorus*—from the Greek words *cone* (cone) and *ourus* (tail-bearing). That genus is now known as *Aratinga* (meaning “little macaw”). The genus name is the first part of the scientific name assigned to every species of plant and animal. It shows what larger group this individual belongs to. The *Aratinga* group, for example, includes many types of parakeets.

The scientific name is important because the common name for an animal can vary from country to country and even within a country, causing a great deal of confusion. When the scientific name is used, everyone knows exactly which bird you are talking about.

1980s. The jenday conure soon followed. After that, aviculturists turned their attention to other conure species, which turned out to be a benefit for both pet owners and wild conures. Pet owners received more suitable companion birds when domestic-bred conures were available, and wild conures were less threatened with trapping and exportation because the demand for them decreased.

Although wild-caught birds were still fairly common pets into the early 1980s, most conures offered for sale as pets are now domestically-bred birds. This means they are healthier and better suited emotionally to be pets than the wild-caught birds of twenty or twenty-five years ago.

Many Conure Species

Depending on which expert you consult, between forty-five and one hundred different species and subspecies of birds in six genera make up the group of parrots we call conures. This book does not include all of the different species because not all are commonly kept as pets.

This book focuses primarily on the *Aratinga* (pronounced *ah-rah-ting-ah*) and *Pyrrhura* (pronounced *py-hurrah*) genera, which include the most common pets.

A Link to Dinosaurs?

In 2001, scientists announced that a 130-million-year-old feathered dinosaur fossil had been discovered in China. It was the first dinosaur found with its body covering intact, and it was identified as a Dromaeosaur, a small, fast-running dinosaur closely related to Velociraptor, with a sickle claw on the middle toe and stiffening rods in the tail. According to the American Museum of Natural History, Dromaeosaurs were advanced theropods, which is a group of two-legged predators that includes *Tyrannosaurus rex*. Dromaeosaurs had sharp teeth and bones that were very similar to those of modern-day birds.

The fossil was found in Liaoning Province in northeastern China. It was described as looking like a large duck with a long tail. The animal's head and tail were covered with downy fibers, and it had other featherlike structures on the back of its arms and on other parts of its body.

The first feathered dinosaur was found in China in 1995. This discovery, *Sinosauropteryx*, was also a theropod dinosaur, and it

A few birds in other genera, such as *Nandayus*, *Cyanoliseus*, and *Enicognathus*, are discussed as well because they also make good pets.

One way to distinguish the two genera of conures is to remember that *Aratinga* birds are brightly colored (vibrant greens and reds, for example), while *Pyrrhura* birds are darker in coloration (deep green or maroon). *Aratinga* birds also lack the light-colored markings on the upper chest that *Pyrrhura* birds characteristically have.

For an in-depth look at the many species of conures, consult Joseph Forshaw's *Parrots of the World*, which describes the appearance, native habitat, and natural history of each species in detail.

Some breeders think conures and macaws are closely related. In fact, the genus name *Aratinga* means "little macaw." There are some physical similarities worth noting: similar body shapes, brightly colored feathers, and

was also found in Liaoning Province. *Sinosauropteryx* dates from between 121 and 135 million years ago, and it falls in between *Archaeopteryx*, the earliest known bird, which lived about 150 million years ago, and *Protarchaeopteryx robusta*, which lived at about the same time as *Sinosauropteryx* but probably could not fly, despite the presence of feathers on its body.

Several other species of feathered dinosaurs have been found in the same region, and scientists believe that some species of dinosaurs developed feathers to help them keep warm.

Fossils of birdlike dinosaurs and dinosaurlike birds have been found in Madagascar, Mongolia, and Patagonia, as well as in China. The *Eoalulavis*, found in Spain, was one of the earliest birds that could maneuver well during flight, thanks to a feather tuft on its thumb called an *alula*. This feature is found on birds today, and it helps them with takeoffs and landings. Some scientists theorize that birds evolved from dinosaurs, while others are still seeking an earlier reptile ancestor for birds.

long tails. Further genetic analysis is needed to determine just how close the relationship is between these groups of birds.

Conure Characteristics

Conures are outgoing, cheerful, inquisitive little acrobats who take an active interest in their surroundings and the activities of their human family. They are also intelligent, playful, and extremely affectionate.

Although they are smaller members of the parrot family, conures have large personalities and sometimes seem to be unaware of or unable to remember their size. To prevent tragic consequences and an emergency trip to the veterinary hospital, conure owners should closely supervise all interactions between these birds and other pets, such as larger parrots, dogs, and cats.



Birds are more closely linked to dinosaurs than this iguana is. Without the feathers on these babies, you can see the resemblance.

Conures offer something for almost anyone. Some species are known to be cuddly, others can learn to talk fairly well, and still others are strikingly beautiful. Most are also quite affordable pets. (Chapter 2, “All Types of Conures,” describes the twenty-five most popular species.)

Strange Sleeping Habits

Another interesting aspect of the conure personality is their tendency to snuggle under something when they sleep. Don't be surprised to find your bird under a corner of his cage paper if the cage he lives in doesn't have a grille to keep the bird out of the cage tray. You can provide your conure with a washcloth, a fuzzy toy, or something else cuddly to snuggle with.

Don't become alarmed the first time you see your conure asleep with his head tucked under his wing and resting on one leg. Although it seems your bird has lost his head or a leg, he's fine. Sleeping on one foot with his head tucked under his wing (actually with his head turned about 180 degrees and his beak tucked into the feathers on the back of his neck) is a normal sleeping position for many parrots,

Aratinga conures are noted for their loud, strident calls, as well as their lively, fun-loving, playful, cheerful personalities.

although it looks a bit unusual or uncomfortable to bird owners. Be aware, too, that your bird will occasionally perch on one leg while resting the other.

Conures also fall asleep in their food bowls, often on their backs with their feet in the air. You may fear your bird has died the first time you see him do this. But some conures routinely sleep on their backs. As long as he appears healthy, eats well, and acts normally, you have no cause for concern if your conure sleeps on his back. Some parent birds even feed their chicks when the babies are lying on their backs, so it's a perfectly comfortable position for a conure to be in.



Some conure species are known to be extra cuddly.

Bath Time

Conures are also great bathers. They'll try to bathe in their water bowls if nothing else is available, but they really prefer to be dunked under the water faucet or to stand under a light shower in the kitchen sink. Be sure the water is lukewarm before letting your conure take a quick dip, and allow plenty of time for your bird's feathers to dry before he goes to bed (a blow dryer set on low can accelerate the drying process).

Escape Artists

Finally, conures can be excellent escape artists, so make sure the cage you select for your conure is completely secure and that the door and cage grille are not prone to popping open or falling out. Make sure the food and water bowl openings have covers that you can slide into place to help keep your pet in his cage while you're changing the bowls. Check to make sure all windows in your home have screens on them and doors to the outside world are closed tightly before you let your conure out of his cage.