



Mindo - Trip 3

The Pionus Parrot Research Foundation has been working with the Pionus parrots of Ecuador's Mindo Valley since November of 1999. On two earlier expeditions we looked at behaviors and flock activities of Bronze-winged (*Pionus chalcopterus*), White-headed (*Pionus seniloides*), and Red-billed (*Pionus sordidus*) parrots. We also uncovered some information about Bronze-winged's breeding behavior during our second trip in January/February 2001.

The Mindo Valley is a 33 square mile area with the northeast corner located at 00° 00' 00", 78° 45' 00" west and the south west corner at 00° 05' 00" south and 78° 50' 00" west. The valley begins on the northwestern slope of the Andean volcano Guagua Pichincha located in the Western Cordilla of the Andes Mountains and produced eruptions of steam and mud on numerous occasions during our visits. The terrain of the valley and surrounding areas is quite rugged; the elevation at the floor of the valley is 1300 meters and the highest ridges in and around the valley reach 1650 meters.

The region is a typical sub-tropical cloud forest. Much of the valley is immersed in clouds for extended periods throughout the day. There are no significant seasonal variations in the climate except during periods of El Niño and La Niña. The temperature ranges from 50 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit during the evening and 56 to 70 degrees during the day year-round.

Roughly 30% of the forested regions of the valley have been fragmented by cattle farmers and plantation growers over the past three decades. Crops produced on these deforested areas include guyabo and other tropical fruits, coffee, corn, and small amounts of bananas. Beef cattle are raised in two areas of the valley, although herds tend to be small. Most families keep small flocks of chickens. There are no heavy industries located in the valley; most of the 1200 residents are farmers, farm workers, housekeepers, laborers, and shopkeepers.

The Mindo Valley was the first Latin American region to be designated an IBA (Important Bird Area) by Birdlife International. Because of its isolation and relatively pristine condition, the area is home to over 1500 species of birds, many of which are migrant

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Pionus... to the Rescue

Hi, this is TARA, Tucson Avian Rescue and Adoption.....

You've got a bird you'd like to give up? What kind is it?

Pionus is not one of the words we hear very frequently.

There are trends that TARA has seen over the 5 years since we have been an official rescue organization. A lot of the trends have been : cockatoos, macaws, conures (this year these are what we are currently seeing), greys, cockatiels and budgies. They even seem to come in cycles. As this article is written, we seem to be in a male umbrella cockatoo and conure trend.

What we have not seen a lot of in our incoming birds are Pionus parrots.

Because I have two Pionus parrots of my own now, I wondered why is that? We know that these birds are the best kept secret of the aviculture world. Why are they not showing up as much in rescue?

In the five years that TARA has been official, there have only been two Pionus parrot come into the organization. out of a total of approximately 216 birds in the three years we have been keeping a tally. These two came in recently

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songbirds from North America. Parrots in the valley include 4 species of Pionus parrots - Blue-headed parrot (*Pionus menstruus*), Bronze-winged parrot (*Pionus chalcopterus*), White-capped parrot (*Pionus seniloides*), Red-billed parrot (*Pionus sordidus*), several species of parakeets - Maroon-tailed parakeet (*Pyrrhura melanura*), Barred parakeet (*Bolborhynchus lineola*), - two species of Amazon parrots.- Scaly-naped Amazon (*Amazona mercenaria*), Mealy Amazon (*Amazona farinosa*) – the Blue-fronted parrotlet (*Touit dilectissima*), and the Rose-faced parrot (*Pionopsitta pulchra*).

My September 2001 trip was originally planned to be an assessment of the effects of oil pipeline construction on the previously-identified Bronze-winged breeding locations. In late August, 2001, some of the funding sources withdraw a significant portion of the funding and, as a consequence, construction did not begin as scheduled. This last minute change forced me to abandon the initial goal for the trip. Instead, I continued observation of flock behaviors and identification of additional food items.

The trip, originally scheduled to begin on September 13th, was delayed due to the widespread airport closings in the wake of the World Trade Center attack. After several dozen frustrating telephone calls, I was finally able to leave for Ecuador on September 20th. Two days and several thousand miles later, I arrived at the Mindo Birdwatcher's House. While I was sitting on the outside porch catching up on the news with Jane, a large flock of BW's noisily flew overhead, perhaps, as Jane suggested, announcing my return to the rest of the parrots in the valley.

No doubt as a result of the previous month's heavy rains, the flocks of Pionus parrots were moving several times a day, so my biggest challenge was discovering where they were going. That first afternoon, I made my way to the top of the huge southern ridge where I could view two thirds of the valley. I spotted flocks of all three species moving down from the northern reaches and flying into the southwestern areas of forest.

After breakfast on my first morning in Mindo, I traveled with Jane some 12 kilometers east of Mindo to one of the preserves she and Vinicio own. Several student botanists from Pontifica Catolica

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Mindo Valley, looking north toward the equator.

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Universidad del Quito who are doing a botanical survey of the preserve accompanied us. After we parked and walked deep into the preserve, I remained behind at a small farmer shed while Jane and the botanists headed off into another section. Jane had sent me mail earlier this year telling me that she had seen a very large flock of Red-billeds eating in a large tree near the shed, so I set up my camera equipment, hoping to catch some action on film.

As soon as things grew quiet, I became aware of dozens of hummingbirds feeding at the flowers and feeders that Jane has placed in the area. Living in the northeastern US, I'm familiar with ruby-throated hummingbirds, and I had seen several of the more common Ecuadoran species at the feeders at the Birdwatcher's house, so I was not at all prepared for the many different species which were now darting in front of me. One fellow posed eagerly for me. When I was consult a field guide, I was excited to discover that he was a Velvet-purple Coronet, a seldom-sighted species with an extremely small range - less than 50 miles long at elevations of between 800 and 1700 meters. These tiny hummingbirds are among the rarest on earth.

The next morning I awoke before dawn and hitched a ride on the milk collection truck as it was heading out on its run through the southern end of the valley. Once I was four kilometers away from the town, I jumped off the truck and walked along the river that makes a turn at the end of the valley and heads north towards the equator.

Soon after sunrise, I heard the squawking of an approaching flock of parrots. Within seconds, the "scouts" spotted me and soon

after remainder of the flock flew past at an altitude of only 100 feet. I hid myself in some of the scrub beside a small pasture and some 15 minutes later, a flock of approximately 75 White-headed parrots returned and perched in the branches of a pico-pico tree not 25 yards away from where I was seated.

We'd learned on our earlier trips that out of the three species regularly seen in the valley, the White-headed were, by far, the most sensitive to human activity. Although I moved slowly through the underbrush to reach a better position from which to photograph them,



Velvet-purple Coronet

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within the last year. One was a Bronze Wing, Yoshi, while the other is a White Capped Pi, Howita.

I set out to find out why we do not see more Pionus in rescue.

One thought is that there are not as many Pionus breeders out there as opposed to the cockatoo, African grey, and macaw breeders. These birds are the "flashy" birds that one mostly sees when walking into a pet store looking for that "perfect pet."

I must admit that the first Pi I ever saw was when I moved away from San Diego and came to Tucson. My first reaction to this "dull" green parrot was not excitement.

So if Pionus Parrots are not as well represented in the bird world, we would certainly not see as many come to use in rescue.

My other train of thought on this deals with the personalities of Pionus parrots and their human companions.

Margrethe Warden writes "...I also believe that Pi's are far less prone to behavioral problems than the more common rescue birds like greys, macaws and cockatoos. Pi's tend to be more independent so they don't cling to their humans and scream and pluck and mutilate when they don't get the attention they crave."

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I totally agree with that statement. I am on several Internet lists and the Pi list that I belong to seems to be the real core of Pionus parrot information these days. One of the traits that Pionus owners see in their birds is this independence and non reliance on humans for their gratification. I can't tell you how many times a newbie has been told not to expect a Pi to clamor for attention. I know from my own experience that my WC Pi loves to just sit on me somewhere and just "be" while I am on the computer or reading. The "need" to have constant attention is not something that I expect from my Pi. Yes, she loves the scratches and the soft talks, but only tolerates the body kisses and full body rubs that I subject her to. She sometimes is so unobtrusive that I may forget she is even there on the top of the computer chair.

Along the same lines, Pat Burke writes, "I've been surprised by the number of pi's out there in multi-bird households. I'm on far too many e-lists, LOL, but I do see a pi listed in a lot of sig lines, though I rarely hear people talking about them. I'm not sure why, but would tend to believe it's because they present fewer behavioral problems than many other birds and they just tend to go with the flow of things, and fit in well with a multi flock household."

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they were spooked and left before I could achieve my goal. I then set up my camera equipment and waited, but they did not return. Instead, a flock of parakeets settled into the neighboring trees and made plenty of noise – effectively announcing my presence to any parrots who might have been considering moving in to eat. Nevertheless, I spotted two large groups of BW's flying along the river, undoubtedly heading towards the Inga plantings we had spotted during our second trip.

Later that afternoon I headed out on the Mindo-Nono road, a dirt road that crosses the Mindo river and then winds through the southeastern hills in the valley, eventually ending in Quito some 35 miles away. After several hours of hiking without seeing a single parrot, I returned to Mindo. Just outside the town, at dusk, I surprised a group of 10 BW's who had been sitting quietly in a short tree at the edge of a pasture.

In late afternoon on the third day of the trip, I heard a loud Red-billed call as I walked out of the Birdwatchers House. I stepped into the street and saw a Red-billed perched on the television antenna of a house two doors away.



During breakfast the next morning, I heard the bird again, this time immediately after hearing the calls of a flock flying just overhead. I grabbed my camera and walked out to get some pictures. Within a few seconds I had attracted the attention of several young children who were preparing to walk to school. They began to tell me of other Red-billeds "living in Mindo." Thinking they were referring to the flocks that we spotted almost daily, I smiled and went back to my photography.

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I agree with Pat on this. They just seem to “blend” in quite well with a flock of birds. They truly seem to be a flock bird.

The only problem that I have ever had with my Pi is her “hatred” of Blue and Gold Macaws. For what ever reason, Nadia hates that species. She would stalk them with intent to do bodily harm (notwithstanding the size difference here). What really threw me for a loop was her sudden attachment to a past TARA Blue and Gold who came to my home for medical rehab due to an amputated wing. I feared for Baby’s safety knowing how Nadia has reacted in the past to that species. But, to my surprise, Nad has taken this bird “under her wing” and is now this B&G’s best bird friend, to the point that their cages are now next to each other and they do everything together when they are out. Baby now even hangs out on Nadia’s cage during the night while Nad is in her cage nite nite. Needless to say, I have adopted Baby. Nad would not have it any other way.

Why this attachment? Who knows, but I would not expect this from any of my other birds in the flock. But my little WC Pi has surprised me with her caring and devotion to another bird in need. Nadia herself was a rescued bird. My very first personal rescued bird.

And maybe we don’t see as many in rescue because of the

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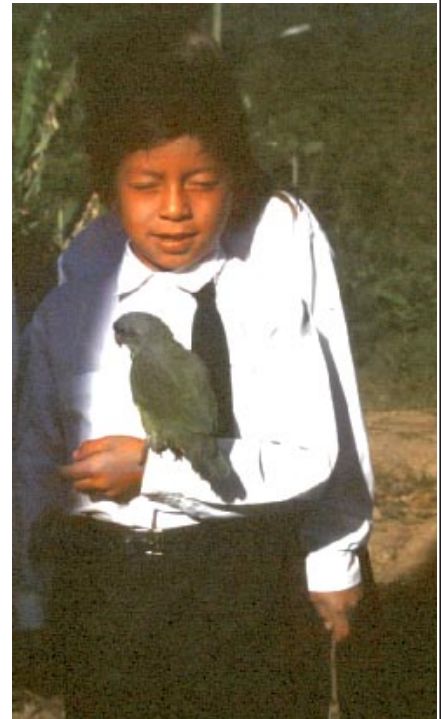
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A few minutes later, a woman called to me from the second floor of her house. She had a Red-billed parrot on her arm. The next sound was that of my jaw hitting the dirt street. One of the children ran into the house and returned a few seconds later with the parrot.

I estimated the bird to be just past weaning age – there were still a few sheathed feathers on the back of its neck. The bird stepped up for me readily, then let out a whistle which was returned by another Red-bill sitting on the TV antenna. The two of them chatted for several minutes while I petted the bird and talked to his young owner. He told me that his father and brought the bird home several weeks earlier as a present.

Later that afternoon, I again heard the bird on the antenna and I stepped out to watch him again. This time the bird slowly made his way down the antenna, then along a wire which led to a small tree in the house’s yard. The bird climbed through the tree and came over to perch in a bush directly in front me where he posed for several pictures. At that moment, a boy came out of the house and he gave me permission to pet the bird. As I gently stroked the bird, he extended his wings revealing that his wings were not clipped. I asked the boy if the bird could fly. He told me that the bird liked to fly off when there were other parrots around, but he always returned. While we chatted, the bird left the tree, walked back up the wire to the eave of the roof, and entered the house through a small hole the homeowner had provided for him.

I turned to return to the Birdwatcher’s House. The lady with the other parrot (he was named Raphael) was out sweeping the door stoop. I asked her where Raphael was and she smiled and pointed above her. In typical Pionus fashion, the parrot was climbing around a flower vine that had been draped over the front door. I reached up with my hand and he readily stepped up for me. I pulled out a wing and noticed that he was not clipped. The woman told me that there was another pet in town and asked me if I would like to meet the bird. I told her that I was leaving for Quito the next morning, but if it was possible, I would like to meet the other bird (she said his name was



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 type of person who lives with a Pionus parrot. I think that Pi people really take the time to understand the behavior and work with it instead of giving up and getting rid of the bird. When someone finally does, I have seen so many Pi's go to other Pi people. It is as if the Pi's get to go to the people that understand them the best..... other Pi people.

Yoshi came to us because his owner who got him as a retirement present, was going back to work full time. He felt that it was not fair for Yoshi to be alone all the time. And Yoshi picked, we feel, because he was left alone a lot. Yoshi's new family could care less what he looks like as they have looked inside this little jewel to see what he really is. And Howita was given up because her caretaker could no longer do right by her. She has a pretty severe scissor beak and has problems keeping weight on, but is doing much better now with her new family.

Whatever the reason they have come to us, I know that Pionus are special birds. I also feel that the people who have Pionus are a different kind of person. They look beyond the feathers into the heart and souls of those wonderful birds we affectionately call Fat Parrots.

Sharon Loper-Bloch, Co-Founder/Director of TARA - Tucson Avian Rescue and Adoption Foundation

<http://www.tarafoundation.net>

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 Silvio).

Several hours after supper, I was sitting on the patio when a teenager came to the gate. When I walked over to see what he wanted, I noticed that he, too, had a Red-billed parrot named Silvio. I petted Silvio while the young man and I chatted and he was surprised to hear that I had several dozen Pionus parrots at my home in the US. I told him that Red-billeds were not common at all in the US at which point he offered to sell me Silvio. I explained to him that it would not be legal for me to take the bird to the US because of the CITES treaty. He told me that Red-billeds were common pets in and around Mindo. He mentioned that Bronze-wingeds seldom got close enough to humans to be captured. I tried to get him to tell me how he had acquired Silvio, but he would only say that Red-billeds liked to be around people, but the Bronze-wingeds only liked to be around each other.

We talked for close to an hour – during the entire period, Silvio kept moving between his owner and me. Not once did he even attempt to fly – even though we were outside. My interaction with the Red-billeds was certainly the highlight of my trip. I've since learned that it's not unusual for young wild parrots to willingly associate with humans. The relationship lasts for one or two years until the urge to breed becomes so strong that the pets fly off to join the wild flocks that inhabit the valley.

All of us who keep parrots understand the special bond that develops between us, but experiencing the attentions of wild birds who choose to live with humans even when there is nothing restricting their leaving was the most intense parrot experience I've ever had.



Birds, The USDA and the Animal Welfare Act

During the American Federation of Aviculture meeting held in August in Tampa, FL, the USDA presented the facts about the changes that may be made to the AWA. As a result of a lawsuit, Congress has ordered the USDA to monitor and regulate rats, mice and birds, except those used strictly for research. This decision has the potential for serious and far-reaching consequences for the avicultural community, breeders and pet owners alike.

The decision was a result of a lawsuit filed by ARDF (Alternatives Research and Development Foundation). The complaint in the suit was essentially that the USDA's regulation excluding birds, rats of the genus *Rattus* and mice of the genus *Mus* for use in research, is arbitrary & capricious as well as an abuse of agency discretion. The ARDF requested a new rulemaking procedure be implemented that was more consistent with the AWA. This suit was settled in October, 2000. The USDA agreed to grant the relief sought by initiating and completing, in a reasonable amount of time, rules on the regulation of rats, mice and birds. The USDA estimated it would take as many as three years before the final rule would be published. The USDA has traveled through a long and arduous process and work on the new regulation began in 2002, shortly after the appropriations bill was passed. Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) attempted to pass a rider to the Farm Bill that would exclude birds and mice & rats bred for research. The Helms amendment passed; however, for the placing of a comma, it included birds and rats and mice bred for research.

The new rule will affect all dealers, breeders, exhibitors and transporters of rats, mice and birds. Prior to the Helms amendment, there were no standards written just for these animals; however, there are regulations governing non-specified warm-blooded animals. There are also general guidelines but none that specifically mention rats, mice and birds.

The rule making process is a lengthy and tedious one which includes publication of proposals on the Federal Register and allowing as much as 90 days for public comment. The speed with which rules, once developed, can be implemented is a rather slow one. At any given time APHIS may have as many as 150 – 200 actions in progress so priority is assigned. The designation of "significant" by OMB (Office of Management and Budget) determines also the length of time. Designations of "Significant" and "Economically Significant" take longer. They require more detailed analysis and the

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Plum-crowned Project

Earlier this year I was contacted by a neotropical ornithologist who told me about 2 flocks of Plum-crowned Pi's that seem to be resident year-round in a remote section of Bolivia's crown jewel, the Apa Apa forest. I contacted the ranger of the forest who said that he's been observing the flocks for quite some time and, yes, they are there all the time. I also managed to wrangle permission for us to conduct research in the reserve. Nobody is allowed into the preserve without securing advance permission.

In 1977, noted ornithologists John O'Neil and T. A. Parker, III learned of 4 Plum-crowned's that were collected in 1961 in northwestern Peru - an area where it was thought Plums did not exist. Three of the skins are at AMH (American Museum of Natural History) and the fourth is located in Peru's Javier Prado natural history museum in Lima..

In 1974, another ornithologist collected a white-capped Pi (err, we call them white heads). At that time, *P. seniloides* was unknown in Peru. The skin sits in the collection of Louisiana State University (LSU is one of the top ornithology schools).

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clearance process is longer.

Dr. Chester Gipson addressed both the AFA Board and the House of Delegates. There was also a panel of USDA officials who gave a presentation to all attendees as part of the convention program. They are planning to meet with a large number of groups and organizations in order to get input on how to structure the rules. The AFA meeting was the first of what will be many meetings conducted the USDA about this matter. Their goal is to learn as much from those of us who keep these birds as they can so they do not develop regulations that cannot work or are not realistic. The bottom line is the USDA recognizes the hurdles, pitfalls and general nightmares facing the development of the rules necessary for compliance. With respect to birds the officials recognize that by their very nature, birds cannot be subject to the same or similar regulations that govern dogs and cats. In order to create reasonable guidelines they must know how the bird industry runs. They have no particular direction in mind, ergo the desire to learn about the industry from those who work in it. As of yet, the agency has not created their definition of “bird”.

The new regulations will impact not just those with exotic birds like parrots and softbills but also those with waterfowl, Ratities such as ostrich and emus, birds of prey, pigeons, and most other non-poultry birds.

For the USDA, these changes are a done deal. There is a possibility that those who do not agree with the new regulations can lobby Congress to change or repeal it as they were not especially interested in enacting it to begin with. The logistics involved in making the changes are monumental. They are not anxious to make this any more difficult.

In summary, it is my impression that the USDA is very willing to work with us. Dr. Gipson introduced himself with the statement “I’m with the Government and I’m here to help you”. That helped break the ice. These officials came to us for help and seem genuinely interested in our input. They came to us first, they introduced themselves, and learned our names. They do not appear to have their minds made up on how to impose the regulations or what direction they wish to head and seem very willing to let aviculturists help lead the way. It was reassuring to know that several of the USDA representatives who were present have or had some exotic bird experience. One of the vets who spoke has a pet Senegal; one has a mother who raises Eclectus. They are not unaware of the complexities of the bird industry.

One interesting point that was made is that as of now, the

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ornithology schools in the country).

When O’Neil joined LSU (where he remains to this day), he decided for some reason to investigate the report of *P. seniloides* and, as part of his investigation, viewed the skins in Peru, AMH, and LSU. There are 5 Plum skins at LSU as well - collected in Peru in the eastern Andes at 9 degrees south latitude. Then, a third collector reported *P. seniloides* in an area of Peru located at 5 degrees south latitude.

After viewing the assorted skins, O’Neil came to the conclusion that the 4 specimens collected in 1961 were NOT Plum-crowned’s but actually white heads. In the article he published in Condor, he defines a clear line between the southernmost occurrences of *seniloides* and *tumultuosus*. He then mentions that there is evidence that there is some confusion with the taxonomy because it seems that, except for the gap, the two species occupy a continuous band (if you look at Stoodley’s maps on pages 26 and 34 you can see that there is a small band between the two species’ distribution list - that concurs with O’Neil’s Condor report). He then goes on to say that all the skins are so similar that it was clear to him that the only difference between white heads and Plums is the purple color.

But, curiously (and this is what made me start asking a few

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the USDA has a total of 95 inspectors to monitor **all** the facilities under their jurisdiction and those facilities number in the tens of thousands. They've asked for triple their budget in 2004 but don't expect to get anything close to that amount. New regulations must be reasonable for them given their funding and staffing shortfalls. At this time, I do not see the pending changes to be something to fear. I do not believe they will be unmanageable or tedious. No one from the USDA is interested in putting any bird keeper or breeder out of business. There is even the potential for some good to come out of this as Aviculture may be forced to become a self-regulating industry.

These statements are based solely on my own observations and conclusions. They in no way indicate any official position taken by the AFA or the USDA.

Margrethe Warden

Bronze-winged Project

Now that our preliminary work on the diet and ecology of the Bronze-winged parrot in Ecuador's Mindo Valley has been completed, we've begun planning for the PPRF's first formal research project.

One soggy morning during

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questions that don't seem to have been asked before), he also mentions that the purple coloration of Plums is faint in young birds and gradually deepens as the birds age.

For some reason, Stoodley, Sweeney, and Rosemary Low fail to mention this "deepening." Additionally, Stoodley reports that Plum chicks are covered in a dense white down which does not fall off when the birds fledge (interestingly, Coral-billed share this characteristic). Rosemary Low reports that white-head chicks also hatch with a dense white down, but it "diminished" by the time the bird was 19 days old.

A second point, and one that raised my eyebrows significantly when it crossed my mind, most of the scientific reports (from top scientists like Jon Fjeldsa, Neils Krabbe, and Robert Ridgely) about white-heads suggest that white-headed migrate altitudinally. I don't want to spend too much time on this right now, but I tend to agree with their assessment because of Ana Sosa's reports that white-heads are rare in the very area where we saw upwards of two hundred a day. When Ridgely published *Birds of Ecuador* (a stunning work, by the way, the most gorgeous bird book I've ever seen), he mentions that the evidence for these migrations is strong.

So that leaves us with two species that are different morphologically and that have different ecologies - at least I think the ecology of each species is different in light of the report of the Plums remaining in the same area year-round.

O' Neil concludes his Condor article with "we believe, in the ABSENCE OF EVIDENCE TO THE CONTRARY (emphasis mine), that the two species of Pionus under discussion do not differ enough morphologically or ecologically to warrant their being retained as separate species."

A third point that nobody else has mentioned is that the area separating the two species is the same area where Peru and Ecuador have engaged in a border dispute for the past century or so. The area, until the last 15 years, has been patrolled by troops of both countries and skirmishes were common. It is not surprising that neither species has been reported in the area. For the past few weeks I've been using the Wings of the Americas database to compare the distribution maps of dozens of species - that strip of land seems to contain very few birds of ANY species (I wonder why?).

I think there are morphological differences and I think it might be possible that the skins O'Neil and Parker referred to may be misidentified. I've made arrangements with Paul Sweet at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City to examine the the skins in question sometime in the next two weeks.

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to examine the skins in question sometime in the next two weeks.

Based on Ridgely's comments about altitudinal migration of white-headed (P seniloides) and our own observations of white-heads in Mindo, I think also that there are ecological differences. Sometime in 2003 the PPRF will be sending some field workers to Bolivia where we will gather more information on the Plum-crowned flocks reported there.

AMNH has waived their policy (of not permitting amateurs to work with their collections) to enable us to get some answers to these questions - another example of how the PPRF is leading the way in encouraging joint professional/avicultural research as outlined in our By-laws.

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our first trip to Mindo, Board member John Leydecker commented wryly that we should simply rent a cornfield to attract the birds in for study. We also raised questions during that first trip about Pionus parrots' reputation for destroying corn crops - for which we found little evidence.

Dr. Jane Lyons and her husband Vinicio Perez have been working with some Mindo residents to establish an ideal research site. The site will consist of a three to 5 hectare cornfield with tall trees at either end of the field where the birds can perch.

We also plan to hire workers to build two large blinds on the east and west sides of the field so that we can observe the birds more clearly during their morning and evening activity periods. The blinds will provide room for the PPRF to observe, videotape, photograph, and make sound recordings of the flock as they interact with the corn.

Once the field has been planted, we'll send in observers to staff the blinds from 6AM to 10AM and 2PM to 6PM daily. We'll be recording the parrots' behaviors during those periods. We anticipate the actual observations will take eight to ten weeks and will take place sometime in July-September, 2003.

Right now we're still working on locating the best area for the work. Naturally, we want to provide living quarters close enough to the field so we can avoid renting 4WD vehicles. This is proving to be more difficult than we first intended so the possibility exists that we will use the resources of the Chuck Pearson Memorial Fund to make outright purchases of land. When the study is done we can sell the land or rent it to other groups

We hope to have these arrangements completed by the end of 2002 at which time we will begin staffing the study and raising the necessary funds.

If you're interested in doing some of the field work, drop me a note at rshade@fast.net.

from the director...

We have many exciting articles in this newsletter - as I'm sure you've already discovered. Funny how we can go for months with little activity and then everything breaks loose at once.

For example, just last night I was contacted by Bernard "Butch" Scot, a bird artist whose works are sought after by collectors. He learned of our work from Jane Lyons and.. well, see the article on page 11.

After spending several months trying to locate affordable UV photography equipment or photographers skilled in such work, I had shelved my desire to investigate UV coloring in Pionus parrots. However, thanks to Board member Pat Burke, we've been able to locate a photographer to do the work. Watch for a report in a future issue.

Several members have expressed concern that the PPRF has gone dormant. As I'm sure this newsletter will attest to, that's not the case. The Board has mandated that we begin publishing newsletters more frequently. Current plans call for the next newsletter to come out early this winter. We hope to provide more detail about our upcoming trips in that issue.

Finally, we haven't been making much noise about fundraising because we want to secure our

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UV and Pionus Parrots

In a past newsletter, we mentioned work that has been taking place in England looking at the coloration of sexually monomorphic birds and how they tell other birds what sex they are. Apparently, many bird species have coloration which is only visible in the ultra-violet spectrum. Humans cannot see in the ultraviolet spectrum because of our eyes' limitations, but birds have special UV receptors which enable them to see far more than humans can. There is a paper available about the work in the PPRF library.

I made several attempts to obtain the necessary photographic equipment to take UV reflectance and fluorescence images, but I quickly discovered that most of the equipment is either no longer manufactured or is far more expensive than our organization could ever hope to afford. I contacted a host of professional and technical photographers, and I even managed to annoy several professors at Lehigh University with my repeated attempts to interest someone in investigating this phenomenon.

Several weeks ago, Board member Pat Burke sent me a note about a caique breeder in the Rochester, NY vicinity who had put up a web page featuring UV reflectance and UV fluorescence photographs his birds. Within minutes I was on the telephone and, well, this time we scored. He put me in touch with Andrew Davidhazy, Professor of Imaging and Photographic Technology at the prestigious Rochester Institute of Technology..

Professor Davidhazy is as fascinated by the possibilities as I am, and he will be traveling to High Spirits Aviary this fall and he and I will take photos of pairs of the six species of Pionus kept in US aviculture. Will we discover evidence of sexual dimorphism in Pionus parrots? Stay tuned!

See Davidhazy's website at <http://www.rit.edu/~andpph/index.html>

RENEW NOW!

If you have not renewed your membership, this will be your last issue of **The Fat Parrot**. Don't miss out the exciting new additions to Pionus knowledge.

We really do appreciate your support and, in return, we offer information that simply is not available anywhere else. Your membership donations are making possible some of the most exciting parrot research taking place anywhere in the world.

Fill out the membership/renewal form on page 16 in this newsletter and mail it in today!

Pionus Portraits

Bernard "Butch" Scott is a renowned wildlife artist whose unique work has been published by the National Geographic Society, the National Wildlife Federation, the Audubon Society, the Sierra Club and Ducks Unlimited. His subjects range from whales and wolves, to butterflies and songbirds.

A recent trip to Mindo resulted in a flurry of work including some of the hummingbirds mentioned elsewhere in this newsletter. Butch has been bitten by the "neotropical" bug and is presently planning trips to Bolivia, Peru, Argentina, Ecuador, and Panama.

I recently contacted Butch to see if he had any paintings or plans to produce paintings of Pionus parrots. He told me that he's seen plenty of Pionus parrots in the wild, but has not yet obtained any suitable photographs. I offered to loan him some of my photographs taken during our work in Mindo but after he found out that Janice and I have (or soon will have) all captive species with the exception of blue-heads, he offered to visit our aviary, photograph our birds, and produce some paintings and possibly prints to assist us in our efforts. We'll have more news in upcoming issues.

Visit Butch's online gallery at <http://paintedfeathers.com>.

The Wonderful White-crowned Pionus

Note: This article was scheduled for publication in the May/June 2002 issue of The Original Flying Machine.

One reason I am fascinated with Pionus parrots is that each species has such dramatically different coloration. Certainly, the most dramatic is the White-crowned Pionus (*Pionus senilis*). Perhaps the most easily obtained captive Pionus, the White-crowned is popular in avicultural circles worldwide.

Now before you letter-writers out there crank up your word processors to tell me that the real name of this species is the White-capped Pionus Parrot, I have to set you straight. Ornithologists worldwide use the term *white-capped* to refer to the white-headed (or Massena's) parrot (*P. seniloides*). The white-capped is exceedingly rare in aviculture.

The White-crowned looks a bit like three or four different Pionus parrots rolled into one. Its wings are strongly reminiscent of those found on the Bronze-winged Pionus parrot (*P. chalcopterus*), while its light blue-tinged breast surely belongs to a Maximilian's Pionus (*P. maximiliani*). Its head, covered mostly with dark blue feathers of varying color intensity, has a bold, roughly triangular-shaped patch with the apex (such as it is) at the top of the beak and extending back just rear of the eyes. The White-crowned has a prominent eye ring which can range from white to pink depending on the age and breeding readiness of the bird, and large, dark eyes. The plumage on the back is of the same shade as that on a Coral-billed Parrot (*P. sordidus*) and the feathers are lighter on the underside of the bird. There is a white patch beginning at the throat and extending slightly into the breast area. Of course, like all Pionus parrots, the White-crowned has the distinctive bright red vent patch.

John and Pat Stoodley's book, *Pionus Parrots*, states that White-crowned Pionus parrots average 23 cm long and weigh 230 grams. Roger Sweeny's book, *Pionus Parrots: A Complete Guide*, describes these birds as being 24cm long and weighing 241 grams on average. Our wild-caught White-crowned is 25cm long and weighs 250 grams. I know of other healthy birds weighing as little as 180 grams. White-crowns share with Dusky Pi's the distinction of being the smallest parrots of the Pionus genus.

Wild White-crowned Pi's range extends from Panama to Mexico, mostly in primary and secondary lowland forests up to subtropical humid forests at 1600m, according to Doug Stotz's *Neotropical Birds: Conservation & Ecology*, a collection of 30 years of ornithological data. Sweeney's book indicates that the White-crowns are seen at up to 2500m of altitude. Viviana Ruiz, a field assistant on one of the PPRF's research trips, reports seeing wild White-crowns regularly near her home in Heredia, Costa Rica. We've recently received information about a pair of white-capped's nesting in the eaves of a tavern located just across the border from El Paso.

Captive White-crowns demonstrate the typical Pionus adaptability that's characteristic of their wild brethren. White-crowns are comfortable being "only" birds yet they are also comfortable with larger flocks. They readily adapt to life in quiet homes, or homes filled with other pets and teenagers without batting an eye.

There are no hard-and-fast rules about any Pionus species' behavior and the White-crowned certainly fits right in. Some writers describe the White-crowned personality as being feisty, curmudgeonly, or even downright aggressive. We've seen White-crowned parrots that could fit any of those descriptions as well as others that are quiet, shy, and introspective. We have one White-crowned that dances to bluegrass, banjo music, and baroque pieces, and makes a snapped finger sound as he waddles and bobs

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in time to the music, and another who readily strikes out at any other bird or person that comes within range. The only predictable White-crowned trait we can see is unpredictability!

For example, every web page I visited that features White-crowneds mentions that they are not good talkers. I'm not sure what folks mean by "good talkers" but I can tell you that our White-crowned, Burdee, a 23 year-old wild-caught male, has the largest vocabulary of any of the 25 Pionus parrots we own. A fiercely one-person bird, he delights in what I call stealth chatter, that is, he utters a phrase, then quickly turns his head so that the listener can't identify who said what – of course that technique is only effective in multi-bird households! But even more confusing, all of our fledgling birds are taught to talk by Burdee. By the time they are ready to be adopted, many of them will proclaim "Whoop, whoop, whoopee" when Janice administers their spray bath. And, if you've adopted one of our birds and it wolf whistles on the way home, you have Burdee to thank.

Burdee cries "Nite Nite" when he wants to roost for the night. If we don't immediately cover his cage, he tries again; "Burdee go nite nite." Should we make the mistake of ignoring the second request, he shouts "Burdee go nite nite.....NOW!"

Ten years ago, our oldest child moved out of the house to attend Hofstra University. As any parent will tell you, the first few weeks of that separation can be as hard on the parents as it on the adult child, and I certainly was not the exception. One morning, several weeks after Julia had moved out, I was puttering around the kitchen at 6:30 one morning when I heard my daughter sneeze. It took a few seconds to register on me, then I heard the sneeze again. I called out her nickname "Brandy?" The response I heard was a throaty, gravelly "Burdee". That little exchange was the beginning of my interest in the sources of Pionus vocalization. Since that time, I have made it a point to spend 15 minutes or so doing other tasks in the morning while playing close attention to the vocalizations made by our awakening Pionus parrots. Typically, I hear a wider vocabulary during that time – a vocabulary which instantly becomes much sparser when I remove the covers from the pet's cages. If White-crowned Pionus parrots are poor talkers, perhaps we'd be better off thinking that we are poor listeners.

We have several White-crowneds besides Burdee and they all are fed the same diet, as are all of our Pionus flock. The main fare is fresh sprouts and chopped, fresh vegetables. We vary the veggies in the mix based on our observation of what they are eating and what they are discarding, but the mix can include squash, fresh peas, yams, cranberries, apples, blueberries, broccoli, cauliflower, pomegranate, lots of freshly-shredded carrots, spinach, mango, papaya, an occasional small piece of orange or lime, cantaloupe, plantains, radishes, celery. We also feed cooked beans with pasta and/or quinoa on a weekly basis in order to provide the 4-6% protein that they seem to thrive on.

We also provide approximately 2 tablespoons daily of a commercial seed mix. We know from Mauro Galetti's study of the diet of wild Maximilian Pionus (as well as the data collected by the PPRF in Ecuador), that a large portion of the wild diet (as much as 70%) is made up of seed. Commercial seed mixes in the US are significantly higher in lipid content, so it's important to restrict their intake by offering only a small amount. At the end of the day, we give a shelled almond to every one of our Pionus parrots as a treat. We are routinely scolded if we accidentally forget an almond for any of the birds.

White-crowneds, as do all Pionus, love spray baths and we try to accommodate them at least three times a week, more frequently in summer. If your White-crowned is water-shy, try turning on your vacuum cleaner. The noise the air makes as it's being sucked into the hose is very similar to the sound of a rainstorm moving through a forest canopy. You'll know when your bird is enjoying his

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bath because he will hang upside down, wings extended, and quivering slightly in an effort to help the droplets of water penetrate through to his skin.

There are some typical behaviors that your pet White-crowned will exhibit over time. The most distressing to new owners is the famous Pionus wheeze. When Pionus parrots are stressed, their first reaction is to try and shrink. If that doesn't work, they will begin wheezing. As long as there is no fluid bubbling up at the nostrils, you don't have anything to worry about. If the wheezing doesn't cause the stressor to disappear, Pionus parrots will thrash as a last resort. If your White-crowned is thrashing, you must immediately remove the stressor from the environment or your parrot could be injured.

White-crowns will fluff up and run back and forth when they are glad to see you, but be careful. If your bird fluffs up and doesn't move, it is indicating that it is preparing to aggressively defend itself. Even though Pionus parrots are smaller than other parrots, their bite can be particularly painful. Burdee, ever the clever fellow, also announces "Bad Bird" if he finds himself in a situation where he might be forced to bite. Sexually mature male White-crowns will strut when they are feeling particularly gorgeous. They'll fan and lower their tails, hunch their wings forward, extend their heads, and exaggeratedly pace back and forth. If your bird is strutting, it's not a good time to ask him to step up!

Any Pionus parrot should be provided with a quality cage appropriately sized for the amount of time the bird will be in the cage, that is, the longer the bird will be confined, the larger the cage should be. White-crowns will use every inch of the cage, so we prefer cages wider than they are high. Bar spacing should be 1" or narrower. Don't scrimp on the cage.

Wild Pionus parrots spend about half of their day perched in trees watching the goings-on around them and yours will want to do the same thing. For several hours each morning and evening, however, Pionus parrots have a much higher activity level. They love to climb, to hang upside down, and chatter to their housemates. Although single White-crowns are relatively quiet, if you have several parrots, expect your White-crowned to make its contributions to the noise in your household.

Be sure to provide toys that can endure vigorous treatment – an excited White-crowned can destroy a perch in an afternoon if not provided with something a bit more durable. Be careful not to provide too many toys, however, because excessive amounts of toys actually reduce the free room a parrot has in its cage. We place no more than two toys in a cage, and we rotate those toys every month or so. Our White-crowns especially like both chew sticks and knotted leather strips that can be unraveled.

All Pionus parrots are exceptionally strong fliers. Pionus means "fat parrot" and this designation no doubt came from the "chubby" appearance of their heavy-musclatured breasts. Pionus parrots never raise their wings above a horizontal plane when they fly, so they are forced to employ more force to stay aloft. As a consequence, it's best to never trust the effects of a wing clip. Even a clipped White-crowned, as many distraught owners have learned, can be off the cage and out the door before you're even aware that an exit was provided. Never take a chance with any Pionus parrot.

As White-crowns mature, some birds may exhibit some overt territorial behaviors. Suddenly your best friend is now more interested in biting and chasing you. It's important to lay a good foundation when the birds are young by providing consistently enforced rules. Birds that are taught to step up without hesitation are definitely easier to handle when they become rambunctious teenagers.

Since there are roughly as many Pionus personalities as there are Pionus parrots, the best approach to acquiring a bird that fits your lifestyle is to visit several breeders and see how the chicks are raised in their facility. Chicks that are raised in isolation from other birds will tend to be quieter and less active.

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Chicks whose wings are clipped at an early age will tend to fly less and may, in fact, be a bit clumsy. Chicks who are weaned to only one or two foods, will not readily accept new foods that you attempt to introduce.

If you want a bird to spend most of the day in a cage, look for breeders who keep their birds housed in cages most of the time. If you want a bird who can be relatively cool about lots of activity, look for breeders whose environment is similar. Don't expect all birds raised in an isolated, quiet bird room to adapt to a house full of teenagers, dogs, cats, etc without difficulty.

We truly love our three White-crowned Pionus parrots and wish to point out that it was our experience with this species that encouraged us to consider building a Pionus-only aviary. We've

never regretted our decision, despite the long hours and often frustrating events we've had to endure. Hearing Burdee announce the arrival of his bedtime at the end of each day still brings a smile to our faces.



Burdee

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