

VI. Breeding

In the wild *Aratingas* travel around in flocks for the greater part of the year. During the breeding season they split up into pairs. Although the moment at which this occurs is dependent on the climatic conditions and the food supply. In Central and South America these factors are less closely related to the seasons than is the case here in Europe. For example, the changes in temperature are less and the number of hours of daylight fewer.

It is a mistake to think that all *Aratingas* nest only in hollow tree trunks and branches. They do in fact also use other sites, such as termite hills (especially those in trees), rock crevices, hollows in cacti, and sometimes even in concealed holes in the ground.

It is striking that the members of this genus have little or no courtship behaviour. In fact generally the only activity apart from the actual mating is the ritual feeding. However, this can sometimes be very intensive and extend over a fairly long period. It regularly occurs that the hen suddenly disappears and it transpires that there are eggs; compared to the Australian parakeets it is much more difficult to spot when these species have reached this stage. For example, the cock never chases after the hen. If you pay careful attention, chewing the outside or inside of the nest-box can be an indication, and they may also spend more time the box during the day. Further, their behaviour towards their neighbours, and sometimes even towards their keeper, becomes much more aggressive.

Generally speaking, *Aratingas* accept partners fairly readily. In the great majority of cases two birds which have been placed together become companions, and are soon not only sitting side by side on the perches, but also preening each other. If this behaviour persists for a number of years without the production of young or eggs, it is advisable to split up the 'pair' as the chance of breeding success will only become slimmer. Of course birds which have recently been placed together need to be given some time to get used to each other (although this is virtually never a problem, and even love at first sight is not unheard of). A pair living in close harmony does not necessarily immediately produce offspring in all cases; all other conditions must also be optimal.

Newly-imported birds may require a number of years to adapt to their aviary environment, even though they are otherwise a well-matched pair. Younger birds are better able to adapt to such a situation than older ones. It goes without saying that things are much simpler if the birds have been reared in captivity. The birds must in any case feel safe and secure in their quarters. Keeping more than one pair of a species can have a favourable effect on the breeding results; they can encourage each other if housed within sight or shouting distance. It is better not to place them directly next to each other, as they may then start to squabble, and so lose their concentration on the matter of reproduction.

Generally speaking it can be expected that *Aratingas* must be two years old before they are sexually mature and able to breed. With a few species, such as the Queen of Bavaria's Conure, this may take even longer.

They have no specific courtship display, but a very strong pair bond does develop and the

cock feeds the hen a great deal. Mating takes place in the typically South American fashion: the cock remains sitting on the perch next to the hen, places one foot on her back and manoeuvres his belly into position against hers. It appears that some pairs also mate inside the nest-box. Birds sometimes mate purely in order to strengthen the pair bond.

The time that elapses between the first egg and the start of incubation differs for each pair. Hens occasionally start to sit immediately, and others only after laying the third egg. The majority start after two. The cock remains close by the nest-box, and he sometimes keeps the hen company a lot of the time. Cocks often spend the night on the nest with the hen. However, they never take part in the incubation; they leave that to the hens.

Although, as has already been mentioned above, Aratingas do not nest solely in hollow trunks and branches, in aviaries you can generally do with man-made or natural nest-boxes. In fact the birds accept these without any problems. Many pairs have the habit of chewing the inside of the box during the breeding season, thus lining the bottom with wood splinters, on which the eggs are then laid. The chewing usually ceases as soon as eggs have been laid. However, keep a close eye open while the birds are at it, as before you know it they can have chewed through the a wall of the nest-box, or worst of all, even through the bottom. This is something that I have had with, among others, my Jendayas. If you are not aware of the situation in time you run the risk of having eggs lying on the floor of the aviary, because the bottom has disappeared out of the box. This is of course a great shame, all the more when it can be avoided by a little attentiveness. If you have birds with this awkward habit it makes sense to take the precaution of covering the bottom of the box with a piece of fine wire mesh by attaching it to the sides, just in case.

If a pair is new it is a good idea to hang at least two different sorts of box in different places, so that they can choose. Once the choice has been made the other nest-box(es) can be removed. I need hardly mention that boxes should be securely attached.

Aratingas are not really fussy when it comes to nesting material. It is best to imitate the natural conditions by using rotten wood. This can virtually always be obtained somewhere. Coarse sawdust is also sometimes used (fine sawdust is too dusty, and can get into the chicks beaks, eyes and nostrils), and a thin grass sod can also be placed upside down inside the nest-box. Cover it with a layer of coarse sawdust and then make a hollow with your fist. Finally, some birdkeepers go into the woods and collect material containing old pine needles and/or rotting leaves from the ground. In the spring this will have become an excellent humus-like material.

Clutches usually consist of three or four eggs; sometimes increasing to up to seven for the smaller species. They are normally laid every other day; although a gap of three days is certainly not unusual. The incubation time is 23 to 25 days and depends somewhat on the weather conditions: the hotter it is the shorter the incubation period, and the colder the longer it takes.

Most pairs produce one clutch a year, although two is certainly not unheard of, particularly if a clutch proves infertile and the eggs are removed in time.

A fertile egg becomes darker the longer it has been incubated. After only four or five days a few veins begin to develop, which can be seen by holding the egg up to a light source. The darker the surroundings are, the better these can be seen.

As mentioned before, under normal circumstances fertile eggs hatch after 23 to 25 days. However, everyone discovers sooner or later that things do not always go according to

plan. There are a number of causes for eggs failing to hatch, some of which cannot be helped. The eggs may become cold because the hen leaves the nest for some reason just before nightfall, and is then unable to find them again in the dark. If she stays away too long the embryos die. If the hen is too young, the breeding instinct may not yet be fully developed. Or one of the parents may be carrying a virus, which gets into the eggs and results in the death of the chicks. Or the shell of an egg may become cracked or broken, causing it to dry out. However, if you notice this in time it can be remedied by painting the spot with nail varnish. This seals the cracks thus halting the drying-out process and allowing the chick to continue developing. Put an egg which has had this treatment back in the nest only after the varnish has completely dried, otherwise there is a risk that the hen will start sitting again immediately and that her feathers will stick to it. An egg can also dry out if the shell is too thin and porous; this can normally be prevented by supplying the birds with sufficient calcium. Dead-in-shell eggs can also be the result of parents receiving such a poor diet that the chicks are not strong enough to break through the shell, or if they do manage it they remain much too weak and die later. Finally, there may be another reason for eggs drying out, for example exceptionally hot weather, but this is not a problem on the whole.

If in your opinion the eggs are taking too long to hatch there is a simple test to see if the chick is still alive: put the eggs into lukewarm water. If the chicks are still healthy you will see the eggs moving, but if they have died the eggs will remain motionless.



3. Dark clouds above the Ecuadorian rainforest, the home of the, among others, Weddell's Conure.