

Breeding the Turquoise Tanager

by Maarten de Ruiter
Cambron Casteau, Belgium

The Turquoise Tanager *Tanagra mexicana* is distributed from Venezuela over western Amazonia to southeast Brazil. It is *not* found in Mexico as its scientific name suggests. It lives up to 500 meters (1600 feet) in elevation and is seen in small groups of up to six individual birds. There are five subspecies of Turquoise Tanager, *T. m. mexicana*, *T. m. vieilloti*, *T. m. media*, *T. m. boliviana* and *T. m. brasiliensis*.

In Europe the Turquoise Tanager is frequently available and the subspecies most commonly offered is *Tanagra m. mexicana* from the Guyanas.

In 1990 a friend of mine obtained a single Turquoise Tanager. Its sex was not known as this species is not sexually dimorphic. It was also in very poor condition with scarcely a feather on it. This poor creature was placed in an all wire mesh cage that measured 0.5 meter (19½ in.) in cube form so it could not come into contact with its own droppings. By observing the feces, many worm eggs were found and the bird was treated with 0.2 milliliters of Panacur 2.5%. A heat lamp was placed above its cage keeping the interior of the cage around 25° Celcius (85°F). A wide variety of fruit was offered along with live insects (mealworms and small crickets). Within three months this bird recovered and was a real beauty!

Around a year later, a second Turquoise Tanager was obtained and again the sex of this bird was unknown. Although this bird looked in good condition, it still was isolated during a six week quarantine period. This was to make sure it was in healthy condition.

These two birds were placed together in a well planted aviary at the beginning of the next spring. Connected to this aviary was an indoor

enclosure that could be heated. The artificial light source within the indoor enclosure was turned on from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Along with the Turquoise Tanagers were a pair of Pekin Robins and two Bay-headed Tanagers.

The two Turquoise Tanagers were observed together most of the time and in the early part of June two eggs were found in a small nest box. The nest box measured 7 cm x 7 cm x 15 cm high (2¾ in. x 2¾ in. x 6 in.). The tanagers had used coconut fiber and dry grass as nesting material. The eggs were blue-green in coloration and had some red-brown spots on them. Both parent birds shared in the incubation duties and after 14 days both eggs hatched. The skin of the young was almost black and they were covered with some whitish down feathers. At seven days of age, the first real feathers began to grow and seven days later the young had left the nest.

Further breeding attempts were not made by the pair but this could have been because the juveniles were left with the parents. Even at two months of age, the young birds were observed begging from the parents. As mentioned above, these birds were fed a wide variety of fruit and insect food. But shortly before this pair of Turquoise Tanagers began to breed, they were fed some egg-food which was mixed with the insect food. During the baby rearing period, the birds also received large amounts of ant-pupa and the parent birds were also observed searching regularly throughout the enclosure (especially the corners) for spiders, flies and other invertebrates.

Breeding results of tanagers are still uncommon and I hope this article has given some useful information for future breeders of tanagers. ➔

The Collared Aracari

by Jerry Jennings
Fallbrook, California

The Collared Aracari *Pteroglossus torquatus* is a colorful native of Central America, ranging from southern Mexico south all the way to Colombia, and as such is the most common of the Central American toucans to be encountered in the wild.

Though the Collared Aracari is common in the wild, it has been quite rare in captivity until the Fall of 1994, when a few dozen birds were imported from Nicaragua. Prior to these importations, less than a dozen individuals were known to exist in the U.S., and in just two collections, where they were reproducing in small numbers.

The Collared Aracari is a small toucan slightly larger than an Emerald Toucanet, with a comparatively long beak. They are monomorphic, requiring surgical sexing to distinguish males from females, though adult birds show some differentiation in beak length, with the male sporting the longer bill. The breast is a bright yellow, with a horizontal red and black stripe across the middle.

Between the stripe and the black feathers on the throat there is a black spot, which varies in size among individuals from very large to very small, and in some individuals it is non-existent. The yellow breast feathers are suffused with red, and the amount increases as the size of the spot declines.

The head and neck of the Collared is black, the back, wings, and tail dark green. Separating the black neck feathers from the green back is a brown ring or "collar", that runs from ear to ear and gives the species its name. Some writers have suggested that the size, thickness, or shade of brown is determinative of sex, though this is definitely not the case.

The beak of the Collared is black at the tip changing to silver along the sides then becoming red at the base. The eyeskin is deep red, contrasted against a bright yellow iris. The rump is red, and the legs blue-gray.

While the Collared is a small toucan,



Collared Aracaris are colorful, comical and one of the few species of toucans that can be safely maintained in a mixed species flight.

it is one of the largest of the aracarís. We weighed 20 adult birds, all in good flesh, and found a range of 185-218 grams. Newly hatched young weigh 8-9 grams, and double in weight every four days.

Collareds were first bred in captivity in the U.S. by the author in 1989, and have reproduced into the second and partial third generations. Because of the small number of founder stock, these birds quickly became inbred. In an effort to rapidly increase the number of birds, babies were pulled for hand-feeding, which succeeded in producing a number of imprinted birds, the males of which made poor parents. Fortunately, the sudden appearance of a number of recent imports of this species promises to improve the Collared's genetic diversity and reproductive potential in captivity.

Like other species of toucans, Collareds prefer to nest in hollow nest logs, which we easily construct from sections of palm tree trunks. However, any hollow log will work, and there has even been successful breeding in a wooden box with a concave bottom.

Collareds lay three to five elliptical, white eggs per clutch and are capable of producing three nests per year. Incubation lasts 16 days (same for all toucan species) and the young hatch at a weight of about 8 grams. Young birds leave the nest in about six weeks, looking like their parents, except the iris is blue, the eyeskin pale yellow, and the beak dark. They achieve their adult coloration in about 10 to 12 months.

In the wild, all aracarís exhibit "help-

ing" behavior, wherein the young from the previous nest help the parents feed the new offspring. While not uncommon in the world of birds (bluejays, for example), this behavior is not encountered in other toucan species. The behavior may also occur in captivity, however, we have not attempted to permit it, since our flights are only 8 ft. x 12 ft. x 8 ft., far smaller than the space they occupy in nature. The potential for aggression between male parents and offspring, though low compared to other toucan species, is nevertheless, a real concern.

Diets for Collared Aracarís are simple. We feed a papaya based diet supplemented with grapes and cantaloupe. Other fruits are also suitable, with the exception of citrus, because of the high acid content (acid is thought to facilitate the uptake of iron). However, we believe it is useful to provide fruits that are available all year, since it may take time for the birds to adjust to new dietary items, many of which may have so short a season as to disappear from the marketplace at the very time the birds begin to eat them.

While toucans are primarily frugivorous, they require some additional source of protein. We have relied on Wayne's Bite (two sizes available: "chunk" and the smaller "bite") dog kibble, which is also very low in iron (80 ppm). This is fed ad lib, and the fruit is offered fresh every day. When chicks hatch we soak the dog kibble to soften it, and make it a moisture source rather than a moisture drain, in order to avoid chick dehydration.

All food items should be diced or provided in small pieces no larger than 1/2 in. diameter, and preferably 3/8 in. Toucans, unlike parrots, cannot chew their food, and generally eat it whole. Large chunks are, therefore, either inedible, or they may choke the bird. It is especially important to feed small pieces 3/8 inch, when young hatch, as the parents will attempt to stuff the larger pieces into the mouths of offspring choking them, or stopping their digestive systems.

Collareds are very hardy birds and a species that rarely suffers from iron storage disease, which, incidentally, is common in a variety of avian species besides toucans. Even so, a low iron diet is the wisest course to pursue, hence the use of Wayne's dog kibble. We have found they are also easy to hand rear when necessary, and these tame young, while not the best birds for future breeders, nonetheless make endearing pets.

Colorful and comical, Collareds are one of the few species of toucans that can be safely maintained in a mixed species flight. They are peaceful, quiet, relatively easy to reproduce in captivity, and they make the perfect addition to the softbill collection. ➤



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