

Black-headed Caiques by Ashley Herrod

Caiques are often called the clowns of the parrot world because of their bright colours and playful antics. They are fearless and bold and love to fool around. In Australia the name is pronounced as in “cake” but in the USA it is pronounced as “cai-eeks”.

Two subspecies of Black-headed Caique occur:

1. *Pionites melanocephalus melanocephalus* is the nominate subspecies and has orange legs, flanks and under-tail coverts. Distribution is Brazil, north of the Amazon River; French Guiana, Suriname, Guyana, south east Venezuela and south east Colombia. This is the subspecies present in Australian aviaries.

2. *Pionites melanocephalus pallidus* is a paler form, with yellowish legs, flanks and under-tail coverts. Distribution is southern Colombia to north eastern Ecuador and north eastern Peru.

Housing

Caiques can be kept and bred in suspended or conventional aviaries. I have kept mine in both with good results. They do a lot of jumping and climbing much like lorikeets. I have seen them housed in quite small breeding cages, however given the room they will certainly use and explore a bigger area. Mine are housed in steel conventional aviaries measuring 3 m long x 1.2 m wide x 2.2 m high. I provide several branches at different heights. The floor is concrete with a drain for hosing the aviary down for cleaning. During hot weather, the caiques will sit quietly on a perch low to the ground where it is coolest.

Diet

In captivity caiques are best kept on a small amount of fruits and a majority of vegetables as the basis of their diet. It should be chopped and provided in a clean non-porous dish that can be washed daily. Some popular fruits and veg that may be fed to caiques include apple, passionfruit, grapes, orange, pomegranate, blue berries, banana, strawberries, tomato, corn (kernels or on the cob), capsicum, cucumber, broccoli, carrot, peas etc.

A good quality clean seed mix can be provided along with pellets to introduce vitamins and minerals that may be lacking in a caique's diet. Seed and/or pellets alone should never form the sole diet of a caique, but should rather supplement a diet of vegetables and fruits. Caiques love nuts such as almonds and walnut halves. Nuts should not be offered ad-libitum, but offered perhaps as one almond or half walnut per bird per day. The number of nuts can be increased during the breeding season for parents raising chicks.

Caiques enjoy fresh leafy branches to browse on, which can provide food such as seeds and berries but also something to chew on to keep their beaks in good shape as well as their mind! Suitable non-toxic branches include apple trees, eucalyptus, pine, tea tree, pyracantha and cotoneaster. Caiques love to clamber around in the branches and chew them apart, which is great therapy for a captive

parrot. Fresh water should be provided at all times. To allow caiques to bathe, which most love to do, a wide shallow bowl is suitable.

Breeding

Black-headed caiques are capable of breeding at three years of age, as did my pair. DNA sexing from blood or feathers, or surgical sexing are the reliable ways to determine the sex of a caique because as a species they are sexually monomorphic and cannot be sexed based on plumage or size.

Caiques prefer to roost in a nestbox or log all year round, so it is important to provide them with one. The size of the nest box is not critical, as caiques are not fussy. However for breeding pairs, the entrance diameter should not be larger than necessary: they like an entrance that they can just squeeze into. An entrance diameter of 6 cm (2.3 inches) is good. The usual clutch size is 4 eggs, which are laid 2-3 days apart from each other. Incubation is done by the female only and takes approximately 24-27 days depending on how well she incubates and the temperature of the weather. Chicks fledge between 70-75 days old.

Caiques seem to only cope raising two chicks, but some pairs might raise three chicks. The correct diet is important while adults are feeding chicks and should consist of soft fruits and vegetables and may also include an egg and biscuit mix, so that the parents can easily regurgitate food to the chicks. It is necessary to feed caiques both in the morning and evening when young are in the nest to encourage frequent feeding of chicks by the parents. If possible a midday feed is extremely beneficial too. The adults develop a strong bond with their offspring and it is fascinating to watch them as a family group when the chicks have fledged.

Conclusion

Caiques are a lively, entertaining and attractive parrot to have in the aviary, and are not too much trouble to look after, but they can be noisy at times. In Australia a par-blue mutation exists and is a very attractive bird, but still in low numbers.