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Macaw Care

Macaws are a fascinating group of birds that comprise of the largest species of the parrot family. Some of the common species in the market include: Hyacinth, Blue and Gold, Military, Scarlet, Greenwing, Severe, and Hahn's Macaws. They are scientifically classified in the family Psittacidae and the subfamily Aratinginae. This subfamily is further divided into 3 genera: Andorhynchus, Cyanopsitta, and Ara. Andorhynchus is differentiated from Ara by the presence of a bare ring around the eye and a naked area at the base of the lower mandible. The genus Cyanopsitta has intermediate characteristics of the other 2 genera. These birds vary widely in size, with the hyacinth weighing between 1,250-1,400 grams and the Hahn's only weighing 165 grams. Due to the great variety of macaws, only the more common species will be discussed in further detail.

Hyacinth Macaw (*Andorhynchus hyacinthinus*)

The largest of all parrots, Hyacinths weigh up to 4 pounds and measure up to 100 cm in length. The plumage is a rich blue and the underside of the tail is dark gray. Their normal range is throughout most of inland Brazil. In the wild, these birds are usually found in pairs. Average commercial parrot cages are no match for the immense strength of these macaws. These birds will form very strong bonds with their owners. A stranger should be careful around these birds since their powerful beaks can cause significant damage.

Blue and Gold Macaw (*Ara ararauna*)

This species is about 90 cm in length. The forehead is usually green, and upper parts are generally blue, while the under parts are yellow. They have a fairly large range from southern Costa Rica through Central South America. This species is very popular for its beautiful coloration and its ability to bond with their owner. Blue and gold macaws are the most common species in the pet trade and the easiest to breed.

Green Wing Macaw (*Ara chloroptera*)

The length of green wings is 90 cm and their plumage is dark red with lesser wing covert green. Most of the tail feathers and wing coverts are a light blue. Distribution is from southern Panama through central South America. The green winged is the second largest macaw and is a close relative to the scarlet. Some reports say that these birds are slightly quieter than other species of macaws.

Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao*)

Similar in appearance to the green winged, scarlet macaws are smaller and have yellow shoulder coverts. Their range overlaps the green winged and extends north to Mexico. This bird originates from tropical lowlands and should not be kept at temperatures less than 65 degrees Fahrenheit.

Military Macaw (*Ara militaris*)

This macaw is around 70 cm and has an overall olive green plumage with a red forehead. The distribution is predominantly throughout Mexico with some isolated sites in South America, at altitudes greater than 800 meters. These macaws are able to withstand a large variation in temperatures.

Severe Macaw (*Ara severa*)

This species is also called a chestnut-fronted macaw and is only one half the size of a blue and gold macaw, at 46 cm in length. The plumage of this bird is generally green. The forehead, chin, and margins of cheeks bordering bare facial areas are chestnut brown. The primaries are blue, while the underside of the tail and flight feathers are dark orange. The bird ranges from Panama through northern South America.

Hahn's Macaw (*Ara nobilis*)

Also called the red-shouldered macaw, this is the smallest macaw species at 30 cm in length. This bird is predominantly green with red under wing coverts. Originating from northeastern South America, these birds are found in the lowlands and are rarely at altitudes over 400m. They are commonly observed in large flocks, and it does not seem that these birds form permanent pair bonds like the other macaw species. These birds are also considered to be the best talkers of the macaw family.

Environment

The environment should be different depending on the individual species. The cage size will vary with the size of the bird. It should be large enough for the bird to fully expand its wings without touching the sides. Due to the powerful beaks of the larger species, the wire should be at least 3mm thick, and the spot welds should be less than 10 cm apart. The smaller species (Hahn's) do not have any special cage requirements.

The cage door should be large enough so that all areas of the cage can be reached when the door is open. Food bowls and drinking utensils should be situated at perch height, and should be solidly mounted so that they cannot be moved or tipped over by the birds.

The perches should be of various thicknesses. The thinnest perch should be large enough that the toes cannot encircle the entire perch. A concrete perch is advised to help nail wear and reduce their sharpness. The concrete perch should be placed at the roosting point of the cage or at the level of the food dishes. The amount of perches in a cage should be limited to 2-3, since macaw's long tails are often broken on improperly placed perches.

Do not place the cage in front of constant, direct sunlight or in front of vents. Cage toys prevent the bird from becoming bored with the environment; however, the toys should be evaluated for durability, potential to be toxic, and potential to be ingested. The cage bottoms should be cleaned daily to evaluate proper dietary intake and fecal production.

Behavior

Macaws are very sensitive birds and can become extremely bonded to their owners. If they do not receive adequate socialization during their first years of life, they will develop bad habits, such as screaming and feather picking. Teaching a bird up and down commands is very important to creating a well-behaved pet.

They may show aggression toward their owner's friends or family members. These birds can become extremely noisy, with a far carrying voice. It is almost impossible to keep a macaw without experiencing some amount of furniture damage.

When breeding macaws, the compatibility of a pair is extremely important. If a male and female do not like each other, a successful breeding is extremely unlikely. Birds that are hand tame will often become aggressive during breeding and brooding activity.

Diet

We recommend that 75-90% of the bird's diet be a pelleted diet that is formulated for macaws. The rest of the diet should consist of a mixture of fruit, vegetables, and pasta. Birds should not be given products that have chocolate, sugar, or avocado in them. Due to macaws' higher energy requirements, they may be given some hard shell nuts (Brazil nuts, walnuts, etc.). Sunflower seeds and peanuts should be avoided since they offer little nutritional value and are extremely high in fat. Breeding macaws may need additional amounts of protein in their diet for increased energy.

Medical Problems

Some of the common diseases manifested in macaws include: feather picking, bacterial, viral, and fungal infections, papillomas, proventricular dilatation disease, toxicities, chlamydial infections, and nutritional deficiencies. Annual checkups with a qualified avian veterinarian should be performed to monitor for early signs of disease. Diseases are easier to diagnose and can be prevented with consistent monitoring. Through regular health checks and good husbandry, your macaw can serve as a good companion for many years into the future.