The Crimson-bellied Conure *Pyrrhura perlata* is undoubtedly one of my favourite species. All the *Pyrrhuras* make wonderful aviary birds but for me the beauty of the Crimson-bellied sets it apart. A quick look at the species and you are dazzled by the crimson breast and under wing coverts but examine the plumage carefully and you see a multitude of colours. The colours are complex and the green plumage is more blue than might be realised.

I love their cheeky and inquisitive personalities, their constant activity in the aviary and their wonderful skills in flight which can never be seen in a cage. It was a dream of mine to have a small flock of this species.

In August 2010 I acquired a male and a female on the same day from different breeders. The male was parent-reared and six months old. The female was hand-reared, about nine weeks old and said to be weaned. She was not weaned. I continued to spoon-
feed her, through the mesh of the inside cage, for about five weeks. My policy is always to spoon-feed for as long as a bird needs it.

Most breeders sell hand-reared young too soon. I understood that she still needed to be spoon-fed. Good, strong specimens result from weaning at the bird’s pace, as opposed to forced-weaning. Because she was socialised with her own species from the day she left the breeder, she exhibits totally normal behaviour. To watch the pair there is no indication which one was hand-reared and which one was parent-reared.

Hand-rearing -- with reluctance
In 2012 the pair nested for the first time and hatched two young. When the eldest was 25 days old I was concerned that they were not well fed so reluctantly I removed them from the nest. They fed immediately from the spoon and seemed very hungry. There was a significant difference in their weights, the oldest (male) weighing 92g and the smaller one (female) only 68g.

They were silent and seemed quite nervous. Not until the third day did they make weak food soliciting calls. On the following day the eldest chick was making loud calls and the next day the little one also made strong calls. After that they were very vocal when being fed, making the short, rapid calls typical of chicks of the genus.

The male had already reached his peak weight, indicating he had been well fed. The female actually lost weight for five days. Her peak weight was only 77g at 40 days. I weighed them before the first (6.30am) and last (11pm) feeds of the day. Every day they lost
weight overnight, usually 3g or 4g. I had a problem in that the minimum temperature in the brooder was too high so the heat was turned off and a heater was placed near it. Although it was June it was quite cool at night.

I continued to use the heater at night until the eldest was 41 days old by which time they were almost fully feathered except for the back and rump and the shorter tail; also the ear coverts were still in pin feathers.

At the age of 37 days the young male was vigorously flapping his wings. When he was 42 days old I put them in a small cage for a few hours during the day. By the age of 48 days they were both testing their wings and flying quite well in the kitchen. Indeed, when I let them out to fly they amused me by flying back to the brooder, a few feet away, going inside and settling down for their afternoon nap!

Eventually they were housed in an outdoor aviary and they are still with me -- quite nippy and combative at times!

Parent-rearing and family group
In 2013 their parents reared two young. In 2014 they reared four young. None were removed from their parents and the eight birds lived happily together as a family group. They had an indoor cage 2m long, in which they were shut every night, and an outdoor flight 4.5m long.
In 2015 I stopped the female from laying by removing the front of the nest-box, which was hung against welded mesh. Thus the interior was so light she had no desire to lay eggs there. Why did I stop them breeding? First, the group sized seemed perfect for the size of the accommodation. Secondly, if I had sold the young they would almost certainly have been put into small breeding cages which is how most people in the UK keep them. I did not want my birds, used to space and the family interactions, to be kept like this. I enjoy so much seeing them foraging in a group on branches of berries, just as they would in the wild. And yes! I have been lucky enough to see this species in the rainforest of Brazil!

The family group went obediently, almost as one bird, into the inside cage to be shut in for the night. It is a different story with the two hand-reared birds. They often challenge me, posturing aggressively, strutting about, and being reluctant to enter until I show them a stick. They have never been threatened with it -- they just don’t like sticks.

Now imagine if one of these birds had been sold as a companion. I feel sure it would be nippy and unco-operative. In contrast, the
parent-reared young were extremely well behaved, with me and with the other family members. There was no dominance or aggression. These birds live in family groups in the wild, with older siblings helping to feed the latest young ones.

I would not disrupt this family group but if I had taken out a young one when it was independent for a life as a companion bird, I feel sure its behaviour would be excellent because it had grown up to follow the example set by its parents and, in effect, to “do as it was told.” For example, I have seen the adults “instruct” the young not to fly into the outside flight when the hatch was opened in the morning because they believed (due to loud alarm calls of a Blackbird) there was a threat in the neighbourhood. When they were satisfied there was no danger, all the young flew out.

I should point out that I would never add another bird to this group. It would be attacked as an intruder and probably quickly killed.

**Growing up as part of a family of its own species, is the best start we can give to any species of bird.** By hand-rearing young or fostering them to species outside their genus we are, in effect, denying them their birthright. This sets the foundation for abnormal behaviours which will usually have a negative effect for the entire duration of their lives.

Events of 2016
The group lived together happily without ever having a quarrel. In
the spring of 2016 I saw that the male wanted to nest again: he was gnawing at the roosting box. As my birds from spacious aviaries will never go into small breeding cages, I gave the four 2013 young to Paradise Park in Cornwall. The plan was to put them in a very large aviary in the woodland area, already occupied by a pair of Blue-throated Macaws.

Later DNA sexing showed that all four of the 2013 young were males. The four were removed from the aviary, the first two on June 7 when one was being picked on. This bird was an assertive male whose presence the old male resented as soon as the roosting box was replaced by the nest-box. From that day the equilibrium of the group was destroyed. There was an egg in the nest on June 8; it had gone the next day so the other two 2014 young were removed.

The first eggs probably disappeared: I was away for two weeks from June 22 at the PS of Australia meeting in Brisbane. On July 9 there were seven eggs in the nest and it was apparent that some had been laid by the 2013 female. Eventually both females were incubating five eggs each in the same nest. The distinction between the two groups of eggs was clear although the females brooded side by side. Most of the day (and night) all four birds were simultaneously in the nest.

Most of the eggs were infertile, perhaps because the male had mated with only the mature female. The first chick hatched on July 16, so it must have been laid about June 22. It was difficult to check the nest but by July 21 a second chick had hatched. Both females remained in the nest nearly all the time, although the 2014 female
was occasionally seen outside. July 27 was the first day on which the matriarch female was seen to leave the nest.

The eldest chick was growing well but the youngest was small and usually had little or no food in its crop. I had no intention of removing it for hand-rearing. But a sudden and unexpected drama changed everything. At 4pm on August 6 I opened the door of the outside flight to offer some bunches of seeding dock, when the matriarch female flew into the safety passage.

I was shocked to see she had suffered a serious attack. The forehead and top of her head were raw and bleeding (every feather removed), one eye was half closed and she had a foot injury. I shut her out into the passage, got a small cage and moved her to a small aviary out of sight of other conures. Before releasing her from the net, I bathed her head, cleaned it with antiseptic and put some aloe vera gel on the wounds, to aid healing. She was in a state of shock and did not move from the perch for 24 hours. She did eat a little food.

After the loss of the matriarch the family group longer acted in unison. They seemed confused. Would the chicks be fed? On the following day it was evident that although the older chick had a little food in its crop, they were not feeding the small one. I feared that the male might now want to mate with his daughter and that he would kill the chicks. I reluctantly removed them for hand-rearing but the small chick died the next day. It had almost no feeding response which was why it had not been fed. Severely underweight, it appeared that there had been something seriously
wrong with it.

If *Pyrrhuras* attack one of their clan, it would be killed if you returned it to the aviary. So this was very disappointing for me. I do not know what prompted the attack. It was the end of my experiment. I had hoped this would be the start of another small family group. Now my hopes were shattered. The two 2014 young went to join their siblings at Paradise Park and, after three months apart, male and female were happily reunited.

The other 2016 chick was successfully reared. She has proved to be totally enchanting, extraordinarily sweet and affectionate. Unlike most *Pyrrhuras*, she is not nippy or naughty and does not fly on top of cabinets to evade capture when let out to fly! She always returns like a little boomerang back to my head.

For information on feeding and other aspects of *Pyrrhura* care, please refer to my book *Pyrrhura Parakeets (Conures): Aviculture, Natural History, Conservation.*

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