



Care of your new Pionus Parrot

Pionus are a family of 7 or 8 species of medium sized South American Parrots (30-40cm). 5 of these species are available in the UK, but only 3 are regularly found. They have a lifespan of up to 30 years, so a decision to keep them is a long-term commitment and with it comes great responsibility.

The common species are Maximillian's Pionus, the White-capped and the Blue-headed. Like their larger cousins, the Amazon Parrots, they are generally green, but have many other shades of blues, purples and the bright scarlet of their undertails. These colour combinations make them very pleasing to the eye. Both sexes are similarly plumaged, but the eyes are slightly bigger, and the eye ring surrounding the eye is brighter, in mature males – however this cannot be relied upon. Pionus are becoming more popular as both pet birds and as breeding stock, due to their relatively quiet voices and, unlike most of the larger pet parrots, they do not tend to attach themselves to just one person. Strangely, the larger Maximillian is, in my experience, the quietest species. Some birds will learn a few words and whistle a few tunes.

Your first decision will have been whether you are going to keep one as a house pet or a pair for breeding. This will have determined the housing that you require. The best cage for a single house pet will be made of metal bars and should be a minimum of 75cm x 75cm and be 80cm tall. If caging your Pionus in the house, be aware that fumes from the kitchen, especially those from overheating non-stick pans, are harmful to all birds. Do not place the cage in hot or draughty areas or in strong sunlight where the bird cannot shelter. Cages sold specifically for Amazons or Grey parrots will be perfectly ok and should be furnished with parrot toys, which should be changed regularly to stop the bird from becoming bored. Hand-raised babies are generally best as household pets, but you must make sure that they are fully weaned before you bring them home.

A breeding aviary should be a minimum of 3 metres long x 2 metres wide and be 2 metres tall. This should have a roof to protect the birds from the weather and it is essential that they should have a dry, draught-free shelter for them to retreat into. I cover the top half of the sides of my aviary during winter to give extra protection. Pionus are generally hardy birds and are usually ok in Britain if housed this way. Nest boxes, which should be made of 25mm plywood, should be 40cm high and be 30cm square. The hole should be no less than 8cm in diameter (the birds will make this bigger if they require it) and the base of the box should have a layer of untreated wood shavings. Both cages and aviaries should have natural perches of different diameters – branches cut from fruit trees are ideal.

Pionus do well if fed on a good quality mix of seeds, a proprietary parrot mix is ideal, but this must be supplemented daily with small pieces of fresh fruit, soaked pulses, vegetables and greens. Do not feed chocolate, cabbage, potatoes, avocados or citrus fruits - as these can be harmful. When they are breeding they appreciate some moistened egg food. Mineral supplements and oyster shell grit can be added to this. Fresh, clean water should be available at all times for both drinking and bathing.

Pionus on average lay 2 or 3 eggs in a clutch, but 4 or 5 is not uncommon with the smaller species. The eggs will be brooded mainly by the female for approximately 4 weeks. The chicks will be in the nest for a further 6 weeks and will be independent at about 4 months old. The chicks can be ringed with closed aluminium size T rings at around the time that their eyes start to open. Be vigilant at the time that the chicks start colouring up in case of aggression towards them by the cock bird. They will continue to put on weight for the next few months and will be fully mature and ready to breed at approximately 3 years old.

Pionus have a reputation of being susceptible to respiratory complaints. However, even a healthy Pionus will make a sound that sounds to us like wheezing. Make yourself aware of the normal level of this noise and consult a vet if it becomes louder or more often heard.