



## Sierra Parakeets



The Sierra Parakeet - *Bolbyrynychus aymara* - is as a South American species of parakeet similar in size and shape to the Australian Grass Parakeets. The forehead and crown are dark grey with a tinge of brown. The cheeks, neck and throat are whitish pale grey. The rest of the bird is predominantly green, the upper parts being darker than underneath as this is paler and has a yellowy background. There is a faint bluish tinge on the wings and in the tail, mainly the longer central feathers. The beak is a silvery- white colour.

Although, I have been told that the males have darker grey on the head and brighter breast colouring, I do not think this is reliable when they are young, as my hen contradicted this being darker than the cock on the head. This head colour difference has now totally reversed and now the hen is fully mature, this is now lighter. The behaviour of the cock is the best indicator that I can determine. He is very protective of his mate and calls almost continuously in the spring. There are two main calls, one being a soft whistle, and the other what can only be described as a “chuckling twitter”.

The Sierra Parakeet was first imported into the UK by Gerald Durrell, of Jersey Zoo fame, in 1959. He only brought in 8 not realising that they had never been seen in the UK before. The first UK breeding was by A. Marques in 1962. The first breeding by a FBL member, as far as I can ascertain, was in 1964 by C.D Beckett and he was awarded a bronze breeder’s medal for this.

When I bred from my Sierras for the first time they were housed in a west facing flight 5ft x 3ft x 6ft tall. This flight has no indoor section, but is roofed with twinwall poly-carbonate sheeting, has a solid wooden back and during cold, damp weather more twinwall is screwed onto the front to halfway down. I use 16 gauge 1” x ½” galvanised wire and is double wired between the flights to provide protection against their toes being bitten by their neighbours.

Feeding is managed using a triple dish swing feeder accessed from a safety porch. The ½” thick plywood nest box is also in this safety porch, so that it can be looked in with minimal disturbance to the birds. The perches were apple and cherry branches. The birds delight in stripping the bark of these within a few days, balancing on some of the finest twigs to get at every last bit. This aviary also has supplementary lighting, so that they have 15 hours of daylight. This is supplied by 60 watt bulbs attached to a dimmer unit and there is a low nightlight for the rest of the time.

I feed them each morning with Pink Lady or Golden Delicious apple cut into 10mm squares, a good quality parrot mix with extra Safflower, foreign finch mixed millets, and slightly moistened Cede eggfood supplemented with Birdcare Company Daily Essentials 3and Proboost Supermax. Tapwater, which is left to stand for a minimum of 24 hours, has Calcivet added and this is freely available. On alternate days they also have soaked pulses or chopped carrot. The fruit and veg is always kept in small pieces as I have noticed that many Parrotlike birds pick up a piece, take one bite and then drop it onto the floor. By keeping the pieces small wastage is kept to a minimum.

The hen lays a clutch of about 6 eggs, which are incubated for about 19 days. In my experience the first 3 or 4 chicks hatch within 24 hours of each other, the rest at intervals of one day. This is due to incubation starting in earnest after the third egg is laid. When they hatch they chicks are sparsely covered with white/ yellow down that fills out and gets thicker as they grow.

The hen allows me to inspect the eggs and chicks everyday with no distress. They grow strongly and at 10 days old, when the green adult feathers are starting to emerge, I attempt to ring them with size L anodised aluminium rings. I usually need several goes at ringing due to the rings either being removed or sliding off. These have to be refit and not I find that the right age to ring them is when they are about 13-15 days old. Ringing is quite difficult as the long length of the toes and short legs meant that to put the rings on I have to push them over the main leg joint to get the toes through and then slide the ring back down.

The first chick fledges at the age of 6 weeks and for me is found to be a perfect replica of its parents. The rest of the chicks fledge within the next 7 days. Sierras are independent at approx 8 weeks old, but after they bred for the first time I left them all together as a group. When the chicks were 18 weeks old I had to remove them from the breeding aviary as the two suspected cocks were bullying their father, up until then all 8 birds had been quite friendly all of them roosting in the nest box together. When removing them Sue, my wife, sexed them using the needle and thread method. She decided that we had 2 cocks and 4 hens. This nearly matched what I had determined from observing their behaviour. Since they have been separated from their parents their behaviour has changed slightly and I now have to agree with Sue. Experience has now confirmed our method of determining gender, but is not always 100% accurate.