

Blue and gold macaw

South America

Ara ararauna

Also known as blue & yellow macaw.

Blue & gold macaws are prized for their beauty and personality. Blue & golds are among the largest parrots with tails almost as long as their bodies. Macaws are lively boisterous birds and require generous living space. Their beaks are large and strong for opening large nuts.

Blue & golds are a brilliant ultramarine blue above and gold beneath. They have a black throat that distinguishes them from the Blue-throated macaw. The naked facial skin is white and has rows of black feather forming lines. The facial skin blushes with excitement. The tail is long and tapered, blue above and gold beneath.

Blue & golds have an extensive range throughout most of tropical South America from eastern Panama and lowland Colombia, and a large range throughout the Amazon basin. They inhabit forest of many types. They feed on locally available fruits; especially palm nut fruits, nuts and buds. They nest in cavities, especially in dead palm trunks. Usually fly in pairs or small family groups but sometimes in flocks of up to 25 birds.

Length 30-33 inches. Weight 850-1300 gm

Life Span - Up to 50 years. Age at maturity – 3-6 years.

Immature birds have dark eyes which change over time from black to grey to white to yellow. This progression can be used to estimate the age of a macaw.

Macaws are not as long lived as cockatoos. Breeding age is up to approximately 30-35 years. A 40 year old macaw shows definite signs of aging. A 50 year old macaw is very old.

Personality - Young hand-raised macaws are very adaptable and typically easily handled by many people. They must be socialized and exposed to a variety of experiences (veterinary visits, other pets, visitors, wing and nail trims, car rides, etc.) at a young age to avoid fearful behavior. Macaws can

make excellent pets, especially hyacinths and blue & golds, although some have a tendency to become nippy. Macaws can be very loud as well as destructive. While some speak, most macaws have limited ability to mimic. Macaws are very intelligent and relatively easy to train. They are a favorite for shows and trick training.

Activities - Macaws are playful and love to chew. They should always be provided with toys, especially wooden blocks that can be chewed, and branches from non-toxic trees. In order to ensure safety companion macaws should not be allowed unsupervised freedom in the home as they often encounter toxins or dangerous items. Young macaws should be socialized to many people and exposed to a variety of situations such as new cages, toys, visits to the veterinarian, handling by friends, wing and nail clips, etc. to avoid fear of novel situations.

Dietary needs - All macaws need plenty of energy for good health. Many of their natural foods, especially palm nuts are rich in oils, and calories. Macaws should be fed a formulated (pelleted or extruded diet) as a basis for good nutrition. The diet should be supplemented with fresh fruits and vegetables daily to add variety and psychological enrichment. Feed approximately ½ cup Kaytee Exact. Also offer ½ cup of fresh fruits and vegetables. Give 2-3 nuts as treats. Small amounts of seed may also be given as treats especially as rewards for good behavior. Vitamin supplements are not needed for birds that are eating a formulated diet.

Blue & golds are moderately difficult to hand feed from a very early age. They require a high fat diet and do well with additional protein as well especially at a very young age. Kaytee Exact Macaw is a good choice. A small amount of peanut butter or ground sunflower seeds may be added to increase protein and fat levels further but adding too much can slow digestion.

Identification - All companion and breeding birds should be individually identified to assist in recovery if lost and assist in maintenance of medical and genealogical records. Many breeders apply closed leg bands when chicks are young. While they present a slight risk of entrapment closed bands are preferable to no identification, especially for breeding birds. Microchips, which can be implanted into the muscle or under the skin, are a reliable means of identification but require electronic readers to verify

identification. Tattoos may be used but often fade or become illegible with time. Foot prints may have some application in identification.

Grooming - Routine bathing or showering is vital to maintaining good plumage and skin condition. Birds can be misted and allowed to dry in a warm room or in the sun, or dried with a blow drier. An ideal way to bathe macaws is to put them in a cage outside, sprinkle them with the hose, and allow them to dry in the sun. Macaws are strong fliers. Most of the primary flight feathers (10 feathers closest to the tip of the wing) should be clipped to prevent flight. Clip only enough so the bird will glide to the floor.

Sexing - Macaw species show no obvious sexual dimorphism (visual difference between the species) therefore endoscopic examination (Surgical sexing) or laboratory sexing techniques are needed for accurate sex determination. Males are usually larger and have larger heads. The sex ratio of wild caught birds was historically predominately female. This led to frequent hybridization with scarlet macaws, which have a predominately male sex ratio. The resulting hybrid is called the Catalina macaw.

Housing - Macaws are very active and should be provided the largest cage that space and budget allows. Macaws **MUST** be allowed space to fully extend their wings or muscle atrophy will occur rendering them unable to fly. As macaws are strong chewers, durable cage construction is very important. Many are also adept at opening cage latches. Locks or escape proof latches may be necessary on cages.

Ideally pet macaws can also have a large cage outdoors for bathing and exercise.

Breeding – Blue & gold macaws are bred regularly in captivity. Breeding season is usually in spring and early summer, although some pairs will breed almost year round. Clutch size is usually 2-4 eggs but sometimes more. Incubation period is average 25.5 days (23-27 days). Some additional high fats seeds, like sunflower seed, should be added to the diet during the breeding season to stimulate reproduction. Inexperienced hand feeders should allow the parents to feed for the first few weeks.

Nest Box - Large horizontal wooden boxes (approx. 24"x24"x 36" or 48") are well accepted by large macaws while some will breed well in a vertical

wooden box (approx. 12" x 12" x 36"). Macaws should be provided with plentiful chewing material. Pine shavings make excellent nest box bedding.

Cage size - Macaws must be able to open their wings without touching the sides of their breeding cage (wing span is approximately 3 feet) and should have adequate space to move freely between 2 perches. Example of appropriate suspended cage size for large macaws is 5' x 5' x 8', although larger is better. Cages should be suspended 3-4 feet above the ground.

Cages for large macaws must be constructed of strong wire, which can withstand chewing. Twelve gauge welded wire, 1" x 1" works well for most pairs. Chain link may be needed for pairs that break welded wire caging. When breeding macaws, noise and proximity to neighbors must be considered.

Mate aggression is uncommon in macaws. Pair bonds are strong but not necessarily life long.

Common diseases and disorders

- Proventricular Dilatation Disease (Macaw wasting disease)
- Feather picking
- Chewing flight and tail feathers by juveniles
- Oral and cloacal papillomas
- Psittacosis (chlamydophila infection)
- Bacterial, viral and fungal infections
- Constricted toe syndrome, chicks
- Beak malformations - chicks
- Pancreatitis
- Allergies, especially to cockatoos
- Kidney Disease - gout
- Toxicity, heavy metal poisoning

Many common health problems of macaws can be prevented by good diet, nutrition and routine health care. Routine veterinary examination (annually) can help you to keep your pet in excellent health and enhance your relationship with your bird.

Conservation status – Common, stable – Blue & Gold macaws are listed on Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Fauna and Flora, but only because almost all parrots were listed as a group. Blue & golds are very common in captivity.