

Scarlet macaw

Central and South America

Ara macao

Also known as red & yellow macaw.

Scarlet macaws are prized for their beauty and personality. Scarlets are among the largest parrots and have especially long tails often 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 (large species).

Scarlet macaws are a brilliant red with yellow coverts on the wings and dark blue flight feathers. They are distinguished from the similar green-winged macaw by size (Greenwing is larger) by the color of the wing coverts, and by the lack of facial feathers. The naked facial skin is white with no feather lines. The tail is long and tapered. The under tail coverts and rump patch are blue.

Scarlets have an extensive range throughout most of the Amazon basin of tropical South America. South American scarlets have green tips on the yellow wing coverts. A separate population occurs in Central America from southern Mexico to Panama. The largest and most striking scarlets are found in Nicaragua. This population, which was recently described as a subspecies, has little to no green on the wing coverts.

Scarlets inhabit lowland tropical forest and woodlands. They feed on locally available fruits; especially palm nut fruits, nuts and buds. They nest in cavities, especially in large soft wood trees in which they can modify the nest cavity. Usually fly in pairs or small family groups but sometimes in flocks of up to 25 birds.

Length 32-38 inches. Weight 900-1200 gm

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

Immature birds have dark eyes that change over time from black to gray 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. Scarlets 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 of Kaytee Exact daily. 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.

Scarlets 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 handrearing formula is a good choice. A small amount of peanut butter or ground sunflower seeds may be added to increase protein and fat levels.

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 legs 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. Footprints 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 is predominately males. This has led to frequent hybridization with blue and gold macaws, which had a predominately female sex ratio. The resultant hybrid is called a 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 – Scarlet macaws are bred frequently 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

- Clostridium infection

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 – Endangered in Central America, stable in South America – Scarlet macaws are listed on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Fauna and Flora, because of their rarity in Central American where they have declined due to habitat destruction and trade pressures. Scarlets are very common in captivity but not bred as frequently as blue & gold macaws. International trade is limited and requires both import and export permits.