

Consider A Caique As Your Next Pet Bird

Learn more about these colorful, confident on-the-go parrots.

By Sandee L. Molenda, C.A.S.

Rarely do aviculturists find themselves in unanimous agreement. However, rarely have I met someone who didn't agree on the engaging and clownish personality of the caique parrot. These small (9 inches) but sturdily-built South American parrots are highly desired pets due to their beautiful plumage and lively, inquisitive natures. Caiques (commonly pronounced "ky eek" in the United States) love to play and are often described as natural clowns with a sweet, somewhat mischievous nature. These high-energy parrots require an owner who appreciates and nurtures their unique personalities.

Courtesy Shontall Ross, New Jersey

There are two species of caique parrots. The black-headed caique (left) and the white-bellied caique (right).

There are two parrot species of caique each with several subspecies. Neither species can be sexed visually. The black-headed caique (*Pionites melanocephala melanocephala*) originates in the Guianas, Brazil, Columbia, Venezuela, Ecuador and Peru. In the subspecies *P. m. pallida*, the throat, flanks and thighs are clear yellow and the band around the nape is pale orange-yellow.

The second parrot species, often called the white-bellied caique (*Pionites leucogaster leucogaster*), hails from Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru. The name "white-bellied" might be a little misleading. "As all caique species have white bellies, yellow-thighed is a bit more accurate common name," said breeder Gail Worth of Aves International. The subspecies *P. l. xanthurus* possesses paler plumage with the thighs, sides of body and under tail-coverts as well as top and underside of the tail yellow. The lower back and upper tail-coverts are green interspersed with yellow. The thighs and sides of the subspecies *P. l. xanthomeria* are yellow. The topside of the tail is green, the underside blackish. The periphthalmic eye ring is gray and the beak horn-colored with a grayish base. The feet are dark gray.

"The yellow-thighed caique is somewhat less common in U.S. aviculture than the black-headed caique due to the number of birds imported for breeding stock in the 1970s and 1980s," noted Worth.

Not only playful and energetic, caiques also excel intellectually. They enjoy exploring new objects, whether it is a new puzzle toy or surfing in a new acquaintance's hair. The best caique pets are well-socialized through frequent handling by many people. Some caiques exhibit territorial behavior, especially around the cage. "Caiques have an extra dose of self-confidence, but are intelligent enough to know when their bluff has been called," said Nancy Speed of Mississippi Pea Patch Aviaries. "They will gracefully worm their way out of any situation they cannot control."

Both parrot species of caique have a variety of vocalizations that consist of screeches, shrieks and squawks. The black-headed caique's unique call is often described as a sort of "toot," which might be used to communicate with other caiques within the flock. Talking isn't a caique's area of strength. Their relatively quiet voices are often compared to conures and Pionus parrots. They're more likely to mimic sounds than human speech. Of course, it depends upon the individual caique's talent and the time each owner invests in training.

Caiques often hop or jump rather than fly to get from place to place. They'll need to be protected from other animals and unsafe objects while playing on the floor. "Some people say they are not good flyers, but I believe that is a misnomer," said Speed. "My breeders are in flights 6-feet long, and they fly a lot. Their flight is not swift and direct like a hawk-headed parrot, but flying is important."

A Cage With Enough Room

Because of their acrobatic displays, caiques require extra large cages for their relatively small size. Many breeders recommended a minimum cage size of 312-feet high by 3-feet deep by 4-feet in length. Choose one with safe bar spacing, no more than 34 or 78 an inch. Lots of perches, wooden chew toys and a variety of frequently rotated toys will keep your caique satisfied and entertained. Caiques seem to delight in the thrill of movement – hence the hopping and hanging from objects – so swings and other mobile toys, even the outstretched hand of a person, are favorites of these birds.

Out-of-the-cage time is very important for caiques, and they should have a playgym or cage playtop with lots of toys. Most caiques appreciate stripping nontoxic branches with the leaves still attached, and they'll even bathe in these if the leaves are soaked. Bathtime is a relished caique activity, and many prefer a leaf bath.

As with most parrot species, a nutritious diet maintains their overall good health and longevity. A high-quality pelleted or seed diet for small hookbills supplemented with equal amounts of vegetables, fruit and greens works best. Provide legumes, grains, whole-grain breads and an occasional nut on a regular basis. "Caiques love fruit, and I think the extra sugar is not detrimental to their health since they are so energetic," added Speed. "I also feed sprouted sunflower seed, which they relish along with orange, apple, green peas, fresh carrot and butter peas to my breeders."

Caiques reach maturity at two to three years of age, and can live past 20 years old if well cared for. Although not for everyone, those with an endless amount of energy and willingness to provide constant fun for this on-the-go parrot, a caique might just be perfect. I can guarantee that you will never be bored with a caique in the house.