

Ranch

BUSINESS BY TOM STEVENS

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A Parrot for Every Pocket

GREG PIO

Met the "parrotlet": a downsized bird for downsized times.

Santa Cruz bird fanciers **Sandee and Robert Molenda** met their first parrotlets at a Sacramento bird show in 1986, and the encounter changed their lives.

The couple previously had bred parakeets, cockatiels and finches for sale to pet shops, but when they spotted the miniature parrots, all that flew out the window. The Molendas bought their first breeding parrotlet pair, named their Santa Cruz Gardens home **Parrotlet Ranch**, and went into the parrotlet business big time.

"We're one of the biggest parrotlet breeders in the U.S. now," says Sandee Molenda, adding that Europe is where the real action is in parrotlets, a breed of pocket-sized parrots that could become the designer pet of the 1990's.

Like the pot-bellied pig that captivated yuppies in the 1980s, the parrotlet is an "apartment-sized" version of its larger namesake and is priced accordingly. While a full-sized parrot costs from \$500 to \$1,000, Molenda says, a parrotlet sells for \$100. Like their bigger cousins, parrotlets can "talk," and the males are brightly colored, running to turquoise, greens and yellows.

Before the recession, buyers who wanted a flashy jungle bird would shell out for a full-sized parrot, Molenda continues, but in these stringent times, parrotlets are becoming the bird of choice. So many people are making the choice that Molenda recently quit her "day job" as a paralegal to devote all her energy to her flock.

Since a breeding parrotlet pair can produce a clutch of eight to 10 eggs every two or three months, Molenda will have to keep her eye on a thousand eggs a year or lose a potential gross of \$100,000. In addition, each hatchling must be hand-fed every half hour, day and night, from the time it is 10 days old until it can be sold at six weeks.

"They can be very nasty little birds if you don't hand feed them," she says. "They'll give you a bite. But if you hand feed them, they get imprinted on people and mellow out."

While working as a paralegal, Molenda would keep her chicks in a special tote bag beside her desk so she could feed them. And while doing errands on cold days, she would plug their bag into the car cigarette lighter to keep them warm.



Parrotlet Ranch proprietor Sandee Molenda and her brood.