



# Introduction to Bird Care

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Parrots and other birds kept as pets (such as canaries, doves, and finches) have very specialized needs. The following information provides general guidelines for bird ownership. It's important to familiarize yourself with the needs of your bird.

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## Housing

Be sure to purchase a cage made specifically for birds. Other cages may contain metal parts that are toxic to birds; lead and zinc are highly toxic. The cage needs to be large enough for your bird to move freely both horizontally and vertically. The cage should be in good condition, and free of rust and broken pieces. It also needs to be made of strong enough material for your species of bird.

Paper is the best choice to line the cage. Paper is easy to change daily and makes it easy to monitor the quality of your bird's droppings. Corn cob and other scoop-able products are not recommended.

The location of your bird's cage is also important. Be sure your bird's cage is secured so that it is not easily knocked over. Avoid placing the cage near windows or doors, as drafts and sudden temperature changes can be detrimental to your bird's health.

Perching is a natural behavior in birds, so adding perches to the cage is an important part of their enrichment and exercise. Natural branches obtained from a pet store, or a live tree that has not been treated with anything (pesticides), are recommended. Terracotta perches also work well. We do not recommend sandpaper perches, as they can irritate the pads of your bird's feet. Perches should be arranged at various heights inside of the cage. Choose a variety of perch sizes and shapes to ensure that



your bird's feet are properly exercised.

Toys provide mental stimulation for birds, which is essential to their health. A variety of safe, sturdy, non-toxic toys that are suitable for your bird's size will help to keep them entertained. Check the toys for small parts which can be removed and swallowed by your bird. Avoid toys containing lead and zinc, and purchase toys from reputable stores. Clean the toys regularly.

The cage should be cleaned on a regular basis, at least once a week. Clean the cage with a mild detergent soap and rinse well. Use a brush to remove caked-on droppings or food. You can disinfect the cage with a mixture of 1 capful bleach to 1 gallon of water and rinse well.

## Diet

It is a common misconception that seeds are a sufficient diet for companion birds. After all, wild bird feeders are filled with seeds, right? However, wild birds eat a variety of other foods in the environment, including plants, insects, nectar, and small animals for some species. The same is true for cockatiels, parakeets, macaws, and other parrots. In their natural setting, these birds consume an unbelievable variety of foods.

In truth, eating a seed diet is like eating only snack foods and desserts. Seeds are very high in fat and deficient in other essential nutrients such as protein and vitamins A and D. Long-term, seed diets make birds susceptible to liver disease, skin and feather problems, obesity, and other medical conditions.

The current dietary recommendation for maintaining a happy, healthy avian companion includes feeding a combination of pelleted bird food, fresh foods, and a small number of treat foods. Treat foods should make up less than 10% of the diet and includes seeds, treat sticks, spray millet, and nuts.

There are bird-specific pelleted diets made by reputable pet food companies. We recommend Harrison's or Lafeber brands due to their exceptional quality. These diets are formulated based on current knowledge of the dietary requirements for birds. We recommend that pellets account for 60-70% of the diet for a healthy bird. The remaining 30-40% of the diet should be a variety of fresh, low-fat, low-salt foods which can include the following:

- Clean, fresh fruits and vegetables (raw or plain cooked)
- Cooked plain beans
- Cooked pasta and rice

NEVER feed avocados, eggplant, chocolate, onions, or high-fat, salty, or sugary foods.

The food should be changed at least once daily, though twice daily is preferred, especially in the summer months. Do not let the food that your bird has dropped sit on the bottom of the cage, as this can harbor harmful bacteria. Moist foods such as beans, rice, pasta, fruits, and vegetables should be offered in a separate dish from the dry foods and should be removed from the cage after a few hours. These foods support the rapid growth of bacteria if left out for too long.

Fresh water should be available at all times. Change the water at least once daily. Clean cups and bowls daily with mild soapy water and rinse thoroughly. We do not recommend adding any supplements (vitamins, minerals, antibiotics) to the water unless directed by your veterinarian; this can cause an aversion to water.

Transitioning to a new diet:

It's important to make dietary changes gradual. Birds can be very stubborn, especially if they are accustomed to a tasty treat food diet. Some birds will starve themselves before they will eat an unfamiliar diet, so make sure you see your bird eating when introducing diet changes.

To gradually change your bird's diet to pelleted food:

1. Place a layer of your bird's regular diet in their regular food bowl, and cover it with a layer of the new pelleted bird food. Mixing foods teaches your bird to select preferred items from the dish, so layering is the preferred approach.
2. Add a second food dish near your bird's favorite perching spot, usually near the highest perch in the cage. Place only a pelleted diet in this dish.
3. Gradually decrease the amount of the old diet and increase the number of pellets in the first dish, over time.

Monitor your bird's eating habits, and be creative! For stubborn cases, try offering only pellets for a while in the morning when your bird is most hungry. You can make the pellets tastier by soaking them in natural fruit juice. Some birds will take several months to accept a new diet, but most birds can be converted. Remember that it is the best thing for the health of your bird!

## Grooming

Wing clips, nail trims, and beak trims are important aspects of your bird's care, and they should only be performed by a trained professional. A proper wing clip will prevent your bird from flying into hazards such as windows, fans, and mirrors. It will also reduce the chances of your bird escaping through an open door or window. When the wings are properly clipped, the bird will be able to gently glide to the ground but is much less able to gain lift or fly a significant

distance. No wing clip can be guaranteed to prevent flight, as some birds can fly with very few feathers. Additionally, a bird can grow new feathers year-round. A bird that could not fly yesterday may fly today. Wing clips usually need to take place after a molt. This may be as infrequent as 1-3 times a year.

Nail trims are essential if you handle your bird frequently. Nail trims are often needed every 1-2 months.

Most birds will never need a beak trim. A bird that has suffered trauma to the area or has a genetic condition may need a regular beak trim to ensure that it can eat and drink normally. Some medical conditions can also cause an overgrowth of the beak. It's important to have any suspected overgrowth evaluated by a veterinarian.

Blood Feathers:

Blood feathers are young, growing, primary feathers. There is an artery that supplies blood to the immature feathers, and the artery is lost when the feather matures. If a blood feather is broken or accidentally cut, it typically needs to be pulled to minimize blood loss. You can use flour or cornstarch to temporarily stop the bleeding while you arrange care at your veterinarian or emergency veterinary center.

## **Safety**

Many common household items are toxic or poisonous to birds. Some common items include tobacco smoke, fumes from Teflon cookware, chemical house cleaners, some houseplants, and many aerosolized products. Contact your veterinarian if you are concerned that your bird may have been exposed to a toxin.

Other hazards for birds outside their cage include access to toxic materials, including dangerous foods, medicines, electrical cords, stovetops, open toilets, and other common household objects. Closely supervise your bird when they are out of the cage to prevent exposure to potential hazards. Jewelry is shiny and interesting to birds, so it is best to keep them away from it.

## **Signs of Illness**

Be familiar with what is normal for your bird. Know your bird's normal activity level, droppings (number, color, and size), food and water intake, and vocalizations. In an otherwise healthy bird, a change in one of these routines may be normal, but they should be seen as a warning. If there is no improvement in 24-48 hours or additional signs develop, call for an appointment.

Call us immediately if you observe signs of a more serious problem, which include:

- Fluffed feathers
- Bird on the bottom of the cage
- Heavy breathing
- Tail bobbing
- Regurgitation
- Closed eyes
- Spread wings
- Bleeding anywhere
- Abnormal discharges or droppings

## **Preventive Care**

A thorough exam by a veterinarian who is familiar and comfortable with birds is recommended. It is important to establish the health status of your bird shortly after purchase. A physical examination, fecal examination (a test from a stool sample), and bloodwork is recommended annually to assess your bird's overall health. Birds are adept at hiding illness, so yearly testing can help to identify illness in the early stages when treatment is more likely to be successful.