

## **Introduction to Bird Care**

Parrots and other birds kept as pets (like canaries, doves and finches) have very specialized needs. The following information provides general guidelines for bird ownership. However, it is important to study and familiarize yourself with the needs of your individual bird. This will help ensure you're providing the best care possible for your feathered friend.

### **Cage:**

Be sure to purchase a cage that is made specifically for birds. Other cages may contain metal parts that are toxic to birds. The cage your bird lives in needs to be large enough to allow him or her to move freely both horizontally and vertically. Be sure the cage is in good condition (no rust or broken pieces) and strong enough to contain your bird. Confirm that the cage does not contain any lead or zinc in its construction. These metals are highly toxic to birds.

Paper is the best choice to line the cage. Paper is easy to change daily and also makes it easy to monitor the quality of your birds' droppings. Corn cob or any other scoopable product is NOT recommended.

Perching is a natural behavior in birds, and adding perches to the cage is an important part of their enrichment and exercise. Natural branches obtained from a pet supply store or a live tree that has not been treated with anything (pesticides) are recommended. Terracotta perches also work well. A variation in size along a branch will exercise the feet better than a straight plastic or wooden perch of the same size. Sandpaper perches should not be used as they irritate the pads of the feet. Perches should be arranged at various heights. They should not be placed over food or water bowls. They must be cleaned regularly. Try to achieve a variety of perch sizes and shapes so that your bird's feet are properly exercised.

Toys provide mental stimulation for birds, and are also essential to your bird's health. A good selection of safe, sturdy, non-toxic toys that are suitable to your bird's size are recommended. Avoid toys containing lead or zinc. Be sure there are no small part that can be swallowed by your bird. Buy toys designed for birds from reputable pet supply dealers. Toys must also be cleaned regularly.

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 and doors, as drafts and sudden temperature changes can be detrimental to your bird's health.

Cages and contents should be cleaned on a regular basis. Weekly cleanings are recommended. The cage can be cleaned with a mild detergent soap. Use a brush to remove caked on droppings or food. The cage can be disinfected with bleach (1 capful per gallon of water.)

## **Diet:**

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

The truth about seed diets is that they are comparable to eating only snack food and dessert. Seeds are very high in fat and deficient in protein and other nutrients such as vitamins A and D. Over the long term, a bird that eats nothing but nuts and seeds is susceptible to liver disease, skin and feather problems, obesity, and many other medical conditions.

The current dietary recommendation for maintaining a happy, healthy avian companion includes feeding a combination of pelleted bird food; healthy, fresh foods; and a small amount of treat foods, like seeds.

Pelleted diets are made by several reputable pet food companies. We recommend feeding a high quality pelleted diet like Harrison's or Lafeber. There are several other pelleted diets available, but we prefer Harrison's or Lafeber due to their high quality. These diets are formulated based on current knowledge of the dietary requirements of birds. It is recommended that pellets account for 60% to 70% of the diet of a healthy bird. The remaining 30% to 40% of the diet should be a variety of fresh, low-fat, low-salt foods. These can include the following:

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

Treat foods should make up less than 10% of the diet. Included in this category are seeds, treat sticks, spray millet, and nuts.

**NEVER FEED:** avocados, eggplant, chocolate, onions, high-fat, salty, or sugary items.

Food should be changed at least once a day. Twice daily changes are preferred, especially in the summer. Do not let food dropped by the bird sit on the bottom of the cage, as this can harbor bacteria. Moist foods, such as beans, rice, pasta, fruits and vegetables, should be offered in a separate dish from dry foods and should be removed from the cage after a few hours. These foods will support the rapid growth of bacteria if left in the cage for too long.

Water should be available at all times. It should be changed at least once daily. Cups and bowls should be cleaned once a day with mild soapy water and rinsed thoroughly. We do not recommend adding any supplements (vitamins, minerals or antibiotics) to water unless directed by your veterinarian; this could cause an aversion to water.

Transitioning to a new diet:

The most important thing is to make any dietary changes gradually. Birds can be very stubborn, particularly if they are accustomed to eating a very tasty diet of mostly treat foods. Some birds may actually starve themselves before they will eat an unfamiliar diet, so make sure you see your bird eating as you are introducing diet changes!

To gradually change your bird's diet, try following these steps:

1. Start by placing a layer of your pet's regular diet in his or her regular food bowl, and cover it with a layer of pelleted bird food. Mixing foods simply teaches your bird to select preferred items out of the dish, so layering is a better approach.
2. Add a second food dish near your bird's favorite perching spot. This will usually be near the highest perch in the cage. Put only the pelleted diet in this dish.
3. Over time, gradually decrease the amount of the old diet and increase the amount of pellets in the first dish.

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 try making pellets tastier by soaking them in natural fruit juice. Some birds may take several months before they will accept a new diet, but be patient. Most can be converted, and remember: it is the best thing for the health of your bird!

### **Grooming:**

Wing clips, nail trims, and beak trims are an important part of your bird's care. They should only be done by a trained professional. A proper wing clip will prevent your bird from flying into windows, fans, mirrors and other hazards. Trimming also reduces the risk of the bird escaping through an open door or window. If the wings are properly trimmed, the bird should be able to gently glide to the ground but is much less able gain lift or fly a significant distance. No wing clip can be guaranteed to prevent flight. Some birds can fly with very few feathers. In addition, a bird can grow new feathers year-round. A bird that could not fly yesterday may fly today. Wing clips usually need to be done after a molt. This may be as little as once a year or 2 to 3 times a year.

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

Most birds never need their beaks trimmed. However, a bird that has suffered trauma to the area or has a genetic condition may need the beak trimmed regularly to ensure normal ability to eat and drink. Some medical conditions in birds can also lead to an overgrown beak. It is important to have your bird evaluated by a veterinarian if you notice the beak is overgrown.

#### **Blood Feathers:**

Blood feathers are young, growing, primary feathers. There is an artery that supplies blood to the immature feathers. As the feathers mature, this artery is lost. Blood feathers are characterized by their dark blue shaft. If a blood feather is broken or accidentally cut, it usually must be pulled to minimize blood loss. Call your veterinarian or emergency center if this occurs. You can also use flour or cornstarch to temporarily stop the bleeding

#### **Veterinary 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, and bloodwork is recommended annually for birds to assess overall health. Birds are adept at hiding illness. Yearly testing can help to identify illness in the early stages when treatment is more likely to be successful.

When to take your bird to the vet:

Avian diseases often progress very quickly. Because birds hide signs of their illnesses, early signs are often very subtle.

Be familiar with what is normal for your bird. Know your bird's normal activity level, droppings (number, color and size) amount of food and water consumed and vocalizations. Although in an otherwise healthy bird a change in any one of these can be perfectly normal, they should be seen as a warning. If new signs develop or no improvement is seen within a 24-48 hour period, a veterinary exam is warranted.

Signs of more serious problems include: fluffed feathers, birds on the bottom of the cage, heavy breathing, tail bobbing, closed eyes, wings being spread out, bleeding from anywhere or abnormal discharges. A veterinarian should see such birds as soon as possible.

#### **Safety Information:**

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

Other hazards for birds outside their cages include access to toxic materials (including certain house plants and dangerous foods and medicines), electrical cords, stove tops, open toilets, and other seemingly innocent household objects. Birds should be closely supervised when they are outside of their cages to prevent exposure to these potential hazards. Jewelry is shiny and very interesting to birds, please keep it away from birds.

### **Emergencies:**

It can be difficult to find an emergency service that will see birds. If you have a medical emergency during non-business hours, please call Rockingham Veterinary Emergency Hospital 603-870-9770.