

Basic Care for Birds

Activity

Most pet birds are intelligent, active animals whose psychological needs must be identified and addressed. Locate the cage near family activity in the home. For some species, opportunities may be provided for exercise in the form of supervised freedom from the cage or flying in the home. If the bird is permitted to fly, be aware of ceiling fans, large windows, hot pans on the stove, stretchy fly strips, and open doors.

Toys

Toys are useful as mental diversions and tend to encourage physical exercise and beak wear; however, they must be selected with safety of the bird in mind. "Chewable" items include branches, pinecones, rawhide chews, natural fiber rope, and soft white pine.

Many enhancements can be provided to occupy the bird's attention. Some birds like to tear paper and enjoy a cardboard roller from toilet paper. A piece of corn on the cob or pomegranate is entertaining for birds. Even branches with leaves placed on or against the outside of the cage for the bird to pull through the wires is "occupational therapy."

Other enrichments include training, foraging, and human interactions.

Nutrition

Proper diet is critical for overall health in every species. The easiest way to feed is to use commercial formulated diets especially made for pet birds. Homemade diets can be considered, but are time consuming and should be developed with the aid of a professional nutritionist. A recent study has shown dietary needs for important vitamins, minerals without exceeding calorie requirements can be met with a diet of about 75% pellets and 25% carefully selected vegetables and fruits. With few special exceptions, seeds and nuts should not be a regular part of a pet bird's diet, but reserved as treats only. Birds' dietary needs vary somewhat with species. Ask your avian veterinarian for recommendations on feeding your bird. AAV provides a brochure on this topic with more details.

Housing

The largest cage that can be accommodated in the home is recommended for birds that are expected to be confined most of the time. The cage must be strong enough to resist bending or dismantling by the bird, made of nontoxic material, and designed for safety and ease of cleaning. In most cases, the cage would need to be wider than it is tall to accommodate stretched wings; however, ample height should be provided as well for long-tailed birds.

Perches

Perches can be purchased, or made of clean, pesticide-free natural wood branches. Perches provide a place to stand, and for some species that love to shred and destroy, a source of entertainment. Perches should be replaced frequently when they become worn, soiled or damaged. Place perches on opposite sites of the cage for species that fly or hop (finches, toucans). More perches can be provided for more agile climbers, like parrots. Perches should be placed so that droppings do not fall into water dishes, and the tail does not rub the side of the cage or fall into food or water dishes.

Food and water bowls

The use of wide bowls rather than deep cups displays the food attractively and may encourage the bird to eat new items. Healthy birds can easily approach the food and water bowls; therefore, it is not necessary in most cases to place bowls directly beside the perch. Birds often overeat or chew on food dishes out of boredom. Placing the food at the opposite end of the cage from the water will ensure that the bird gets some exercise between eating and drinking. It is recommended to have two sets of dishes so one set can be cleaned while the other is being used. Foraging is a great addition or alternative to food bowls for healthy birds. Your avian veterinarian can give you more details about this.

Hygiene

A daily cleaning of the cage floor and bowls helps to prevent problems with food spoilage and permits the owner to inspect the cage floor. Blood on the floor or unusual condition of droppings can alert the owner to potential signs of illness. A weekly thorough cleaning of the cage is recommended.

Cage liners

Newspapers, paper towels or other plain cage liner paper are preferred over wood chips, chopped corn cobs, kitty litter, or sand as cage substrate under the grating, so that the appearance and number of the droppings can be monitored on a daily basis. Birds should not be allowed direct contact with the substrate as it tends to grow bacteria and fungus.

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Security

Many birds benefit from the availability of a retreat inside the cage for a sense of privacy (e.g., paper bag, towel, nest box). However, for some birds these recesses can be perceived as nesting cavities. If this seems to be occurring, visual security can be provided by surrounding the cage area with furniture, real or artificial plants, or other visual barriers.

Environment

Temperature

A healthy bird can tolerate temperatures that are comfortable to its owner. Sudden changes in temperature may be a potential threat to a sick bird.

Humidity

Pet birds can adapt to a wide range of humidity levels, although birds native to subtropical climates may benefit from occasional increased humidity in the home (e.g., in the bathroom with a running shower, or frequent misting of the feathers with water).

Light and Fresh Air

Opportunities for supervised access to fresh air and direct sunlight (not filtered through glass or plastic) appear to be beneficial, as long as shade is available.

Grooming

Routine grooming consists of nail and wing trimming. For healthy birds, nails are trimmed as needed, when they become sharp and uncomfortable for the owners. Wing clipping should be considered carefully. Wings are generally clipped to prevent escape or injury in the home, for example to prevent flying into windows or ceiling fans. Training is sometimes easier when wings are clipped. However, some owners choose not to clip the wings and allow free flight. The free flight area must be chosen carefully and "bird proofed" to prevent injury.

During molt, older feathers are lost, and new feathers develop to take their place. As the new feather emerges, the bird may groom at the covering of the feather. This is normal behavior and should not be mistaken for "feather picking" or mites.

Leg bands can be removed, if desired. Older open style bands are more dangerous and should be removed. Closed bands (a complete ring) seldom cause injury, but should be checked regularly for accumulation of dirt or wounds beneath the band, or swelling above or below the band.

Most birds enjoy daily bathing, and spend a great deal of time keeping the feathers in prime condition. Some will bathe in a dish or bowl, some prefer a shower or bathing under the faucet. Another idea is to offer the bird a large handful of wet lettuce leaves. If the bird resists any form of bathing, a daily misting with clean water will help encourage normal grooming. Plain water is best for misting and bathing. If feathers become unusually soiled, mild baby shampoo, followed by careful rinsing can be used.

New birds should visit an avian veterinarian as soon after purchase as possible. Afterwards, routine visits help detect signs of illness early and keep birds as healthy as possible.

For More Information

For more information on birds, ask your veterinarian for copies of the following AAV Client Education Brochures:

- Basic Care
- Behavior: Normal and Abnormal
- Avian Chlamydiosis and Psittacosis
- Feather Loss
- Feeding
- Health Exam
- Injury Prevention and Emergency Care
- Signs of Illness
- When Should I Take My Bird to a Vet?

Online Resources



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