



## CARE OF THE COMPANION BIRD

The exact nutritional needs of each avian species, has yet to be determined. Our knowledge of birds' nutritional requirements has however, come a great distance in recent years. Many seed, pellet, home made and specialty diets exist, and we encourage you to research the possibilities thoroughly, keeping in mind the natural diet of your pet bird.

Traditionally, most psittacine birds (parrots or hook bills) and passerine birds (canaries, finches, etc.), have been fed a seed based diet. For many species this is unnatural, and leads to serious health concerns. Pelleted and other formulated diets represent a tremendous improvement in nutrition, but should not be regarded as the perfect solution.

The particular needs of your bird should be discussed with your avian veterinarian, as they will vary somewhat with the individual and the species. The following principles are to be kept in mind:

**Seed:** All seed is high in fat, low in calcium and low in vitamin A. Sunflower seeds are particularly bad, and may be addictive. If fed at all, these should be reserved for treats. An all seed diet is never a complete diet, and birds who are fed this way are malnourished. Vitamins cannot compensate for this. If a bird is on a seed based diet, he should be offered as wide a variety of seeds as possible. The seeds should be fresh, and checked regularly for mould (smell the seed, break open a few husks). Regardless of an owner's diligence, however, seed remains a common source of the toxins associated with mould. If a bird is on a seed-based diet, whole grains, seeds, rice, barley, oats and other grains should make up approximately 60% of the diet. The other 40% of the diet is comprised of fresh fruits and vegetables and protein.

**Fruit:** Fruit is high in calories, but not necessarily high in nutritional value. Since birds eat to meet their energy requirements, if fed a diet high in fruit, they may not meet their requirements for such nutrients as calcium and protein. For most species, a diet of 5% fruit is adequate. Nutritionally dense, interesting fruits are recommended. These include papaya, mango, kiwi, berries and passion fruit. Limit the consumption of grapes, and remember that avocado is potentially toxic.

**Vegetables:** 10-20% of the diet should be vegetable, with a strong emphasis on the dark red, orange and yellow and dark leafy green sorts. Many of these are rich in vitamin A or calcium, deficiencies of these nutrients being among the most common seen in pet birds. Try sweet potato, squash, peppers, carrots, broccoli, corn and beans. Feed them raw or cooked, as you might eat them yourself. Offer plenty of fresh, dark leafy greens, such as collards, kale, bok choy and rapini. These can be chopped or cooked, but are often best fed in bunches, allowing the bird to tear and shred his food, as he would have done in the wild. Edible flowers can be a nice treat. Only feed fresh, pesticide-free produce.

**Protein:** 10-20% of the diet can be protein. Mature legumes, that is, cooked beans of different varieties can be included. Nuts are a wonderful treat, and some species need a relatively greater proportion of nuts in the diet. They are also, however, very calorie dense and most captive birds simply do not burn off that much energy. Be careful if feeding peanuts, as they are especially high in fat and are



particularly likely to be affected by fungal growth. Always check peanuts in the shell for the presence of mould.

**People food:** Birds are able to eat safely most of the things that are good for us. Exceptions are avocado and mushroom, both of which are potentially toxic. Birds should not be fed food that is high in sugar, salt, oil or fat. Birds cannot digest milk protein, and so should not consume dairy products. They should not consume any alcohol, butter, caffeine or chocolate. No tea, coffee, ice cream or fried food. If it isn't good for you, it's worse for your bird.

**Commercial formulated diets:** Most formulated crumbled or pelleted diets are vastly superior to a primarily seed diet. A formulated diet should be fed according to the manufacturer's directions, but should also be supplemented with other healthy foods; this can include a little seed as a treat. There are a few birds that should be fed a reduced proportion of pellets. Mutation cockatiels, that is those other than the wild grey coloration, and lovebirds who are mutations of the peach faced variety, should not consume more than 40% pellets. These birds should only receive pellets as part of a seed based diet, which is supplemented with fresh fruits and vegetables.

**Fresh water:** Birds must always have easy access to fresh water, which should be changed at least daily. Be sure not to place the dish under a perch, as the bird may then drop feces into it.

**Grit:** This is required for birds that swallow whole seeds, such as pigeons, chickens and doves. Birds such as parrots, including budgies and cockatiels, and canaries, and finches, who husk seed and then grind it in the gizzard need little, if any grit. For the smaller birds, a pinch of grit, monthly in the food is adequate. Free access to grit is not recommended, however, soluble grit, such as oyster shell can be a useful source of calcium.

**Special requirements:** Some species have very particular dietary requirements, and it is important to research the natural diet of your species. Lorikeets (lories) require a nectar-like diet, carefully supplemented with fruit, pollen and in some cases, insects. Toucans and mynah birds need a diet especially low in iron, and again, careful attention must be paid to "extras" given the bird. Commercial diets exist for both groups, and are recommended.

**Supplements:** The most common concerns with pet bird diets are a deficiency of calcium and of vitamin A, and an excess of fat or calories. Most birds fed a pelleted diet, according to manufacturers' directions, will receive adequate vitamins and minerals, including calcium. There may be exceptions, and these should be discussed with your veterinarian. Seed based diets should be supplemented with a vitamin/mineral product added to the food. Calcium can be offered in the form of mineral blocks and cuttlefish (if the bird eats them), oyster shell and powders.

**Do not over supplement:** this will not compensate for a poor diet. Budgies often need a source of iodine, in the feed or as an aqueous, non-toxic solution added to the water.



## HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENT

**Caging:** In most cases, buy the largest cage you can afford and which your home can accommodate, and which your house can hold. Be sure that it is not an older style, zinc coated cage, and that any paint or other coating does not chip off. Bars should be of an even spacing: the bars should not be so far apart that the bird can pass his head between them. The cage should be wide, rather than tall, as birds fly horizontally, not vertically. At a minimum, the bird must be able to extend his wings fully and turn around, without touching anything in the cage. It must accommodate the length of his tail. The more time your bird spends in his cage, the bigger it ought to be. Particularly for the medium and larger parrots, a second smaller nighttime cage should be considered. Choose a cage that is easy to dismantle and clean. Be sure that your bird cannot escape from his cage: larger parrots are known for opening doors, but many smaller birds are equally adept at squeezing through spaces in the wires intended for food dishes.

**Location:** Cages should be located in well-ventilated, well-lit areas of the home, where the bird will receive an appropriate level of interaction, and where he can observe some degree of activity. Kitchens are usually not appropriate, because of the fumes associated with cooking. It is vital; however, to balance your bird's need for social interaction with his need for security. The birds we keep, as pets are prey species in the wild, and are highly sensitive to feelings of vulnerability. A cage may be best placed against a wall, but not within about four feet of a high traffic area, or beside a door, where people may enter the bird's sphere of vision suddenly. In the wild, something appearing suddenly, out of the corner of your eye, is more than likely a predator. Although a window view may be beneficial, surprising and frightening things such as hawks may be visible, and will make your pet feel vulnerable. Cages should also not be in direct sunlight, so a location against a wall, or in a corner may be best. It is helpful in many instances to cover a side or a corner of the cage. This provides added security and can shield the bird from excessive stimulation. As a general rule, companion birds, particularly the larger parrots, should be housed at chest height. If a bird spends too much time at the same height as his owner's head, or above, behavioral problems often arise. Birds kept too close to the floor will feel vulnerable, as in the wild, this is a dangerous place to be. Cages should not be immediately next to televisions, stereos or radios.

**Temperature and lighting:** Healthy companion birds will tolerate temperatures comfortable to the owner. Birds should not be kept in direct sunlight, without available shade, nor should they be housed beside opening or draughty doors, or directly next to a forced air heat vent. Most companion species, particularly the medium to large parrots; need a consistent dark/light schedule. They should have 11-12 consecutive hours of undisturbed darkness every night. It is not sufficient to cover the cage if television noise and other activity persist. This 12-hour sleep is in addition to the "nap" that most birds take during the day. It is the actual length of the dark period that is important physiologically and psychologically to the bird. Although the consequences of inadequate rest are more obvious in the case of a large parrot, its importance to smaller birds should not be underestimated. If the bird tolerates a cover, this is recommended. Some individuals, including many cockatiels, prefer that they cage be only half covered, or that they have a night-light. Check that the bird does not chew the cover, and that he cannot catch his toes in it. In many cases, it is best to send birds to bed in a room where there will be little or no activity after bedtime.



**Cage substrate:** Newspaper is a perfectly acceptable cage floor covering, the only problem being that it might stain pale colored feathers. Paper towel and plain newsprint can also be used. Cat litter, corncob, wood shavings and sawdust are not recommended. These hide droppings are more difficult to clean and are more expensive. The floor of your bird's cage should be changed daily. This allows you to monitor droppings, a change in which can be an important indication of a change in your bird's health. Organic material such as corncob is an excellent growth medium for the bacteria in droppings. Dusty substrates as cat litter and shavings can be, are damaging to your bird's respiratory tract. Newspaper is cheap, safe, and easy to change and allows you to become familiar with your bird's normal droppings. Do not sprinkle grit on the cage floor. You don't really want your pet to be eating from a surface contaminated by feces.

**Perches:** Natural branches, providing a variety of diameters are best for your bird's feet. Let him choose what is most comfortable. Birds enjoy stripping the bark, and the irregularities of the natural surface promote good foot health. Plastic is too hard and often prevents the bird gripping well. Smooth dowel perches (unless the bird chews them for amusement) is equally difficult to grip, and are usually of an inappropriate diameter for the bird's feet. Be sure that the wood used is non-toxic (fruit wood is a good choice), and that it is fixed securely to the cage bars and does not roll. Be sure not to place a perch above a food or water dish. Clean perches soiled with food or feces. Replace perches now and again, the bigger birds, particularly, like something new to chew. In the case of young birds, it is especially important to provide secure perching of an appropriate diameter, to avoid falls. Birds kept for any length of time on inadequate perches can suffer from arthritis and painful open wounds on their feet. There is always some risk that natural branches will have been contaminated by disease carried by outside birds. The potential benefits to the bird, in terms of stripping bark, tearing leaves and twigs and healthy feet, are tremendous. It may be best to dry natural perches for some time, to scrub them with soap and water and if possible to bake them in the oven (supervised) at 250° C for 10 minutes. We do not recommend sandpaper perches. First, these do not grind down the bird's nails, and second, they are uncomfortably rough and sharp, and tend to roll about the perch, making it difficult for the bird to grip.

**Cleaning:** The cage bottom should be changed daily. In addition to preventing bacterial build-up, this allows owners to recognize what the bird is eating, as opposed to what he throws. Daily cage changes mean that owners became familiar with normal droppings, and can act quickly if something changes. Sometimes it is surprising what our birds get up to during the day, and regular examination of the cage floor will tell you a lot! The bacteria and fungus in a bird's droppings can start to replicate within an hour. They can form spores, which can be breathed in by you and by the bird. Simple daily removal of fecal material and a weekly cleaning of the cage itself; as well as spot cleaning as necessary are usually sufficient. Use soap and water and occasionally a disinfectant, such as dilute (3%) bleach. Always rinse well, and assume that if you can smell an irritating cleaner that it is much worse for your bird. Sunlight is an excellent disinfectant Food and water dishes should be cleaned at least daily, as you would your own. Fresh fruits and vegetables, moist diets and liquids, such as a lory diet should not be left in the cage for more than a few hours. If you wouldn't eat from that dish, neither should your bird.



**Air quality:** Birds need the best possible air to breathe. They are very susceptible to respiratory disease if kept in dusty environments. Avoid air fresheners, aerosols and other sprays (e.g. fur carpets and stain removal, hair spray, insecticides). Cigarette smoke, fumes from paint, cooking and self-cleaning solvents, and non-stick coatings, such as Teflon will either cause long-term irreversible damage to your bird's lungs or may kill him very quickly. Teflon cookware has been considered especially dangerous, but remember that similar coatings are to be found on various heat resistant surfaces, such as some irons or hairdryers.

### GROOMING

**Toenails:** These should not be allowed to overgrow, as the normal shape will be disrupted. Appropriate perching will keep the nails of a healthy bird at the right length, and SHARP! Many owners can file the sharp points off their bird's nails, but we encourage you to speak to an avian vet or an experienced owner before you start. We do not recommend filing or trimming the toenails of disabled or young birds. They need those needle-like nails to prevent themselves from falling, and to feel secure.

**Wing clips:** These should be discussed on an individual basis, as an inappropriate wing clip can have severe medical and behavioral consequences. As a rule, birds should not be clipped until they have learnt to fly, and then it should be done gradually, taking into consideration the bird's species, his environment and his temperament.

**Beak trims:** A healthy beak should not be trimmed. The beak is a living structure, with nerves all along its edges, and clipping can be extremely painful. A beak may overgrow due to misalignment or disease or malnutrition, and these possibilities should be discussed with your avian vet.

**Bathing:** Most pet bird species originate in humid environments. Most birds in captivity are not kept sufficiently humid, and the consequences, including skin and respiratory disease can be severe. From a young age, birds should be given the opportunity and encouraged to bath. A bowl of water, a running tap, and a trip to the shower or misting with a spray bottle are all possibilities. Ideally birds should be given at least a light misting daily, and a heavier wetting weekly. Bath your bird, as often as he will let you, and if he is reluctant to bath, he must be encouraged to do so in a non-threatening way. Keep your bird warm after a bath, although healthy birds can tolerate some variations in temperature. Do not stop bathing (your bird) in cooler weather. Never spray anything other than water on your bird's feathers.

### LIVING WITH A BIRD

Birds are intelligent, messy, fascinating, demanding, noisy and potentially long-lived companions. The decision to have one (or more) in the house should be given careful thought. We encourage you to research your companion thoroughly, including the potential problems and costs. Use more than one source of information for a rounded perspective on your chosen species: magazines, breeders, owners, veterinarians, bird club members are all potentially good sources of information.



**Activity and Toys:** Have a selection of toys, which differ in form and function. These should include noisy toys, colorful toys, puzzle toys, climbing toys, toys to hold, toys to destroy and shred. Provide toys that may be manipulated by the feet and others which can be "beaked". Birds need variety, and the more they are encouraged to play and think, the more rewarding they will be as companions. Rotate your bird's toys, so that he does not become bored. Healthy birds are athletic, dynamic creatures, and if at all possible, should be allowed safe flight in the home or in an aviary. We encourage you to discuss this with an avian vet if your bird does not already have much flight experience. When out of the cage, whether to fly or to climb on a gym, birds must be supervised. Like a two-year old child, there will eventually be a problem if they are not supervised. Do your best to "bird proof" the area, but potential hazards are many and it is unlikely that you will see all the possibilities the bird does! Be aware of the potential danger of toxic plants, children, pets, opening doors, boiling water, open washing machines, painted or treated wood surfaces, sources of lead and zinc (anything galvanized, is zinc coated). Buy or make safe toys without bits which might be swallowed, which do not contain lead parts, and which do not have small clips or snaps on which the bird might snag his beak. Just because it is sold as a bird toy, there is no guarantee that it is safe. If offering cloth, rope or chain toys, be sure that loops do not develop which will allow a head or foot to be trapped. Do not allow birds to play with string in which they might become entangled.

**Training:** Most companion birds and their owners will benefit from some training. Basic commands such as, "up", "down", "OK" and "no" will go a long way to guiding the bird to his place in the flock and to building a secure, communicative and mutually satisfactory relationship between bird and owner. Particularly in the case of the larger species, training is necessary if behavioral problems are to be avoided. Behavioral problems, such as screaming, biting and feather mutilation are the most commonly cited reasons for needing to re-home or euthanize a bird.

**Health Care:** An initial visit to an avian veterinarian is recommended for all new pets. In the case of young birds, or novice bird owners, it is particularly important to get a good start in terms of nutrition and behavior. Your bird should be seen yearly for a well-bird examination. A discussion of husbandry and nutrition, a thorough history and a good physical examination are the best place to start. Companion bird species are prey species in the wild, and they are masterfully adapted to hide illness and disease. We are fortunate to have a number of tests available, which allow us to assess the bird's health both internally and externally. These include fecal testing for parasites, blood testing for infection, anemia and organ function, and radiographs (X-rays) to examine internal structures. Not every test is appropriate for every bird, and your vet should make recommendations and explain them. By the time a bird is obviously ill, it is very ill, and many tests screen for sub-clinical or hidden disease. It is also useful to know that your bird is as healthy on the inside as he appears on the outside, and if all results are within normal limits, they provide an exceedingly useful baseline with which to compare future test results. A good avian veterinarian will educate you and will promote preventative as well as routine health care. Developing a good relationship with your vet allows him to provide the best possible level of care.