

CARING FOR YOUR PARROT

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Parrots (this includes Budgerigars and Cockatiels) can live from 20-50 years depending on the size and breed of bird and we must make sure we meet all of their needs as small inadequacies can build up over time.

When purchasing a parrot it is worth enquiring whether they have been tested for certain diseases such as "Psittacine Beak & Feather Disease". This is a common and highly infectious disease which unfortunately is nearly always fatal. It is also worth noting that although a bird may be certified free from this disease, if it has subsequently been housed in the same air space as untested and infected birds (such as with Budgerigars) this may no longer be the case.

Psitticosis is also common and can infect humans. For this reason screening for this disease is also recommended.

HOUSING

Parrots should be kept in the biggest cage possible and at an absolute minimum the bird should be able to extend its wings in all directions. Parrot proof cages such as those made from stainless steel are ideal. Cheap imported galvanised mesh cages should be avoided as these are commonly made with zinc which is toxic.

Newspaper makes an ideal substrate and should be changed daily. Spraying the paper prior to removal will reduce the risk of transferring disease through dust.

Parrots should be provided with perches that are made from the branches of natural 'non-stoned' fruit trees such as apple trees. These should be free from pesticides and cleaned with a disinfectant such as F10 prior to being given to the bird. These provide an irregular surface with a varying diameter which helps to keep the birds nails short and prevents the formation of "bumble-foot". They also provide a toy to play with as many birds will spend time stripping the bark from the branch. Commercial perches made of Manzanita or Java wood are also available. Sandpaper perches should not be used as these can lead to ulcers on the base of the foot.

Parrots should be provided with chewable non-toxic toys such as cardboard boxes, paper towel roll, leaves, whole oranges and many other commercially available products. Toys should be attached using non-metal clips as these can contain toxic metals. They should be frequently rotated to prevent boredom.

A hide should be provided such as a nest box or hammock. However, these can sometimes stimulate reproductive activity and a sheltered area with a perch but no bottom may be a better alternative.

Birds are designed to fly and they should be allowed access outside of the cage on a daily basis in a safe and secure environment. For this and many other reasons wing clipping is not to be recommended. Many birds also enjoy flying outside whilst wearing a harness – similar to taking a dog for a walk on the lead!

The cage should be placed in a warm area of the house away from drafts but with good ventilation.

Daily bathing or misting is advisable and some birds enjoy a trip to the shower with their owner.

Fresh water should be provided at all times and fresh food offered daily.

UV LIGHT

Birds have been shown to see in the ultraviolet (UV) spectrum of light and the world would look a completely different place to a parrot when viewed without UV light (such as when housed indoors with only normal light bulbs).

Not only does UV light encourage normal behaviour and preening (and possibly prevent feather plucking) but it is also involved in a bird's metabolism of calcium. This is especially true of African Grey parrots and these should always have either access outside on a sunny day in a sheltered area of the garden or be provided with an UV bulb above their cage.

Arcadia provides a selection of UV bulbs that meet the needs of birds and they should be used for a minimum of 4 hours a day. Light in general should be provided for no more than 12-14 hours (a black out sheet can be used over the cage to artificially reduce the amount of light that a bird receives).

It should be noted that most plastic, glass and fine wire mesh will block out UV light and therefore a bird placed next to a window will not benefit from any UV light.

HOUSEHOLD DANGERS

Some metals present in the house can be highly toxic to birds when ingested, these include zinc and lead. This can be accidental ingestion as birds move around using their beaks or whilst chewing things around the house. Things to be careful of are: zippers, curtain weights, old paintwork and household keys.

Other potential toxins include: avocado, bacon, chocolate, mouldy nuts such as peanuts, rat poison, caffeine, tobacco and salt.

Indoor fumes can cause breathing difficulties and in certain circumstances death. Things to avoid include: air fresheners, deodorants, cigarette smoke, and fumes from overheated Teflon cooking pans. Teflon should not be used anywhere in a house with a bird as it can kill almost instantly even if the bird is in another room!

Other potential risks include electric cables, pets or toxic plants.

DIET

Nutritional problems are extremely common in parrots and are often missed by owners. Most seed based diets are based on food designed for chickens and are not designed to sustain a healthy individual over many years. Lack of a suitable diet over time can lead to poor plumage, a suppressed immune system and other health problems.

Most "parrot seed" mixes on the market are of a poor quality and are nutritionally inadequate. They are generally lacking in vitamins such as A and E and also in minerals such as calcium. Recent research has shown that the best diets available for parrots are ones based on a complete, balanced formulated product with limited seed and human food supplementation. Many parrot mixes sold

market themselves as complete but most parrots will leave the healthier components of the diet only eating the tastier seeds and therefore these are no better than other seed mixes.

For this reason it is recommended that all parrots are converted to an extruded pellet such as Harrison's bird food. Obesity is common and most parrots require only a maximum of two tablespoons per day of pelleted food. It can be difficult to convert "seed-junkies" but with time and perseverance most birds can be converted.

If seed is to be offered then this should be of a human grade rather than that generally sold in many pet shops. Fruit and vegetables (especially highly pigmented ones) can be offered in moderation to supplement a pelleted diet with fruits from tropical countries having a better protein and fibre content than those grown in temperate regions, which are normally very high in sugar.

Grit should be readily available as either oyster shell or mineralised grit. Budgerigars will also benefit from a commercial iodine block.

BEHAVIOUR

Parrots are social animals and as such enjoy social interaction. It is important to ensure a good pair bond with all members of the family whilst avoiding excessive pair bonds with certain individuals (many birds think of their owner as their mate and may become aggressive to other members of the family/flock). Below is a list of behaviours to encourage (and some to avoid).

- Mutual preening/grooming,
 - Avoid grooming the legs, inner thighs, lower stomach and lower back.
- Talking/singing,
- Offering treats by hand.
 - Avoid feeding from your mouth.
- Teach basic commands such as "step up" and "stay" and reinforce these frequently.
- Discourage inappropriate behaviour by ignoring it and reinforcing the preferred response, e.g. ignore the squawking bird and reward it when it is quiet with play or food.
 - Remember that loud vocalisation is normal for a parrot and not something to be completely abolished. Most birds will vocalise early in the morning and later in the evening and this is completely normal.
- Leave a radio/television playing whilst you are out.
- Allow exercise outside of the cage on a daily basis, birds are designed to fly and should be allowed to exhibit this behaviour.
 - Teach the bird 12 places around the house where food is hidden and encourage them to forage there. Once this is learnt you can then cycle the hiding places so that only a few contain food and the bird must explore each one to find its reward.

- Ensure interactions with the entire family and not just one individual.