

A Guide for Bird Owners

Birds are unique pets, not only in their appearance, but also in their behavior, diet, response to disease and relationship to their owner. Because of their differences from more traditional pets, the bird owner must be more attentive to subtle changes in behavior and appearance.

Behavior

Birds are low on the food chain and predictably will regard anything new as a threat until proven otherwise. New furniture, drapes, a new cage location, a new toy, are all threats until proven otherwise. Birds do best with a routine, however, the slow, safe introduction of new places, things and people will result in a calmer pet. These new introductions and experiences should take place repetitively until they become part of the regular life of the bird.

Birds will instinctively seek the high ground in a new situation or when unsure about the surroundings. The highest bird in the tree has the best view of any threat, the best escape route and any predator has to go through all those other guys to get to them. It is very common to see a bird on the owner's shoulder when I walk in the exam room; this tells me the bird is nervous and to go slow. Birds can show a behavior called displacement aggression; they will strike out at whatever is close if they can't reach the real threat. Owners sometimes get bitten by their own bird when the bird really wanted a piece of me! This can be avoided by controlling the bird's movements as soon as it is out of the carrier. Learn to lock the bird's feet onto your index finger with your thumb as soon as the bird steps up. If it escapes from your finger and starts up your arm, drop your arm forcing the bird down (usually), and try again.

Birds, like any species, will work out a social order and your life will be easier if you are at the top! Birds are very good at manipulating their owners and it is never a bad idea to analyze their behavior from this perspective. Birds are social animals, living in flocks or family groups; the flock provides protection, grooming, intellectual stimulation and reproductive opportunities. The humans in the bird's home become surrogates for the flock and the bird can become frustrated when we don't behave in an appropriate manner. This can lead to biting, screaming, plucking or other objectionable behaviors. Judicious use of "time out", learning when to ignore the bird, and use of diversions can help

establish a human led social order. Remember, birds are still wild animals that have been habituated to live with humans in the last hundred years or so. Dogs and cats have been domesticated over several thousand years and willingly accept that role. Birds respond like wild animals - by flight, by aggression if cornered, and by instinctually masking signs of illness, this is true even if the bird has been hand raised. There are several good books on understanding and modifying bird behavior, which I will list at the end.

Bird behavior is a fascinating topic, but their intelligence and refusal to play by our rules can cause frustration. Their behavior is completely logical by parrot standards, if illogical by human patterns.

DIET

In the wild, birds work for a living. In a cage, they don't. There aren't any seed cup trees in the forest; birds must move and forage for their survival. Most species will cover several miles and spend several hours each day foraging for food. When they are not foraging, they are still active with social grooming, predator avoidance and play. In a cage, the activity is obviously severely limited and it is usually "all you can eat" six inches away from the bird. Limited activity, along with high calorie foods, will result in overweight, unhealthy birds.

We don't know the best diet for pet birds, but there are a number of products that are a pretty good guess. We do know most birds eat a variety of things and most species take some meat protein, usually by eating insects. We know there are different foods available at different seasons in the forest and we know many of these foods are not available in markets. I think the best recommendation is to use a pellet diet as a starting point, but provide variety also. Variety means healthy for you, healthy for your bird. The only absolutes, are no chocolate and no avocado. Excessively salty or sweet foods should be limited, but an occasional piece of popcorn or a chip is ok. Unsweetened health grain cereals, breads and pasta, small bits of meat (especially when molting), vegetables and fruit are all good choices. I recommend a fifty/fifty mix of pellets and healthy table food or homemade foods like Birdie Bread, Beak Appetit or Bean Cuisine. Recipes for these are available over the internet.

We have had enough experience with pelleted diets to know they are

not right for all birds. Cockatiels especially may not thrive on pellets, but pellets can still be offered just as a smaller percentage of the available diet.

A very common dietary mistake is to feed too much seed. Seeds are very high in calories due to their oil content, but are deficient in most other nutrients. A seed is a burst of energy designed to get the plant up to sunlight where it can begin photosynthesis. A seed doesn't need vitamins and minerals for the long run, it's a burst of energy stored as fat. Birds in the wild eat seed - after they have expended the energy to find and crack them open. Seeds are notoriously deficient in vitamin A and calcium. Vitamin A is necessary to maintain healthy mucous membranes like sinuses and calcium is vital for bone and muscle. A small amount of seed is ok, but it should not be a significant portion of the diet for parrots.

Because a bird's metabolism is very fast, you cannot just remove the old diet and start the new. A small bird can starve in several hours if it refuses the new diet. There are several ways to introduce new foods to your bird. In a feeding study done with cockatiels, 90% of the birds accepted a new food if only one new food item was offered every day for two weeks. An additional 90% of the remaining birds accepted the new food if it was offered every day for another two weeks. First thing in the morning when the cage is uncovered is a good time to offer the new food - patience and persistence are key. Some owners have had success by slowly changing the ratio of new food to old over several weeks. Mimicking eating the food in front of the bird and then offering it to the bird can also work.

Humidity

Most species of pet birds come from tropical rain forests. They don't call them rain forests for nothing; these forests average hundreds of inches of rain a year and a high ambient humidity even when it's not raining. Denver has a very dry climate and this is even worse if your home has forced air heating or cooling. This dries the bird's skin, possibly initiating plucking, and causes gunk to accumulate in the sinuses predisposing the bird to sinus infections. I often see sinus infections in the winter months due to lack of humidity and seed based diets.

If you have a humidifier on your furnace, use it. Many birds enjoy

human showers, either a direct spray or indirectly on top of the door in the steam and mist. There are also suction cup perches available to attach to the shower wall. Misting into the air over the bird with a sprayer bottle several times daily helps. Adding a small amount of aloe juice to the spray solution is soothing for itchy skin. A shallow flower pot base on the floor of the cage acts as a bath and an evaporative surface to increase the humidity locally.

Exercise

In the wild, birds are energetic, active animals; they look for food, scout for nesting sites and escape predators each day and do it all over again the next. Birds spend a good portion of each day on the ground foraging for food, chasing each other and grooming or bathing. Many species like Amazons, Cockatoos and Quakers commonly become obese if allowed a sedentary life with unlimited food. This sets up heart and liver disease, arthritis and early death.

Flying is the natural exercise for birds, but our homes are not the natural environment for flight. It's great if you can have a dedicated aviary, however most bird owners can not. You can still exercise your pet with "elevator" rides up and down on your hands, forcing the bird to use his muscle groups to maintain balance. Another exercise is the "earthquake": rocking your hand back and forth again to force movement for balance. Chasing the bird around the floor also helps.

I believe in wing trims. I regularly see traumatized birds. Windows, ceiling fans, cooking food, open toilets and aquariums, dogs and cats are common sources of injury. A wing trim reduces the chance of these types of injury. Some birds can still fly, even trimmed, especially if there is a breeze.

I also believe in taking your bird outside on sunny days that are warmer than 60 degrees for the fresh air, mental stimulation and feather health. Most tropical species can easily tolerate Denver high temperatures, but birds with exposed cheek patches should be monitored for sunburn and they all should have access to shade while outside. Sunlight stimulates vitamin D production necessary for calcium absorption and in my opinion helps the feathers stay brighter and healthier. Birds caged outside should be monitored as predators may be attracted to them.

Environment

Birds are much more sensitive to fumes and odors than people - that's why they used to take canaries into coal mines. You must be careful with furniture polishes, scented candles, incense, cigarette smoke, plug-in air fresheners and powdered carpet cleaners around your bird. Also paint fumes, remodeling dust, fireplace smoke and kitchen odors can cause problems.

Teflon, when heated to over 400 degrees releases a compound called PTFE that can be rapidly fatal for birds. Teflon is found on non-stick cookware, on irons, ironing board covers and in stain resistant fabrics. Normal use of these items is safe. The danger occurs when the material is overheated: the pot burns dry or the iron scorches the material.

A good rule of thumb for painting is to keep the bird out of the room twenty four hours longer than you can smell the fumes and when the bird is moved back in the room to watch its behavior closely for the next several hours. The same rule applies after using the self-cleaning cycle on your oven.

Some birds thrive on chaos and want to be in the center of the activity in the home, others become nervous featherless wrecks and need a quiet room and steady routine. Cages should be not be near doorways or should be set so the bird has a good view of anyone approaching the cage. The cage should be at least large enough for the bird to spread it's wings without touching either side. Used cages are inexpensive and can be cleaned at a car wash and then disinfected in diluted bleach for. Newspaper should be used to line the cage: it is clean, cheap and allows you to check the droppings daily for moisture content and appearance. Two toys in the cage at any one time are adequate. A group of four toys rotated two at a time at two week intervals works well, but you should also provide destructible toys like toilet paper tubes or old phone books.

Most tropical species are on a 12 hour light cycle and do best if bedtime is closely observed. A quiet room without flickering lights, televisions, computer monitors or car headlights tracking on the wall, works best. The cage should be covered at night. Most birds can easily tolerate night time temperatures in the low to mid 60s, but the change should be gradual over a few hours. A low wattage red or blue bulb in a drop light or goose neck reading lamp is an inexpensive source of nighttime heat that won't interfere with the

bird's sleep cycle. Place the light at one end of the cage so the bird can adjust its temperature by moving away from the light.

Health

Birds are wild animals habituated to live with humans. In the wild, a bird lagging behind the flock, sleeping excessively or disinterested in its surroundings quickly becomes a meal for an alert predator. Birds instinctively hide any signs of disease. Because of their small size and rapid metabolism, disease progresses quickly. By the time a bird is ill enough for the novice owner to be aware of it, the bird is often quite sick and should be seen immediately.

A sick bird is quieter and less active than normal. It may be sleeping more than normal and is usually fluffed continuously. There may be a change in the consistency or color of the droppings. Regurgitation may be evident in the cage or as messy, spikes of feathers on the face and head. Disease may also present itself as an abnormal posture on the perch, the body and feathers usually do not touch the perch in a healthy bird. If a bird is weak, they may not have the strength to balance on the perch and are on the cage floor.

Rapid weight loss is common. Owners should feel the animal's keel at least twice weekly: a rounded chest gently sloping away from the keel bone is ideal. If the keel is becoming more and more prominent, the bird is losing weight. Scales are relatively inexpensive and one of the best tools available for monitoring health. Know the normal weight of your bird and keep a log to document changes. Any steady decrease or sudden decrease of more than five percent of body weight should be investigated.

Droppings usually have three components; feces, urates and urine. Sometimes an elimination will contain only the urates and urine. The fecal portion is usually some shade of green and coiled into a "C". The urates are the urinary waste product and are some shade of white. The urine should be clear and no more than two to three times the diameter of the stool. Newspaper on the bottom of the cage makes it easy to examine the droppings for changes in color, consistency and fluid content. Be aware that colors in pelleted foods and fruits can show up in the droppings - pinkish stool from a bird eating strawberries for example. Some species like large macaws also tend to have wetter eliminations normally. Seed eating species like doves and finches tend to have

dry stools.

Birds sneeze to clear their nasal passages like any other animal, so occasional sneezing is normal. Continual sneezing, nasal discharge or facial swelling is not normal and should be investigated. Poor diet/lack of Vitamin A is the most common cause of respiratory disease, followed by environmental causes and infectious disease. Adequate humidity, a varied, quality diet and cautious use of fume-producing products will prevent many respiratory issues.

Another source of health problems is poor hygiene. The cage should be cleaned at least twice weekly. This means not only changing the papers, but also disinfecting with a diluted bleach solution followed by a thorough rinsing to remove the bleach residue. Bacteria and yeast can be transferred from the hair coat of dogs and cats and from human mouths to the bird's feathers. The bird then ingests the bacteria or yeast while preening. Prevent bacterial transfer by washing your hands in between animals and not kissing your bird or feeding it directly from your mouth. Some species like conures, swish their food in their water bowls before eating. The resulting organic debris in room temperature water quickly results in abundant bacterial growth. Change the water frequently for these birds.

Birds should be supervised when they are out of their cages. Birds are curious and will investigate their surroundings, picking at and picking up interesting objects in their beaks and sometimes ingesting them. Lead and Zinc are two common toxins often found in our homes. Lead is found in solder, wine cork foil, and paint in older homes. Zinc is used in pennies, zippers and jewelry as a rust inhibitor. Birds are attracted to bright, shiny objects like metal and it is not unusual to find bits of metal in a bird's digestive system when radiographs are taken. Signs of metal intoxication include vomiting, bloody stools and seizures. Treatment is usually successful, but prevention is far better.

Resources

Birds for Dummies by Gina Spadafore and Brian Speer DVM is the best basic bird primer I have found. Basic questions and good advice. I recommend it to any novice owner or even if you are contemplating owning a bird. Birds are not for everyone and doing some research before purchasing one may save you and the bird from an unhappy ending. Far too many birds are bought as impulse

purchases and many of these end up in rescue organizations like the Gabriel Foundation or are passed from home to home. The Gabriel Foundation also has a good website at [Gabriel Foundation.org](http://GabrielFoundation.org). Another reason I like Birds for Dummies is the appendix listing worthwhile web sites. The web for birds is like the web for anything else - a wide open forum anyone can contribute to - no matter how experienced or not.

Good Bird and The Parrot Problem Solver by Barbara Heidenreich are very useful books dealing with behavioral issues. There is also a good behavioral column in Bird Talk magazine each month.

Animal

Hospital

(c) 2008