

The General Husbandry of Caged Birds



Birds provide a rewarding relationship for many owners today, but keeping this relationship a long and happy one can be more challenging than many people anticipate. There are some elemental facts, which this paper will discuss that should better the chances of your bird reaching a healthy old age.

To begin with, choose the species that is best suited to your lifestyle. All too often, an owner will be surprised by the time demanded by a social bird such as an umbrella cockatoo and be forced to find the bird a new home. This is upsetting for bird and owner alike. A better choice for the busy person may be something along the lines of a finch or canary. Your veterinarian will be able to guide you in ways to make the right decision.

Providing the proper housing and environment for your bird follows some fundamental rules, but, as with every aspect of bird care, will be a learning experience for the owner. The cage should be large enough for the species you have selected. It should be large enough for the species you have selected. It should be near a source of direct sunlight (not shielded by glass), or at least in proximity to a UV light. Perches should be of varying diameters, very clean, and never covered with sandpaper. Toys provided should be safe (non-ingestible and non-toxic), and should be removed before a trip to the vet's. Paper toweling is best for the cage bottom. Do not clean the cage bottom or transport carrier before a vet examines your bird; their droppings can tell the doctor a lot about their state of health. Food and water (or juice) should be changed at least twice daily, or whenever soiled. Some birds will enjoy an area that is noisy and well populated. Less social species require more privacy to prevent stress. Unless covering the cage panics your bird, it should be done at the same time each evening and not removed until you awaken. Cages should never be placed near air conditioning or heat and ventilation outflows.

There is an art to the proper feeding of caged birds, as well. Non-staining fruit juices, such as apple juice, are often substituted for water. They not only provide more nutrients than water, but also help to better mask the flavor of antibiotics, vitamins, etc., which may be added to the drinking supply. Large caged birds should be fed no more than 20% seed or seed mixes. Seeds are, in general, too high in fat to be the mainstay of any healthy bird. The remaining 80-100% should be comprised of at least one item from the following groups: whole grain, animal protein, vegetables, and fruits. Grit should not be given to hookbilled birds. Smaller caged birds, such as Canaries, cockateils, and parakeets, should be offered a similar variety, but are allowed some grit. Vitamins and minerals should be supplied in adequate amounts. Vitamin A is especially important, and is found in yellow vegetables.

Pelleted formulas, fairly new on the market, have been manufactured not only for the nutritional needs of different species, but also for a wide range of ailments. They are an excellent source for the owner who does not have the time to make their feathered friend a homemade meal. Fruits and vegetables can be supplemented for variety and the mental stimulation of different colors, shapes, and textures.

A plethora of dangers exist for the household bird. Not only must they avoid cats, dogs, and ferrets, but they may also be faced with curious toddlers, and architectural barriers not found in the wild. Windows (closed or open) can be lethal, as well as cooking areas, and indoor pools or hot tubs. High concentrations of lead and the fumes created by overheated Teflon can be fatal. Dozens of toxicities exist for birds, from chocolate, avocado, salt and alcohol, to certain plants, pesticides, and minerals. Stress can wreak havoc on the caged bird. Feather picking and self-mutilation, usually caused by stress of some sort, can lead to dangerous bacterial infections if not aggressively treated.

Birds are fragile creatures. For optimal health, they should be examined by an avian veterinarian when purchased, and thereafter whenever necessary, but certainly twice a year. Avians are masters at hiding illness. Owners should look for ocular or nasal discharge, lethargy, anorexia, fluffed feathers and poor grooming, among other signs. If a bird is bleeding, exhibits open-mouth breathing at rest, has poor balance, or has changed or absent vocalizations, it is considered an emergency. A good avian veterinarian will look at fecal samples, give a thorough physical exam, and may suggest bloodwork. He or she will be able to answer any of your husbandry questions, and may recommend other reliable sources of information, as well. While birds are a challenging exotic animal to own, a small amount of research will provide both you and your pet with many years of entertainment, enjoyment, and love.

