

Bird care - Parrots

There are around 400 species of parrots in the world, from the small budgies to the large macaws. Parrots are among the most intelligent birds and with their charismatic and social personalities, ability to imitate speech and noises, and colourful feathers, they are very popular as pets around the world. However, it is these very characteristics and their long lifespans that mean they have certain needs that must be met for them to live a healthy life.

Housing

- A cage should provide opportunities for your bird to display its normal behaviours and should be **as large as possible**; this depends on the bird's lifestyle and how much time it spends in the cage. At a minimum, a cage should be large enough for a bird to completely stretch out its wings without touching the sides or objects in the cage. The bird's tail should not touch the floor of the cage.
- Birds should feel safe in their cage and have a sense of privacy, but also be a part of the family. Their cage is best positioned against a wall or furniture, elevated from the floor. The bird should be at the same level as a person's chest. Having people and other animals hovering over the top of the bird can be stressful.
- The cage should be sturdy enough for the type of bird it is intended for, be made of non-toxic material (eg. plastic-coated, powder-coated or stainless steel), rust-free and easy to clean. **Zinc, copper and lead are toxic.**
- Newspaper or paper towels are the most hygienic and easy to clean materials for lining the bottom of the cage. Do not use sand, wood shavings or similar type beddings to line a cage floor.
- Perches should be **natural native branches** of various diameters. Dowel perches should not be the only option available as these can lead to pressure sores on the feet. Sandpaper perches are abrasive to the feet and should not be used. Do not place perches over food and water bowls.
- Food and water bowls should be removable, easy to clean and made of non-toxic material (eg. plastic for smaller birds, stainless steel for larger birds).
- Various safe toys (eg. natural wood, cardboard, native plants, large vegetable pieces) should be offered for **enrichment and foraging**. It is **normal behaviour** for a parrot to chew on wooden perches, safe wooden toys and native plants. Opportunities for this should **always** be available. Avoid metal (zinc, copper, lead, rusty toys) and rope/cloth toys. Not all commercially available bird toys are safe for birds. See "Foraging for birds" handout for more details.
- Poor hygiene, commonly from accumulation of dried droppings and old food, can cause illness in birds. The cage, perches and food bowls should be cleaned regularly. Organic material, including dried droppings, should be scraped away, followed by scrubbing and washing with soapy water, rinsing well and drying.

Management

- Parrots should be allowed exercise and flight outside the cage to maintain their health, and socialise with their human companions. If given free flight of the house, it is important to keep your bird safe, and keep doors and windows closed to prevent accidental escape. Some of the common household hazards are glass doors and windows, mirrors, fans and hot surfaces (eg. stovetops), which the birds can fly into. Inhaled (eg. smoke, sprays, cleaning products) and ingested (eg. baits, certain household plants, heavy metal containing objects) toxins must also be kept in mind.

- Supervised outdoor time is important for access to sunshine and fresh air. If placing your bird's cage outside, ensure there is access to shade to prevent overheating, and keep away from wild birds and other animals.
- Provide bathing opportunities. Some birds prefer a fine water mist, while others prefer a shallow water dish, a running tap or a shower.
- Provide a regular day and night cycle, with ~ 12 hours of sleep. Ideally, birds should be placed in a dark quiet place to sleep. Avoid covering the cage with a blanket as this limits air flow.

Behaviour

- Behavioural problems are commonly seen in pet birds, and can develop as a result of inappropriate socialisation and human interactions, or an inappropriate environment lacking in opportunities for normal behaviour, such as foraging and flying. Most bird species kept as pets, particularly parrots, are social flock creatures. They have unique characteristics, not far removed from their wild counterparts, and are highly intelligent. Their physical environment and human interactions should attempt to replicate their natural environment for optimal well-being.
 - Appropriate **socialisation** with human companions is vital to prevent behavioural problems developing. There are numerous resources available on parrot behaviour, including online resources and parrot preschools, to guide a new owner in understanding the unique aspects of parrot behaviour and socialisation.
 - Pet birds often spend many hours alone during the day, deprived of socialising and foraging opportunities, which can result in behavioural problems. Providing **foraging opportunities** is vital to fill this time. See "Foraging for birds" handout for more details.
 - Depending on the bird's lifestyle, having a bird companion should also be considered.

Diet

- **A well-balanced varied diet is one of the most common aspects of bird health**, with poor diet being a common cause of illness in pet birds. See "Bird feeding" handout for details.
- Food should be offered fresh daily in shallow food dishes. Leaving a deep food dish filled for days to weeks is unhygienic, does not allow accurate monitoring of bird's food intake and does not provide foraging opportunities.
- Fresh water must be provided daily. Adding vitamins or other additives to the water is not recommended, unless advised by your vet.

Health care

- Newly acquired birds should be examined by a vet, which includes infectious disease and parasite testing.
- Annual check-ups are recommended thereafter. AVES provides a comprehensive service for birds, including annual check-ups, and nutrition and behaviour advice.