

Feeding your bird (parrots)

Most pet birds are fed a seed-only diet, which is not nutritionally balanced and can predispose to many health problems, including obesity, lipomas, cardiovascular, reproductive and liver diseases, and behavioural problems. Seeds are high in fat and carbohydrates, and lack many micronutrients and protein. Birds are foraging creatures and in the wild consume a wide variety of food items. There are about 400 species of parrots in the world, and their natural biology and nutritional requirements differ. The recommendations below are a general guideline. Species-specific recommendations and quantities will be discussed during a consultation.

A balanced diet should be varied and should include the following items offered daily:

- Pelleted/crumbled diet
 - These diets have been nutritionally formulated to be fed as a staple diet, however, a variety of other food items listed below should still be fed to encourage foraging behaviour. There are many different brands commercially available. The formulations recommended by AVES are Harrison's and Roudybush. See below for conversion recommendations.
 - Variety of fresh vegetables and small amount of fruit
 - Such as: bok choy, spinach, celery, broccoli, parsley, peas, carrots, capsicum.
 - Berries, kiwi, grapes, apple.
 - Some seeds
 - Certain species, including cockatiels and budgies, require higher proportion of seeds in their diet than other species.
 - If feeding sunflower seeds to larger species, limit to 5-10 per day, and ideally use them as treats and for training.
 - Australian native vegetation (branches, leaves, blossoms, pods, pollen) and fresh grass
 - Such as: eucalyptus, bottlebrush, grevilleas, banksia, acacia, melaleuca.
 - Fresh grass pulled out with some roots attached.
 - Ensure these are free of pesticides and other chemicals, and rinsed with water.
 - Small amount of human food as a treat
 - Pasta, rice, wholegrain crackers or toast. Limit to a small piece per day.
- ⊗ DO NOT feed your bird avocados, rhubarb, chocolate, onion, garlic, salty and sugary foods, seed sticks/treats.

Introducing your bird to new food and achieving acceptance can be challenging, particularly in mature birds. Birds are creatures of habit and will choose foods that are familiar. Birds that have never been fed anything other than seed generally do not recognise the new food as being food! Some birds may even be fearful of the new item that just appeared in their cage. While some birds, particularly younger ones, can quickly accept pellets/crumbles once they realise it is edible, many are resistant to converting and require a few months of patience and persistence.

These are several methods of converting birds to pellets/crumbles. The method chosen depends on the bird, its personality and lifestyle.

1. Cold turkey: this method should NOT be done unless under strict supervision by an avian vet as it requires very close monitoring. Completely withholding seeds and offering pellets only can result in starvation that can have fatal consequences.
2. 2 hours cold turkey: this method takes advantage of the fact that most birds will gorge in the morning and late afternoon. Remove all seed from the cage at bedtime. In the morning, place pellets/crumbles in the seed bowl and offer that to your bird. Do this for 1 hour and observe if your bird is picking up the pellets/crumbles and crushing them up. After an hour, offer the normal food. Repeat this in the afternoon. If your bird takes to the pellets/crumbles, is crushing them up and appearing to eat them, your bird has accepted the new food.
3. Instinct: this method takes advantage of the fact that parrots generally prefer to eat at the highest location in the location. Fill a dish (same or similar to the one you use for seeds) and place it at a high up perch where your bird spends most of its time.
4. Gradual switch: this method works well for curious birds that are likely to try new foods. Mix $\frac{3}{4}$ of the original diet with $\frac{1}{4}$ pellets/crumbles. Do this for 1-2 weeks. Continue increasing the proportion of pellets/crumbles by $\frac{1}{4}$ every 1-2 weeks. Once you are offering $\frac{3}{4}$ pellets/crumbles, monitor your bird closely. This is a slow conversion method and may not work, but is safer for birds that cannot be monitored closely.
5. Act as if you are eating the pellets/crumbles: this method works well for birds that are socialised and are curious to try foods that they see their owners eating. Pretend you are eating the pellets/crumbles, then offer them to your bird (as you would with human food). For birds that are less socialised to people, using a mirror and placing it above the food dish or on a flat surface with pellets/crumbles sprinkled on top can help as the bird believes that the “other bird” is eating the pellets/crumbles.
6. Soaking the pellets/crumbles in water: this method works for birds that like moist mushy foods. Soak some pellets/crumbles and place them in a dish. Only leave the soaked pellets/crumbles in the cage for about 2 hours as it will spoil. If your bird eats the soaked pellets/crumbles, gradually reduce the amount of water.

Monitoring conversion: there are a few ways to monitor the conversion process.

1. Weighing your bird every morning. If your bird loses more than 5% of its bodyweight in a week, it may be starving. Go back to offering seed for 1-2 weeks, then try the conversion again.
2. Monitoring the droppings. If the faecal portion of the droppings is small, dark green or black, it means the bird may be starving. If the faecal portion of the droppings is normal size and is slightly paler in colour, it means the bird is eating the pellets/crumbles.
3. Consistency of the pellets/crumbles. If the pellets/crumbles are being crushed into fine powder, your bird is likely to be eating them.

Offering fresh vegetables. Every morning put a small piece of a fresh vegetable in the cage. It is easiest to peg it between cage bars at a high location. Keep replacing it every morning. Remove any uneaten fresh food at the end of the day. Do not expect your bird to eat it immediately if it has not been offered these food items previously. It is important to keep persisting and be patient until your bird becomes comfortable and familiar with the new food. You may use similar methods outlined above for pellets/crumble conversion, like pretending to eat the food.