



Dr Izidora Sladakovic BVSc (Hons I), MVS, DACZM
Avian & Exotics Service
izidora@avesvet.com.au
www.avesvet.com.au

Conversion to pellets/crumbles and novel foods

Introducing your bird to new food and achieving acceptance can be challenging, particularly in adult 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 new foods, including pellets, many are resistant and require a few months of patience and persistence.** These are several methods of converting birds to pellets/crumbles and other novel foods, some of which are outlined below. The method chosen depends on the bird, its personality and lifestyle. A vet examination is advised before starting the conversion process. Completely withholding seeds and offering pellets only is NOT recommended and can result in starvation that can have fatal consequences. The conversion needs to be a gradual process.

1. 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. After an hour, offer the original food (seed). Repeat this in the afternoon. If your bird takes to the pellets/crumbles, is crushing them and appearing to eat them, your bird has accepted the new food. Gradually increase the % of pellets/crumbles and decrease % of seeds over a period of 2-4 weeks.
2. Parrots generally prefer to eat at the highest location in the cage. Fill a food bowl with pellets/crumbles and place it at a high up perch where your bird spends most of its time. Placing novel foods, such as vegetables and native plants, between cage bars at a high up perch can also encourage birds to try these foods.
3. Gradual switch: this method works well for curious birds that are likely to try new foods. Mix $\frac{3}{4}$ of the original food 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. If your bird is crushing up the pellets/crumbles and appearing to eat them, your bird has accepted the new food. This is a slow conversion method and may not work, but is a safer method for some birds. Although less effective, crushing up the pellets into fine powder and sprinkling on top of the seeds may result in some inadvertent consumption as the bird is eating seeds.
4. Mimicking: For socialised birds, pretend you are eating pellets/crumbles, then offer them to your bird, particularly during mealtimes. 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. Birds are more likely to try new foods if they see other birds eating it.
5. Soak some pellets/crumbles and place them in a food dish. The soaked pellets/crumbles can be mixed with seeds and vegetables pieces to encourage your bird to pick at the mixture and gradually accept the new food. Only leave the soaked pellets/crumbles in the cage for a few hours as it will spoil. If your bird eats the soaked pellets/crumbles, add some dry pellets/crumbles to the mixture. Alternatively, mixture of soaked pellets/crumbles, seeds and vegetables can be baked into small “cookies”.

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 likely eating the pellets/crumbles.
3. Consistency of the pellets/crumbles. If the pellets/crumbles are being crushed into fine powder, your bird is likely eating them.
4. If your bird becomes unwell or you have any concerns, stop the conversion and contact your vet.