

Parrot nutrition and feeding

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, skin and feather problems, and behavioural problems. Seeds tend to be high in fat and carbohydrates, and lack many vitamins, minerals and protein/essential amino acids essential for health.

Birds are foraging creatures and in the wild consume a wide variety of food items, including seed pods, flowers, leaves, fruit, nuts, grass shoots and pine cones.

There are about 400 species of parrots in the world, and their natural biology and nutritional requirements differ (and for many species are not completely known). They are broadly categorised into the following groups based on the primary food they consume:

- Granivores (seed/grain eaters): such as budgies and cockatiels
- Frugivores (fruit eaters): such as eclectus parrots and orange-winged Amazon parrots
- Nectivores (nectar eaters): such as lorikeets and lorries
- Mixed (frugivore-granivore): many species of macaws and cockatoos

*** Seeds, grains and fruits consumed by these parrots in the wild are different to the domesticated and commercially available products and produce.

Some parrots are generalists and consume a wide variety of food items, whereas others are specialists. For example, blue and gold macaws consume a variety of seeds, fruits and nuts, whereas hyacinth macaws consume a large proportion of palm nuts.

The outline below provides a general feeding guideline only for healthy birds. There is no “one size fits all”. Specific requirements differ between species, life stage/age, season, gender, moulting, reproduction, lifestyle, and the presence of any illnesses. Dietary changes should be done gradually.

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

- Pellets/crumbles
 - There are many different commercially available formulations. See “Conversion to pellets/crumbles” for more details.
 - Pellets/crumbles have been formulated to provide macronutrients (carbohydrates, protein and fat) and micronutrients (vitamins, minerals) in the appropriate proportions to prevent excesses and deficiencies that occur with seed-only diets. They are designed to be fed as a staple and should make up **at least 50% of the parrot’s intake.**
- Fresh vegetables and fruit
 - Peas, carrots, capsicum, bok choy, spinach, broccoli, kale, fresh herbs
 - A variety of vegetables provides a source of enrichment and micronutrients, and can be offered to all parrots
 - Berries, kiwi, passionfruit, mango, papaya
 - Offer to frugivorous species

- Many Australian granivore species (eg. cockatiels, budgies) are less likely to eat fruit
- Seeds, grains and nuts
 - For many species, seeds should be limited to ~ 10-15% of daily food intake. Some small granivore species, such as cockatiels and budgies, require a higher proportion of seeds in their diet than other species (~ 30-40%). Budgie seed mix is suitable for these small granivores. Commercial seed mixes primarily consist of millet, canary seed, wheat and oats. Quinoa, buckwheat and seeds high in omega-3 fatty acids (flax seeds, hemp seeds) can be added to increase variety.
 - Sunflower and safflower seeds are high in fat and calorically dense, and should be limited to treats and for training in larger parrot species.
 - Nuts are calorically dense and should be limited to treats and for training in larger parrots. Certain larger species require more nuts in their diet.
- Wild vegetation (flowers, branches, leaves, pods) and fresh grass
 - Eucalyptus, bottlebrush, grevilleas, banksia, acacia, melaleuca, dandelions, thistle
 - Fresh grasses with grass seeds
 - Ensure these are free of pesticides, other chemicals, and wild bird droppings, and rinsed with water
- Human food
 - Pasta, rice, wholegrain crackers or toast. Limited to a small treat.
- Animal protein
 - Some parrot species are considered omnivores as they consume invertebrates such as grubs and insect larvae
 - ⊗ Avoid feeding animal protein, such as chicken, fish or dairy products, as these can be detrimental to health
- The natural diet of nectivores consists of nectar, pollen, honeydew, insects and fruit. Pet lorikeets/lories should be offered the following food items daily:
 - Liquid diet once or twice daily, ideally made fresh daily
 - Dry food available at all times
 - Vegetables, fruits and native vegetation as outlined above

Most pet birds are over-fed. However, there is no correct quantity to feed as this depends on the species and size of the bird, its lifestyle and activity levels, moulting and reproduction, and caloric density of the food. Food items can be divided into dry (pellets/crumbles, seeds, grains) and wet (fruits, vegetables, flowers, native vegetation). As a general guide/starting point:

- Dry food: ~ 1-2 tablespoons for small parrot, ~ 2-3 tablespoons for medium parrot, ~ 3-5 tablespoons for large parrot per day
- Wet foods can be offered in larger quantities due to their higher water content, and they offer enrichment and foraging
- It is important to monitor the food intake, droppings and weight of your bird to ensure appropriate quantity is offered
- Fresh water must be provided daily. Adding vitamins or other additives to the water is not recommended unless advised by your vet.
- ⊗ DO NOT feed your bird avocados, rhubarb, chocolate, onion, garlic, salty and sugary foods, seed sticks, dairy.