

THE BIRD OWNER'S MANUAL



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Please note: some of the photos I use in this manual are not credited because I found them on google but could not find out who took them or where they came from. If you see one of your photographs in this manual and would either like to be credited or would like the photos to be removed, by all means, feel free to let me know: frombeakstobarks@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Birds have always been a part of my life, in one way or another. My grandmother was an avid birdwatcher and my mother had finches when I was a little girl, so I don't remember a time when I wasn't surrounded by these marvelous creatures. As I got older, my love for birds continued to grow. The more I learned about them, the more I realized there was to learn. Living with companion parrots is a continuous learning process, but a delightful one.

With that background, I completely understand why people see a parrot and want one of their own. They are dazzlingly beautiful, mind-blowingly intelligent, comical, cute, and (sometimes) cuddly. But I also know how much work, commitment, and knowledge is required to live with them, and too often I have seen what happens when unprepared owners bring home a feathered baby: rescue organizations overflow with birds that have tragic and sometimes irreparable physical and emotional damage, and craigslist is full of ads by people who “just don't have the time” to take care of their “sweet but untamed” birds.

I believe the solution to this is education. I believe that most people have good hearts, and if given the proper tools and information will make good decisions. If people know what is involved in parrot ownership beforehand, those who are not presently able to properly care for a bird will realize it before they've paid their money and brought one home, and those who are will be better equipped to do so. This manual will hopefully get people pointed in the right direction.

I should point out that the title is somewhat misleading: nobody owns a bird; they *live with* a bird. The moment you start thinking that you own and therefore control this animal, you are going to be frustrated and disappointed. These are not domesticated animals. They are wild animals who are smart enough to adapt to captivity, but still have the instincts and independence of a wild creature. As such, they are much more high-maintenance and complex than your average dog or cat, and as I said at the beginning, living with them requires continuous learning.

The information presented in this manual is just the tip of the iceberg. There is a wealth of information out there, some of which is more valuable and helpful than others. Even this manual is just one person's opinion, based on my own experience and the research I have compiled while living and working with birds. I can point you in the right direction, but it's up to you to continue your own research. How much or how little you learn is up to you. I will give you this important pointer, though: there is seldom ever one single right answer, and anyone who tells you otherwise has an ulterior motive. Everything has its pros and cons, everything has risks and rewards. Some choices are better than others, and there are some choices that are just plain bad, but there are many choices that can be beneficial, depending on your situation. My advice to you is to do your research, ask for advice from people with knowledge and experience, but ultimately decide for yourself which avenue is best for you. Only you know your bird and your situation better than anyone else. The responsibility lies solely with you; it is both your right and your privilege. Your bird's life and well-being depends on it.

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CAGES AREN'T PRISONS

There are people out there who will tell you that it's cruel to cage a bird. There are songs and poems that vilify cages and mankind's need to put birds in them. And certainly, a cage can be an instrument of harm in a bird's life if used improperly. But the truth is that most parrot species construct their own "cages" in the wild, and every parrot needs a space where they can feel safe and secure. They need a bedroom as much as we do.

There are several factors that make a cage suitable for a bird:

SIZE

The rule of thumb for bird cages is: "AS LARGE AS YOU CAN AFFORD."

There should be enough space for your bird to spread its wings and fan its tail feathers, flap its wings and move around the cage to get plenty of exercise.



= GREAT!

The se and many other pictures in this manual were borrowed from drsfosterandsmith.com.



= TERRIBLE!

The only time a cage that small would be suitable for a bird that large is if it is being used as a travel or a sleep-only cage (and, indeed, these are the uses it is advertised for).

What is a sleep-only cage, you ask? It is an option that some people use in addition to a regular bird cage. Birds need 10 – 12 hours of sleep per day, and many people's homes and lives make that difficult to achieve. So, during the day, birds either stay out on playgyms (we'll talk about those in a later chapter) or in their regular cage in a common area like the living room or den, and at night their owners put them in their sleeping cage in a dark, quiet room. That way the birds can get enough sleep without the humans in the house having to disrupt their regular activities. If you're going to use a sleep cage, though, you need to be disciplined about making sure that your bird comes out of the cage when he wakes up in the morning and goes to his bigger living space. Don't get lazy about it and leave him in there. Birds that get left for long periods of time in small, confined spaces can develop anxiety and depression, which can in turn cause severe mental and behavioral disorders.

If you can't afford a HUGE cage just yet, get as large as you can afford and make sure your bird gets LOTS of out-of-cage time. And start saving up for something bigger!

BAR SPACING

This is more important than it may initially seem. If the bars are spaced too far apart, small birds can get their heads stuck or can even squeeze out of the cage altogether. Conversely, if the bars are too close together, larger birds can catch their toes or feet between the bars and do serious damage that may result in amputation. Below is a handy little chart I found on exoticpets.about.com. All credit goes to that site for this marvelously handy table:

Note: all dimensions are given in inches and in the format width x length x height.

Species	Minimum Cage Size	Bar Spacing
Finches	18"x30"x18"	1/4" to 1/2"
Canaries	18"x24" x18"	1/4" to 1/2"
Budgies	18"x18"x24"	1/2"
Cockatiels	20"x20"x24"	1/2" to 5/8"
Lovebirds Parrotlets	24"x24"x24"	1/2"
Ringneck Parakeets	24"x24"x36"	1/2" to 5/8"
Conures Poicephalus	24"x24"x24"	5/8" to 3/4"
Caiques Pionus Jardine's	24"x24"x36"	5/8" to 3/4"
Amazons Mini Macaws Goffin's Cockatoos African Greys	24"x36"x48"	3/4" to 1"
Large Cockatoos	36"x48"x48"	1" to 1.5"
Large Macaws	36"x48"x60"	1" to 1.5"
Doves and Pigeons	*see below	1/2" to 5/8"

*Dove and Pigeons: Doves need daily flight time so should either be kept in a flight cage or given daily flight time outside of the cage. With time outside of the cage for exercise, diamond doves can be kept in a cage 24"x24"x24" with bar spacing of no more than 1/2" and ringneck doves in a slightly larger cage (for example, 24"x36"x24"). Pigeons are most often kept in outdoor flights but if kept indoors need a large cage and daily flight time as well.

MATERIALS

This one's pretty cut and dried: there aren't many materials that are safe and appropriate for bird cages.



SAFE:

Powder-coated steel
Stainless steel



UNSAFE:

Pretty much any other material

Some cages have one or two acrylic sides. That's ok, but you should never purchase a cage that has more than two solid sides (three if you count the bottom). Birds need bars to climb on, and they also need good airflow.

SAFETY

In addition to harmful materials, there are many things that can make a cage unsafe:

***Rust:** Water + metal + oxidation = a chemical that can kill your birds if they ingest it. And since birds put their beaks all over their cages, if there's rust on your cage, it poses a threat to your bird.

Keep your bird's cage clean and dry and you can avoid this danger.

***Improperly installed hardware:** Make sure all the screws and bolts are fastened properly and securely. Bird skin is very delicate and friable, and if metal pieces are sticking out, they can inflict serious wounds.

***Inappropriate Locks:** Make sure that your cage has secure locks that your bird cannot open on his own. Some species – cockatoos and macaws especially – are notorious for being little Houdinis, while others wouldn't even push a cage door open if it were unlatched.

***Cleaning products:** We'll talk more about this later, but any aerosolized chemical can be deadly to birds. Their respiratory systems are much more efficient than ours, so things that would merely be an irritant or possible allergen to us could be deadly to them. The chemicals used in cleaning products – even those that are marketed as bird cage cleaners – are dangerous in and of themselves, but also contain perfumes that can cause respiratory distress in your bird. **The only products that are safe enough to clean your bird's cage and supplies with are plain old apple cider vinegar, water with GSE (Grapefruit Seed Extract) added to it, or a steamer with distilled water.** Believe it or not, apple cider vinegar on a paper towel melts away bird poop like magic—better than any chemical cleaner I've seen or tried.

PLACEMENT

Cage placement can be tricky, and obviously you are going to need to observe how your bird reacts to its environment. But generally speaking, these are some of the most important factors:

- **With the “flock”** - A bird's cage should be where it can see and hear and be a part of its human flock, but not in a high-traffic area like a hallway or the center of a room where people and other animals are constantly walking around all sides of the cage.
- **Window proximity** – While birds often enjoy looking outside, if their cage is right up against a window, they might feel threatened if they see something outside that they perceive as a predator. They can also overheat, since windows can act like a magnifying glass for the sun's rays. Place the cage near a window, but not right in front of it.
- **Comfort corner** – Birds need a corner that is darker and more private, where they can retreat if they need a nap or feel threatened by something near their cage. Placing the cage by a wall or a piece of furniture works well for this.

PERCHES

With the exception of birds who have learned to flip onto their backs to play or cuddle, all birds spend their entire lives on their feet. Without proper foot care, birds can develop arthritis, sores, or other debilitating podiatric diseases. Also, in the wild they are constantly moving around from branch to branch to tree trunk to cliffside...much of their exercise comes from navigating their way through a complex, multi-leveled jungle. For these reasons, having just one dowel rod perch across the middle of the cage is totally unacceptable. They need variety, both in the diameter and the materials of their perches. In my opinion, no cage is complete without at least one perch from the following five categories:

1) The Wood Perch



Wood is obvious because birds in the wild spend a lot of time perching on wood. Its relatively smooth texture and natural variation in shape and diameter provide your bird with valuable exercise for his feet.

2) The Cement or Sand Perch



Cement and sand perches are great because the rough texture stimulates circulation in their feet and helps to keep beaks and nails worn down. Some are consistent thickness while others, like the photo to the left here, vary in diameter. As long as you have at least one perch that has a varied diameter, it doesn't matter which perch does, but preferably more than one of your bird's perches will.

3) The Cotton Flexi-perch



Bendable perches are great for your bird, because the cotton is soft and is the equivalent of a squishy, comfortable mattress for us, but also because you can bend it into whatever creative shape will challenge your bird and give him a fun playscape. When he gets bored with the shape, you can simply rebend it into a new shape instead of having to buy a whole new perch. You do have to be careful to keep your bird's nails trimmed, though, because if they get too long and sharp they can get caught in the cotton fibers.

4) The Ledge



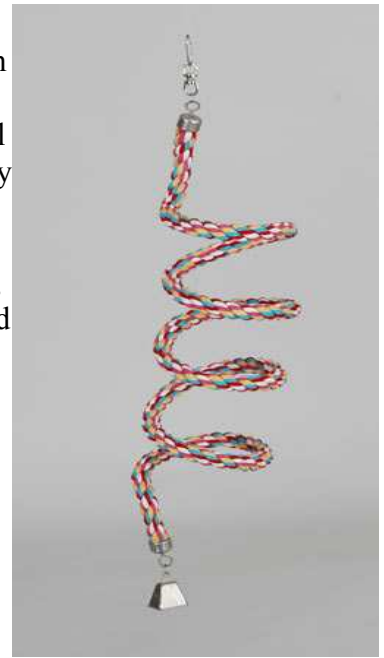
In the wild, parrots also find niches on cliffs or on the ground where they can relax their feet, eat a snack (as demonstrated in this picture), or rest on their keel for a little while. It's nice to offer your bird a chance to do the same. You can find perches that actually look like rocks, like the one to the left, and others that are made of cage bars. Happy Huts are an acceptable alternative, although be careful with hormonal females, as they might want to turn their Happy Hut into a nest box!



5) The Swing / Boing



Monkeys aren't the only animals swinging from tree to tree in the jungle; parrots do a fair amount of it, too. It's good mental and physical stimulation for them to climb onto and then stay balanced on a swing or a boing, and you can see their delight when they've mastered it. Even my toeless Eclectus loves to play on hers, although how she manages to balance is beyond me! No cage is complete without one.



HEALTH FOOD: IT ISN'T JUST FOR HIPPIES



A healthy and varied diet is crucial to all companion parrots. What that diet entails will vary among species, but with few exceptions (like lories and lorikeets, which need a nectar-based diet) every parrot needs varying amounts of the following: **FRUITS, VEGETABLES, SPROUTS, GRAINS, LEGUMES, SEEDS, NUTS, AND FRESH WATER.** It is up to you to find out what ratio is best for the species of bird you are getting, but species differentiation IS important when it comes to nutrition. For instance, birds like Macaws and Hawkheads have very high metabolisms and need to eat a lot of nuts and legumes that are higher in fat and protein, while birds like Greys, Cockatoos, and Eclectus have a tendency towards obesity and need a very low-fat diet, with few nuts and much more high-fiber foods. I won't go into specifics here about types of foods and the reasons for feeding them because there is an excellent website that already offers that information here:

www.landofvos.com/articles/mydiet.html

and here: www.landofvos.com/articles/feeding.html

(Bear in mind that the ratios and portions this author is suggesting are specific to her eclectus parrots, so they may differ from what your bird needs.)

I do, however, want to talk about some important aspects of feeding:

WHENEVER POSSIBLE, GO ORGANIC

As I've mentioned before, birds are highly sensitive to chemicals. We are fortunate in Austin to have several resources for relatively affordable organic produce, including but not limited to: Whole Foods, Central Market, some HEB locations, Wheatsville Co-op, Greenling, and local organic farming coops that will deliver to your home.

If you absolutely must get produce that has been sprayed with pesticides, rinse them obsessively. Wash them with GSE (Grapefruit Seed Extract) and/or vinegar. Then rinse them some more. Pesticides don't only kill pests; they kill birds, too! And pay attention to your prepackaged frozen fruits and vegetables: not only are many of them grown with pesticides, but they are often fortified with sugars to keep the colors fresh and the flavors sweet.

WORK SMARTER, NOT HARDER

I'm a realist: I know we're all busy. Asking most people to spend twenty minutes cutting up fruits and vegetables and cooking beans every day just isn't realistic. Fortunately, there are ways around this. Here are some ideas:

***Produce kabobs** – Put whole or huge chunks of fruits and veggies on a skewer and hang the skewer in the cage. You can also just wrap huge chunks of produce in paper or cardboard, or in a brown paper bag, and hang them in the cage or place them in a bowl. That way your bird has to tear through the inedible stuff to find the edible stuff. Not only are they getting their healthy foods, but now it's also a foraging game!

***Birdie bread** – Make a huge batch in one go and freeze what you aren't going to use in the next few days. Every few days pop a container of birdie bread from the freezer into the fridge and you've got your bird's food thawed out and ready to go! Recipes can again be found here:

www.landofvos.com/recipes/index.html

Alternately, you can buy pre-made, organic birdie breads from places like www.jolleyfeathers.com

***Foraging rolls** – You can buy relatively inexpensive, pre-made foraging rolls at www.phoenixforagingrolls.com that are full of nutritious, organic veggies, fruits, legumes, grains, nuts, and edible flowers. And while you wouldn't want this to be their only source of fresh foods, it's certainly a wonderful treat that can give you a day off from food preparation!

***Chop and freeze** – I buy a ton of organic fruits and veggies in bulk, and a 15 bean soup mix, and some seeds. On the first day, I will put the seeds on a tray and soak them in water with a little GSE added to keep the water from getting gross. On the second day I soak my beans. Then on the third day, The Big Prep Day, I drain and rinse the sprouts and beans, set the sprouts aside, and start to cook the beans. While the beans are cooking, I chop up the fruits and veggies into relatively small pieces. By the time I'm done, the beans are cooked. I then mix the sprouts, beans, chopped fruits and veggies together and spoon individual daily servings into snack-size sandwich bags. Then all the bags go into my freezer. Each day I take out one bag, pop it in the fridge, then feed my birds from the bag that was already in the fridge thawing out from the day before. The entire preparation process takes 3 to 4 hours, but lasts me about 2 months! 4 hours prep time for 2 months of food is doable by anyone's standards!

KEEP IT FRESH

Fresh foods spoil after a few hours, so should not be left in your bird's cage for very long. Having said that, I know that sometimes you are running late in the morning, feed your bird, and then run out the door for work. But you're gone for 8 hours and unless your bird cleans out his bowl, that food will be sitting there the whole time! What to do? Again, I'm going to mention GSE. Grapefruit Seed Extract is a natural antimicrobial product that is safe for ingestion in small amounts but powerfully effective. Just add one or two drops to the fresh foods and stir them together well to ensure that it is mixed in, and it will help to slow the growth of harmful bacteria on the produce. It's the next best thing to being home to take out the old food after 4 hours.

PURE WATER

Tap water contains many chemicals and heavy metals that aren't great for humans and are terrible for birds. Again, I want to reiterate that birds have a much more efficient respiratory system and metabolism, so things that we ingest and inhale all the time with minimal or only very long-term negative effects can build up in a bird's body quickly and be lethal after a relatively short period of time. For this reason, it's not a good idea to offer unfiltered tap water for your bird to drink. Use a filter or buy distilled water. It's better for you and your birds. Also, once again GSE comes in very handy: add a few drops to your bird's water every day and it will slow the growth of bacteria in the water when your bird inevitably will drop food or feces into his bowl. You can also teach your bird how to drink from a water bottle to further prevent contamination and bacterial growth.

THE GREAT PELLETS DEBATE

Many people have spent long hours having heated debates about whether or not birds should eat pellets, and what percentage of the diet pellets should make up. To me, it's a rather silly thing to be debating over. If pellets work for you and your bird, use them; if they don't, don't. I personally am gone long hours some days, and would rather leave my birds with other options when their fresh food isn't so fresh anymore. Plus, they come in very handy with foraging toys (which we'll cover in a later chapter). So, I use pellets, but not by any means as their main food source.

The important thing about using pellets is ensuring that you use a good quality food. You want your kids to eat Kashi or Raisin Bran, not Cocoa Pebbles or Trix, right? It's the same principle with birds. There are so many high-quality pellets out there that there's no need to settle for less. **There is no good reason to feed a dyed pellet.** Dyes and parrots don't mix well, and oftentimes parrots will pick out their favorite colors and just toss out the rest anyway, creating unnecessary and excessive waste.

My favorite pellets or pellet-like foods are as follows:

Avian Naturals – www.aviannaturals.com

Bird-E-Licious (although it's currently out of production for about six months while they build a new facility) – www.ptlffoundation.org

Harrison's – www.harrisonsbirdfoods.com

Roudybush – www.roudybush.com

While there are other perfectly good pellets out there, these use extremely high-quality ingredients and generally have the highest number of healthful foodstuffs with the minimum amount of filler. To a lesser or greater degree, depending on the brand, they use organic, unsulfured, human grade product and have excellent reputations among avian vets, breeders, and aviculturists alike. For more information about each, you can check out their websites.

SUPPLEMENTS

A rich and varied diet as described above shouldn't need much or any supplementation. In fact, an over-supplemented diet can be more dangerous to your bird than an under-supplemented one. For instance, you should NEVER add any vitamin supplements to your bird's diet without discussing it with your vet. Having said that, there are some supplements that, in the right context and in appropriate amounts, can be enormously beneficial to your bird's health. Just do your research and consult your vet before adding anything to your bird's regular diet. Super supplements include:

ALOE DETOX: Absorbs toxins and cleanses vital organs.

FATTY ACIDS (Omega-3 and -6): Improves and regulates the function of many things, including electrical activity in the heart and brain, blood pressure, blood clotting, immune and inflammatory responses, etc. It's better for birds to get plant-based fatty acids (flaxseed) than protein-based (fish).

FLOWERS: Certain flowers can help calm raging hormones, sooth anxiety, support the immune system, increase cardiovascular health, etc. Just make sure you're getting the actual flowers and not flower “essences”, which contain less than 0.1% flower in an otherwise useless suspension.

MILK THISTLE: Supports and even regains liver health. This is one ingredient in Aloe Detox.

PROBIOTICS: Fortifies and revitalizes the colony of normal gut flora that aids in proper GI function, nutrition absorption, and healthy defecation. Especially good during and after diarrhea or a course of antibiotics, when the existing colony has been depleted. Go [here](#) for more information.

RED PALM OIL: An excellent source of beta carotene and great for skin and feather health, red palm oil should nevertheless be given in VERY small amounts (no more than 1/8 tsp per day for larger hookbills and 1/16 tsp for smaller), as it is extremely high in fat.

SNACKING CAUTIONS

Every bird needs and wants snacks and treats from their owners. Their favorite foods can be used as excellent training tools, and offering them by hand can be an excellent way to develop a bond between you and your bird. However, be selective about what snack foods you offer, and try to avoid excessive amounts of the following:

***Dyes** – Some birds eat dyed food and seem to have very few problems, but the fact is that birds' kidneys are not meant to process artificial dyes, and many birds fail to thrive if dyes are a part of their diet. Eclectus are especially susceptible to dyed foods, and have been known to pluck, wing-flip, toe-tap, or even succumb to renal failure.

***Sulfured fruits** – You can usually tell a dehydrated fruit is sulphured because it will have an unnaturally bright color, although you can't know for sure unless the packaging specifically says that the fruits are unsulphured. Sulfuring can cause allergies and itchiness, which can then lead to feather plucking, and in high doses it can also cause respiratory symptoms like asthma. Avoid sulphured fruits whenever possible.

***Preservatives and flavor enhancers** – Some preservatives and flavor enhancers are made from natural products and are just fine, but others pose a very real and serious threat to your parrot's health and well being if ingested on a regular basis. Some birds are highly susceptible to even the smallest doses, so they must be entirely eliminated from some diets. These products include: **BHA** (kidney toxicity), **BHT** (kidney toxicity), **Ethoxyquin** (carcinogen), **MSG** (brain and eye damage, common allergen), **Propyl Gallate** (liver toxicity), **Propylene Glycol** (kidney and liver toxicity), **Sodium Nitrate** (carcinogen), **Sodium Nitrite** (carcinogen).

***Dairy products** – Remember that at no point in a wild bird's life would they be eating dairy products, so obviously their bodies aren't designed to effectively digest them. While they can sometimes benefit from the calcium, offer dairy products VERY sparingly, and watch your bird closely for adverse effects such as diarrhea or a sour-milk smell in his skin and feathers. If anything does occur, don't give your bird dairy products at all. Just like people, some birds are more lactose intolerant than others.

***Sugars, salts, oils** – This one's a no-brainer. If it's bad for people with our big, hearty bodies, it's going to be extra-bad for birds with their smaller, more sensitive bodies. While these things can of course be nutritionally beneficial in small amounts, it's a terrible idea to let birds eat them in large amounts. Be especially careful of nuts and trail mixes that are sold for human consumption. They may seem like a great idea, since birds need to eat nuts and fruit, but they have waaaaaay more salt and sugar than a bird's body can handle.

***Peanuts** – Yes, peanuts. Peanuts can harbor a dangerous mold called asper, which can pose a threat to your bird's health. Asper is a mold that commonly occurs in the environment, and most birds' immune systems successfully keep it at bay. But if your bird's immune system is temporarily suppressed (stress, for instance, can cause this) or if your bird ingests a large quantity of asper (such as what can be found in some peanuts), the mold can overcome your bird's immune system and develop an infection. Aspergillosis is difficult to diagnose, expensive to treat, and can be fatal, so it isn't something to be taken lightly. Feed peanuts very sparingly or you'll be playing Russian Roulette with your bird's life.

*****These other harmful foods should NEVER be given in ANY amount:**

Alcohol, avocado, caffeine, cassava (tapioca) root, cocoa products, raw meat, and the seeds and pits of apples, apricots, cherimoya, peaches, and plums.

TOYS ARE NOT OPTIONAL

When people hear the word “toys”, they usually think of little children greedily opening Christmas presents. You can spoil a child with too many toys, so people naturally jump to the same conclusion about parrots. In fact, whenever any of my non-bird-loving friends come to my house and see my birds' set-up, they say, “Wow, your birds are spoiled!” The reality is that birds need toys. And not just one or two toys, a LOT of toys. And those toys need to be rotated every few weeks. When we bring a bird out of the wild and into our homes, it is our responsibility to substitute in the best way possible the activities and mental stimulation that they would get in their natural habitats. If we fail to do so, our birds become unhealthy, bored, destructive, and self-destructive. They scream. They pluck their feathers. They self-mutilate. They bite. They destroy furniture. They develop neuroses and psychoses that are heartbreaking to witness and difficult to overcome. You are not only NOT spoiling your birds by giving them a variety of toys, you are providing for their basic needs.

Every toy serves one or more purpose. In order for your bird to be happy and healthy, you need to make sure that at least one toy in his cage fulfills each of the following needs:

The Need To Chew



Parrots chew a lot in the wild. They chew on wood to dig out tree hollows or build nests. They chew through tough plants to get to the edible parts. And in many parts of the world, they chew, scrape, and swallow clay in order to absorb toxins and acids found in their natural diet. If you don't give them something they're allowed to chew on, they'll use that piece of heirloom furniture in your living room instead. Or the moulding on your door frame. Or just the sheet rock close to their cage, in a pinch.

The Need To Shred



Again, parrots do a lot of shredding. Unless you want them shredding your drapes or that Monet in your living room, give them an acceptable alternative.

The Need To Preen



Preening is a parrot's way of grooming. They preen themselves and they also preen the ones they love. But when they get bored, they can over-preen and cause damage to their feathers. Giving them something else to preen helps to eliminate feather destructive behaviors.

The Need To Use Their Feet



It may sound silly, but parrots need to hold and manipulate things with their feet. Their feet are also their hands; they explore, feel, hold, touch, and grab things with their feet. Providing foot toys for your birds increases their motor reflexes, flexibility, and strength, and it also provides the mental stimulation of exploration.

The Need To Problem-Solve



Puzzle toys are vital to their mental development and go a long way in preventing boredom. You want to start with easier ones with your baby bird or a rescue who hasn't had a lot of practice, and then eventually work them up to more difficult toys. But the important thing is to always give them some challenge that they have to figure out.

The Need To Interact



Holding, petting, and hanging out with your bird is all good, but in order to strengthen the bond you have with your bird and be a part of his learning process, it's a good idea to get a toy that you can teach him how to use. Training him how to ride a skateboard or put coins in a bank or match up rings according to color will make him smarter and make you his Number One Favorite Person!

The Need To Forage



I saved this one for last because it is possibly the most important kind of toy you need to offer for your bird. In the wild, birds don't have slaves presenting their food to them in a silver bowl. They have to work hard all day long to locate and then obtain their food. This activity is called "foraging", and is a vital part of your bird's well-being. It prevents obesity, gorging, and boredom, provides mental and physical stimulation, and gives your bird a task to accomplish. In a sense, foraging toys can provide for all of the needs listed above. Save your bowls for the fresh foods, and offer all the nuts, pellets, and other hard, dry treats in several foraging toys hung in different parts of the cage. Make your bird earn his meal, and he will feel much more happy and fulfilled for it.



BIRDIE RECESS: THE INS AND OUTS OF PLAYGYMS AND FORAGING AREAS

There's another need that wasn't mentioned in the toy section, but that is every bit as important: the need to exercise and explore. Providing the perfect cage environment for your bird is essential, but not complete. Birds also need a lot of time away from their cages as well. Just as they would leave their nest or tree hole or rocky crevice in the wild to forage and explore all day, they need to do the same in captivity. Obviously, they can't fly for miles on end in a pet home, but you can provide them with places in your home where they can run wild and just be birds for a while. They need to climb, hang, swing, flap their wings, explore, forage, navigate through obstacles—in short, they need a playground.

Selecting an adequate playgym can be tricky. These are some important factors to consider:

Usable Space



The gym on the left has multiple levels on which to play, and multiple places where you can hang toys. There's ample room for movement and exploration here. On the right, however, you have a gym with few places to go and little to do, with very limited places to put toys—and yet it takes up almost as much floor space as its counterpart on the left.



Comfort



Remember that your bird is going to be spending a lot of time on his playgym, so the perches and materials it's made of should be comfortable and easy to grip. Square perches with sharp edges, like this gym on the right has, are both unnatural and uncomfortable for a bird's feet. But while plain PVC would be far too slippery and unstable for a bird, the gym on the left uses PVC that has been twisted and scored to give it texture and variability, allowing birds to have a firm grip on their perches.



Variety



Birds are smart and like to be challenged. So even if you have a stand with good, comfortable perches and multiple levels, if those levels are all the same and provide nothing new or different, there might as well not be any perches there at all. Notice how the stand on the left has two kinds of wood and sisal rope all intertwining. If you hung a toy on one level there, it would not be accessible from other parts of the gym. A bird would have to climb, weave, navigate through the maze of branches in order to get from one toy or perch to another. Tantalizing!



FORAGING AREAS

So you've found a playgym that you and your bird like. Congratulations! But you're not done! Birds need more than one foraging area to play on and explore. They need multiple stations that they can visit back and forth. If your bird can fly, he will enjoy the exercise of flying back and forth between stations. If he can't fly, he will enjoy climbing between them with ladders or perches or ropes—whatever you can think to use.

I know what you're thinking: not everyone can afford to turn two or three rooms of their house into an indoor jungle. But even if you have a very small living room and can barely fit two playgyms into it (like me!), you can still make the most of the little space you have by utilizing the ceiling to hang ropes, swings, bird-safe plants, and other parrot-friendly items.

For instance...



Starbird's Get-A-Grip abaca hanging nets might be a bit of an investment, but are worth every penny, as they provide the exercise and enjoyment of canopy climbing like little else that we can provide in captivity.

Photo courtesy of thelaughingparrot.com



The ceiling is also an excellent place to hang boings or swings, or even just a long bit of sisal rope. Get creative, but make sure that everything you use is safe for your parrots.

Photo courtesy of parrot-paradise.com



Offering your parrot fresh branches and leaves from fruit or eucalyptus trees is another fantastic way to enhance his foraging areas. Eucalyptus especially is beneficial: not only does it provide a psychological need to chew and shred leaves and branches, it is also a natural insect repellent and air freshener. Since both miticides and aerosolized air fresheners, plug-ins, and incense are toxic to your birds, it's only fair that they provide a healthy and refreshing alternative for you! You can purchase fresh, organically grown eucalyptus from <http://www.eucproducts.com/>

If you're starting to feel overwhelmed, **don't panic!** Help is both abundant and free. There is another homemade book (not unlike this humble little manual) floating around the internet that I think should be required reading for all bird owners. It is called *The Parrot Enrichment Activity Book*, which can be downloaded for free at: www.companionfids.com. This book offers a wealth of information on how to provide adequate enrichment activities for your parrots. It also includes several ideas and instructions on how to make your own foraging toys using cheap, household items. I want to stress that, even though it is wonderful to make your own foraging toys, it is also necessary to have at least a few nice, acrylic toys in your bird's play areas and cage at any given time. This is because birds go through homemade toys much more quickly than the durable acrylic ones, and if you get busy (like we all do from time to time) and don't have time to make new toys for several days, your bird will be left with nothing to do. Having said that, knowing how to make some cheap toys at home can be a welcome relief to your budget if, like me, you have limited expendable income.

There is also a relatively new but truly wonderful website devoted specifically to enriching the lives of companion parrots: www.avianenrichment.com. This website offers abundant information as well as many recommended products. It's a great site for new and experienced bird owners alike.

TO FLY OR NOT TO FLY: THAT IS A VERY GOOD QUESTION

Another topic that is often the center of heated debate in the companion parrot community is whether or not to clip your bird's wings. There are benefits and dangers to both, so it is up to you to learn what they are and decide what's best for you and your bird.

FLIGHTED



Photo by Stephanie Jackson

Note that the handler in this picture has a harness on her bird (harness is difficult to see because it is black), which is attached to an extension lead which is securely fastened around her wrist. If you are going to take your bird outdoors without a carrier, it is vital that he be trained to wear a harness, and that harness should be on him at all times while outside. The best harness on the market, in my and many others' opinion, is the Aviator Harness. Information about it can be found here: http://www.theparrotuniversity.com/aviator_harness.php

Although harness training can be tricky and takes a lot of time and patience, there is an excellent series of articles about how to do it [here](#).

<u>Pros</u>	<u>Cons</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">+ Allows birds to perform their most distinctive natural characteristic, which is both physically and psychologically beneficial+ Provides built-in exercise+ Gives your bird more freedom+ Recall / flight training builds a stronger, more trusting bond between you and your bird and decreases the chances of him becoming lost.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Makes your bird more vulnerable to potential hazards such as: open doors and windows, ceiling fans, floor lamps, hot stoves, open toilets, and the list goes on- Recall / flight training is a great responsibility that requires a lot of time and patience on your part, and without it an out-of-control flighted bird can be a menace to the household and a danger to himself

CLIPPED



If you are going to have your bird's wings clipped, make sure it is done correctly. As in the picture above, only the first four to six primary feathers should be clipped below the point where the coverts overlap. For heavier birds, I clip four feathers; for lighter birds, I clip five or six. The goal is to give your bird the ability to safely glide to the floor without being able to achieve lift, but also without crashing to the ground and injuring their keel.

DO NOT clip more than six primaries.

DO NOT clip any feathers other than primaries.

DO NOT clip the wings unevenly.

DO NOT leave the first two primaries intact for “aesthetic purposes”.

A bad wing clip can cause injury, permanent damage, or even death to your bird. To learn how to correctly clip wings, read [this article](#).

<u>Pros</u>	<u>Cons</u>
<p>+ Increases safety as birds are less likely to fly into hazardous situations or fly away (although it should be noted that they can still fly with clipped wings, and a gust of wind can carry them great distances!)</p> <p>+ Can aid in developing a stronger bond between you and a new bird, since he will rely on you more and be less independent and self-sufficient (although clipping wings should never be used as a method to “tame” birds or force them to do something they don't want to do)</p>	<p>- Birds are unable or less able to escape if a predator or other pet attacks them</p> <p>- It is up to you to do flying exercises with your bird to keep him physically healthy</p> <p>- Sometimes, the clipped ends of the feathers can irritate a bird and encourage him to start barbering his feathers</p>

LET THERE BE LIGHT!



Photo courtesy of SpectraBird.com

Lighting is an important factor that many people don't even think about when living with a bird. Remember that the vast majority of these animals are from tropical climates and get approximately 12 hours of sunlight every day. Birds need full spectrum light for adequate vitamin production, hormone production, feather health, and many other reasons. In fact, it is thought that many physical and behavioral problems are caused or at least exacerbated by a lack of adequate lighting.

The science of light and how it affects birds is very complex; I'm not going to even attempt to explain it here. Fortunately, there's already a fantastic website devoted to this topic: www.birdsandlighting.com

LIGHT UP YOUR BIRDS

The Great Outdoors

Obviously, one way to make sure your bird gets adequate light is to make sure he gets plenty of time outside—either giving him time in an outdoor aviary, or taking him out with you on a harness or in a backpack carrier. If you have the time or set-up to devote several hours of outside time to your bird every day, natural sunlight is fantastic.

True full-spectrum lighting

But remember that in the wild, parrots get around 12 hours of light every day. Few people can provide that kind of outdoor exposure, especially in cold-weather climates. To my knowledge, there is only one kind of artificial lighting that provides true and complete full-spectrum lighting:

<http://www.spectrabird.com>

The bulbs are comparatively expensive, but are much more energy efficient, environmentally friendly, and long-lived than your average bulb. You can either choose to purchase one of their relatively expensive but useful and well-designed systems, or you can get a cheaper, compatible ballast elsewhere. Either way, this bulb is the best way to go.

The other “full-spectrum” bulbs

If you don't have a way to give your birds enough natural light (coming through a window doesn't count, since glass filters out crucial elements), and are on a budget and will need to save up some money before you can afford a spectrabird system, there are other kinds of lighting that, while not being optimal for birds, will certainly be better than nothing. Please just know in advance that, no matter what they may say on the package, they do not truly provide completely for your birds' needs. There are many lights that fall in this category—from gro-lights (for plants) to reptile lights to lights that are specifically packaged and marketed for birds, you have plenty of options here.

SCRUB-A-DUB-DUB; DOES A BIRD GO IN A TUB?

While you probably shouldn't dunk your bird in a bathtub, it is important for him to get regular baths. Again, most parrots are from tropical climates, where it is hot and humid and rains frequently. Most pet homes are too dry, and without getting a regular bath, their feathers and skin can get dull, itchy, and flaky. Build-up of dirt and dust on his body can cause him to start barbering or plucking his feathers, or worse.

There are several ways to bathe a bird:

Mister



Automatic misters are a great way to maintain a consistent bathing schedule. This is especially helpful if your bird hates baths and you don't want him to associate you with something he fears or dislikes. The drawback is that you have to be very careful about how to rig up the mister so that your bird cannot chew on the hose or the electrical cord. The last thing you want is an electrical fire or a massive leak!

Spray Bottle



Spray bottles are nice because you can add supplements to the water - like George's Aloe or an herbal plucking remedy - if your bird needs an extra boost of moisturizer, etc. You also have more control over how much, where, and how strong the spray is. But, it is somewhat labor intensive, and can be unpleasant if you have arthritis or some other disease or injury that affects the use of your hands.

Shower perch



Bringing your bird into the shower with you can be a great bonding experience, and the added warmth and humidity can be very comforting for him and good for his feathers and skin. Be careful, however, not to let the water get too hot or too cold, and not to get any soaps, conditioners, or bath oils on his feathers.

Bird bath

One fun way to bathe your bird is to let him do it himself. Provide a shallow bowl of water so that he can splash and play on his own. Of course, this method is very messy and the water needs to be changed out frequently. And if your bird doesn't know how to bathe himself, you might need to show him and encourage water play.

SPEAKING PARROTESE: COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR BIRD

The basis for any successful relationship is good communication. This is as true for companion birds as any other relationship. Although very rudimentary conversations with parrots are possible, the majority of your communication with your bird is going to be through body language.

Knowing your bird's body language is vital to establishing good communication and understanding between you. Pay attention to his posturing and what his eyes and beak are doing. Know what each subtle movement and glance means. Be observant. Barbara Heidenreich, an internationally renowned avian behaviorist, has a DVD on how to read parrot body language, aptly called *Understanding Parrot Body Language*, which is available at www.goodbirdinc.com. I would highly recommend this if you are not already familiar with how to read a parrot's body language.

But communication isn't just about good perceptive skills. You also need to pay attention to how you use your body around your bird, and be aware of what messages you might be sending to him. Here are a few pointers:

Arms = Wings

In your bird's perception, your arms are your wings. Therefore, the way you move your arms will be interpreted as wing movement. If you move your arms around in big, dramatic movements, especially above your head, your bird will read that as a threatening or agitated movement. In order to appear non-threatening, fold your hands behind your back—your “wings” are “folded”, appearing calm and comfortable.

Look vs. Stare

Eye contact is obviously important to communication, but *how* you make that contact can make the difference between a trusting friend and a terrifying predator. Predators stare head-on, with both eyes giving a level gaze. Parrots, on the other hand, inspect something from the side, using one eye to focus on the object of interest. If you want your bird to trust you as a friend, look at him like one.

Volume

Both birds and humans raise their voices when they are angry, excited, or scared. Regardless of the reason, none of the emotions displayed with a raised voice are conducive to making your bird feel calm and comfortable around you. You might be super excited to see your new guy, but keep the volume down until you and he know each other well enough to indulge in a good game of excited group chatter.

Energy Level

Birds are also very sensitive to human emotion. If you are stressed or angry or scared, they are going to pick up on that and respond accordingly. If your bird senses that you are tense and a little bit irritable, he's not going to know that it is because you just had a bad day at work; he's going to think that those emotions are all aimed at him. Try to only approach your bird when you are in a calm, happy state of mind. Otherwise, your bad vibes might taint your interactions with him.

These are just a few concepts illustrating how your body language can affect your bird. There's always more to learn and more to explore, but the rule of thumb is to be aware, not only of what your bird is telling you, but what you are telling him!

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION...



Behavioral issues are such a common problem with companion parrots that most people who do not own parrots know them only by their bad habits. I've had so many people tell me that they don't know why anyone would want such an ill-tempered, biting, screaming monster for a pet. What they and, indeed, many bird owners don't understand is that parrots are not innately bad; we humans inadvertently teach and reinforce undesirable behaviors. It is, therefore, our responsibility to learn how to foster desirable behaviors in our companion parrots instead, and prevent undesirable ones from developing.

Of course, it isn't as simple as it sounds. But fortunately, there are a wealth of resources on how to positively influence your bird.

One site that is absolutely fantastic and that I've already briefly mentioned once is www.goodbirdinc.com. Barbara Heidenreich's site is chock full of behavior-related information in the form of books, DVDs, a magazine, a blog, a workshop calendar, and even a podcast of the radio show she participates in.

Another tremendous resource is Dr. Susan Friedman's site, www.behaviorworks.org. This site provides information about the science of behavior, and offers both classes and a listserv group about Parrot Behavior Analysis—and both are invaluable for working through a behavioral problem with your companion parrot.

There are literally dozens, if not hundreds, of websites about training parrots and dealing with parrot behavioral problems, but many of them have sub-optimal and/or conflicting advice. I would encourage you to explore and keep an open mind, but also use a critical mind and good common sense when searching the internet for information about parrot behavior. The sites listed above are by well-established scientists and professionals who have devoted their lives to learning and teaching people and birds. Use that as a standard by which to compare anything else you might read or hear about.

ACHTUNG, BIRDY

What's even more important than preventing bad habits is preventing death or serious injury to your bird. Just as with humans or any other species, there are many hazards in the world for birds, many of which people would not necessarily think of or know about. In addition to the other dangers mentioned throughout this book, the following items can pose serious threats to your bird's life. But let me stress this: it is important to know what the dangers are and to do your best to avoid them, but it is equally important to then store that knowledge away and go about living your life and letting your bird live his life without remaining in constant fear of what might happen. Do your best to minimize risks, but also know that they will always be out there and you will never fully be able to control them, no matter how zealous you might get.

BATHROOMS: Be careful when your bird is in or near your bathroom. Hazards like grooming products, cleaning products, open toilets, elastic bands, hair clips, and plugged-in electrical equipment (especially near wet surfaces) can endanger your bird if he is left unattended around them. Also be aware of any aerosolized chemicals like perfumes, deodorant, hair spray, etc., that your bird could inhale, as these are toxic as well.

CANDLES: While scented candles are especially harmful, even unscented, all-natural candles like beeswax can be toxic to birds. Even wicks without lead still release other toxins, the wax itself can cause an impaction if ingested, and of course an open flame can burn a curious bird.

CARBON MONOXIDE: Any home that uses gas should have a carbon monoxide detector in it, but it is especially important to be aware of CO levels when a bird is in the house. Because of their more efficient respiratory system, it can become dangerous at much lower levels than what is considered dangerous to humans. Pay attention to your CO detector and make sure your bird's living area is well-ventilated.

CARPET: The glues used underneath it and the Scotchgard sprayed on it are both toxic to birds. As long as it has the new-carpet smell, it is emitting those toxic fumes. Also, if a bird ingests carpet, it can cause an impaction. Carpet also harbors dusts, molds, fungi, and dander that can irritate your bird's respiratory system and cause or exacerbate allergies or even more serious respiratory illnesses.

CLEANING PRODUCTS: Almost any chemical cleaning product, especially scented ones, are toxic to birds. Beyond that, they also tend to be expensive and contribute to human allergies. The cheapest, safest, most effective cleaning products in the world are water, vinegar, baking soda, citrus oil, and grapefruit seed extract. Those five products can clean, disinfect, and polish almost anything. For really tough stains, oxyclean is relatively safe to use around birds, as long as they don't ingest it (obviously). And for your laundry, use only unscented, allergen-free laundry detergents.

DEODORIZERS: Products like plug-ins, sprays, scented oils, potpourri, carpet powders, Febreze, and any other aerosolized scented product can cause serious respiratory illnesses in your bird. Instead, you can simmer spices and citrus rinds, or you can bring in fresh, nontoxic flowers, fresh eucalyptus branches and leaves, or other nontoxic herbs or aromatic plants such as peppermint or verbena.

DISEASE: Do not allow your bird to be exposed to other birds of unknown medical backgrounds. If you bring a new bird into your home, make sure to keep her quarantined for 90 days in a different building or a room with a separate ventilation system, and wash your hands and change your clothes between handling the two birds. Alternately, do not take your bird to a location where there will be other birds of unknown origin, such as a bird fair or aviary. Even the best boarding facilities cannot protect against the spread of certain diseases. It is much safer to have an experienced pet sitter come to your home.

DRY CLEANING: Dry cleaned clothing should be kept away from birds and in a separate ventilation system until the odor is entirely gone, as the chemical used in dry cleaning, perchloroethylene, is a known carcinogen.

FANS: Any kind of fan, either ceiling fans or floor models, should not be turned on when your bird is out of his cage. Even birds with clipped wings can get caught in a fan and killed or seriously injured.

FERTILIZER: Both inorganic and organic fertilizers are toxic for your bird. Even soil and compost can contain asper or other harmful fungi and molds. Do not let your bird come into contact with any of it.

FLOOR LAMPS: Torchiere lamps – that is, the floor lamps that open towards the ceiling with the bulb easily accessible from the top – can badly burn a bird if he were to land on it. Make sure your bird has no access to lamp bulbs of any kind when they are hot.

GLASS AND MIRRORS: Flighted birds have been known to fly into windows, mirrors, or other transparent or reflective surfaces and be seriously killed or injured. Show your bird that they are solid objects or adorn them with something that will indicate to your bird that they are (such as curtains, blinds, or decals) and he will be much less likely injure himself in this way.

GRIT: Unlike passerines and some other families of birds, parrots do not use or need grit, and if ingested it can cause a life-threatening impaction.

HOME IMPROVEMENT PRODUCTS: Paints, solvents, finishes, adhesives, Scotchgard, the dust from drywall and texturizers, and pretty much any other chemical product used in home improvement and repair is toxic to birds. These things are obviously necessary, so when you must use them, remove your bird from your home and keep your home well-ventilated for several days before reintroducing him. The rule of thumb is that if you can smell it, it can still harm your bird.

KITCHENS: Be careful when your bird is in or near your kitchen. Hazards like hot surfaces, boiling water or food, smoke or toxic fumes, knives and scissors can kill or injure your bird.

LEG BANDS: These should be removed by your vet (and only your vet) after you bring your new bird home, as he can easily get the band caught in something and can lose limb or life.

METAL: Any metal that is soft or small enough to be swallowed by a bird can cause life-threatening toxicity. DO NOT let your birds chew on or play with any product that contains metal in even trace amounts. If he does, or you think he might have, take him to your vet immediately.

MICROCHIPS: While these are a far safer and more reliable method of proving your bird's identity than leg bands, some birds can have allergic or infectious reactions to the chip. Discuss the risks and benefits with your vet and decide for yourself whether or not you want to chip your bird.

OPEN WINDOWS AND DOORS: DO NOT leave any windows or doors open if your bird is out of his cage. Even clipped birds can get out and a gust of wind can carry them great distances.

OTHER PETS: Monitor your bird carefully around other animals; even in play, they can injure each other. Bigger birds have been known to kill smaller ones. Ferrets, cats, and some breeds of dogs are natural predators of birds, and sighthounds especially should always be restrained or removed when a bird is out of his cage, as their chase instinct can override any training or socialization. Also, dog and cat saliva contains bacteria that are deadly to birds. If your bird is only slightly injured by a dog or cat, even by accident, you must seek immediate veterinary treatment.

PESTICIDES: Any pesticides that a bird can inhale, ingest, or absorb through the skin can be deadly. This includes sprays, flystrips, foggers, powders, mothballs, flea collars, shampoos, and the miticide discs that are sold to be hung on your bird's cage. Instead, you can use baits as long as they are in areas your bird can't access. Austin also has a couple of organic pest control companies, such as Chem-Free (512-837-9681). For flea and tick prevention, the safest thing to do for your dogs, cats, and birds is to use veterinary-approved topical and oral flea medications on the mammals (never on your birds!), such as Comfortis, Sentinel, Capstar, Frontline, or Advantage (NEVER use Advantix or any of the over the counter flea topicals like Hartz, as they contain permethrins, which are toxic to cats, birds, and most other small animals). Another safe, effective, and relatively cheap pesticide you can use is diatomaceous earth. Sprinkle it along the edges of your walls and windows, leave it for a day or two, then vacuum it up and reapply. Just be sure to use the diatomaceous earth sold for gardening, not for water softeners.

PLYWOOD and PARTICLE BOARD: These wood products are toxic to birds. Use only pure, preferably untreated, wood to make perches, toys, or other items for your bird.

POISONOUS PLANTS: There are many plants in our homes and yards that are highly toxic to birds if ingested. The list is long and the level of toxicity varies, but none of these plants should be kept in a home with companion parrots. The Humane Society publishes and updates a fairly comprehensive list [here](#).

PTFE: Teflon (polytetrafluoroethylene) and other non-stick surfaces release a deadly gas when overheated that will kill birds instantly and cause flu-like symptoms in humans. It is also a carcinogen. Avoid non-stick cookware, cooking bags, and electrical appliances like hair blowers and space heaters that have PTFE and instead use safe alternatives like stainless steel, stoneware, pyrex, and PTFE-free appliances. If in doubt, contact the manufacturer to ask whether or not they use PTFE on their products.

SALIVA: The saliva of humans and other animals poses a serious health threat to birds, as it contains microorganisms that a bird's immune system is not equipped to handle. Do not let your bird stick his beak or head into your mouth, do not offer him food that was in your mouth, and do not let your pets drool on, lick, or bite your bird.

SELF-CLEANING OVENS: These ovens are coated with metal oxides and fluoropolymers that release deadly fumes. Don't use the feature at all, or, if you must, remove your birds from your home for a day or two during and after the cleaning cycle, and in the meantime thoroughly air out your home by opening all doors and windows and turning on all fans.

SMOKE: Smoke from cigarettes, cigars, pipes, joints, bong, burning incense, and even burning toasters or other appliances can cause severe irritation to the eyes, skin, and respiratory system of birds, and can even cause severe respiratory illness or even death. Nicotine is particularly insidious, since it lingers in fabrics, perches, and other porous surfaces and continues to cause irritation long after the smoke itself is gone.

STYPTIC POWER: Coagulants like kwik-stop or silver nitrate are great for stopping nail bleeds, but should never be used on a bird's skin or feathers. Cornstarch or flour can be used to stop minor bleeds, but for serious bleeds you should apply a pressure bandage and seek veterinary assistance as soon as possible. Blood feathers should be pulled with a pair of needle-nose pliers or hemostats, as they will not clot on their own and your bird can bleed out.

SUBSTRATES: Litter of any kind can get impacted in a bird's crop if ingested, and also harbors harmful molds and fungi when wet. Wood shavings (not from all trees, obviously, but from the ones most commonly sold as wood shavings in pet stores: pine, cedar, and redwood) can also be toxic to birds and/or cause impaction, and should therefore also be avoided.

Neither should ever be used to line your bird's cage trays. Instead, use paper of some kind (e.g. newspaper, butcher paper, pre-cut cage liners, etc.), and change it often. If you have cats and they have clay litter, be sure to keep their boxes in an area that has a separate ventilation system than your bird's, as the clay dust is harmful to birds' respiratory systems.

TEA TREE OIL: While this product can be very beneficial to humans and other mammals, it is irritating to birds' skin and toxic if ingested. Keep this product away from your bird.

TOYS: All toys should be examined regularly for any loose parts, knotted threads, sharp objects, rusted metal, feces, or any other object that might pose a danger to your bird. One of my birds lost a toe from getting it caught in a knotted piece of rope (before he came to me), and another almost hung herself on a loop of raffia (while I was sitting there watching her play), so this is not an uncommon phenomenon. So even though toys are essential to a bird's well-being, they also need to be carefully checked to ensure their safety.

UNSANITARY CONDITIONS: Keep your bird's cage and tray clean to prevent the growth of molds and harmful bacteria, as well as the accidental ingestion of feces and the attraction of unwanted pests. Clean all bowls daily and toys and perches weekly. Wash your hands before and after handling each bird. Change your clothes before handling your bird if you have come into contact with any other birds outside your home.

I know what you're thinking right about now. You're looking at the list above and thinking, "There's no way I can live like this. This is a completely impractical lifestyle!" I've said it before and I'll say it again: **don't panic**. First of all, the lifestyle isn't nearly as impractical as it initially seems. You will find that after the initial adjustment period it's actually pretty easy to maintain, cheaper and cleaner than the alternative, and you and your family will discover and enjoy the health benefits that result from these simple changes. But secondly, let's have a quick discussion about *cumulative effect*. While some of the products above, like PTFE, really are immediately deadly to your bird, most of them are not. If your power goes out and you light a candle, or if your daughter's friend spritzes herself with perfume in your living room, chances are good that your bird is not going to immediately keel over and die. Trace amounts of this or that irritant aren't going to do a bird in all at once, but if you get lax about using this or that chemical, or allowing this or that product into your home, or exposing your bird to this or that danger, eventually something is going to catch up to you and your bird will suffer for it. Think of it this way: if you're standing in a field and one bullet gets fired into that field, chances are good that it's not going to hit you. But if you're standing in that same field and thousands of bullets are flying into it, the chances are very good that at least one of them is going to hit you. It may be in the arm or it may be in the heart, or it may be both, but the higher the concentration of bullets in the field, the greater your chances of getting hit and possibly dying. The same principle applies to protecting your bird. Like I said before: use common sense, do your best to minimize the risks, but don't have a heart attack if your thoughtful but absent-minded husband washes your bird's dishes with dish soap one night. The point is to enjoy living with your bird, not to be overwrought with fear for his life.

THE BIRD SCOUT MOTTO: “ALWAYS BE PREPARED”

And what if an accident does happen? What then? Every bird owner should have a first aid kit in case the unthinkable does happen, and they should know what is in their kit and how to use it. There are many different pre-made first aid kits available for purchase, but I find that it's better to make your own. First of all, no pre-made kit I've seen yet has been comprehensive enough to be considered complete, and secondly, if you put a kit together yourself, you will know exactly what's in it and where to find everything. Below is a wonderful guide from www.peteducation.com on how to make your own first aid kit:

Since you never know when an accident will happen, keeping a pet emergency kit at your home is a good idea. You can put a first aid kit together yourself and buy the items separately, or buy one ready-made. If you make one yourself, use a small plastic tub with a tight fitting lid to store the following items:

Important Phone Numbers

- Veterinary clinic phone number and directions to the clinic
- Emergency clinic phone number and directions
- Poison control center phone numbers

Equipment and Supplies

- Magnifying glass
- Scissors
- Tweezers
- Nail clippers and metal nail file
- Styptic powder or sticks, Kwik Stop, or cornstarch
- Penlight
- Scalpel blades and handles
- Turkey baster
- Eye dropper
- Syringes of various sizes
- Feeding tubes of various sizes (if you are trained in how to use them)
- Lubricant such as mineral oil or KY Jelly (without spermicide)
- Cotton swabs
- Clean cloths and/or paper toweling
- Disposable gloves
- Stethoscope
- Gram scale
- Needle-nose pliers or *hemostats*
- Wire cutters
- Net
- Towels for restraint and/or to cover cage
- Pet carrier
- Heating pad or heat lamp to use at home

- Home thermometer to measure temperature of bird's environment
- Heat pack or hot water bottle (to keep the bird warm during transport, wrap the pack in a towel - do not apply directly to your bird, or burns may result)

Bandaging Materials

- Square gauze of various sizes - some sterile
- Non-stick pads
- First aid tape - both paper (easily comes off of skin and feathers, or use masking tape) and adhesive types
- Bandage rolls - gauze and Vetwrap
- Wooden sticks of various sizes for splints - tongue depressors, Popsicle sticks, toothpicks
- Stockinette
- Gel foam - stops bleeding from wounds (ask your avian veterinarian)
- Band-Aids (for humans)

Nutritional Support

- Rehydrating solution such as Gatorade or Pedialyte

Medicines*

- Wound disinfectant such as Betadine or Nolvasan
- Triple antibiotic ointment for skin
- Antibiotic ophthalmic ointment for eyes, e.g., Terramycin
- Eye wash solution
- Sterile saline

*Watch the expiration dates on any medication, and replace as needed.

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In addition to a first aid kit, every bird owner should have a disaster preparedness kit. Below is an excellent article about disaster preparedness written by Jamie Leigh-Powell.

Disasters come in many different forms, from wildfires and floods, where you may have a bit of warning, to a chemical truck collision or an explosion, where there is no warning. By their very nature they can bring chaos and panic even to the calmest of us. Preparedness is the key to surviving disasters, whether small and local or large and national. So to help our bird owners, here is a parrot emergency kit.

Bare Essential Disaster Kit

Water - Plan for at the very least 3 days' worth, but better to have 2 weeks' worth. Water is vital for everything to live and a disaster situation can send people rushing to the stores buying up water. Remember to allow not only for drinking, but cleaning too. Rotate in new as you buy it and use the old at home so your supply is always fresh.

Food - Bird food is not the first thing stores are going to be worried about getting into a disaster-struck area; plus, if you have to evacuate out of your normal area, you may not be able to get the food you need for your bird. Consider how much food you go through in a week and then pack enough for at least 2 weeks, allowing for spills. As with water, food should be rotated in with new food being placed in the disaster kit and the older bag then used at home.

Dried (unsulfured) fruits and veggies are good for making sure your bird gets his daily veggies.

Individual fruit or apple sauce cups are good too, as long as they have no added ingredients and are in juice only.

Remember to include any supplements your bird is used to having.

First Aid Kit - Any medications your bird takes should also be kept in here.

Towel - A large towel should be included and can be used for anything from covering a cage, restraining a bird, making a shady area, etc. A towel is your best friend; take one for each bird if possible.

Carrier - One for each bird. Keep them next to cages with newspaper on the bottom; you really don't need to waste time trying to get them out of that cupboard when there's a house fire or chemical spill. Have a towel next to the cage as well in case the bird is not tame, or is scared and not cooperating.

Cage - A carrier is safer for a bird during the actual evacuation, but is a little cramped for an extended stay. Consider investing in a collapsible cage (some good ones fold up to the size of a suitcase) to give your bird more space to move around and more room for toys.

Dishes - For putting food and water in. Heavy porcelain ones are great here as you can put them at the bottom of a cage or carrier and it's hard for the bird to knock them over.

Newspaper - For lining the cage, etc.

Paperwork - Vet records and proof of ownership including microchip information and photos of you with the bird. Include a detailed description, noting any distinguishing markings, and keep a copy with you, too.

Toys - A bored bird is an unhappy bird. Keeping spares of your bird's favorite toy in your disaster kit goes a long way for the mental health of your bird in an emergency.

Water Bottles – With a bottle there is less chance of water spilling and being wasted when it is in limited supply. Plus, if there are contaminants in the area then there is less chance of them getting into your bird's water. Most carriers can be adapted to add a small water bottle.

Spray Bottle - For misting your bird to keep it cool and for the benefit of his feathers.

Cleaning products – Vinegar, etc. Look for small travel bottles at your local supermarket to keep these in, and make sure to label the bottles very clearly so that they are not accidentally switched or confused.

Depending on how many birds you have, there are all sorts of things you can keep the kit in, such as a duffle bag or even a Rubbermaid tub. The important thing is that it is handy to grab in a hurry. A central location is good because if you put it next to one door and are cut off from that escape route it will be useless.

Make sure you know the best way to pack your car with supplies so you are not flustered when an emergency happens.

Plan at least three routes out of town and at least three different places to stay.

Make sure you know of vets, etc., out of your area that will be able to help you should your bird become ill.

SIGNS OF ILLNESS

You can have the best first aid and emergency kits in the world, but if you don't know what your bird's signs of illness look like, they aren't going to do you any good. Because illness for a wild bird is tantamount to being easy prey, birds will hide their illness until they are gravely ill. These are the important tells that will give you valuable days or hours of advance notice that could mean the difference between life and death for your bird.

WEIGHT: Know your bird's normal weight and weigh him weekly to ensure that he is maintaining that weight. Weight loss is the first sign of illness. Unless you are purposefully putting him on a diet, if your bird loses 10% or more of his body weight in a month's time, take him in to see the vet.

DROPPINGS: There are three parts to a bird's droppings: feces (the solid part), urine (the liquid part), and urates (the milky white part). Depending on his species and diet, the color and consistency of his droppings will vary to an extent, but you should know what is normal for your bird and notify your vet at the first sign of change. If the feces are liquid, your bird has diarrhea. If the droppings are black and a tar consistency, your bird has not eaten in 48 hours or more. If the urates are a color other than white or pale green, your bird's kidneys could be distressed. If the urine has a reddish, brownish, or yellowish tint to it, it could indicate the presence of bleeding or organ failure. And obviously, if you see blood, your bird is bleeding somewhere in his digestive tract.

VOMITING: Learn the difference between vomiting and regurgitation. Many parrots will often regurgitate as a sign of affection towards their human companions; this is normal. However, if your bird is frequently regurgitating whether or not his favorite person or toy or other bird is present, and is producing partially digested food or liquid, it is time to see a vet.

YAWNING: When a bird stretches out their neck and opens their beak wide, it may look like yawning, but they are actually adjusting their crop. You will often see this after they've eaten a particularly satisfying, chunky meal or when they're settling down for a nap. However, if they do it frequently throughout the day, it can be a sign of a serious yeast or bacterial infection of the crop, and should be seen by a vet immediately.

SKIN DISCOLORATION: Unless your bird is a plucker, you won't be able to easily see his skin. However, if you do peek between the feathers and notice that his skin is abnormally colored, take him to see a vet. It could be a sign of obesity, organ failure, trauma, bleeding disorders, or some other serious illness.

ITCHINESS: While it is perfectly normal for birds to have the occasional itch, and some birds love to massage their own heads, frequent scratching and sudden, severe biting at himself means that your bird is itchy and either has allergies, overly dry skin, or some kind of skin infection. Have it checked out.

COUGHING/SNEEZING: Again, it's normal for a bird to have an occasional cough or sneeze, but if it happens often and especially if any discharge comes from his nares, your bird needs to see a vet.

BREATHING: If your bird's breathing is abnormal – be it rapid/shallow breathing, labored breathing, or wheezing – this is a sign of serious illness. Take him to your vet immediately.

TOE TAPPING/WING FLIPPING/NEUROTIC TICS: These symptoms are especially common in eclectus and usually indicate some kind of malnutrition. It is not well understood, although we are constantly learning more about it, but must be seen by your vet.

FEATHER DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR: This is a complex issue that has many root causes and therefore many treatments, but if your bird begins this behavior, it is vital that you rule out a medical basis before addressing behavioral ones.

MENTATION: Some birds are less active than others, but if your bird's activity level is abnormally low, it could be a sign of serious illness. If your bird is sitting fluffed up on the bottom of his cage, this is a sign of grave illness. Because they don't show illness until they are near death, this is a true emergency. Take him to the vet NOW. Don't wait until the morning. Don't wait until Monday. Drop what you're doing and get him seen immediately.

There are many other symptoms of illness, most of which are pretty obvious. Use common sense; if your bird is falling over, too weak to grab and hold things, having a seizure, etc., he is obviously very ill and needs to be seen by a vet right away. It's better to be safe than sorry.

AVIAN VETS IN AUSTIN

So you've used your first aid kit to stabilize your bird after his emergency, but now where do you take him to be seen for further medical care? Finding a good avian vet and developing a good relationship with them is an important part of having a companion parrot. Not only for emergencies, but just like people and domestic pets, birds should be getting an annual physical exam as well. In fact, it is very important to take your new bird to the vet as soon as you bring him home, so that your vet can get to know you and your bird, and they can establish a good baseline of what is normal when your bird is healthy so that if an emergency happens they already know your bird and will be able to tell exactly how ill he is. Annual exams can then establish that your bird is staying near (or returning to) his baseline and can also catch disease in early stages. We are blessed in Austin to have many good avian vets:

All Creatures Mobile Veterinary Clinic

Dr. Leanne Jakubowsky
288.2809

Love Pet Hospital

Dr. Carolyn Love
282.0221

Parmer Lane Pet Hospital

Dr. Bill Campbell
260.5443

Research Pet and Bird

Dr. Paul Skellenger
258.2577

Westgate Pet and Bird

Dr. Ginger Davis
Dr. Paul Brandt
892.4463

If you currently live or are moving outside of Austin, you can find a qualified avian vet at the Association of Avian Veterinarians website: <http://www.aav.org/>

OTHER INVALUABLE RESOURCES AND READING MATERIALS

As I said at the beginning, living with a bird is a constant learning experience. It's up to you to get to know your bird and learn about how best to take care of him, and there are plenty of exciting and inspiring ideas out there. Here are just a few more places that I can recommend to get you started on your journey into the world of companion parrots. Godspeed!

COMMUNITY FORUMS

Some of the most fertile places for discussion and the sharing of ideas and information are message boards and mailing lists. There are so many of these that I wouldn't even know how to find them all, but here are a few that I have found to be particularly active and helpful:

<http://parrottalk.com/mlist1.html>

There are many breed specific mailing lists at parrottalk, and the two that I belong to (for eclectus and macaws) are the friendliest, most helpful, most drama-free forums I've ever belonged to.

<http://theperch.net/discussion/>

Not only does this site have a message board for every parrot and soft bill species imaginable, they also have boards for every bird-related topic imaginable. If you have a question or need advice about literally any subject related to your bird, throw a question up on the appropriate board and you'll start getting feedback within minutes.

<http://www.birdboard.com/forum/>

Like theperch.net, but not.

www.livejournal.com

LJ also has two great parrot communities:
parrot_lovers and captiveforaging

yahoogroups.com

Yahoo has several groups devoted to specific parrot and softbill species. Do a search for your breed and you will find many tremendous resources.

WEBSITES

Here are some other websites that might not have been mentioned earlier on but are nevertheless overflowing with information.

www.upatsix.com

birdsnways.com

www.parrots.org

www.rationalparrot.com

www.mytoos.com

www.anafricangrey.ca

www.oldworldaviaries.com/info.html

www.plannedparrothood.com

www.proaviculture.com