

# What To Feed

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One of the most confusing issues facing beginning Aviculturists is the question of what diet to feed. To listen to some you would think that anything but a manufactured extruded diet is a death sentence, while others tout "whole foods" (whatever those are), "natural diet," cooked foods, sprouts, and a seemingly endless list of herbs and additives. Pretty soon you begin to feel like whatever you do, your birds are doomed to suffer and die at an early age. Nor does it help talking to other breeders. One will feed an all seed mix, while another feeds only cooked foods, a third feeds pellets and others feed every combination you can think of. Before long your head spins, your stomach turns and as one person put it to me at a recent club meeting (Central California Avian Society, Fresno, CA) "I almost wish I had never got a bird, no matter what, I am afraid I am killing it."

So, how to work through all that conflicting information and arrive at a diet that will assure a long, healthy, happy and productive life? The answer is not easy but it is simple. Get Educated! Learn as much as you can about the nutritional requirement of the individual species being kept and about the nutritional values of the foods you want to offer.

Getting educated is far from easy. This is especially true when it comes to the nutritional needs of most bird species. Research flocks maintained by universities and by diet manufacturers tend to represent a few common species, with Cockatiels dominating most flocks. This is hardly surprising when you consider that there are over 9000 identified species of birds, some 3000 of which are occasionally to commonly kept in captivity, and second to the Budgerigar in captivity is the Cockatiel. Further, much of the information derived from captive research is either published in what for most of us

are obscure publications, such as "Zoo Biology" and various textbooks, or is kept as proprietary information by the manufacturers. Nor are ornithological studies and publications much help. In addition to being hard to locate, such studies often provide only vague data regarding diet, and no nutritional information. Typical of such studies and data are statements similar to "...observed feeding on grass seeds, flowers and other vegetative matter."

Fortunately there are some easily accessible sources of information on the nutritional needs of many species. This publication (AFA Watchbird) has contained many articles by experienced breeders, keepers, and by such well known researchers as Tom Roudybush on Avian Nutrition. Other periodic publications, especially the newsletters of various specialty clubs and societies, also frequently contain useful information. Information on specialty clubs can be found in this publication and at the AFA web site:

<http://www.afa.birds.org>

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One periodical deserves special mention. The "Exotic Bird Report" published by the Psittacine Research Project, Department of Animal Science, University of California, Davis, CA. 95616-8521. Written for the layman, it is easy to understand and contains regular updates of ongoing research, current projects, and past avian research conducted at the University of California.

Additionally there are many good books that deal with individual species.

Pet stores that sell birds usually carry a few books on common species and can order others, but are usually limited a few specialty publishers. A better source is your local bookstore. While few bookstores will carry books on captive birds in stock, they will be happy to help you research titles and then order books for you. Most bookstores also offer search services for out of print books. This is especially useful, in that for many species, the few books written go out of print quickly and become difficult to find. Similar services are offered by the online book sellers such as amazon.com.

In today's world you cannot talk about information resources without mentioning the internet. Many people rely on the internet for their information needs. Over the last decade the internet and the World Wide Web have evolved into easily accessible sources of information on virtually any topic. Even a simple search using one of the major search engines will reveal hundreds to thousands of sites dedicated to any subject you can imagine. A search conducted while preparing this article revealed 29,201 locations that at least mentioned Avian Nutrition, 41,100 sites containing the key word Cockatiel, 6001 sites for Fig Parrots, and 2506 for Aracari. How to pare these down to useful sites is really the topic for another article.

The easiest way is to conduct searches using the scientific name of a species. Still that leaves truly daunting numbers, but patience and creative use of search criteria can reveal vast amounts of information. A word of caution though. While the internet is a great resource, the quality of information regarding Avian Nutrition and specific species varies greatly, from scientific papers, to angry diatribes for or against a particular food. But even apparently reliable sources need to be scrutinized carefully. One site I reviewed contained the recommendation that yellow corn be given as a supplement

to a pelleted diet, while warning that white corn contained little nutritional value for parrots (both actually have the same nutritional values). It turned out that the writer (a DVM) was simply repeating information he had gleaned from an article appearing on a web site by someone claiming to be an Avian Nutritionist without bothering to check the facts. So be wary, just because something appears on a web site, doesn't mean its true.

The second half of the feeding equation is to become educated about the foods you feed your birds. Until recently it was difficult in the extreme for the average person to obtain accurate information on the nutritional values of a particular food. Publications were difficult to find, with universities and major metropolitan libraries being the only places likely to have those resources. Fortunately this has changed dramatically in the last few years. Institutions from major universities, to foundations, to the U.S. Department of Agriculture have made their nutritional databases available to the public through easy to use web based interfaces.

Want to know the protein content of Cardoon (less than 1%), or how much iron there is in spinach (27ppm)? Are sunflower seeds as devoid of nutrition as many experts would have you believe (they are not)? The answers are just a few mouse clicks away for anyone with a computer and an internet connection. One no longer needs to rely solely on the word of the experts. The same resources are now available to all of us, giving us powerful tools, enabling us to make informed decisions.

While there are hundreds of web sites that offer nutritional data, there are three that are exceptional in the quality and quantity of the information provided. Taken together, they take much of the drudgery and uncertainty out of designing a diet that will meet the nutritional needs of your birds.

**1. USDA National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference**  
[http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/cgi-bin/nut\\_search.pl](http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/cgi-bin/nut_search.pl)

Perhaps more than any other site, this is the most comprehensive. So while it does not contain data on every food known, you can find just about anything you can think of, from apricot baby food, to frozen zucchini. What is especially nice is that it contains so much information on prepared, dried, cooked, frozen and manufactured foods as well as fresh foods. A word of caution, this is an old data retrieval system and spelling must be correct. Also it is necessary to use the "return" key after entering a food item to be searched, clicking on the "More Information" icon takes you to a site information page, not to the database.

**2. Nutrition Analysis Tool 2.0**  
<http://www.nat.uiuc.edu/mainnat.html>

This is by the Food Science and Human Nutrition Department of the University of Illinois. This is an especially useful site. While not as extensive as the USDA site, it has the advantage of allowing you to combine ingredients and develop a diet without too much difficulty. The site is also more tolerant of misspelling and accepts a wider range of common names than the USDA site.

**3. New Crop Search Engine**  
<http://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/SearchEngine.html>

This is by Purdue University. This is an unusual site in that it is a search

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engine rather than a data base. The advantage here is that you can enter items not normally found in conventional nutrition data bases, such as Milo or Cactus Pads and find sites that contain the nutritional information – very useful for some of the specialty seeds, fruits, and vegetables coming onto the market as the immigrant population from Asia, Africa, and South America grows. ❖

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<b>Pacific Parrotlets:</b>	Pastel	Isabel	Fallow
	Blue	Lutino	Yellow
	Pastelblue	Fallowblue	Isabelblue
	Albino	White	

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