

# CAGE SHOPPING

## *What to look for when buying a parrot cage*

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Let me start off by saying that in a perfect world dogs would not need leashes, cats would not need to be kept indoors, people wouldn't be restrained in offices, and birds would not need cages. I'm still stuck in my office so I guess we aren't there yet. Most people can't afford a house with a dedicated sunroom/aviary for a companion bird. It just isn't safe for a bird to freely roam ones home unsupervised any more then it is safe to let a toddler have free rein of the house. Even if you are a bird watcher with no intention of ever keeping a bird in a cage you should still take the time to get to know the basics of cage requirements. If for no other reason than you are known as a birdbrain (to be read one who knows about bird matters). Because of this you never know when you'll get that 03:00AM call "Dude...Guess what I won in a poker game! How do I.....?"

Whether you build or buy a cage for a parrot there are a lot of things to consider. To make things easier I've written down a few thoughts that may help avoid some of the bigger pitfalls. Whether you choose to build or buy a cage you will save yourself a lot of trouble in the future by thinking about your bird's cage now. After all a parrot can live well past fifty years. Do you want to live that long with someone who has a grudge? Just kidding! However you need to understand that parrots have some unique requirements so you can't just go out and buy a cheap dog kennel or rabbit cage.

### **Size Matters**

Get the BIGGEST cage that you

can afford and fit in to your lifestyle. From the parrot's point of view, there is no such thing as a cage that is too large. After all their natural homes in jungles and savannas are very big places. The cage should be at least as wide as one and a half times the wingspan of the bird. A Parrot must be able to flap its wings to exercise. If you must choose between height or width, go with width. You can always let the bird out to climb. However, at a minimum the cage needs to be tall enough for the bird to stand up, but the more climbing room, the better. It is important to remember that the smaller the cage, the more time the bird NEEDS out of it.

### **Construction**

#### **Bars**

The bar spacing should be no wider than one to one and a quarter inch apart for a medium sized hook bill such as amazons, grays or eclectus. It is important to remember the smaller the bird the less space you can have between the bars. The diameter of the bars is another thing you should think about. Where as an eclectus may not be as prone to chewing on the bars, a Macaw may decide to get it's daily iron requirements from the bars of it's cage! You need to make sure the bars can hold up to the bird. There should be some horizontal bars for the bird to climb on. You can use perches for the bird to climb on in a pinch. However, the more things a bird can climb on the more area it has to exercise, play or just enjoy a better quality of life. The more surface area the bird can climb on the more living space it

has. This is the same reason there are skyscrapers in New York. If you can't build out build up!

#### **Materials**

As for what the cage should be made of? There are a number of good materials and a number of very bad materials. But in the end they break in to two groups metal or plastic. There are considerations that need to be taken in to account for whatever material you choose. Before you ask, wood is not a suitable material for a cage. Parrots LOVE to destroy wood. Save that behavior for your fine furniture and not their cage.

#### **Metal**

The commonly accepted metals used in cage construction are steel, aluminum and tin. These are all suitable materials for a cage as long as they are not galvanized. The best material for a cage is stainless steel. The problem is that stainless steel is very expensive! Plain old fashion steel can be suitable, ask anyone from Pittsburgh. If the cage is plain old steel it needs to be protected from rust via paint or a powder coating. Rust is even more dangerous to birds then it is to people. People don't tend to chew on metal. For this same reason you need to make sure the paint or powder coat is safe for your bird, not all are. Watch out for galvanized steel or aluminum, even galvanized chicken wire. Galvanizing uses zinc. Zinc can and will kill your bird by heavy metal poisoning. Avoid this material like the plague. If you have to use a galvanized material there are things you can do

with oxidation, sun bleaching and paint treatments. However, like being a male interior decorator in Texas, as a rule it's best not to go down that road unless you have to. Also don't forget to check the hardware. Even if the cage itself has no zinc the bolts holding it together might.

### **Plastics**

As for plastics or (polymers to be technical) the two commonly accepted ones are PVC and acrylic (Plexiglas tm). PVC pipe is a suitable material for a cage. But, there are issues to consider. PVC can make a suitable, if well er... a unique looking cage. Extra attention must be used on the joints to ensure that a larger hook bill cannot snap off pieces of the PVC and swallow them. This could cause the bird injury or even death if the material becomes impacted in the intestine. Once again, you need to make sure the bars can hold up to the bird. Acrylic is the most common plastic used in cage construction. Some of the most beautiful cages I have ever seen were made from acrylic. As with most things there are trade offs. With acrylic there are some factors that really do require serious consideration. The major concern with an acrylic cage is air quality. Most of the better acrylic cages have a built in air flow system. On top of not allowing for ample air-flow, acrylic will also out gas toxic gases. It's debatable that even at room temperature a small amount of fumes may off gas. In temperatures over 400f acrylic will release hydrogen cyanide. Of course you should never keep a bird in a cage that is anywhere near that temperature. The real reason to note this is because birds have such sensitive pulmonary systems, hence the mine canaries. With an acrylic cage you need to remember in case of fire you will have even less time to rescue your bird because of the risk of toxic gas. There is also an issue with ultraviolet light and acrylic. There is much debate in the avian community about the importance of ultraviolet (UV) radiation in avian health. Most of which isn't germane to

this article. In a nutshell not all acrylics pass UV radiation. If you want your bird to have access to sunlight you can't assume that it will pass through the acrylic. The last concern with an acrylic cage is that some birds have a real problem with the concept of "clear." Imagine how you would feel if you were surrounded by invisible walls? Oh, wait that's my office building never mind. Bottom line is, if you aren't worried about the off gassing or UV issues then there are some beautiful acrylic cages out there. But before you sucker for that gorgeous showroom model try to think what it will look like with mango and blueberries smeared down the sides.

### **Other Concerns**

If you can get a cage with feeding doors get it. This way if your bird becomes protective of its cage or feeding bowls you can feed it and keep your fingers. Well, you'll stand a better chance. Make sure any doors can lock shut and make sure the bird can't open them. Note that your bird is smarter than you! Make sure there are no slots the bird can squeeze through. Take a good look again at the feeding doors. Check the door locks. Remember that your bird is smarter than you! Birds can get through some amazingly small holes. Again remember that your bird is smarter than you! Don't forget to look at how accessible the bolts and other hardware are. I know of a case where a Macaw's favorite game is to undo the bolts holding his cage together. He will wait for his guardian to come home from work. The bird will then undo the last bolt causing the whole cage to collapse on itself in a heap. All the while the bird is laughing maniacally. Still think you're smarter?

Avoid round cages. Round cages take up more floor space for fewer square feet. Do the math some time. Also, parrots are prey animals. This means they are ALWAYS on the look out for predators. A round cage will make a prey animal feel very exposed. For this same reason place the cage

against at least one wall. This gives the bird one less direction they have to always watch out for an attack.

Make sure you can clean the cage. Look for a door big enough for you to fit in. After all you'll have to clean the inside of the cage too. Also look for things like a sliding bottom pan and removable floor grate. Once again make sure there are no slots the bird can squeeze through. As I have said birds can get through some amazingly small holes. Once again remember your bird is smarter than you. You might want to also look for a cage with "seed catchers." This is a four or so inch lip or shelf sloping upwards all around the cage. It's astonishing how much that little lip will catch and redirect to the bottom pan instead of the floor.

For a mid sized parrot expect to pay anywhere from \$400-\$700. There is a large price range. It will depend on what you want and how lucky you are. I have seen everything from \$200 to Oh my God you spent WHAT!!!! Don't forget there are a number of great deals out there on used cages and there is nothing wrong with getting a used cage. However, remember buyer beware. So do your research.

One last note it is absolutely essential that you sterilize any cage before your bird ever gets near it. You can do this by washing it with a mix of one part chlorine bleach to twenty parts water. And letting the cage dry in the sunlight. There are some very nasty avian viruses out there for which there are no vaccines. You can really never be sure of what happen to the cages last occupant. Even if the cage is new you have no way of knowing what bugs may have "hitched a ride." This truly is a case of an ounce of prevention really is worth a ton of heartbreak.

In case you wanted to know, I have a female Solomon Island Eclectus. I lucked in to a new still-in-the-box 36"x30"x64" Jungle-Nest cage for \$250 on E-Bay. Once again, remember when using E-bay, buyer beware and do your research. ❖