

# Pellets

Lloyd Marshall, Northbridge, Western Australia

**M**ost parrot breeders feed a predominantly seed diet. A breeder in Western Australia has switched to pellets with excellent results.

More babies, bigger babies, brighter coloured birds. All these factors, according to Western Australian parrot breeder Diana Andersen, are due to the fact that she has changed her birds' diet to one that is consistently the same and provides exactly what the birds need in precisely the correct proportions.

We all know that birds discard heaps of seed mixes and that it's virtually impossible to ensure that birds eat exactly what we want them to, so how does she do it?

"Simple," Diana said, "I feed them a pellet diet that contains everything they need — a maintenance diet for most of the year and special breeding pellets when they are producing young."

She said both diets contain all the necessary ingredients as well as calcium, with the breeding diet especially formulated so that it has additional ingredients for young birds as well as containing the "trigger" ingredients to encourage breeding in the first place.

"In the wild the birds don't get a dish with a seed mixture," she said, "instead they eat what they consider to be necessary, based on what is available."

She said many birds in captivity eat their favourite foods in big quantities and when their owners see them eating heaps of those foods they supply more because they feel that the food must be good for the bird.

"But that is not necessarily the case," Diana said, "and sunflower seed is the perfect example of that scenario."

She provides her birds with fruit, vegetables and seeding grasses as treats

because she believes an all-pellet diet would be too boring.

"And the same can be said of an all-seed diet," she said.

Diana said pellets provide a balanced diet, whereas with seed the birds pick and choose what they want to eat and there is no guarantee that all the seeds are in top condition.

"We've all seen situations where seed mixes are dusty and where some seeds in a mix are obviously beyond their usable date," she said, "and many breeders are now switching to pellets because they want to be sure that their birds' diets are balanced and they can be sure that the birds will get the same mix of ingredients all the time."

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According to Diana it's not only large breeders who are switching to pellets.

"People with one or two pairs are appreciating the benefits," she said, "and I know of a lady with a couple of pet birds who has changed her birds onto pellets."

Asked how people could be sure that pellets always contained the appropriate mix of ingredients, Diana said manufacturers stand to lose too much if they do the wrong thing.

"It's relatively new to use pellets," she said, "and there is no way any manufacturer would risk getting a bad name by producing substandard products."

Diana said zoos and poultry breeders around the world have been using pellets for many years, not just for birds, but for many animals as well.

"I am not aware of any problems," she said, "because the manufacturers have too much to lose if they do the wrong thing, whereas people who make up seed mixes can substitute more of one seed if they run short of another seed or just leave a seed out completely if it can't be obtained."

Asked about the economics of pellets versus seed, Diana admitted that, kilo for kilo, pellets were more expensive.

"But you must remember that half of the weight in a kilo of seed is husk and that a good percentage of seed in a mix is discarded by the birds," she said, "which means that in some cases probably 75 per cent of the purchased seed is wasted."

"With pellets a little dust is left behind, but there's nowhere near the amount of wastage that there is with seed."

Diana said pellets also cause less grief when it comes to rodents because seed is no longer sprayed all around the place to attract the little monsters.

When I visited Diana's aviaries I noticed that her birds were unusually bright, particularly her princess parrots, whose aquamarine wing flashes were almost a fluorescent colour.

She breeds galahs, princess, and 28s in suspended cages around three quarters of a metre wide, a metre and a half high and two-and-a-half metres long and all the birds were in peak condition and unusually brightly coloured.

Diana showed me a nest of 28s with seven youngsters and told me that last year she ended up with 36 young galahs on the perch from 50 fertile eggs.

"I converted seven pairs of galahs to pellets last year," she said, "with the result that six pairs double clutched and one pair triple clutched."

She said the losses were due to egg breakages and all chicks recorded great growth rates and were extremely

healthy.

"My lutino galah hen needed calcium injections the previous year and performed very poorly, with fertility and egg binding problems," she said, "but this year, on the new diet she laid 13 fertile eggs with no egg binding and no need for supplements."

Diana said she knows of several people who had problems with chicks suffering from leg bone breakages due to metabolic bone disease.

"When they switched to pellets the problems disappeared due to the fact that the diet contains calcium to strengthen the birds' bones," she said.

Ali Fotiades, who runs a City Farmers rural and garden supplies stores in Western Australia, has a pet Alexandrine hen called Frank, which eats a mixture of pellets and seed.

"She eats about 50-50 small parrot mix and pellets and I also give her some green grain and grit mix as well," Ali said.

The 18-month-old bird went straight for the large pellets as soon as she saw them.

"She loved them straight away,"

Ali said.

Her other pet bird, a four-year-old Sun Conure called Ceecee, was switched from seed to pellets at eight months of age after having trouble with a bacterial infection.

"I switched him cold turkey," Ali said, "and he took to the pellets right away."

Ali said a lot of people have told her that the Sun Conure has a lot more red colouring than other suns and that he is very well muscled.

"His droppings are the same as any other parrot and not at all messy," Ali said.

Diana Andersen said she switched her birds by mixing the pellets with seed then reducing the quantity of seed over a two-week period.

"If they like the pellets straight away I cut the seed out after a couple of days," she said.

"Several people have told me that Alexandrines convert really easily, in a couple of days."

She said in her experience, black cockatoos seem to take the longest to

change over.

"They are slow and reluctant and I monitor their droppings to see what they're doing," she said, "and once they are largely on pellets I cut out the seed."

Diana said she had a problem with a pair of Western Corellas, which refused to look at the pellets.

"They refused for a few weeks and it seemed that they were prepared to starve," she said, "but when I tried them a while later they switched OK when we mixed crumbles with their seed, which seems to work better than pellets with birds that are reluctant to change their eating habits."

She said one of the advantages of using Roudybush pellets was that it came in various sizes, which means she can start birds off with crumbles in the seed and work her way up to using small or large pellets.

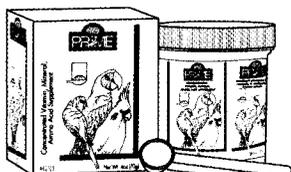
"Macaws like the big pellets," she said, "because they can pick them up and hold them in the claw while chewing them." ♦



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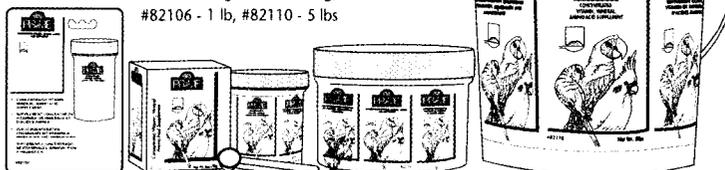


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