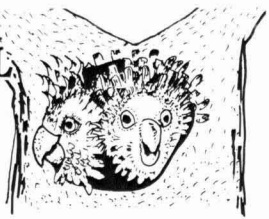


THE NATURAL CHOICE

by Eb Cravens
Santa Fe, N.M.



Creative Caging in Home and Backyard

Whether you own one bird or numerous pairs of birds, valuable time and money can be saved by designing and creating your own cages.

Obviously, the least expensive option is to build your own cages. Materials needed include a good quality flush wire cutters, a power grinder for sharp edges, a supply of flat J-clips, a clip rolling tool and cage wire which can often be purchased from a quality hardware store. We find the 1/2" x 1" and 1" x 1" welded wire (galvanized after welding), and the 1/2" x 1/2" galvanized hardware cloth are all easily cut and J-clipped and suffice for nearly all our needs.

These wires, however, are safe to use only with species whose beak strength is limited. Psittacines stronger than medium sized Amazons, Derbyans or Goffin's Cockatoos require thicker gauge wire mesh and harder clips. As all our breeders are second generation, domestic, handfed stock, somewhat larger parrots may be kept in lighter gauge wire enclosures because they do not try to escape. In addition, if a cage is amply filled with natural chewing materials, rocks, toys, etc., a hookbill will rarely develop a habit of attacking the wire itself.

It is a good idea before you begin, to put on a long sleeved shirt and jeans as working with wire normally produces lots of scratches!

A logical alternative to building at home is to purchase ready-made flights or cages from one of the excellent cage companies listed in national bird magazines. They not only offer several wire choices, but also fabricate almost any custom design you can envision.

So here are our favorite cage styles

for home and garden based upon ease of construction and specific function:

■ The Cylinder Cage

It is a simple matter to fabricate a round parrot cage by bending a 5' to 8' length of wire into a tube just as it comes off the roll, and clipping the ends together. A wire top and bottom can be attached with patience and perhaps some galvanized wire twists at the spots where the round pieces do not match up well enough to be J-clipped. We also utilize 3/4" plywood cut round as a top to protect birds in the rain. This cage design is quite useful when hung by a chain in a backyard tree or under the house eaves. We use it for doves kept out year round and as temporary play cages for inside parrot pets who enjoy being under the tree in natural weather. Stuff branches and greenery into the cage to create an organic playground for chewing hookbills.

■ The Window Cage

One of our favorite concepts, especially in warmer climates, is a wire cage constructed to hang on the outside of the house in front of a window which can be opened to access the cage. A typical 4' x 4' metal sliding window will require a wire cage approximately 5' x 5' built about 24" out from the house and attached by means of a 2" x 4" frame screwed to the house. A tight fit will prevent escape. Food and water is introduced through the window from inside. These cages are perfect for kitchen windows or in rooms where a lot of time is spent since the parrot is both a part of indoor activity and in an outside environment at the same time. An added advantage is that spilled food and droppings fall through the wire cage bottom onto the ground outside. We cultivate a garden bed below all our window cages to grow both flowers and the sprouting seeds from wasted bird mix. In colder weather, such outside cages may be kept warmer by introducing a six inch layer of straw or hay to the bottom of the cage. Change straw every few weeks as it becomes soiled. These wire cages are popular with pet parrots who love to sleep outside, but want to keep an eye on family activities. A closed window will dampen the sound of a screaming bird. The visual delight of a clean window cage full of new cut foliage and perhaps a



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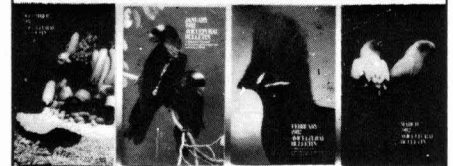
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breeding pair of cockatiels or a single conure is akin to an avian aquarium! Remember that chewing psittacines and house construction materials do not mix. Metal flashing or non-toxic boards must be used to keep a destructive bird away from paint, plaster, insulation, etc. If in doubt, build a full cage with a small door and hang the entire cage.

■ The Corner Cage

One of the easiest aviaries to construct can be planned to fit into the corner of an interior room or patio. Simply take the height from ceiling to floor and an adequate measurement from side wall to side wall, giving a large enough corner triangular space. Then construct a wooden frame to fit those dimensions and cover the frame with wire mesh. Cut access doors and screw the frame into the corner walls, ceiling and floor. Presto! A corner flight. Such cages are space efficient and roomy for all types of birds from canaries to parrots. We like to attach most of our branch perches towards the front of the wire mesh or even mount a tree in the corner prior to erecting the wire. Keeping the birds from perching near the back walls will avoid unnecessary dropping stains on those surfaces. Walls and frames should be painted with a non-toxic washable enamel. Floors may be lined with paper or changeable sheet material — or a pull-out tray can be fabricated. If the cage is placed in a dark corner, be sure to provide full spectrum lighting for the birds' continued health.

■ The Modified Walk-in Cage

For certain applications, walk-in aviaries may prove extremely useful. We have designed a way to transform any of our standard off-the-ground aviaries into modified walk-ins. Our first project was a 4' x 4' x 10' cage up on 24" legs. We cut an 18" strip of wire out of the bottom of the cage from front to back. We then built a wire corridor 18" wide down to ground level from front to back, forming an aviary shaped like a "T" when viewed from the end. A door 6' high and 18" wide was framed and hung on the entrance end and the walk-in was complete. We use this aviary for keeping Princess of Wales and other Australian parakeets since these psittacines are such a delight to walk

among even when breeding. The same type of narrow footway walk-in is used for our baby fledgling flight cage, allowing us to mix young weaning parrots in a playground atmosphere where visitors can walk in and pick up the pets. Such a design in cages saves us some wire mesh square footage (hence cost) over a full walk-in and reduces the available ground area for the birds. The partial shelf-like arrangement of the "T" proves quite useful for natural branches, stumps, lava rocks and sprouting soil flats in addition to the large food and water bowls. It is important to always put a wire bottom on walk-ins of this sort as added protection against digging varmints which could threaten the birds' safety.

■ The Standard Flight Cage

So much has been written about essential psittacine accommodations that we only need offer our specific "musts." The emphasis here is on *flight!* Regardless of parrot size, we like to build our cages a minimum of 10' long. Using 36" wide wire, we cut four ten-foot lengths and J-clip them together to form a long tube. Then, 36" x 36" end panels are clipped to enclose the tube, leaving one end half open just enough to crawl inside the cage. Four non-toxic 6' long 2" x 4" legs are then stapled to the four corners of the cage with a hammer from the inside. You may then climb out of the cage (no matter how much your partner wishes to J-clip you inside!). The cage is stood upon its four legs, cross braces of lumber are added, and final clipping of the end is complete. Doors are cut in the end for feeding and at the halfway point on one side for easy access to the inside nest box and birds. Following the natural disasters in Florida and California the past few years, we now emphasize that all cages and flights should have door access, allowing keepers to net their birds and remove them within a few seconds. If the psittacines retreat into nest boxes, the boxes should have quick release hardware to remove the box with the birds inside.

Flights 10' long for cockatiels, lovebirds, conures, Amazons, Asian parakeets and African parrots allow the birds sufficient space to flap and land in more than a brief perch-to-perch hop. Our Australian parakeets, king parrots and small cockatoos are given

cages 16' long because of their swift flying. Some breeders offer cockatoos (and other species noted for mate abuse) aviaries 20' or more in length believing that cramped space is a major contributor to such abuse.

It is important to create imaginative perch patterns within each standard cage. This allows parrots to find several comfortable sites upon which to spend their time and lessens the chance of a habitual male/hen dominant perching pattern being established. Observe well your psittacine's cage activities. If you note pyramid piles of droppings building up on cage bottoms, don't dismiss it with a, "he always perches in the same place." Accept the responsibility of making the entire flight interesting to your birds. All my hookbills are most active in their cages when I keep the cages stocked with branches and chewable organics. Utilize perches of different size and shape. Try to affix saplings which flex beneath a parrot's weight or ropes which swing and sway. If your conures persist in sleeping up in the corner hanging on the wire, put a branch with leaves to hide among up in that corner. Our psittacines love to sleep somewhat hidden.

Other cage considerations include: roofing — we believe in full flight roofs to keep wild bird droppings out of the cages. Rain baths are taken at the bottom of the flight where moisture slants inside. Mesh — 1/2" x 1" welded wire — is essentially ratproof, but allows mice easy run of cages. To use 1/2" x 1/2" hardware cloth keeps out larger mice but not small ones. As this mesh often has drips of solder material in the corners, we avoid using it with stronger parrots or those voracious chewers who might bite off a metal flake and get zinc poisoning. The 1/2" x 1/2" mesh does seem to resist rusting longer over the years.

Some aviculturists have created separate flights for small birds which are joined by tubular wire "canals", allowing birds to pass from flight to separate flight at whim.

Your imagination is the only limiting factor when designing wire cages for your home or garden flock. I have a conure flight fastened into the spreading limbs 12 feet up in a tree. It sways like a boat in a strong wind, but the parrots love it and produce fantastic offspring in a hollow eucalyptus log!●