

Traveling With Pet Birds

by Carolyn Swicegood
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That time of year is here again. As the days grow longer, we daydream of faraway places and we long for a change of scenery. But wait – what about the birds? How could we possibly enjoy traveling with nagging worries about our feathered friends left behind? Maybe we could ask a trusted friend to come in and care for them, but what if the birds stop eating? What if the caregiver forgets something? What if a bird becomes ill while we are away? Maybe that trip was not such a good idea after all. Perhaps we should just stay at home and save the worry and the expense of a bird sitter.

There is an enjoyable option – bring the birds along! After all, if we have the urge to fly the coop, just imagine how exciting a trip could be for our wild friends who were meant to travel the skies daily. Take to the air or hit the road with your feathered flock and enjoy your trip as well as your birds. Here are a few travel ideas to consider.

Airline Flying

If at all possible, take your birds inside the cabin of the plane with you instead of in cargo. The cargo hold is pressurized and safe but it is probably more stressful for the birds. Most airlines allow passengers to carry on their birds in carriers that fit under the seat. Each ticket holder is entitled to carry one bird in the cabin of most airlines for an extra charge of about \$50. A family of three can take a total of three birds for about \$150 extra. Some airlines limit the number of animals per flight allowed in the passenger cabin as well as the cargo compartment. The maximum number allowed is usually five to eight animals, so reserve space for your birds early and confirm 24 hours in advance. It can be helpful to check in

before the recommended arrival time. Always book non-stop flights when possible. This minimizes handling, loud equipment sounds, stress, and the possibility of other problems. For air trips over eight hours in length, schedule a flight with one stop. If the bird is traveling in cargo, instruct the carrier to give the birds water and fresh food supplied by you. Secure the food and water dishes near the door to make it easier to service and minimize the chance of escape into the airport. If the bird is traveling in the cabin with you, use the stopover to offer water and clean the floor of the carrier if you can find a safe quiet place to open the carrier.

Documents and Regulations

Most airlines require a health certificate issued within 10 days before the flight. It is important to make arrangements with the airline well in advance of the departure date. Birds should be listed for the flight at the same time as human passengers. International travel requires much more advance planning than travel within the country. Double check the regulations required for animals to enter and leave a foreign country. It is most important to determine whether regulations require the quarantining of birds in either country. Some countries require up to six months quarantine of pets entering the country.

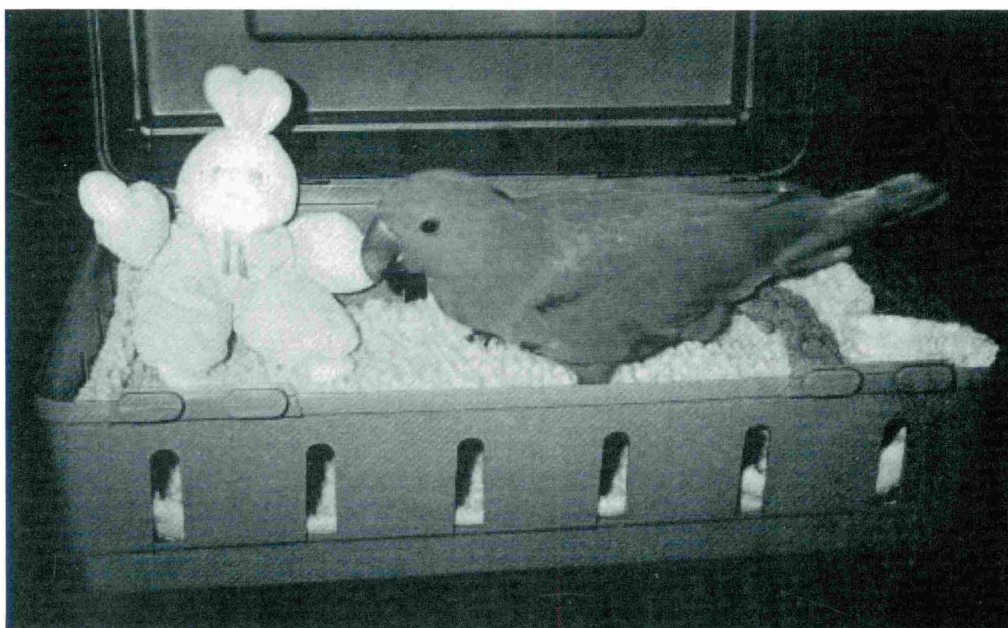
Choosing a Carrier

Purchase the carrier recommended by the airline well in advance and familiarize the bird with the carrier by taking short trips, especially if the bird seems nervous about being confined. It will be necessary for the bird to remain confined to the carrier for the duration of the flight if it rides in cargo. If your bird is traveling with you in the cabin of the plane, some flight attendants will allow you to remove the bird from the carrier, even though regulations forbid it. Besides the standard plastic under-the-seat carrier, there are shoulder bags and other soft bags with steel frames that have been airline approved for carry-on birds. Young birds travel well in carriers without a perch. To absorb droppings, some travelers use a piece of cotton rug with non-slip backing. I prefer nubby dog bedding fabric over a piece of material designed to prevent rugs from sliding on the floor. The nubby texture absorbs droppings and keeps them away from the birds' feet.

Tagging and Covering the Carrier

Carriers should be well marked and tagged with information such as flight number, destination, owner's name and address, home phone number, and the bird's name and schedule for food and water. Some owners take the

Photo by Carolyn Swicegood



An under-the-seat carrier for airline travel.



A female Eclectus ready to travel.

extra precaution of using a permanent marker to write all the information and instructions somewhere on the carrier.

Taking along a discrete cover for the carrier will prevent prying eyes and pointing fingers both in the airport and during the flight. If you do not cover the carrier, prepare to be swamped with gawking onlookers who somehow are completely fascinated by a flying creature about to hitch a ride on an airliner! If you like to teach, now is your chance. You will have a captive audience of fellow passengers to educate on birds and their care.

Airsick Birds – Really

Believe it or not, some birds are prone to in-flight motion sickness. Before the trip, familiarize your bird with fresh ginger root by placing several slices in the carrier every time you go for test rides. Ginger is a peppery tasting treat that prevents motion sickness in most birds. Do not give birds a heavy

feeding just before the flight. Place a few moist foods such as half an orange or a few juicy grapes inside the carrier.

Be Considerate

Consider the comfort of your fellow passengers. If someone sitting next to you is allergic to birds or afraid of them, offer to ask the flight attendant to change seats. Some passengers will welcome the distraction of an exotic passenger nearby. Bring along a thick, dark cover for the carrier in case the floor is drafty or your bird becomes overly exuberant while airborne. Covering the carrier can be comforting to a bird that feels insecure and fearful, especially during takeoff and landing.

After the Flight

Once you have landed and carried your feathered buddy off the plane or retrieved him from cargo, you are on your way. Many hotels allow birds to stay in a room or suite with you for a

small daily or weekly fee. Guide books and hotel directories are a great resource but pet policies change often so it is necessary to verify the current policy. Some hotels offer special rates for pet owners. For a fee of \$4, Super 8 will issue a card entitling the holder to 10% off the price of a room. Check for similar deals which add up to good savings over the duration of a long trip.

Some hotels allow guests with pets to stay only in rooms where smoking is allowed. This can be a problem if you or your pets have allergies. Some pet rooms are unsuitable due to soiled carpets, odors, or worn furnishings. Ask beforehand if the room is the same quality as non-pet rooms. When inquiring about keeping birds in your room, explain to the manager that the bird will be confined to a cage, therefore doing no damage to the room. If they ask about noise, explain that you use a cage cover (if your bird can indeed be quieted with a cover). When you leave, clean up the mess! Don't make it difficult for the next traveler with birds by leaving the room looking like the scene of a food fight!

Travel Cage or Carrier?

Teri and Larry Crosiar warn, "If you use the plastic Vari-Kennel for a bird with a strong beak, take along an extra one for a long trip. Daphne, our Eclectus, chewed her way through two of them, even though she had toys and millet sprays to busy her beak. I think I'm going to find her a good metal travel cage before we take off again. A perch can be installed in the plastic Vari-Kennel a couple of inches from the floor. This can be made with a short piece of dowel rod and two large screws. Drill the screws through the sides of the kennel into each end of the dowel. Install the perch near the floor of the carrier so that if you swerve or stop quickly your bird can simply step off the perch instead of falling."

Most birds enjoy riding perched in a travel cage while watching the world go by. They quickly learn that the vehicles passing by will not harm them, but they never fail to duck when going under an overpass. The instinctual fear of "predators from above" is

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alive and well.

Whatever your choice for your bird's home away from home during the trip, allow the bird to try it out and become comfortable with it before the trip. By observing your bird in the carrier or cage, you can correct any problems with the setup before you leave.

A cage cover is essential both in the car and in the hotel room to block direct sun and drafts, as well as to provide security and restful sleep. Absolutely nothing can ruin a vacation trip faster than a lost member of the flock, so be sure that your birds have an adequate new wing clip to prevent escape. By planning ahead, we have made the annual trek by car or van with all our parrots from the southern tip of Florida to the mountains of North Carolina without a problem.

Food, Water, and Safety Tips

Reserve accommodations well in advance of your trip. Ask for a room or suite with a small refrigerator and microwave oven. If they are unavailable, take along a small crock pot to prepare food in the room. A cooler will preserve fruits and veggies brought from home and replenished as needed. Some coolers are equipped with adapters that plug into the lighter of the car and the electrical outlet of the hotel room. Here are a few helpful hints for advance planning of a car trip:

- Always seat belt the travel cage securely before driving and secure any luggage that could fall on the cage in the event of a quick stop.
- For the duration of the car trip, only soft toys should be hung in the cage. All toys and dishes should be secured to the cage bars or floor to avoid injuries to the bird in case of a sudden stop.
- Pack a portable perch or a screw-on perch for the travel cage top so that the bird can have some freedom once you are settled in your

home away from home.

- Assemble a first-aid kit of the most essential items such as a coagulating agent for broken blood feathers or nails. Ideally we would take everything that the birds could possibly need but in the interest of traveling light, choose emergency items carefully.

- Locate an avian vet in the area and keep the phone number handy.

- Bring drinking water from home. A change in water can cause upsets for sensitive birds.

- Sheri Blackshire who travels with a Grey and an Eclectus recommends placing ice cubes in the water dish instead of water which can spill more easily.

- Juicy foods such as grapes, pears, berries, apples, celery, mango and papaya also contain water without the problem of spillage.

- Pet canteens with a bowl built on the side are available and save space.

- A spray bottle of pure water is a *must* for a car trip with birds. It can be used for quick cleanups and could save the lives of overheated birds stranded due to car trouble in hot weather.

- Pack all the bird food together – dry foods can be kept in the cooler in sealed plastic bags. Baby wipes or paper towels and a bottle of Grapefruit Seed Extract (GSE) serve multiple purposes. They can be used to sterilize water and to clean bird dishes.

- To make your own sterile handi-wipes, moisten folded paper towels in a solution of eight ounces water and ten drops of GSE.

- If you spend your vacation in a hotel room, ask to do your own cleaning. Your GSE, spray bottle of water, and paper towels or baby wipes will do most cleaning chores and you can avoid the problem of toxic fumes from hotel cleaning solutions that could be harmful to birds.

- Pack food toys such as millet spray, almonds and other unshelled nuts, whole fruits and veggies, and of course the bird's favorite toys.

- Carry detailed emergency instructions for bird care in your wallet with your driver's license. An extra copy in the glove compartment could be helpful in the event of an accident.

During the Trip

- Never locate your bird's travel carrier in a seat facing an airbag. The impact of an inflating airbag during a bump-up can be fatal to birds.

- Never leave birds unattended in an unlocked car when stopping for fuel or supplies. Unless you are traveling alone, take turns staying with the birds. If you are alone and have only one or two birds, take them with you in a covered picnic basket when you must leave the car briefly.

- Minimize the time that birds are left alone in the hotel room. Secure your bird safely in the travel cage and secure the cage if possible when you leave. Use the "Do Not Disturb" sign at all times.

- When you dine in restaurants, order bird food to take home. Unsalted corn on the cob, rice, baked potato or sweet potato, fruits, and most veggies are good choices.

- When you leave the hotel, clean up all bird debris and leave a generous tip for the cleaning staff.

- Stick to the usual feeding and sleeping schedule of your birds whenever possible.

Most of all, enjoy your trip and enjoy your feathered companions too. Some birds are stimulated by family car trips to talk much more than usual. It is a great time to teach them new words, phrases and songs. Don't forget the new wing clip and enjoy traveling with your birds! Bon Voyage!

Online Resources

- International pet travel information:
<http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Ranch/1146/intl.html>


- For pet-friendly hotels and other accommodations, check out this comprehensive web site:

<http://www.petswelcome.com>

- Free online directory to pet-friendly hotels across the U.S. and Canada.

<http://www.travelpets.com>

*State by state listings for information on pet-friendly lodging, dining, shopping and other activities.

<http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Ranch/1146/usa.html> 

Visit the

AFA Web site at:

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