

# Taking Pet Birds Outside

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**T**aking your birds outside on warm weather days can be a wonderful experience for them and for you. It also can be a terrifying and traumatic experience for them. How quickly they learn to enjoy the great outdoors depends on your bird's personality, possible phobias, and how gradually you introduce them to time outside.

Exposure to natural, full spectrum sunlight is important to the long-term health of parrots. Like humans, the vitamin D from sunlight absorbed through their skin is essential to good health. Studies show that sunlight filtered through glass does not provide full spectrum light, so it is more beneficial for birds to have exposure to direct sunlight. However, your bird's physical safety and emotional well-being must always come first. If your bird exhibits phobic behavior when taken outside, by all means do not force the issue. A very gradual introduction might overcome the fear and if not, you can provide full spectrum lighting indoors with special lights as a next best choice.

Never take your bird outside without some type of restraint. Use either a cage, a carrier, a leash, or a harness. Even with clipped wings, many birds can still become airborne if the right breeze comes along to provide the necessary lift.

## Using A Bird Harness

Some birds are willing to accept a harness, which allows them to flap their wings as they ride on your arm or shoulder. It does, however, have its drawbacks. Some birds simply will not accept a harness and

it is too stressful to try to force them. Some owners overcome their bird's fear of the harness by gradually moving it closer to the cage until the bird becomes accustomed to looking at it. Then the owner gradually accustoms the bird to the harness outside the cage, eventually touching him with it and gradually placing it on him.

If you are lucky enough to have a bird that immediately accepts the harness, you still must exercise caution. A sudden noise outside, such as a car driving by, a horn honking, or even the sight of a dog, cat, or wild bird, such as a hawk, might frighten your bird and cause it to fly off your shoulder. Although it is on a leash and cannot fly away, if you are not paying attention, your bird could land hard on the ground and be injured by being accidentally stepped upon or by being grabbed by another animal.

Check the condition of the harness regularly because many birds can snip through the nylon cording and suddenly fly away. Never use your bird's harness as a tether to a T-stand or other perch. Your bird is defenseless when tethered and could easily become food for a predator. Also, if it flies off the perch in fear, it could become entangled in

the harness and strangle or possibly hit the ground hard.

When your bird is out on a harness, don't forget to keep track of the time and how long it has been since your bird had access to food or water. While your bird may come to enjoy walks in a harness, it is still an exciting and stressful activity, so make sure it gets plenty of rest after an outing. Do not make it an all-day event until you have gradually worked up to longer hikes. Do not be overly confident just because your bird is on a harness and leash – there are still many dangers to consider.

## Outside Cages and Carriers

This is my preferred method because the birds are safely contained and protected from predators while having access to food and water at all times. I have small cages for my birds – usually just large enough for the bird to stretch out its wings. For instance, the Cockatiel and Conure are in 12" x 12" square cages; the Cockatoo and Eclectus go outside in 24" wide travel cages (I call them "porch" cages). Each porch cage has one perch, and a food and water dish. There is no need for toys because they do not spend an extended period of time in the porch cage.

Avoid placing birds in direct sunlight because they can become overheated very quickly. Also be aware of the temperature. I prefer the dappled shade on my deck under my big maple tree in the late afternoon – it provides just the right balance of sun and shade. In cool weather, the cage can be placed in the sun with a cover over half the cage area, but you must keep an eye out for overheating.

It is important to start slowly when taking birds outside. Place the porch cage against a wall outside, and cover the top and sides with a towel, leaving only the front end open for the birds to look out. Stay with them the entire time, talking calmly to them. Make the first session no more than five or 10 minutes. Each time they go out in their

porch cages, you can increase the time. You also can gradually fold back the towel so that half of the top and sides are open, but make sure to leave the back half of the cage and part of the sides and top covered with the towel. This towel provides a shelter where they can hide and feel safe if they see a wild bird or predator, or if the sun creates a need for shade.

Even after your birds become comfortable with all sides of the cage open, make sure to place a small towel over half of the top of the porch cage so that they have an area of retreat from sun or potential predators.

Birds quickly learn to enjoy outside time. On warm summer days, after about 30 minutes outside, they are absolutely thrilled to get their showers – all of them have wings fully spread, every feather on their body raised to allow the water to penetrate to their skin. Several of my birds will actually hang upside down so that I can get them soaked all the way through! It sometimes takes a full 32-ounce bottle of water for each of the little birds and *two* 32-ounce bottles of water each for the Cockatoo and Eclectus! Once they are completely drenched, they will sit on the sunny side of their porch cages with eyes half closed as they dry in the warm sunshine.

If the air is really warm, your birds might also enjoy being sprayed with the garden hose. Make sure that you are far enough away that the water spray is not hard and aim the hose above the birds so the water falls on them like a natural rain. Also, there is some concern that bacteria may breed in garden hoses, so drain your hoses after every use and run water through them for several minutes before aiming the water at your birds.

Make sure all cage doors lock securely so that your bird is not at risk of escape. Never leave your birds alone while outside in their porch cages. Use their time outside as your excuse to relax with them and enjoy reading a book or magazine. ➔

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