

Selecting a Healthy Bird

by Katherine Quesenberry, D.V.M.
New York, New York

Purchasing a new parrot as a pet or as an addition to an established aviary is exciting. It is also an anxious undertaking for the buyer. It is sometimes difficult to evaluate the health of an individual bird in the commotion of a large group of birds in an aviary or pet store. Both the beginning and the experienced hobbyist can be trapped in the dilemma of dealing with a sick bird which appeared healthy at the time of purchase several days to weeks earlier. This lag time, or incubation period of disease, makes it important to quarantine any new bird. New birds should be kept separate from other birds from four to six weeks after purchase.

Before purchasing any bird, it should be decided what type of bird is best-suited for the environment and personality of the potential owner. Small birds such as cockatiels and parakeets can be delightful companions. They are well-suited for children as well as adults. Small parrots and conures are good in apartments where space and noise are considerations. Medium-sized parrots such as Amazons and African grey parrots require more attention but adapt to most situations. Large birds, including macaws and cockatoos, can be wonderful pets but are demanding and can be very destructive. Seed-eating birds such as canaries and finches are easy to care for. They are delightful pets for people who don't want a lot of individual interaction with their birds.

The next step in purchasing a bird is to choose a reputable pet store or breeder. Visit different pet stores, check listings in pet bird hobbyist magazines, and talk to other bird owners to gain information about reputable dealers. The escalating price of pet birds will tempt many people to seek out a "deal," often under questionable circumstances. The adage "you get what you pay for" is true, even in birds. Inexpensive parrots are often smuggled or have underlying health problems. Adult, wild-caught parrots are routinely sold as hand-raised babies to the unsuspecting buyer. It is typi-

cally the buyer who loses if a health problem is found after the purchase is made. Most reputable pet stores and breeders will guarantee the health of a bird purchased from them for a specific time period, or until the bird has been examined by a veterinarian.

When choosing a bird, look for one that is bright, alert and active with good feathering. Inspect the nose, eyes, and mouth for any discharge, swelling, or redness. Look at the plumage; feathers should be sleek, shiny, and colors bright. Check carefully to make sure there are no signs of feather-picking or chewing. If the parrot is sold as hand-tamed, make sure it can be easily handled and is friendly with unfamiliar people. Spend time with the bird to get to know its personality. Be wary of any parrot that appears wild or frightened. Taming a frightened or aggressive bird usually takes much time, effort, and patience.

If purchasing a hand-raised baby bird, it is best to leave it in the hands of an expert until it is successfully weaned. If you choose to handfeed the bird, become thoroughly familiar with the proper technique. Strict hygiene is essential in handfeeding. Crop burns, slow crop emptying, and bacterial or yeast infections of the crop are usually directly related to handfeeding practices. Over or underfeeding, improper cleaning of utensils, and feeding a formula either too hot or too cold are common problems of the inexperienced owner.

A thorough examination by a veterinarian is recommended for any newly purchased bird. It is important to choose a veterinarian who has experience in the medicine and surgery of caged birds. A physical examination may uncover abnormalities such as old fractures, abnormal nares, or cloacal papillomas which may not have been apparent to the buyer. Various laboratory tests can be done depending on the health status of the bird, the suggestions of the veterinarian, and the wishes of the owner. Routine tests may include

staining of fecal bacteria (Gram's stain), examination for intestinal parasites, and basic blood tests. A Gram's stain of a sample of the droppings is useful in assessing the type and relative numbers of bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract. Gastrointestinal yeast (*Candida* spp.) are also easily detected by a Gram's stain. Swabs of the crop may likewise be examined to assess bacterial and yeast population of the crop. This is especially important in young handfed birds because of the frequency of crop infections. Samples of the stool may be examined for presence of intestinal parasites. Intestinal parasitism is uncommon in most pet birds. However, certain species of birds have a relatively high incidence of infection with specific parasites. For instance, giardia is a common protozoan parasite of cockatiels. Giardia are detected by either direct examination of a fresh fecal sample or by special staining of the feces.

Most routine tests are simple and can be done within a few minutes at the time of the office visit. A more thorough evaluation of the health of a bird requires other diagnostic techniques. Blood tests are very informative and are used to evaluate general body health. The biochemical profile is a test which measures specific organ enzymes and blood components. Problems such as abnormal liver or kidney function and electrolyte abnormalities are detected by this test. The complete blood count is an estimate of the numbers and types of both white and red blood cells. The presence of anemia, infection, or stress can be determined with this test. A bacterial culture of the droppings or a sample of crop contents will determine the type of bacteria present in the gastrointestinal tract. Test results must be interpreted carefully and in relation to the health of the bird. Often abnormal bacteria are cultured from the crop or feces of a clinically normal bird. These bacteria may be transiently present in the gastrointestinal tract, especially in the crop. The acidity of stomach juices destroys most of these bacteria during digestion. If known disease-causing bacteria are cultured or if a bird is showing signs of disease, then antibiotic therapy is indicated. Overuse and misuse of antibiotics can contribute to clinical problems and must be avoided.

Chlamydiosis or psittacosis is an

ever present problem in psittacine birds. It occurs commonly in birds under stress such as during quarantine or shipment. Commonly, a bird may carry and shed the organism without showing signs of sickness. Any other bird exposed to this bird without adequate immunity will become sick. *Chlamydia psittaci*, the causative agent, can be detected by several methods. None of these tests are 100% reliable and results must be interpreted in relation to clinical findings and other supportive diagnostic tests. Two common methods for testing for chlamydia are the ELISA test and the serologic test for antibody titer. The ELISA procedure tests for the presence of chlamydia in feces or in cellular debris from a cloacal swab. The test is positive if a bird is shedding chlamydial organisms from the intestinal tract. The serologic test measures the antibody titer in the blood. A positive titer indicates a bird has been exposed to chlamydia, but is not diagnostic of disease. A very high level of antibodies indicates a recent exposure or probable active infection. A third method of detecting *Chlamydia psittaci* is to culture the

organism from a fecal sample. This is a difficult and time-consuming process. One of the most accurate methods to diagnose chlamydiosis is to identify the organism in the stained tissue section. However, this process requires a tissue sample from the liver or spleen. Tissue samples can only be obtained by necropsy or by invasive methods such as a liver biopsy.

Radiography is another tool used in screening for disease problems in a newly purchased bird. It's indispensable in detecting many physical abnormalities. The size and anatomy of most birds limit detection of certain abnormalities such as an enlarged liver or spleen. Old fractures, joint luxations, and poor bone quality are all readily apparent on radiographs. A diagnostic film requires precise positioning. Most parrots become excited, overheated and breathe rapidly when they are held for this positioning. Because of this, most large birds must be lightly sedated for the procedure. Because of the cost and the need for tranquilization in most large birds, radiography is not used as routinely as other diagnostic tests during a

purchase examination. However, it should be considered because of the valuable information it provides.

Vaccines for two serious diseases in pet birds have recently become available. Herpes virus (Pacheco's disease) and psittacine pox virus are both highly fatal diseases which occur most frequently during the stressful, crowded conditions of quarantine and shipment. The individual household pet or small, stable groups of birds are not at high risk of exposure to these diseases. Vaccination of the individual pet bird in a home environment is probably not important unless exposure to unfamiliar birds is anticipated. Adverse reactions to vaccination have been reported. Vaccination of any bird should only be done with a clear understanding of the risks involved.

The risk of purchasing an unhealthy bird can be minimized with a thorough veterinary examination and diagnostic testing. Not every test is necessary in every bird. Bird owners should understand the basics of a veterinary examination and diagnostic testing. Preventative medicine is always best to ensure a healthy bird. ●



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