



1987 Watchbird photo contest honorable mention winner: Pet Bird category. Red Lored Amazon by Brian Breetzke, Charlottesville, Va.

Choosing That Special Pet

by Elaine Radford
Metairie, Louisiana

As an addicted reader and writer of science fiction, I'm sometimes amused by my colleagues' mention of scientifically designed pets. You and I know that there's no reason to wait for the genetic engineers to do their stuff in order to have a galaxy of choices for the perfect companion. The large and varied class of birds already contains enough species to match almost any lifestyle. The real trick is deciding which of the feathered charmers is right for you, your family, or your customers. The following

checklist should help you narrow down the search for that special bird.

When choosing a pet bird, the single most important consideration is the amount of time you have to spend with the new acquisition. Birds are highly social creatures who become seriously depressed if deprived of interaction with others; a single tame parrot, for instance, will want to be with you at least an hour each day. If you can't provide sufficient human compan-

ionship, get two birds and let the pair amuse itself. Finches, who rarely learn to accept human friendship in lieu of relationships with their own kind, should almost never be kept alone.

Another central consideration is your expectations for the pet. What do you want from your birds — self-sufficient beauty, melodious song, personality-plus companionship? The person thrilled by the trills of a canary may be exhausted by the tricks of an attention-hogging parrot, while the fan of a



Blue Gold Macaw
BG

Scarlet
SC

Toucans
TC

Amazon/African Gray
AAG



Cockatoo
LB

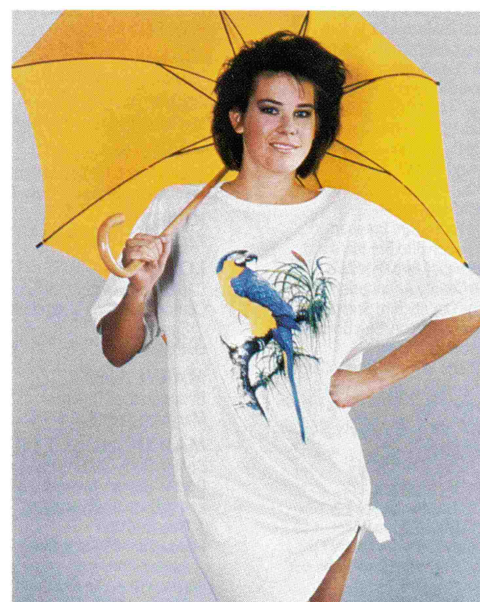
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cuddly, chatty Amazon may be bored stiff with the finch that resolutely ignores her. (And then some of us are beak freaks addicted to anything with feathers . . . but that's another story.) In general, you'll find that a pair of finches or lovebirds provides natural life and beauty without making undue demands on your time and energy, while the popular small parrots such as the cockatiel and the budgerigar make rewarding, easily handled pets for beginning trainers with time for play.

Many people crave the magnificent beauty and saucy personality of the larger parrots. That's fine, but you should be aware that most novice keepers have neither the nerves nor the patience to tame down a large, wild parrot. To avoid disappointment, leave the imports to the experts and hold out for a domestic hand-reared baby. The sweet, trusting nature of a parrot that has known only love at human hands is doubly important when you're staring down a specimen with a beak as big as your fist!


Don't feel sheepish if you think it over and realize that what you really want is a bird that talks. Speech and trick training is a wonderful way to grow closer to your bird; it also keeps your pet sharp by exercising the intelligence it would have used in the wild to find food or evade predators. Although superstar talkers have popped up in almost every widely-kept parrot species, most people have the best luck with *young* Amazons, African greys, ringneck parakeets, and budgerigars. Many experts disagree, but I don't advise worrying unduly about the sex of your pet in light of claims that male budgies or cockatiels make better talkers than females. If you hold off speech training until the bird's sexually mature, you'll get poorer results in any case. Training early and often is, in my opinion, the best way to guarantee yourself a talker.

Safety is an especially important consideration when selecting an avian pet for a child. A youngster who can't romp with a cat or a dog may try to "play" with the finches, panicking the little creatures and even provoking their escape. A large parrot, on the other hand, may feel perfectly comfortable rough-housing with a child, to the point of returning a mischievous tail-tweaking with a painful nip. Fortunately, nature has provided us with the budgerigar, a sweet-natured, safe bird in a delightful child-sized package. Older, more responsible children can even tame this bird (and the cockatiel) themselves.

For information about contacting any of these member clubs, please call
that club's closest state coordinator. There is a state coordinator
listing with phone numbers elsewhere in this publication.

A few factors outside your control will also influence your final decision. Allergy or respiratory disease sufferers, for example, may want to avoid members of the cockatoo family, including the cockatiel, because they produce a fine powder down that irritates some people. If you live in an apartment, space and noise are important considerations. While only a crank could be annoyed by a canary, a pair of finches, or a budgie, anyone might be irritated by the sunrise serenade of a conure or macaw! (Some sensitive individuals may even be disturbed by the monotonous peep of a cockatiel, although its cry doesn't carry that far.) In most cases, however, a single, small hookbill will be quiet enough to slip by the neighbors. Since space is at a premium in most condo and apartment units, you'll do well to stick to the smaller, more conveniently housed species anyway.

We all know that we should insist on the healthiest birds available, but sometimes our hearts get us in trouble. Do try to resist a bird that's out of condition. Experienced breeders can sometimes identify a specimen that will thrive if rescued, but a novice may only add the stress of transfer to a sickly bird's problems. The best thing that most beginners can do to improve the condition of birds offered for sale is to reserve their dollars for sellers that care! If you aren't sure what a fit specimen looks like, don't be embarrassed to bring along a book or magazine article showing a top-notch example.

Cost is the *last* thing you should consider when looking for your special bird. Don't be tempted to pay too little. A cheap parrot hawked at a flea market or sold from the back of a truck is probably smuggled (if it's wild) or stolen (if it's tame) — and disease, trauma, and legal hassles aren't bargains at any price. Be sure that the person who sells you the bird today will be around tomorrow, and don't hesitate to get your understanding of the seller's policies in writing. You'll avoid a lot of heartache by paying a little more to sellers willing to stand behind their birds. If the best of a particular species is out of your price range, consider a different species. Perhaps the lovely sun conure can meet your yearning for the spectacular as well as a hyacinth macaw; maybe a ringneck parakeet will sweet-talk you as nicely as a handfed double yellow headed Amazon. Don't forget that galaxy of avian choices: no matter how small your home or your bank account, you too can enjoy a fine feathered friend. 



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