

Living in Las Vegas on less than \$2 a week

Feeding the birds doesn't have to be a crapshoot or cost a fortune

By Madeleine Franco

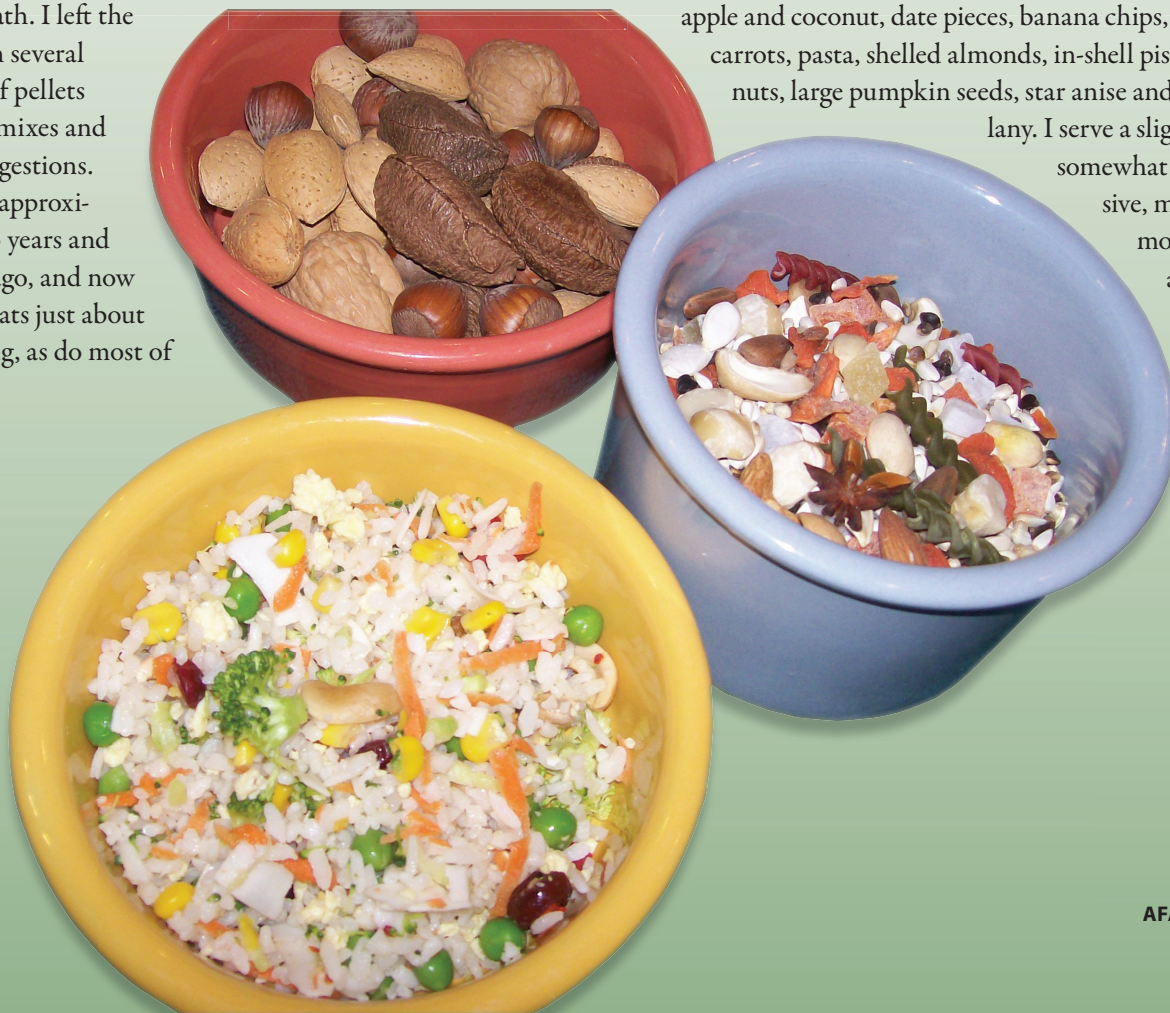
The first parrot of my adulthood was a previously loved Eleanora Cockatoo named Tommy, who is still an integral part of my flock. Having worked mostly with waterfowl, and not having owned a psittacine for more than 30 years, I was more than a little rusty on the specific dietary needs of parrots. So, I asked a local bird store owner who was worlds more experienced than I, "What is the best thing to start feeding my cockatoo?" She looked at me quite intently and gave me—now that I think about it—probably the best advice one can give anyone starting out with a bird more experienced than its keeper, "Well, first, I'd feed him something he'll actually eat."

The point was that as much as we have tried to make it so—and for as many years as nutritionists have analyzed it—feeding a pet parrot is not an exact science. Parrots are, after all, opportunistic feeders and, like humans, they can readily form bad eating habits if appropriate foods are not offered. However, if a familiar food is not offered when trying to correct a diet, a bird can literally starve himself to death. I left the store with several samples of pellets and seed mixes and many suggestions. That was approximately 13 years and 29 birds ago, and now Tommy eats just about everything, as do most of

the other members of my flock. It doesn't cost a fortune to feed them, but it does require some creativity and a bit of consumer opportunism to provide appropriate nutrition and to avoid expensive waste.

Now, it has been said that you are what you eat, and I like to keep it interesting. There is not a thing in my birds' diet that I haven't personally tasted, and that includes the pellets, seeds, and even the parrot biscuits, and I try to balance colors and tastes. Pellets alternated from various manufacturers (again, to keep things eclectic) are always available and seed is replenished every other day. However, the macaws get nuts, Nature's original foraging toy, daily. I feed other feature items, including birdy "fried" rice, sweet potato French toast (see recipe for Zoe's Favorite Sweet Potato French Toast at www.premiumpinecones.net/articles.html) and muffins, approximately once a week.

I buy in bulk, though certainly not institutional bulk...typically 600 pounds of seed mix at a time. The last time I bought was in early May and I'll purchase again in late October/early November; large freezers are key. My own deluxe seed mix contains safflower, sunflower, buckwheat, cubed dried papaya, pineapple and coconut, date pieces, banana chips, dehydrated carrots, pasta, shelled almonds, in-shell pistachios, pine nuts, large pumpkin seeds, star anise and other miscellany. I serve a slightly lighter, somewhat less expensive, mix that seems more appropriate for the hot Las Vegas summers.





I garnish some of the birds' dishes with yet more cubed coconut, pine nuts, and pistachios, as several of them are specialists. Clusters of giant millet (stalks for the larger birds) are a much sought-after treat. Additionally, I distribute in-shell mixed nuts among the large macaws and almonds and cracked walnuts and hazels among the smaller birds. Everyone gets human grade, in-shell roasted, unsalted peanuts once weekly. And, let's not forget about those macadamia nuts.

Tahoe (a young Hyacinth) hasn't really learned yet how to crack mac nuts and subsequently eat them, though he has gotten better of late; in months past, he would rarely get it right and the mac nuts would just hit the window like bullets. So, every day he gets shelled mac halves and raw cashews, in addition to in-shell brazils and hazels, both of which he is quite adept at cracking and eating. Cracking those in-shell macs is apparently post-graduate work.

My last nut order was for approximately 100 pounds, between in-shell and raw shelled; though I don't skimp on the nuts, that amount will last me probably 2 1/2 to 3 months. I grow my own palm nuts, which are not as much of a favorite as they used to be with the Red-tails and some of the other cockatoos, who now seem to prefer the pistachios and pine nuts, especially in summer.

Other favorite foods include birdie "fried" rice (brown rice, egg, mixed vegetables, seasonal leafy greens, including sometimes "organic, field grown" dandelions from the yard, minced nutmeats and crushed red pepper), which—though a major hit when I serve it—is usually wasted if I offer it more than once a week. "Toy" foods such as raw corn wheels, carrots or jalapeño peppers, cooked sweet potatoes or pumpkin a la carte are also featured. For almost any of the "white" cockatoos, but especially the Rose-breasted or Major Mitchell's, try placing in their cage an entire ear of corn only partially husked, and watch the fun begin. In the fall, make that wild or "Indian" corn, though the nutrition derived from all that destructive fun will be negligible, if any. I'm sure I needn't tell you how I discovered this. I make my birdie bread and corn muffins with minced carrot,

apple or cranberry juice and crushed nuts. Chicken and chicken bones are offered on a rotational basis when available incidental to the regular household menu; parrots so enjoy extracting the marrow from the long bones that one finds oneself wishing that chickens had more than two legs. I rarely offer beans anymore, as none of my birds seem to like them; however, one of my Goffin's Cockatoos, at large in the house most of the day, has been known to go nares-deep into a bowl of homemade pea soup.

As midnight snacks. I sometimes provide Nutriberries™ or parrot biscuits soaked in either fruit juice or warm water; the soaked biscuits have a Zen-like effect on my flock.

All in all, I spend under \$3,000 a year to feed 30 birds that range in size from a Black-headed Caique to a Hyacinth Macaw. This averages approximately \$100 each annually, or slightly under \$2 a week. I'm sure I could eliminate some waste and bring the cost down, but I think it is important for parrots to be able to pick as a function of their fondness for foraging. Anyway, the leavings are recycled by a friend of mine at one of the few local parks that allow bird-feeding, and I wouldn't want her to go there empty-handed.

Undoubtedly, my Hyacinth is the most expensive to feed, followed not closely by my Red-tailed Cockatoos and the other large macaws. Tahoe's probably \$4–\$5 per week—much of it attributable to waste due to his still-developing dexterity—obviously raises the average.

A friend of mine, who owns 19 small to medium-sized parrots and a flock of canaries and finches that she breeds from time to time, has established feeding as a near art form. Unlike myself, she is retired, and tending her flock fills the greater part of her day, much of that spent in food preparation and distribution.

Among this particular flock, the largest consumers of fresh food are the canaries and finches, with the finches, especially, licking the plates clean to the extent that finches can lick. All birds are fed essentially the same foods. Approximately 70 percent of their diet consists of fresh cooked meals that include fresh and frozen vegetables and either rice, pasta, barley, egg



food, or a combination thereof. Additionally, as 15 percent of their diet each bird also receives every other day, alternating with seed, a serving of a pellet mixture consisting of one part pellets, one part unsweetened cold cereal and/or granola, one part assorted fruit (mango, pineapple, coconut shavings and pieces, banana chips, apricot dices, cranberries, etc.), and one part shelled nuts. She also feeds as 15 percent of their diet a good quality seed mixture that includes assorted freeze-dried vegetables, fruits and nuts.

The diet is heavy in the dark leafy greens excepting lettuce, and in the deep orange veggies such as yams, squash, sweet potatoes, and pumpkin. Artichokes—though I myself have found that they make intriguing toys for larger birds—are not included in the menu; neither is anything in the onion, mushroom or tomato family. Vegetables are a combination of fresh and frozen, but NEVER canned due to salt load and relatively poor nutritional value. To fight the boredom, vegetables are artfully alternated. If a serving of cauliflower, corn, green beans, radishes, yams and peppers are offered one day, a combination of carrots, broccoli, fresh peas, squash, radishes and leafy greens may be served the next.

Extraordinary to the weighted average of the flock's diet are the early evening snacks, usually a couple of slices of apple or seedless grapes with walnuts, peanuts or almonds. On occasion, and when in season, fresh strawberries, cranberries, mango, papaya, banana, or orange slices are served with the nuts. Fresh corn wheels are a flock favorite and are eaten to the nubs. Baked goods, often made with fruit juices such as apple or cranberry, are offered several times weekly. These juices may also be incorporated into hand-feeding formula. Tahoe, whose hand-feeding ritual was often akin to caulking a tub, especially seemed to relish the cranberry overtones. An antioxidant with notable astringent qualities, cranberry was also helpful in managing the tendency to develop mucous in the upper gastrointestinal tract, which seems particularly common among Hyacinths and Eclectus parrots.

So, what does such a sumptuous banquet cost? A person who

spent approximately 30 years managing a small business and balancing the books, my friend tells me that the entire aforementioned menu, largely based on her own opportunistic foraging through local Las Vegas produce departments, is available for less than \$1 per bird per week. But, everyone issues a disclaimer these days, so here's mine: Costs may be slightly higher east of the Mississippi because of transportation expense.

No matter where you live, if you identify some good deals on your staples, such as pellets, rice and other grains, and seed mixes (free shipping or buy one-get one, for example); buy in reasonable bulk; shop for produce bargains, typically represented by in-season fruits and vegetables; and engage in some rudimentary menu planning, you truly can feed your birds an interesting and nutritional diet for less than you imagined. These techniques—coupled with attention to certain individual avian food choices and preferences and thought to balancing it all against good nutrition—will likely result in a happier, more interested and engaged flock, and a happier you. And, who knows...you yourself may even start eating better. After all, you could do worse than a late-night snack of papaya, coconut, pineapple and almonds. I ought to know!

Madeleine Franco, founding president of the Southern Nevada Parrot Education, Rescue & Rehoming Society and former president of the Las Vegas Bird Club, is an award-winning business writer and a work-from-home bird mom to a mixed, non-breeding flock of pet parrots. She also operates Premium Pine Cones, Ltd. (www.nattynewfeathers.com), an internet-based business that specializes in remedies and toys for birds that pluck.

She has been an invited speaker at AFA Conventions and has made numerous presentations to bird clubs on refeathering, socialization, pet flock management, and traveling with birds.

Formerly a Special Purpose Permittee of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for the rehabilitation of migratory waterfowl, she became hooked on hookbills following a trip to Australia in the very late 20th Century, though she notes that she's not quite as old as that sounds.