

Feeding Your Bird The Proper Diet

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While proper diet is important for all animals, it is especially essential for birds. Since finches, canaries, parakeets and other small birds have very specific dietary requirements, I will be discussing primarily large birds here. Even the largest birds have small intestinal tracts, and somewhat delicate digestive systems. It is important to remember this when formulating a suitable diet for them.

Many bird and pet department stores today recommend a prepared blend of seeds along with a vitamin supplement as a complete bird diet. Many people erroneously believe this to be sufficient. It is not, however, adequate. Even in cases where no immediate ill effects are seen, this kind of diet will eventually cause difficulties for the bird. One major problem is that most of the prepared diets for large birds have a sunflower seed base. Sunflower seeds are of little nutritional value to caged birds, because they are high in fat content and low in substantive protein. (It is important to note here that I specifically refer to the "caged bird.") Your pet bird's wild counterparts get far more exercise and usually have a greater variety of fresh foods available. Your bird has only what you give it, so be selective!

Sunflower seeds are sweet and oily, and birds tend to like them far more than other, healthier seeds. Your bird will become habituated to this diet, and may be unwilling to try new things which it does not recognize. Given these facts, it may be necessary to slowly wean your bird off a mostly sunflower seed diet and onto a healthier one. A particularly good seed to use as a base is safflower due to its high protein, low fat properties. You should gradually introduce increasing amounts of safflower seed while lessening the amount of sunflower seed.

I also recommend alternating a seed diet with a fruit, vegetable and cooked poultry diet. You can use fresh fruits and vegetables, a prepared "fruit treat" blend, or both. A blend which I prepare for all my birds, wholesale, retail, breeders and pets, includes: raisins,

dates, apricots, bananas, papaya, carrots, peanuts, oats, cracked corn, hemp, corn kibble, pea seeds, pumpkin seeds and safflower seeds. The fruits and vegetables are dried. Blends such as this one are available at most good bird or pet department stores, and can be used along with daily seed diets. If you prefer to alternate two diets, remember that birds are creatures of habit, and the diets should be given, in turn, on a set schedule. Your bird will soon come to expect this wonderful, healthy new diet regimen. As for the cooked poultry, or even low-fat meats, it should be noted that birds in the wild often avail themselves of these protein-laden foods. For the caged bird, cooking will eliminate any chance of parasitic infestation.

Protein is an essential element of a good bird diet, and can be provided many ways. As mentioned, safflower seed, fruits, vegetables, meats or poultry are all good supplements to your bird's seed diet. Another good way of giving your bird necessary nutrients, and breaking bad dietary habits, is allowing the bird to sample some of your own food. If you do not want your bird "begging at the dinner table," you might try giving small portions of "people" food on a special plate on top of the cage. When you begin doing this, be patient! Your first attempts may end with food being thrown aside. Continue offering these treats, and eventually your bird will decide to try them. Some foods should be limited or not given at all. These include: hard cheeses, rice, refined sugar products such as candy, and roughage vegetables such as broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower. There is some controversy regarding these foods, however, in my experience with birds, I have found that they can be harmful. Cheeses and rice can cause constipation. In birds, straining to excrete waste can force a small portion of the intestine outside the body, causing a prolapse. Sugar products can be hard to digest, and may overstimulate your bird's metabolism causing hyperactivity. Fibrous vegetables may produce gas which will

cause discomfort and, as a result, the bird may take on a sick appearance. In view of this, these foods are not a recommended part of a good bird diet.

One food your bird should never have, under any circumstances, is fresh bread. The mold-producing fungus present in bread is called aspergillus. This fungus causes an infectious illness in both man and animals known as aspergillosis. In birds, the disease is often fatal. This fungus can be present even when it is not detected by the human eye. Due to relative body sizes, even a microscopic quantity, harmless to humans, can be disastrous to birds. Take care to provide only thoroughly toasted bread, as this will eliminate any danger. And remember, any one food, in excess, can be unhealthy.

Now that you know how to provide the proper basic diet, you should also be aware of the "do's and don't's" regarding diet supplements. There are two key supplements: vitamins and minerals. These are separate elements, and your bird needs both.

Many health problems in birds are caused by dietary insufficiencies. The most commonly occurring problem is vitamin A deficiency. Therefore, I strongly recommend a good multi-vitamin for your bird which is high in vitamin A. Check the labels. Vitamin A should be among the first ingredients listed. Some of today's vitamin supplements can be used in the bird's water as well as on the food. If you choose to do this, be certain you change the water daily to prevent spoiling, and to preserve the potency of the vitamins. Avoid the constant use of vitamin supplements which are high in amino acids. These are beneficial only in increasing new feather growth and color intensity. The amino acids heighten all metabolic activity in the bird and can cause personality changes as well as excessive molting.

As for minerals, all birds should be provided with diet additives to insure adequate mineral intake. Mineral oils, mineral blocks and powdered additives are available. Mineral oils are very useful in a bird diet. They provide for smoother digestion and excretion and help the skin and feather condition along with providing needed minerals. When applied to the food, mineral oil will help powdered vitamins adhere to the seed thus allowing higher vitamin intake for the bird. I prefer using a synthetic oil since it requires no refrigeration, and will not spoil. Along with the oil, a mineral block or powder supplement should be given to provide,

among other things, necessary calcium. A mineral block may be more convenient for you, especially if there is more than one bird in the cage, since no mixing or measuring is needed. The block simply hangs in the cage until it is entirely consumed.

Since dosages vary with both vitamins and minerals, depending on the brand and form you choose, be sure to check the labels or consult a local bird handler for proper dosages.

Two very controversial diet supplements are gravel and crushed oyster



This is a traditional parrot seed, but to make it a more nutritional mix, safflower seeds were added giving the parrot chow a safflower base with just a little sunflower seed for flavor.



This is what a traditional parrot mixture looks like. It contains more sunflower seed than a cage bird needs. Out of the three seed mixtures pictured this is the one with the least nutritional value for your pet.



This is one of the many fruit treats on the market today, which is more nutritionally balanced than any of the other seed mixes for large birds. This, as a steady diet, can be very expensive if you have more than a couple birds, but probably the best overall.

shells. I do not use gravel for any of my birds. To my knowledge, there has never been a case of a bird dying due to lack of gravel. There have, however, been many documented cases of birds dying from ingesting an excess of gravel. When too much gravel is consumed, excretion becomes impossible, and the bird will become quite ill and usually die as a result. Gravel should only be given as a digestive aid when a bird's droppings contain whole, undigested seeds. At this time, provide only enough gravel to satisfy the bird's immediate craving for it, and then remove the dish from the cage. As for oyster shells, I strongly discourage their use at any time, for any bird. They are too coarse and sharp. Broken oyster shells can actually puncture delicate intestines. Calcium is available from much safer sources.

It is important to remember that your large bird has a long potential life span. Improper feeding may not affect your pet immediately, but be assured that it will eventually cause problems. With all the pleasure your bird gives you, it is a small thanks to provide the nutrition he or she needs. Diet affects not only health, but appearance as well. With proper diet and nutrition, you will have a happy, healthy, beautiful bird for many years to come. ●