

channel-billed toucans

by Dale David DeWald
Silver Spring, Maryland

Channel-billed toucans are tropical, rain forest birds and can be found in the wilds of Venezuela, the Guianas, Brazil, Trinidad, and other parts of South America. Flocks usually are found near water, sometimes a mile above sea level. Their branch-to-branch hopping behavior in the wild translates into fun pets as they hop from arm to arm to perch to perch. Channel-birds can make loud chirps, but typically are content by sounding rather soft "clicks." I never have heard one "talk" as a parrot might, but channel-bills are not common in captivity. Young pets tame easily and delight in human contact.



Photo by Dale D. DeWald

The channel-billed toucan.

These toucans are medium-sized birds — about 20 inches in length. The bill ranges from five to six inches but, to me, appears to look much longer. The channel-bill's body, tail, and bill appear

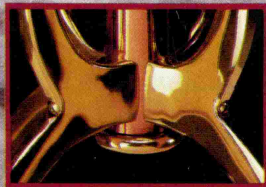
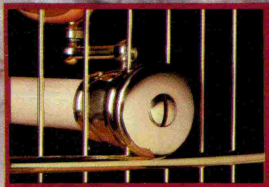
to be dark blue or black, but other colors are added: red on the breast and rump, yellow in the neck, white on the cheeks, and light blue around the eyes and near the base of the bill.

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Housing

The cage or aviary must be large enough to allow each channel-bill to fully stretch its wings and neck without having any feathers touch its cage. A relatively large (three feet long, two feet high, and about two feet wide) cockatiel-type cage would be fine; a smaller cage would do if the bird gets out to exercise daily. Square-type (as opposed to round) cages with non-toxic metal bars, either horizontal or vertical, are sure to last. Toucans typically do not climb about their homes as members of the parrot family do; as such, bar spacing and strength are not too critical. Good features for any cage would include: a slide-out bottom tray that makes cleaning easy; at least two perches at different heights and of different sizes such as 1.5 inches and 1 inch diameters (remember channel-bills like to hop, just the way most finches do); food and water cups that can be serviced from the cage's outside; and, a door that opens widely for your hand with the bird on it to enter and exit quickly. If you can build a ventilated and well lighted "box" around the cage with just the front of the cage completely exposed, you will cut down on your cleaning chores. Most toucans are extremely messy eaters and have loose droppings. A non-toxic epoxy paint on your cage box again will aid in your sanitation tasks.

Location

Although channel-bills have a rather weak bite, they are best kept out of bill reach (at least six inches) from other birds, especially smaller species as most of the finches are, toxic plants, and anything you do not want destroyed. In the wild, toucans eat a variety of foods including small birds and other animals. You also must protect your channel-bill from other household pets, drafts and sudden temperature changes, direct sunlight except for a few hours each day, people noise (do not mount your cage on the top of your T.V.!), and constantly low or high temperatures. Toucans will do very well between 65 and 85 degrees F.

Safety

When your channel-bill is out of its cage utilize the same precautions as you would with a parrot and with the placement of the cage. Provide a hopping area. Two parrot-type "T" stands within two feet of each other work well. Keep all doors and windows locked, and cover mirrors, windows, and other openings which may lead to injury or

escape. Because toucans are good flyers, you may want to keep the primary, or flight feathers clipped so that your channel-bill cannot fly easily for more than ten feet. If you keep small birds such as finches and parakeets, do not leave your channel-bill alone with them for even a few seconds. In fact, I had one channel-bill that actually attacked a green winged macaw. Fortunately, I pulled the toucan away before the macaw realized what was happening: the macaw would have won that fight promptly!

Food

Although channel-bill toucans seem to eat about everything, exact nutritional requirements are not known. Therefore, variety is the key. Three basic soft foods include: high quality canine growth food soaked in water, parrot chow soaked in water, and mynah bird pellets soaked in water. One of these three should be available at all times, but please change the food every 12 hours or at least every day so that harmful germs do not get the chance to grow quickly in the food dish. Live food, such as crickets or meal worms, will be taken, but be careful to be sure it is not contaminated. Mynah bird meal moistened with some fruit juice makes a nice treat as do the fruit flavored mynah bird pellets.

Different fruits rotated daily are suggested. Save your seedless grapes for "showtime." Just about any toucan loves to catch and eat grapes tossed to him by his human. Vegetables and fruits usually taken include: dark greens such as spinach or collards, chopped carrot, banana, sliced orange or grapefruit, and chopped pear. Apples may or may not be eaten, but that applies to just about any food. Toucans *cannot* survive on a seed diet and most nuts are too tough for a soft bill.

Water

Provide a bath dish at the cage bottom or mist down your toucan almost every day. Change any bird's drinking water every day. Check the water receptacle whenever you stroll by the cage — most toucans drink quite a bit and love to upset water dishes. Unless you live in an area with an unusually poor water quality, tap or well water at room temperature is fine.

Supplements

Grit, gravel, cuttlebones, and the like probably are not necessary for the health of a channel-bill. Once a week, just in case, I sprinkle oyster shells in the toucan's food; I usually have a cuttle-

bone or mineral block available, but I think that it serves the purpose of amusement only. Toucans like to play with toys, so safe parrot-type toys and a mineral block may add something to your pet's mental health. However, toucans do not have to chew nearly to the extent of parrots.

Vitamin and mineral supplements are extremely important. Some mynah bird pellets are fortified. Liquid vitamins and minerals for the water dish may be used as can some human-type drinks like Gatorade. I prefer the powdered supplements — they stick to the fruit well, they usually are eaten, they typically are not as expensive as the liquids, and they should contain minerals, vitamins, and other necessary supplements in one convenient powder. Do not, however, exceed the recommended amounts. If in doubt consider the toucan to be cockatiel-sized for supplement purposes.

Accident, Illness, and Health

Locate one or more avian vets in your vicinity before you need one! Purchase a bird care book that has been revised within the last few years. Start to worry if your channel-bill toucan has a sudden change in behavior such as sitting on the cage floor with ruffled feathers for long periods of time. Injuries such as blood loss or a broken bone are emergencies.

If you can do nothing else for your sick bird, gradually increase the heat and humidity (in a bathroom, for example) and be sure to feed and water your pet. Supplements, including honey, added to the drinking water may provide the energy burst needed until professional assistance can be obtained. Nevertheless, a clean and safe environment will pay off because the prevention of accidents and sickness is cheaper and better than the treatment.

It is generally believed that a pet toucan can live more than 20 years in captivity. This short article cannot touch on every aspect of toucan keeping and there is much to be learned. Therefore, please continue to support the American Federation of Aviculture and its member organizations such as the National Finch and Softbill Society.

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