

# Parrots as Pets

by Tony Silva  
North Riverside, Illinois

The majority of pet parrots receive an appallingly poor diet. Sunflower, parakeet mix or a commercially manufactured seed diet and an occasional piece of orange or apple, generally constitute their fare. This is very deficient and can only lead to health problems. The ideal feeding schedule should consist of a balanced seed mix, the composition varying with the species. This should be augmented daily with fresh fruits, vegetables and greens, and any table scraps that are not excessively greasy or spicy. There is nothing that an Amazon or macaw likes more than a chop bone with some meat.

Variety offers a balance. Certainly, the healthiest parrots are those that receive everything on the household menu, as well as some seed; there are many that have reached very advanced ages on such provisions.

There are a number of pelleted feeds on the market. These are highly nutritious, but my experience has shown that unless supplemented with table scraps, fruits and vegetables, the parrot soon becomes bored.

In the past several years certain authorities have recommended that food should only be offered for a short period in the morning and again in the afternoon or evening. This is a principle I cannot accept. All one has to do is study parrots in the wild to realize that foraging takes up a large portion of their time. If one is worried about obesity, then small amounts should be given several times a day but not withdrawn.

My birds are fed seed in the morning, supplemented with fruits, vegetables, dog chow and wheat bread.

Later in the evening they receive table scraps or specially cooked foods.

"Should grit be offered?" is a question for which varied answers exist. Personally, I offer a good quality oyster shell mix to my birds. Field studies have shown that parrots take pieces of stone or shells, which assist the gizzard in grinding food.

Budgerigars (*Melopsittacus undulatus*) and cockatiels (*Nymphicus hollandicus*) enjoy salt, thus mineral/salt licks should be placed in their cages. These are readily available.

There are a number of commercially manufactured water soluble vitamins. These are widely used, and were once given to my parrots. After several years of use they were discontinued in favor of a powdered vitamin-mineral powder that is placed directly on the food. Water soluble vitamins can lose their potency very quickly, can be an ideal medium for bacteria, and may inhibit drinking; some birds dislike the taste and who can blame them?

Hygiene goes hand in hand with a proper diet. Nails require regular grooming in some species. How much is to be removed can vary, depending on the frequency with which this is carried out and the species.

One cannot emphasize enough that extreme caution must be taken and that the task be accomplished by a qualified clinician. There have been cases in which an individual clipped nails at the base of the toe! This not only causes severe injury but considerable pain to the parrot.

The bill may occasionally require trimming. Again, the parrot should be examined by a competent person who can judge whether it is required or not. Knowledge of the species in question is imperative; for instance, the upper mandible of the slender-

billed cockatoo (*Cacatua tenuirostris*) is naturally elongated and does not require a manicure despite the appearance.

Parrots generally keep the beak trim by chewing perches, or branches supplied for this purpose. The beak of certain species gives the impression of "flaking." This is usually a natural occurrence and one that does not justify concern. If unsightly, it can be filed down with caution.

Most individuals keeping a parrot have the wings clipped. How this is accomplished can vary. My personal preference is to clip several primaries on one wing, thus keeping the parrot permanently grounded. When taming a wild parrot, the bird may be so persistent in escaping that it may fly into a window, perhaps gaining sufficient speed to sustain injury. By preventing flight, such problems can be avoided.

When clipping, the wing is opened and the first four or five primaries are removed, using the primary coverts as a guide to prevent injury to the actual wing. Never cut along the primary coverts, rather, slightly below.

For aesthetic reasons, many leave the first two or three primaries (actually they are number ten through eight, for these feathers are counted backwards). When doing this, both wings are usually clipped. This slows certain species down but generally permits some flight; for example, a Patagonian conure (*Cyanoliseus patagonus*) thus clipped would be able to fly with dexterity.

Many parrots are lost through carelessness. The owner either felt that the bird was "so attached it would never leave" or was unaware that it had moulted, hence new wing feathers emerged. The loss either occurs when one takes the parrot out of doors, or it flies through an open door or window.

I could cite many examples in which parrots have escaped with partially clipped wings, never to be seen again. Most of these survive in mild climates, forming the foundation of escaped flocks of conures, Amazons, and Quaker parakeets (*Myiopsitta monachus*) in Florida, Puerto Rico and California.

"Is there something I can do to prevent my pet from attaining liberty when I take it outside?" is an oft-posed query. The answer is tacit: avoid taking undue risks. Resist taking it outdoors, even if the wings are clipped and it appears incapable of flying; many pets have surprised their

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owners.

Tethering is often contemplated as a form of preventing a parrot from attaining liberty. It certainly restricts the bird but is cruel and could result in severe injury. If the parrot is accidentally startled, it may take off, gaining enough speed to break the chained leg, or may fall and hang until detected.

Whenever a parrot is given freedom indoors, it must be under constant supervision. Unless this precaution is taken, the beak may be applied to furniture, electrical cords or house plants, a number of which are poisonous.

Keeping the pet parrot in the proper cage is very important. Usually the parrot remains alone all day until its owner comes home from work or school, so the cage needs to be large enough to provide comfort and security for those long hours at home.

There are no established standards, but several rules can be followed. The cage should be big enough so that the tail and head do not touch the top and bottom of the cage, and the door should be wide enough so that the pet owner has no trouble removing the bird. Ideally, the bird should be able to stretch its wings, but this is not realistic with every species, such as macaws, which have very wide wingspans.

Gauge of the wire or bars is rarely considered when purchasing a cage — a mistake, in my opinion, for certain parrots can free themselves from flimsy netting without much effort. For example, there is a very popular new cage on the market. When it first became available I purchased one. Two years later a hyacinthine (*Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*) and a pair of Mexican military macaws (*Ara militaris mexicana*) had literally dilapidated the structure. Cages are certainly not cheap, so when making the initial purchase, think ahead. It would be rash to buy one that the bird would destroy within a few years; remember parrots are very long-lived and, if required, a slightly more expensive cage should be purchased from the onset, relieving additional expense in the foreseeable future.

Many times I have heard the question, "Are horizontal or vertical bars on a cage better?" One is not better than the other, but my personal choice would be horizontal; the bird would be able to climb the sides with greater ease than if they were vertical.

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Smooth bars that run vertically can make climbing difficult for certain parrots if there are no cross bars on which the beak can be hooked.

I recommend that cages be covered at night, especially in colder climates. This would be impossible with an extensive collection but not with a few birds. Covering at night has several purposes: body heat keeps the parrot warm, should there be a drop in temperature (many apartments or houses chill at night); prevents drafts; and keeps the bird quiet very early in the morning as it would be unable to see sunlight for a longer period — a necessity if one has neighbors that would be disturbed by the typical cacaphony at that time.

The cage bottom should be lined with an absorbent material. Crushed corn cob is widely available and probably the most suited. It does not get strewn when the bird flaps its wings, is very absorbent and does not have a pungent odor as is the case with cedar. Newspaper is commonly used, but often the parrots pull it through the grid and shred it, making a mess. Moreover, certain inks contain poisonous substances, which could conceivably injure the bird as it chews the paper to pieces.

The grid should always be in place. This prohibits access to feces and any food particles that have spoiled.

Strict hygiene is imperative. Cages should be cleaned daily and on a regular basis should be scrubbed with a non-toxic disinfectant. Diluted chlorine bleach can be used, providing rinsing is thorough. Likewise, food and water cups should be scrubbed daily.

Food bowls should be sufficiently heavy so that they cannot be turned; also chewproof. Plastic can be demolished quickly, cast iron may rust or leach, and aluminum may be so lightweight that some parrots would have no difficulty in tipping contents. My preference is ceramic bowls, which can be disinfected very easily, cannot be inverted (except by the very largest parrots), and provide a lip on which they can rest while feeding.

Plastic perches have been widely used in recent years — a most unfortunate circumstance. Parrots have difficulty gripping these unless the surfaces are roughened, and then the surface may have sharp particles that cut the footpads. Metal can become excessively hot or cold if exposed to the elements, as well as being slippery. Wood is consequently the best

suited.

Parrots have an urge to chew, which keeps the beak trim and helps overcome boredom. Gnawing is a need that cannot be thwarted under any circumstances.

My personal preference for a pet would be a hand-reared parrot, because it is naturally fearless. If the bird was raised with considerable attention and good care, it will usually make an excellent pet. If it has been neglected, it may show fear. I have seen numerous parrots that were hand-reared in Central or South America to which little attention was paid during quarantine; many eventually became fearful and would nip very hard when an attempt was made to handle them.

Two forms of hand-reared parrots are available; those native to the country of origin when imported, and those which were domestically bred. The latter generally are removed from the nest prior to three weeks of age.

Parrots can be separated into three categories according to nexus: bonded, non-bonded and somewhere in between. This field is generally not given attention by a prospective buyer — a serious mistake, for it will dictate to a great degree the personality of the parrot. Bonded birds show the greatest affection to one another, and will reflect this on their owner. They will permit and enjoy handling. Cockatoos, Amazons, macaws, and many other species fall under this classification.

Ringneck parakeets and other *Psittacula*, eclectus and blue rumped parrots (*Psittinus cyanurus*) fall under the non-bonded category. These parrots are not friendly toward their owners and will not permit petting.

Those that do not fit precisely into either group include slender-billed *Enicognathus leptorhynchus* and austral conures (*E. ferruginea*). They are generally good pets but are not overly fond of touching.

There are many kinds of parrots available as pets. If you are careful to choose the right one for your personality and circumstances, you can have a wonderful pet for years. Indeed, the bird may outlive the owner. There are equally many ways to care for pet parrots. The above techniques, methods and materials have worked well for me and my pet parrots. It is my hope that they will work equally well for you and your pet. ●





*The Finsch's Amazon or lilac-crowned is one of the smaller Amazon species. It makes an excellent pet and can learn to talk very well.*



*Macaws are not pets for everyone. They are large and powerful and can utterly destroy a wooden house and all the furniture. If caged and handled properly, they make excellent pets but require the love and attention of a truly dedicated parrot person.*



*Most Amazons (and this blue-cheeked species is no exception) make entertaining and playful pets. When hand reared, they are fearless and very tame and usually pick up a few favorite words.*



*PVC perches were popular for awhile but are not suitable for birds. These cockatoos would be much happier on a wooden perch that they could grip more easily and could chew on for entertainment and beak trimming.*



*The blue headed pionus is a relatively quiet bird that can be very loving and playful.*



*This golden conure is a very trusting and very beautiful pet. Most conures are a bit noisy in the morning and evening and probably would cause neighbor problems in a thin-walled apartment.*