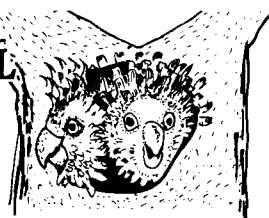


THE NATURAL CHOICE

by Eb Cravens
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"Some Thoughts on Food"

Throughout the birdkeeping world, there seems to be almost as many concepts about feeding as there are aviculturists. Strong opinions abound wherever nutritionists gather. What seems certain is that we have come a long way: little more than one hundred years ago, psittacine collectors in Europe were debating whether cockatoos really needed water! And these days many totally different feeding programs produce monumental success.

We of The Natural Choice accent several factors in our regular feeding schedule. The first of these is raw unprocessed food. Each and every wild caught avian creature imported into the U.S. was born and raised on natural, uncooked food sources. That is the way the ancestors of our captive birds survived for tens of thousands of years. Our belief is that birds being fed a great part of their diet with "unlive" or processed foods are at greater risk to develop deficiencies which manifest as organ failure, reduced immune systems, tumors, bad tempers or other behavior problems. At least 50% of all the food we offer our flock is in the natural form as it occurs when harvested. Furthermore, when possible, we like to spend 30 minutes or so prior to morning feeding gathering "wildcrafted" food ingredients — those taken from nature following the pattern of what other wild birds are eating in our area. If such sources are not readily available, we turn to our garden, which is grown without chemicals or commercial fertilizer.

A typical morning feeding for our aviaries will include seeding grasses, flower and weed buds, undried sunflower heads, orchard papaya, guava, passionfruit, and macadamia nuts along with garden vegetables and greens like carrots, peas, asparagus, beets, kale, vine spinach, chard, comfrey, celery, lettuce, nasturtium and more.

Six years ago, in conjunction with aviculturist Dale Thompson in California and Bob Miller of "L'il Friends" Bird Diets in New Mexico, Feathered Friends

of Santa Fe designed and began mixing a "Morning Soak Mix" based upon Thompson's work with "Soak and Cook" products being used on the west coast, but without the need for cooking. Acceptance by finicky wild-caught pets and the nutritional results compared to our old feeding program have been nothing short of phenomenal. Three months on the new diet and our pets were trimmer, more active, brighter colored at their next molt and eating a greater part of all the foods provided them (much to the benefit of our pocketbooks!).

This basic mix is comprised of pearl barley, lentils, green split peas, brown rice, yellow split peas, white proso millet, raisins, whole oats, canary seed mix containing flax, rape, niger, and hemp and rolled corn. It is soaked in boiled or hot water for at least 20 minutes in the morning while we are having our coffee, drained well and mixed with our chopped fruits and vegetables and a powdered vitamin/calcium supplement.

Having noticed at the shop that a vast majority of pet and hobby bird owners are unwilling to cook regularly for their birds, we chose to offer this quicker solution to the need for fresh and soft foods. The decision to include canary and other quite nutritious tiny seeds in the soak mix was to procure certain results: 1) It provides parakeets, Cockatiels, lovebirds, Australian and grass parakeets and the like with a daily dietary ingredient closely resembling seeding grasses in the wild (canary seed is akin to spinifex grass species); 2) It creates an enjoyable crunchy ingredient, in the otherwise soft food, which sticks to the pieces of carrot, squash, cucumber, lettuce and such after the entire batch is mixed up. We quickly noticed that larger picky parrots who would pick up carrot for example and drop it out of their food dish were holding onto the chunk and nibbling off the canary seeds. Four weeks later the same parrots would take a prolonged chew from such carrot chunks they were holding before letting

them drop from their mouth. Presto! A whole new arena of food offerings opened up for our Goffin's Cockatoos, African Greys or Green-winged Macaws who would heretofore not touch vegetables!

I, for one, no longer agree with bird-keepers who tell me that such and such a bird will not eat vegetables. One hard-headed Rose-breasted Cockatoo took four whole months before she began sampling the morning soak mix. Normally it is the aviculturist who gives up first; but we persisted in filling a cup for her every morning along with her seed mix (a holdover from the previous owners).

Of course there are certain guidelines to feeding soft foods. We find cockatoos and Cockatiels are more likely to accept a variety of vegetables than loads of fruit, for example. Many pet owners cut up large hunks of fruit or veggies and when the bird throws them out, they conclude he or she will not eat that. But it takes a tremendous amount of time and effort for a bird to throw out grated soft foods. Smaller pieces has solved many a finicky-eater syndrome.

Serving up live foods also entails avoiding the temptation to pour out a quantity of frozen peas and carrots every day and call that vegetables for your bird. Taste them sometime! This is not how thousands of generations of wild birds fed and evolved. We recommend pet owners look seriously at such item offered to their birds. Was it freeze dried, molded, extruded, vitaminized, boiled, toasted, pressed or powdered? None of this equates to wildcrafted bird foods with vitamins, amino acids, minerals, and complex enzymes existing in the balances put there by nature.

The second factor emphasized in our aviary feeding program is variety of content. If I offer an interesting food dish to my birds, invariably they rush down to the bowl to take a look and begin eating. This means varying the fruits and veggies in weekly cycles or greater monthly cycles. Not only is strict routine of food source boring to intelligent birds, but it has the added danger of establishing dangerous metabolic routines in our flock. With all our wonderful knowledge of avian nutrition, we have not yet learned it all. To offer the same foods day in day out year after year is to risk subtle nutritional setbacks which may manifest as untimely death, mate aggression, or more commonly, breeder shutdown. Interest at the food dish is

generated by changing the way we chop or grate the ingredients, hiding a peanut under the soft food on Wednesdays, or switching pelleted diet additives and vitamin mixtures regularly.

Oh yes! We believe strongly in pelleted diets. The dedicated research by makers of such foods have given a gift to those of us who seek to keep healthy birds. But, again, all within moderation. We like to add a splash of pellets daily to the morning mix after preparation. They remain dry and crunchy and increase the range of nutrients ingested by our birds. Our only qualification is to choose a pellet palatable to our birds. There are some horrible tasting ones on the market, believe me; and a simple pellet test in your aviaries will determine which diets the flock will choose.

What about 100% pellet diets? No comment.

In the interest of variety our afternoon feeding is a quality seed mix doled out at about one and one half to two tablespoons per Derby-sized bird. Parrots love to crunch, as much as do American movie goers! But our seed mixes are also an effort to offer dry nutrition in a natural form. By and large, the smaller seed varieties are less fattening than sunflower and safflower mixes so we coax even the macaws and Mollucans to ingest Cockatiel mixes every other week or so. To feed the same afternoon seed mix year in year out is inviting anomalies to show up in your birds. Don't be afraid to test the freshness of your seed mixes by sprouting a sample. Seeds that are too cheap and don't sprout are futile offerings. Two feedings per day give us the chance to survey what the birds have eaten of the soft mix, hence cutting back or increasing the seed allotment. If the birds have leftover seed at the end of the day then there is something wrong, or they have been given too much seed. Feeding too much seed results in birds picking out their favorite grain and leaving the same ones day after day--thus reducing their nutritional spectrum.

We would like to note here that when we set up our aviaries outside, we contemplated seriously a way to avoid the rat and mouse problem we have seen at many other sites. I do not like poisons because they cost money, they kill more species than intended (sometimes even a bird), and they are notoriously cruel. My solution to the rodent problem was to offer larger food trays to catch dropped foods and to remove all seed

cups from the aviary cages just prior to sunset. This did wonders. Mice and rats prefer to feed at night and I have as yet to experience a proliferation to the point where I see daylight activity. Added benefits to this are no rodent activity inside a cage at night to spook nervous birds; no chance for birds to wake up early and fill up on leftover seeds before their morning soak mix breakfast; and an added reminder to me to wash each food cup daily. There are many large aviaries which do not wash food cups daily and I admire their keepers for their success and expertise. Their birds are not sick and the operations seem unaffected. So, to each their own. My feeling is I would prefer that my birds not have to eat out of anything that I would not eat from, that's all.

By the weekend, I need a break. So quite often I do not go through the soak and chop veggies routine on Saturday. Instead, the birds are given a single feeding of dry foods, such as seed, health grain bread with peanut butter, cheese chunks, dates, granola, apple chunks, corn on the cob, cranberries, millet spray, aloe vera chunks, perhaps watermelon, unsalted corn snacks, and peanuts. We avoid daily seed mixes with

peanuts, preferring them as a treat. If your bird crunches open a shelled peanut and does not methodically eat the insides, chances are he is getting too many peanuts!

This Saturday feeding is given in the morning and lasts the birds all day except for feeding mothers or weaning chicks. I am given a rest against "burn out", we all like the variety, and it teaches the birds to eat only once as on a "lean day" in the wild. Next morning they are oh, so hungry! Some added notes: we have had good luck providing two food bowls for pairs whose relationship includes domination of the dish by either the male or female. Sometimes they eat together, sometimes they prefer to be at separate bowls. It is not possible for one mate to constantly get all the goodies.


We filter all water given to the aviaries just as we filter the water in our kitchen. Chlorination is not one of nature's regimens.

So good luck and good feeding! Perhaps you will find, like us, that after years of boasting "My birds eat better than I do," you will be changing your own diet to a more natural choice. ➔



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