

General Husbandry of Caged Birds



Ness Exotic Wellness Center

1007 Maple Avenue
Lisle, IL 60532
(630) 737-1281



Housing

Pet birds may sit on T-stands or on their cages while their owners are home to supervise them. While their owners are away, however, they should be kept in their cages to avoid accidents.

You should purchase the largest cage that you have room for and that you can afford. Consider that your bird will spend most of its life in this cage – eating, sleeping, playing and going to the bathroom. The cage must also be appropriate for the bird that lives in it. This may seem obvious, but often people will buy a large cage so a bird will have room, but they do not consider the spaces between the bars. A bird may get its head stuck between bars that are not spaced correctly for its breed, or it may even escape. The shape of the cage is also important. Birds do better in a square or rectangular cage instead of a round one. Birds feel more secure having defined territory that corners provide.

Perches must be of the correct diameter for the bird's feet, and should also have some variety so the bird can exercise its foot muscles. A good choice is a manzanita tree branch, sold in stores, that has several diameters of branches combined in one. Do not use branches from outside, because they can contain parasites and chemical residue. Sandpaper perch covers do not prevent overgrown nails, but they do cause irritation and wear of the soles of the feet. They also turn on the perch, making the bird feel insecure. These covers should not be used.

The placement of the perches is also important. Do not place them so that the bird's droppings fall into food and water cups while perching. They should not be so close together or to the cage bars that the bird hits its tail feathers or does not have room to turn around. Birds like both high and low locations, usually preferring to sleep up high at night. Make sure there is enough head room.

Toys are essential to the well-being of pet birds. In the wild, they would spend most of the day searching for and eating food. Being locked in a cage with nothing to do will lead to stress. Birds may begin picking their feathers or become ill. The toys must be appropriate to the size of bird, or injury may result. Large beaks can break toys meant for smaller birds, and small birds will not be able to manipulate large toys. Also, get to know your bird. Offer bells, wood, straw, etc., and rotate toys so it seems as if he is getting new ones.

The location of the cage in the home is important. Some birds thrive in areas of heavy traffic, where they receive attention and are part of what is going on. Others seem to prefer more privacy and solitude. You should not place your bird's cage directly in front of a window. Cages should also not be placed directly beside, in front of, or beneath air conditioning, heating and ventilation outflows.

A pet bird should never be kept in the kitchen. In addition to the obvious gas fumes, occasional smoke, and uncovered pots and pans, there is another, more dangerous threat. Super-heated Teflon and other non-stick pan coatings emit fumes that are deadly to all birds. This "accident" usually happens when someone inadvertently leaves a non-stick coated pan on a heated stove burner. The pan becomes hot, the coating overheats and it emits toxic fumes. Birds that inhale these fumes die quickly.

Free Flight

Birds were given wings to fly. Not only is the exercise physically healthy for them, it is also beneficial to their psychological wellbeing. Therefore if a bird can be reasonably trusted to stay out of trouble and spend its time with the family or on its cage, then it should be allowed to fly. However, not every bird can be trusted or every home conducive to a flighted resident.

Your bird must be supervised at all times when it is out of its cage. Birds can be terribly destructive to a home and its furnishings. In addition, all homes contain objects that can be harmful to a bird that gets too curious or intrusive.

Birds resting on open perches are usually content to remain there, taking flight only when frightened by a sudden movement or loud noise. Unfortunately, these "impromptu" flights are taken without a flight plan. Birds often wind up crashing into walls, doors, windows or mirrors because of their confusion and poor depth perception.

Birds allowed unrestricted flight may escape through an open door or window. Most bird owners mistakenly believe that their bird would never fly away and leave them. Unfortunately, birds that escape become easily disoriented outdoors. This confusion makes it unlikely they will be captured or returned.

Free-flying birds may be injured by ceiling fans, hot stoves, and toilet bowls. They may bite electrical or telephone cords. They could be attacked by other pets in the household. Birds may chew on carpeting or other fabrics and swallow these materials, resulting in crop and intestinal impactions.

Caged birds allowed unrestricted freedom may eat poisonous house plants. Another type of poisoning is heavy metal toxicity, with lead being the most common. Most caged birds love to chew on this soft metal. Some household sources of lead are leaded and stained glass, curtain and drapery weights and pulls, and costume jewelry. Eating even a small amount of lead can poison a bird, but it can be successfully treated if diagnosed early enough.

There is something else to consider when allowing birds unrestricted freedom within the home. Free-flying birds tend to assume a more dominant position in their relationship with people, and often become intolerably aggressive.

Wing Trimming

The decision to deny a bird unrestricted flight (as in the wild) is subconsciously made by each bird owner at the time the bird is made a captive pet in the home. Wing trimming merely makes this confinement safer for the bird.

Flight feathers of both wings should be trimmed. If the bird takes flight for any reason, its descent to the floor is balanced and relatively controlled. When only the feathers on one wing are trimmed, then it results in an unbalanced descent to the floor that often leads to injury of the bird. Also, many birds can fly as soon as one to two flight feathers have grown out on the trimmed side.

Some owners prefer not to trim the wings of their smaller birds because their flying brings the owners great enjoyment. These birds have a smaller turning radius in flight than the larger ones, so they can usually safely fly about most homes. An advantage of not trimming the wings of these small birds is that it allows them to escape when in danger or threatened by other pets in the home. However, it is generally best to keep your pet bird's wings trimmed and to supervise him.

Trimming the wings is like trimming your fingernails. If done properly, the bird will experience no bleeding or discomfort, and will not appear much differently. Trimming makes handling the bird easier and usually shortens the time for taming. Have an experienced veterinarian or technician do this and/or teach you how to properly do it.

Beak and Claw (Nail) Clipping

The claws of pet birds tend to overgrow and surfaces of their beaks may become rough and irregular. In the wild bird's natural environment, this doesn't occur because they wear down their claws and beaks on tree bark, rocks and other abrasive surfaces. Most caged birds need periodic nail trims.

Do not try to trim the beak of your bird. An emery board, nail clippers, or small nail trimming scissors can be used to trim the claws of smaller caged birds. A rapidly rotating grinding stone (Dremel Tool) may be utilized to trim the claws of larger birds, and to shorten, shape and smooth the beak. If you try to trim the claws yourself, you must have something on hand with which to stop any bleeding that may occur. A recommended styptic powder is Kwik-Stop, available at pet stores and most veterinarians. Corn starch or flour can also be used if styptic powder is not available.

If bleeding occurs while trimming the claws, do not panic. First, carefully restrain the bird. Next, squeeze the toe just above the claw (tourniquet effect). Then apply the styptic powder to the bleeding claw. Alternate the last two steps until the bleeding has stopped. Always seek veterinary help when your bird is bleeding or has bled. Bleeding always represents an emergency situation. The steps outlined above are first-aid procedures only and are not a substitute for veterinary assistance.

Nutrition

As the saying goes, birds "are what they eat". To be healthy, they must eat the necessary nutrients in the proper proportions. It is not possible to cover the topic of nutrition here due to its scope, but suffice to say that there is no single diet ideal for all species of birds or even all birds of a given species. Please see our handout titled "Avian Nutrition" for detailed coverage of the subject.

Leg Band or Quarantine Ring Removal

Leg bands and quarantine rings are often applied to the legs of caged birds for regulatory purposes or to help breeders to identify individual birds. Once the bird is sold, the band or ring is unnecessary and should be removed. Most limb injuries in caged birds involve bands, such as broken or sprained legs. Band removal should not be attempted by the owner. Only an experienced veterinarian or technician should perform this procedure.

Bathing

Many exotic pet birds originally lived in tropical climates where it rains frequently. Birds typically take advantage of this by “showering” during a rainstorm or bathing in puddles formed by the rainwater. This keeps their feathers healthy, and maintains a brilliant sheen to the plumage.

Caged birds should also be allowed to bathe daily, or as often as is convenient. Some prefer to bathe in a small container, while others enjoy being misted with water. Regular water should be used. Commercial solutions available for bathing offer no particular advantage and may, in fact, be harmful. Many owners enjoy taking their birds into the shower with them.

It is important to allow the bird to air dry in a warm room or in the warm sunshine. It is best to let the bird bathe in the morning so it is totally dry before going to sleep at night.

Covering the Cage at Night

Because of the insulating capacity of feathers, it is not necessary to cover a bird’s cage at night to protect from drafts, unless you live in a cold climate. But there are other benefits to covering cages at night. It provides a regular period of privacy not usually allowed during the day. Also, it tends to keep the bird quiet in the early morning when it would otherwise become active and vocal. If you currently cover your bird’s cage at night, continue to do so. If you have not done so in the past, you may try it. If your bird acts agitated, do not continue to cover it.

Hygiene

Good hygiene is an important part of bird husbandry because most birds are confined to a relatively small living space. Droppings often accumulate on cage parts and perches, and contaminate food and water cups. This results in bacterial and mold growth.

Perches should be kept scrupulously clean at all times. Cage bottom coverings should be changed daily. Cages should be given a thorough cleaning at least once a month. Sanitizing products work best if the cages and perches are first given a thorough soap and water scrubbing to remove all of the major contamination. Diluted chlorine bleach can be used if thoroughly rinsed off afterwards.

Food and water containers must be thoroughly cleaned once or twice daily before they are refilled. The corners of these containers are the most common areas for bacterial buildup, so concentrate on those trouble spots while cleaning. If possible, use a dishwasher because its extremely hot temperatures help to disinfect. Several sets of food and water cups should be maintained and used interchangeably. Contamination of the water with droppings, uneaten food and saliva contribute to bacterial growth. Small numbers of these bacteria quickly multiply into millions of organisms in a water container, yet the water will appear normal to you. These bacteria do not affect most people but can be devastating to birds.

Disease: How to Recognize It and What to Do

Most disease in caged birds is directly or indirectly related to malnutrition and stress. Malnutrition most often stems from what the bird eats, rather than how much it eats. Most are given enough food, but not enough proper food in the proper proportions. Stress results from any condition that compromises a bird's state of well-being. Examples include poor husbandry, inadequate diet, rapid temperature changes and trauma.

Owners must understand that birds tend to hide signs of illness. They can compensate for serious internal disease in such a way that they appear healthy externally. It is theorized that evolution has "taught" birds to hide signs of illness to avoid being prey.

Because of this disease-masking tendency, by the time an owner recognizes illness in a pet bird, it may have been sick for a week or two. Therefore, one cannot afford to wait and hope the bird improves. Be observant and act promptly. Learn to look for subtle

signs of illness. Take special note of changes in your bird's routine and habits. Call your veterinarian promptly if you suspect illness.

Following is a list of signs of illness easily recognizable by the concerned bird owner. Alone or in combination, they signify potential illness in your bird:

Signs of Illness

- Inability to perch (bird on cage bottom)
- Bleeding (always an emergency)
- Open-mouthed breathing when at rest
- Balance problems
- Change in droppings
- Reduced or no appetite
- Weight loss
- Changed or no vocalization
- Fluffed up feathers
- Droopy wings
- Sneezing
- Discharge from nostrils
- Obstructed nostrils
- Discharge from eyes
- Closing of eyes
- Swelling around the eyes
- Change in clarity or color of eyes
- Soiled feathers on head or around nostrils
- Inactivity
- Poor preening/feather maintenance
- Change in bird's routine
- Limping or not bearing weight on one leg
- Swollen feet or joints
- Lumps or masses anywhere on body
- Tail pumping (rhythmic back and forth motion of the tail when at rest)

As a general rule of thumb, any caged bird that appears ill to its owner is seriously ill. One day of illness for a bird is roughly equivalent to 7 days of illness for a person. Pet owners tend to first seek advice from pet stores and purchase antibiotics and other medications there. With very few exceptions, these non-prescribed products are worthless. They allow the sick bird to become even sicker. They also compromise the results of diagnostic tests needed to properly diagnose and treat the patient. Contact your veterinarian at the slightest sign of illness in your bird.

Transport your bird to the doctor's office in its cage or some other suitable container (a smaller cage, pet carrier or box). Never visit the veterinarian with your bird perched on your shoulder. This does not provide protection for your pet. Cover the carrier to help minimize the stress to your sick bird. If you take your bird in its own cage, do not clean it first. The material you discard could represent valuable information to the veterinarian.

Droppings Can Reflect Illness

A bird's droppings reflect its state of health, so it is a good idea to pay close attention to them. A bird's digestive, urinary and reproductive tracts empty into a common receptacle called the cloaca. The products from them are expelled through the vent, which is the opening at the bird's "south end".

A normal dropping may contain excretory products from the intestinal tract, urinary tract or both. The fecal (stool) portion of the droppings should be green or brown. The color is influenced by the bird's diet. Normal droppings are formed into a coil, reflecting the size and diameter of the intestine. Along with the fecal portion is a variable amount of urate ("whitewash") and urine ("water"). The urates are usually in a blob or mixed in with the feces and should be white or beige.

It is important to regularly observe the amount of urine being excreted in the droppings. The urine portion soaks the papers on the cage bottom beyond the perimeter of the droppings. Materials such as corn cob or walnut shell bedding should not be used in bird cages. It is impossible to evaluate droppings when these materials cover the bottom. They also tend to promote rapid growth of disease-causing fungi, especially when wet with urine or water. Newspaper or paper towels are preferable.

Smaller caged birds (finches, canaries, budgies) tend to have an individual blob of fecal material with an accompanying amount of urate. The amount of urine excreted is usually quite small.

A bird has diarrhea when the fecal portion of the dropping lacks form ("pea soup"). Diarrhea is not very common in birds. A dropping with a normal fecal portion but a large amount of urine around it represents a watery dropping (polyuria), not diarrhea. All diarrheic droppings appear loose, but not all loose or watery droppings constitute diarrhea. This is a very important distinction. Polyuric droppings may indicate disease (diabetes or kidney disease), but more often they result from increased water consumption or consumption of large amounts of fleshy fruits and vegetables.

The color, consistency and amount of each component of the droppings of normal caged birds frequently change, depending on the type of food consumed, amount of water consumed, amount of stress experienced, mood changes, and other factors. Abnormal droppings typically remain abnormal in appearance during the entire course of a bird's illness.