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General Husbandry of Caged Birds

Diet

Birds, like people, are what they eat. Therefore, to be healthy, they must consume all of the necessary nutrients (protein, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, and minerals) in the proper proportions. **Seed diets are not healthy for caged birds.** Seeds are high in fat and contain limited vitamins and minerals. Birds that are fed a high proportion of seeds (more than 25% of their diet) develop life-threatening nutritional deficiencies and severe liver problems. These birds can look fat and healthy for several years before succumbing to secondary diseases as a result of their poor diet. They often develop digestive or respiratory illnesses due to a compromised immune system. If your bird eats a largely seed diet, please ask for our “Converting Seed Junkies” handout, which discusses appropriate measures for changing their diet to a healthy one. **Never change a birds diet too quickly!!!** Birds must be given time to adapt to a new diet and some birds will actually starve if you switch them too suddenly. If you feed your bird peanuts, be sure they are well washed because some shells contain toxins from the soil.

Commercial pelleted diets are recommended. They are similar to premium cat and dog foods, which contain all the nutrients for a healthy, long-lived pet.

We recommend and sell **Harrison’s** pelleted diets—they contain the highest quality ingredients and do not have preservatives. Other quality pelleted diets include Roudybush and Zupreme. Store all open pelleted diets in the freezer to keep them fresh. Avoid artificially colored foods. Also **avoid seed-pellet mixtures** because most birds will pick out the seeds to the exclusion of the healthier pellets.

If you like, you can supplement any diet with a variety of veggies, fruits, yogurt, occasional seeds, cereals and pasta. Some birds love frozen mixed veggies (microwaved to defrost them), pizza, chicken, macaroni, crackers, frozen pasta meals, and the list is endless. **You can give your bird virtually anything you eat—just stay away from high fat or sugary foods.**

Caged birds (esp those not on a quality pelleted diet) can be given vitamin supplements. Powdered vitamins can be sprinkled over fruits, vegetables and other table food items to which the powder will adhere. Powders do not adhere well to dry seeds and may end up on the bottom of the food cup. Sprinkle over seeds only if your bird will eat nothing else. Vitamins should not be added to the drinking water because they will promote bacterial growth. Mineral supplements can also be added if your bird’s diet is lacking in one or more of these trace nutrients. Mineral supplements are especially important for egg-laying birds to replenish calcium used in forming eggshells. Cuttle bones, oyster shells and mineral blocks may also be provided for their mineral value.

Because birds do not have teeth, they do not chew their food. The gizzard (stomach) functions to break up seeds and other food items so that they can be digested. Wild birds consume sand or tiny pebbles (grit) which pass into their gizzards and remain within this muscular organ to assist in the mechanical breakdown of seeds and other firm foodstuffs.

Grit is not necessary for proper digestion among hookbilled birds (parakeets, cockatiels, parrots). Grit for hookbilled birds is unnecessary and may, in fact, create serious problems (grit impaction and intestinal blockage) when consumed in large amounts. This is most likely to occur during periods of illness. For this reason, grit need not be given to hookbilled caged birds, but it should be provided for soft-billed caged birds (finches, canaries). Owners of finches and canaries, however, should be vigilant and remove the grit from the cage at once if illness is suspected.

Housing Considerations

Pet birds may be caged or allowed to remain on perches while the owner is home to supervise their activity. Birds should be confined to cages while their owners are away to avoid accidental injury and other misfortune.

Unsupervised pet birds allowed the run of the house often get into trouble. Not only can they be terribly destructive to the home and its furnishings, but all homes contain objects that can be harmful (directly or indirectly) to pet birds. These include mirrors, windows, walls, houseplants, electrical cords, and items containing harmful chemicals.

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

The major source of poisoning of pet birds is lead found in curtain (drapery) weights, curtain pulls, leaded and stained glass, fishing sinkers and ammunition carelessly discarded in ashtrays or dropped on the floor, costume jewelry, and in the lead wrapping around the tops of wine bottles. Most caged birds seem to have an affinity for this soft metal and love to chew on it. Poisoning results from eating even a small amount of lead. Lead poisoning can be successfully treated if diagnosed early enough.

Caged birds allowed unrestricted freedom in the home might eat houseplants or chew on electrical cords, resulting in illness and injury. Some unsupervised pet birds chew on macramé, carpet and other similar fabrics and often swallow these materials, resulting in crop and intestinal impactions. Free-flying birds are also more vulnerable to injury from ceiling fans, hot stoves, and attack by pet dogs, cats and ferrets sharing the same household. It is wise not to underestimate the aggressiveness of our four-legged friends, and to restrict contact between them and pet birds as much as possible.

Birds allowed to fly within the home may escape through open doors and windows. Most bird owners have the mistaken notion that their bird would never fly away and leave them. Unfortunately, birds that have escaped the owner's home easily become disoriented when outdoors. This confusion makes return or capture of the escaped bird very unlikely.

The location of the cage and/or perch in the home is important. Some birds thrive in areas of heavy traffic, where they receive lots of attention and are part of all of the goings on. Others seem to prefer more privacy and solitude. A pet bird should never be kept in the kitchen. Super-heated Teflon and related brand-name non-stick pan coatings emit fumes that are deadly to all birds. This accident happens most often when someone inadvertently leaves a pan, coated with a non-stick surface, on a lighted stove. The pan becomes hot and the non-stick coating overheats, emitting toxic fumes. Birds that inhale these fumes die quickly. Also make sure to remove your bird from the house when cleaning an oven, carpet, painting your house, spraying for bugs, etc.

There are several other considerations when allowing birds unrestricted freedom and flight within the home. Birds flying about may end up in the toilet bowl or in an uncovered pot or pan cooking on the stove. Watch for ceiling fans, and opening and closing doors—especially to the outdoors. Free-flying birds tend to assume a more dominant posture in their relationship with people, and often become intolerably aggressive.

Wing Trimming

To be safe, all caged birds should have their wing feathers trimmed. The decision to deny a caged bird free, 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. The 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.

Trimming the wings is like trimming your fingernails. If performed properly, the bird will experience no bleeding or discomfort. Wing trimming makes taming the bird easier and usually shortens the time for taming. Furthermore, this procedure changes the bird's appearance very little. Have an experienced veterinarian or veterinary technician perform this task and teach you how to do it properly.

Beak & Nail Trimming

In a wild bird's natural environment, they are very active and wear down their claws on tree bark, rocks, and other abrasive surfaces. Most caged birds need their claws trimmed periodically in spite of gimmicks often employed to keep them shortened. Sandpaper perch covers, for example, do not prevent nail overgrowth, but they can cause irritation and excessive wear on the soles of the feet. Sandpaper perch covers should not be used.

An emery board or nail clippers can be used to shorten the claws of smaller caged birds. A dremmel tool is used by professionals to trim the nails and to shorten, shape and smooth the beaks of larger birds. You should not attempt to trim the beak of your birds. If you do attempt to trim the claws, you must have something on hand with which to stop any bleeding. These clotting aids are called styptics. Recommended styptics include Kwik-Stop, silver nitrate sticks, and ferric subsulfate.

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 to the bleeding claw. Alternate the last 2 steps until the bleeding has stopped. Always seek veterinary help when your bird is bleeding or has bled. Bleeding always represents an emergency situation. Cornstarch or flour is a common household item that can be applied to stop bleeding. The steps outlined above are first-aid procedures only and are not a substitute for veterinary assistance.

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 (broken or sprained legs, etc) in caged birds involve a banded leg. Band removal should not be attempted by a bird owner. Only an experienced veterinarian or veterinary technician should perform this procedure.

Bathing

Many exotic pet birds originally lived in tropical climates where rainfall is a daily, or otherwise frequent, occurrence. Rainwater provides drinking water and an opportunity for bathing. Birds typically take advantage of this moisture by showering during a rainstorm or bathing in puddles formed by the falling rainwater. This keeps their feathers healthy, and restores and maintains a brilliant sheen to the plumage.

Caged birds should also be allowed to bathe periodically. Some prefer to bathe in a small container; others tolerate being sprayed or misted with warm water. Regular tap water and a spray bottle or plant mister should be used. Commercial solutions available for this purpose offer no particular advantage and may, in fact, be harmful. Many pet bird owners enjoy taking their bird into the shower with them on a regular basis. Bathing activities can be undertaken once daily or as often as convenient. It is important to allow the bird to air dry in a warm room or in the warm sunshine.

Covering the Cage at Night

A benefit of covering your bird's cage at night is that it provides a regular period of privacy not usually allowed during the day. Furthermore, it tends to keep the bird quiet in the early morning when it would otherwise become active and vocal. If you now cover your bird's cage at night, continue to do so. If you have not done so in the past and find that your pet bird panics or acts agitated with a cover over its cage, do not continue covering the cage.

Hygiene

Good hygiene is an important aspect of husbandry for caged birds because most are routinely confined to a relatively small living space. Consequently, droppings often accumulate on cage parts and perches and tend to contaminate food and water cups, resulting in bacterial proliferation and mold growth.

Perches should be kept scrupulously clean at all times. Soap and water, cleansers and sandpaper may be used to clean them, if necessary. Cage-bottom coverings should be changed daily. Cages should be given a thorough scrubbing and cleaning at least once a month.

Diluted chlorine bleach (1 part bleach to 40 parts water) can be used if thoroughly rinsed off afterwards. Food and water containers should be thoroughly cleaned once or twice daily before they are refilled. Bottlebrushes work best

for cleaning water tubes and bottles. Water tubes and water bottles with a ball valve at the drinking end (water bottles for rodents) are increasing in popularity. They greatly reduce the possibility of contamination of the drinking water with droppings, uneaten food and saliva, all of which contribute to massive bacterial proliferation within the water and its container. The corners of food and water containers are the most common areas for bacterial buildup, so concentrate on them while cleaning these containers.

Several sets of food and water cups should be maintained and used interchangeably. One set not in use can be soaking in a disinfectant solution. When possible, use a dishwasher for the final cleaning of these food and water containers because their extremely hot temperatures aid disinfection. Rigid standards of hygiene must be maintained at all times. Disease-causing bacteria grow freely in most water containers. Small numbers of these bacteria from food or droppings can quickly multiply into millions of organisms in a water container, yet the water appears normal to you. These bacteria can have devastating consequences for caged birds if allowed to multiply.

Disease: How to Recognize It & What To Do

Droppings Can Reflect Illness

A bird's droppings reflect its state of health. **Pay close attention to the droppings—they are a window into your birds health.** A normal dropping will contain excretory products from the intestinal tract, urinary tract or both. The fecal (stool) portion of the dropping should be green or brown. The color is influenced by the bird's diet. Normal droppings are formed into a 3 dimensional coil reflecting the diameter of the intestine. Along with the fecal portion is a variable amount of urates (whitewash) and urine (water). The urates are usually in a blob or mixed in with the feces and should be white or beige. If they appear yellow or lime green, this is an indication of liver disease.

The urine portion soaks the papers on the cage bottom for a variable distance beyond the perimeter of the dropping. It is important to regularly observe the amount of urine being excreted in the droppings. For this reason, such material as crushed corncobs or walnut shells should not be used on the cage bottom. It is impossible to evaluate each dropping when these materials cover the cage bottom. These materials also tend to promote rapid growth of disease-causing fungi on the cage bottom, especially when wet with urine or water. Newspapers or paper towels are preferable.

A bird has diarrhea when the fecal portion of the dropping lacks form (pea soup). A dropping with a normal fecal portion but a large amount of urine around it represents a watery dropping, not diarrhea! All diarrheic droppings appear loose, but not all-loose or watery droppings constitute diarrhea. This is a very important distinction. Watery 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.

Most disease in caged birds is directly or indirectly related to malnutrition, stress, and/or poor hygiene. Most caged birds do not receive enough of the proper foods and 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, moving, new additions to the household, change in schedules, and trauma.

All owners of caged birds must understand that **birds hide signs of illness.** Birds 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 harassed and possibly killed by other birds in the same flock. **Birds have a strong preservation instinct.**

Because of this disease-masking tendency, by the time a bird owner recognizes illness in a pet bird, the bird may have been sick for 1-2 weeks. Therefore, one cannot afford to take a wait and see approach and hope the bird

improves. Be observant and act promptly. Learn to look for subtle signs of illness, and take special note of changes in the routine and habits of your pet bird. Seek veterinary assistance promptly if you suspect illness.

Signs of Illness

- *discharge from the eyes or nostrils
- *change in clarity or color of the eyes
- *closing of the eyes
- *swelling around the eyes
- *obstructed nostrils
- *soiling feathers on head or around nostrils
- *sneezing
- *inability to manipulate food within the mouth
- *reduced appetite or not eating at all
- *fluffed-up feathers
- *inactivity
- *droopy wings
- *decreased preening and feather maintenance
- *break in the bird's routine
- *changed or no vocalization (may be serious)
- *weight loss—feel the breast bone—is it prominent?
- *equilibrium problems (very serious!)
- *inability to perch (bird on cage bottom)
- *limping or not bearing weight on one leg
- *swollen feet or joints
- *change in quality or quantity of droppings
- *open-mouthed breathing when at rest (very serious!)
- *tail pumping (pumping motion of the tail when at rest)
- *lumps or masses anywhere on the body
- *bleeding (always an emergency situation, regardless of the origin)

If you suspect illness in your bird, do not delay in making an appointment with your veterinarian. Either transport your bird within its cage or use some other suitable container (smaller cage, pet carrier, box). Never visit the veterinarian with your bird perched on your shoulder. Cover the container during transport to minimize stress. If you bring your bird in its own cage, do not clean it first--the material could represent valuable information to the doctor.

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 seven days of illness for a person. The tendency for pet bird owners in this situation is to first seek advice from pet stores and there purchase antibiotics and other medication for their sick pet bird.

Contact your veterinarian at the slightest sign of illness in your bird.

After a veterinarian has initially treated a sick bird, home care is very important. Sick birds must be encouraged to eat and must be kept warm. Illness can cause significant weight loss in a matter of days, especially if the bird stops eating. If this happens, the patient must be hospitalized. However, even a sick bird with a healthy appetite can lose substantial weight because of the energy drain caused by the illness. Supplemental heat (space heater, heated room, heating pad under the cage bottom or wrapped around the cage, heat lamp) is vital for a sick bird. It is especially necessary if the bird's feathers are fluffed up. Provide just enough heat so that the feather posture appears normal. Overheating the patient must be avoided at all costs. Heat-stressed birds pant, hold their wings away from the body, depress their feathers close to the body, and appear anxious and agitated. Heat stroke and death can result if the bird continues to be overheated. The environmental temperature should be kept at 80-95F for sick birds. The patient's cage should be covered (top, back and sides) during its convalescence.

If a bird refuses to crack seeds or eat other foods that require a great deal of work, offer hulled or sprouted seeds or other easy foods, such as warm cereal, cooked rice, cooked pasta, vegetables, applesauce and other fruit sauces, and peanut butter. Birds that refuse to eat **MUST** be hospitalized. Few people can successfully force-feed a sick bird at home.

If you suspect that your bird is sick, or if you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to ask our staff. You may stop in or call us at 303-948-5000.