

ALL ABOUT BIRDS (THE PET VARIETY)
OR
“MOMMY WHY IS THERE A FEATHER IN MY SOUP?”

By: Dr. Douglas R. Yearout
All Animal and Bird Clinic
Everett, Washington, USA
www.holisticanimaldoc.com
All Rights Reserved

So you want to own a pet bird do you? Or maybe you already have one or more. No matter, because the next two columns will deal with everything you ever wanted to know about owning and caring for pet birds. What does that word pet actually mean? Well, all birds were, or their ancestors once were wild. Many are still captured from the wild and sold in the pet trade, and an ever growing number are bred by private party or commercial breeding facilities. Pet literally means companion, and many of these birds are truly members of the family, loved and cherished just as any other pet. One doesn't usually pet them like a dog or cat but they do like to have their heads scratched, their feathers preened, or rarely their back stroked.

There are many sizes of pet bird available, and they come in a variety of colors and price ranges. Most will come from the so called parrot family meaning that they have a hooked beak, have two toes extending in front, and two toes behind on their feet. Most of these birds can mimic our voices and many other sounds. They are agile, smart, very playful, and can actually learn to do several tricks. They tame very easily to stand on the hand or on a shoulder. Yes, you too can wear an eye patch and pass for “Blackbeard” the pirate with your very own “Polly want a cracker” on your shoulder. They'll coo in your ear and pull on jewelry, earrings, glasses, and even nip your ear lobe if you're not nice to them. These beaks are sharp and powerful and they can and will inflict painful bites on various parts of your body. Be careful, train them well, and expect that you will get bitten at times (keep them away from your face).

There are two other groups of birds, kept as caged or aviary birds in the house. There are the various finches and the canaries, in which the males will sing like a meadowlark. These are all compact little birds of various colors with a cone shaped finch like or sparrow beak. Then there are the mynah birds which are relatives of starlings. They have a pointed beak like a robin and are black and yellow. The mynahs are some of the best mimics in the bird world as well. All of these birds have three toes forward and one in the back. None of them like to be held, cuddled or carried around like the parrot (psittacine) family and prefer to be in a large cage or aviary to being on your finger. There are waterfowl and game bird hobbyists, and breeders who keep many sorts of fowl on a pond, in various sizes of pens, or free roaming on their property. Some of these are the various types of pheasants, quail, ducks, geese, and grouse.

Then there are the pigeon enthusiasts who keep and fly homing pigeons, and other breeds of fancy pigeon. There are the 4-H groups who specialize in various species of farm type

poultry, and of course the gentleman, or lady backyard farmers who keep a few ducks, hens and a rooster for fresh eggs, and slug control. All these birds are usually outside critters, and although a great deal of time is spent with them, most are not considered pets in the true sense of the word, which is not to say that many of these birds are not lavished upon, allowed to come indoors occasionally, and treated every bit like a favorite pet bird.

When one spends any time with captive birds we find that they have all the wants and need that any other animal kept as a pet would have, and indeed it should be mandatory that all these needs are met to be able to enjoy a full and normal life. Birds in general are flock or social creatures. It is normal and necessary for them to want other birds of a like kind in their lives. If there is no flock around they will want to identify with their human family as part of their flock, and if they are not allowed to have some type of rich social interaction with us or other birds they will have a fairly dull, boring, and uneventful existence. If a bird is not going to be tamed and interacted with on a regular daily basis then they should either not be kept at all, or be allowed to be with at least one cage mate, preferably more, to form a small flock.

As said previously many of these breeds are captured from the wild and imported from tropical habitats all over the world. Some can be tamed over time especially if they are very young, but many are essentially “in jail” or captive, caged, and are never really very happy with all of that. Cages should be as large as possible, and the birds should be out of their cage as much as possible, interacting with the caretaker, toys, nutritious foods, and as many healthy diversions as possible. Often these wild caught birds are used for breeders, and live in larger aviaries with mates, allowed to produce young, which are then hand fed and tamed, and the offspring make much better well adjusted pet birds. If I were to ever want any type of parrot family bird it would only be purchased from well recommended breeders, or pet stores specializing in hand fed baby birds which have never known the freedom of the wild. Good sellers of birds will work with you and determine which breed is best for your particular needs, as to body size, ability to talk, living situation, size of your budget and ease of care.

It would behoove you to get a little research done about what it is you want before you buy. There are excellent books available at stores and the library. Talk to bird veterinarians, quality pet stores, breeders, and bird owners themselves before you buy. They are a wealth of information.

Once you have made that purchase you have made a serious permanent commitment to your bird. This decision could well be lifelong indeed as many of the larger size parrots will live at least as long as you will, and you may even need to pass him or her on to your offspring as well. Generally the smaller the body the shorter the life span. The common parakeet (budgie) can live up to 15 years, canaries and finches up to 12, the cockatiels and conures 20-30, mynahs 15-20. Smaller Amazons and Cockatoos 50, and the larger parrots such as yellow headed Amazons can live 75 years. Of course most of these life spans are never reached due to the same factors that affect the rest of us, like improper nutrition, and care. I have seen some real old timers in my practice. It is a joy to behold a well cared for geriatric pet bird in those twilight years, know he has beaten most of the

odds, and has done better than most of his fellow travelers here in captivity land. This thing called captivity is not all negative to be sure. There are many negative things out there in the real world. Birds succumb to predators, starvation, disease, and the ever present constant loss of habitat by the hands of man. Just as we destroy millions of acres here in the states to build homes and pave it over with parking lots, so do the natural areas of these birds get destroyed in their native lands. In fact in some countries for certain breeds of bird that is the main reason why they are captured and filter into the pet trade. This is also true for many species of reptile, and other exotic or zoo animals. Captivity is often the last hope for preserving and breeding some rare or endangered species, and birds are no stranger to this method of survival in conservation facilities.

One of the birds most important survival features, and what makes them so unique is their ability to fly. The old adage "flight or fight" is a standard mantra in understanding the biology of stress. We learned our early aerodynamic principles from watching birds fly. There is nothing more beautiful than watching a flock of migrating Canada geese on the wing during a fall evening against a setting sun. It is a remarkable adaptation this gift of flight. With our pet birds it can become a hazard to their health instead of a protection and travel method. When a pet bird gets out side that ability to fly away may actually seal its fate. They may not know how to survive, or food availability and weather conditions are not compatible with long term survival. If birds accidentally escape in warmer habitats in the southern states or Hawaii, they almost certainly will make it, and often become pest species. Here in the northwest they will almost never make it thru a winter. If they are not recaptured by some surprised good samaritan they almost surely will starve or succumb to the weather, lack of food, or predators. There are other indoor hazards to flight, such as ceiling fans, picture windows, toilets, cooking and wood stoves. Countless pet birds have become severely injured or died as a result of flying into, on, or at something not very safe. So what should you do?

Wings and feathers are what a bird is all about. Certainly they can be trained, and if one is very conscientious and careful to avoid these pitfalls then certainly let them fly. They love it, and it is good exercise to boot. Unfortunately most of us don't have that time to ensure safety for "in flight" pet birds. They can have their wing feathers trimmed so as to make flight more difficult or impossible. It certainly is safer, and is a very good thing to do, but it is still too bad that there isn't a better way. I evaluate every client's situation and recommend based on my best guess as to trim- or not to trim. One good thing is that a bird molts or loses and regrows all of its body feathers twice a year. If wing trims are done there certainly will be yet many more chances to fly in just a few short months when the cut feathers are molted out, and new ones appear. So it is not an all or nothing thing. I also recommend a trim in the spring when the weather improves and we begin to open those doors and windows. It won't be the first or last time that a door gets left open and out goes Tweety on her maiden voyage to the great bird feeder in the sky. Folks will get their pet back occasionally with ads in the paper, or walking the countryside, calling with the cage and food in tow. It is almost useless to climb up even if you could get that high up into the tree. They will just chatter at you, and fly off when you make the grab. If it is already dark you have a great chance of grabbing Tweety, as they are quite reticent to move off their perches in the darkness. There are many success stories of course of

recovery, but these are few and far between. The bird is pretty happy at first to get up there and be a real bird, but they soon get cold, wet and hungry. Some will go to wild bird feeders or fly right into another person's house or yard, and beg to come in putting up little fight. These are the lucky ones I think, and so wing trimming is just one of those cold "turn the head" necessities. That indeed is how some clients encountered and acquired their pet bird; Tweety came to them instead of the other way around.

Your pet bird will need nail trims occasionally as they will not wear off in captivity. Nails that get too long are unhealthy, and will deform the feet, possibly causing arthritis and injury. Beaks will need a trim occasionally depending on the bird. Some liver ailments will cause the beak to be brittle and grow longer. Your bird veterinarian will show you how to groom these birds properly so you can tackle it yourself, or better yet just have it done once to twice a year by a professional that knows how to do it right. The nails shouldn't be cut too short as it will be difficult to hold on to the perches and they may fall. I can't count how many improper wing, beak and nail trims I have seen. Make sure the groomer knows how to do this properly or take them to someone else. Birds have what is known as pin feathers, or feathers "in the blood", which means the new feather shaft has fresh blood in it like a straw filled with liquid. If these break or are cut there is a lot of unnecessary bleeding. The feather must be plucked out entirely to stop the flow and a new feather will grow in its place. The perches that you provide should be of a variable diameter so they can exercise their feet properly. Birds never lay down except as babies, so the foot health is very important. I recommend unsprayed apple, plum, and vine maple fresh branches be used as perches. They will love you for the fresh chewing bark to eat, beak exercise, and the special feel a natural branch has on their feet. The usual perches used are pre-cut unfinished wooden dowels which I don't recommend.

Speaking of chewing this is a second favorite birdie pastime after flying. Birds love to chew things up, the more expensive the furniture or woodwork the more gleefully they chew the stuff into oblivion. You must always know where the bird is at all times to avoid damage, and prevent injury due to chewing the wrong things like electric cords. There should be an adequate number of toys of a good variety that any good bird pet store can help you with. Birds are inquisitive, playful, and need many diversions in captivity to occupy their time. They get bored very easily, and boredom is one of the main reasons for self mutilation, and feather plucking, along with sexual frustration at not being able to have a mate and carry out the annual cycle of the "birds and the bees".

Their food and water should be changed fresh daily along with a fresh clean cage, and scrubbed dishes. They depend on us fully for their care, and one should be fanatically as clean as possible with them. My old rule is that if it isn't clean enough to eat or drink out of the dish myself then it needs more work. Food should include fresh veggies and fruits (wash them well-and soak in dilute apple cider vinegar for 15 minutes to remove all traces of pesticides), and a pelleted diet like Harrison's or Lafeber's which is appropriate for the size of the beak. Just feeding seeds is never the right thing to do. Birds do not just eat bird seed. Oh yes they will eat it, and indeed may get hooked on it, but it is not a complete balanced diet. Get help from bird veterinarians on the proper diets, and how to

change them over from seed to other foods. They are extreme creatures of habit, and will be very wary and ignore new foods. The transition must be careful, slow and done with care. They will starve themselves waiting for the old food, while being in the midst of plenty of new food(sound like any kids you know). There are some table foods which can be enjoyed by your pet bird, but again get a good education on this, don't give meat, or dairy to birds and stay with plant based proteins. There are several handouts available at my office with very specific information about all these subjects.

There are many houseplants that are extremely toxic and poisonous to pet birds so keep them away from them, as they will chew on them readily. Only 1-2 little nibbles of a philodendron will cause irreversible kidney damage in a little budgie. I like to grow up bird seed sprouts and wheat grasses for them to rip apart which satisfies that urge to graze on real plants.

Wild birds spend their whole day searching for and obtaining food, preening (grooming the feathers), traveling, and socializing with others. They are normally chatty, raucous and noisy. This is why many people get rid of a pet bird due to the incessant screaming and vocalizing. There are very few cheap good deals, and it is unfair for Polly to go from home to home because he just speaks his mind as he pleases. Again educate yourself about what you are getting into before you impulse buy. They are like hyperactive little children that never grow up. They crave and demand and need your attention. If you have a busy life and cannot spend a good part of your day with them as you would with a young child then owning a pet bird is not for you, and certainly if it will be a single pet alone they do better if they have some bird company of their own to take up the slack of your scarcity. Some birds bonded with their owners will not take readily to another of their own kind (they think they are people), especially the babies that have been hand fed and raised by their caretakers. They will often see the human as a surrogate mate, and will want to pair bond with you each breeding season. This can lead to all types of disappointing psychotic issues for all concerned. A good bird veterinarian or behaviorist may be able to help bring this issue to a positive outcome. Homeopathy offers some of the best treatment of mental-emotional disorders of birds. Sometimes it's not the bonding that is the problem, but the extreme jealousy toward their human caretaker's partner. Aggression toward humans is not an easily tolerated behavior as their bites hurt like hell! Some of the female hens will lay eggs, and try to nest, even without a male handy(they don't need no stinkin man). There can even be excessive egg laying in cockatiels and budgies to the detriment of their health, maybe even getting an egg stuck (egg binding) which is a medical emergency.

There are so many other things I'd like to say, but to recap, find the bird that fits who you are, get good complete information, feed and house them properly, meet their emotional and mental needs, and if you are truly a bird person, they will reward you with love and years of happiness.