



Small Bird Husbandry Sheet

Small birds (parakeets, cockatiels, lovebirds, parrotlets, finches, canaries etc.) make great additions to the family. Birds are extremely social animals and tend to do best in pairs or small groups (3-5). The lifespan of birds of this size ranges from just 6 years to over 20 years. Parakeets, cockatiels and lovebirds (psittacines) are social with other birds and their owners. Finches and canaries (passerines) tend to bond more with other birds than their owners and do not usually enjoy being handled.

Housing

Passerines require a cage that is at least 18 inches long and wide for a pair, although, bigger is always better. Even though they are very small, they need a lot of room to fly around in their cages to feel comfortable. The bars should be spaced no greater than ½ inch. They will also require a minimum of 2 perches to feel at home. Psittacine cages should be at least 24 inches long and wide, although bigger is always better. Bar spacing should be about 0.5-0.75 inches wide.

It is beneficial for bird's feet to have a variety in the sizes and types of perches. Perches should not be placed directly above food and water dishes in order to avoid contamination. Sandpaper perches are irritating to the feet and are not recommended.

At night, your bird's cage should be covered with a light-proof covering. This will cause them to feel more secure and behave more docile at night. Cockatiels, along with some other birds, can be prone to night-frights, and it may be better for them to have a small nightlight available during nighttime.

Birds are highly sensitive to any toxins in the air. For this reason, your bird's cage should not be anywhere near the kitchen. Fumes from non-stick pans and self-cleaning ovens, among other kitchen items, are very toxic and potentially lethal to birds. Take care to avoid using scented candles or aerosolized anti-odor sprays (Glade, Febreze etc.) as these also have lethal potential. Your bird will require several toys to keep itself entertained. Toys with bells, ladders, wooden blocks and foraging materials work great. Hammocks and other toys with a lot of string or the potential to have the fabric fray should be avoided or very closely monitored; your bird can get tangled or injured in them. Pieces of cardboard to destroy are a great and inexpensive way to keep your bird entertained. Toys should be rotated regularly (every 3-7 days) to keep your bird mentally stimulated. Birds who are mentally stimulated tend to behave better and have less vices (plucking out feathers, etc.). Re-arranging the positions of perches regularly is another way to stimulate your bird.

Feeding

Diets based on seed should be avoided in birds due to their high fat content, which leads to health issues. Seeds can be given occasionally as treats, but diets consisting of 80% pelleted food are preferred. Seeds should only be about 5% of their diet. There is a large variety of commercial pelleted diets available. Fruits and vegetables such as: bok-choi, broccoli or cauliflower leaves, cabbage leaves, apples, bananas, melons and kiwis should make up the remaining 15% of the diet. Avocados, and pits or seeds from any citrus fruits are toxic and should not be given to your bird. Fresh, filtered water should be made available 24/7 and changed at least daily or whenever soiled. Psittacines benefit greatly from dark green vegetables such as: spinach, broccoli, silver beets, peas and grated carrots.

Some tips for switching your bird to a pelleted diet:

- Offer only pellets for a portion of the day. Birds can be picky and may refuse new food options when first offered. By allowing your bird to try only the pellets for a portion of the day, allows your bird time to adjust while still making sure they are eating what they are used to.
- Wet the pellets down. Sometimes making the pellets into a sort of damp mush, may make it more appealing for your bird to try initially. Eventually you can transition into completely dry.
- Offer in a smoothie. You can blend the pellets into a mixture of veggies and fruits to mask the pellets. Sometimes if you were to try your own version of the smoothie (without the pellets) at the same time, it may make your bird more willing to try this new food.

Brands of pellets we recommend:

- Mazuri
- Zupreem
- Roudybush
- Harrison's
- Lafeber

Cleaning

Maintaining a clean environment for your bird is of utmost importance. The cleaner the cage is, the healthier the birds tend to be. Newspaper, paper towel, or a combination of both makes the best substrate for your bird for that very reason. They are absorbent of any waste and are very easy to add or remove to the cage. This bedding should be changed daily to prevent any buildup of waste. The cage should be fully cleaned regularly with a commercially available bird cage cleaner or a very dilute bleach solution. Ensure the cage, perches, dishes and toys are thoroughly scrubbed, rinsed and allowed to dry completely before your bird is allowed contact.

Enrichment

While keeping birds as pets can be a very rewarding experience, larger birds need extra enrichment in their lives in order to really thrive. Birds are very social animals and spend a lot of time in the wild socializing with other birds, preening, vocalizing, flying, and foraging for food. When placed in captivity, these normal behaviors cannot be accomplished in the same way. Here are some suggestions to enhance the quality of life of your captive bird companion.

- **Foraging!** : There are a ton of foraging toys available for purchase, or you can make your own. In the wild, birds spend roughly 80% of their time foraging for food. When we simply place their food in a bowl in front of them, it discourages their natural instincts to work for their food. Start by having your bird search for something very high value and ideally move toward eventually having your bird forage for all food items.
- **Appropriate Interactions** (more for handleable psittacines): - It is important to note that there are appropriate and inappropriate ways to interact with your pet bird.
 - **Inappropriate:** Avoid cuddling or stroking the back of your bird and try to keep physical contact to only the top of the head. This kind of inappropriate contact stimulates the bird reproductively/hormonally and can lead to behavior issues and physical ailments later in life.
 - **Appropriate:** Instead, try training your bird with positive reinforcement techniques. You can even use clicker training for these tricks! Try teaching flying from one area to another area on demand, moving toys, talking, etc. to strengthen your bond with your bird.
 - When training, be consistent – this includes all household members
- **Allow your bird to be a bird** (more for handleable psittacines): Consider allowing your bird to keep its full wings for flight. Just make sure to ensure your home is a safe space for flying (i.e. turn off ceiling fans, close windows and blinds). Flying is what birds are meant to do, and it has physical benefits as well. This helps expend energy as well as decreases chance of heart disease and increases cardiovascular health.

Consider the above lifestyle choices to ensure your feathered friend has a long, happy, healthy life.