

Basic husbandry for cage and aviary birds – part one: correct nutrition

Author : Jo Brown

Categories : [RVNs](#)

Date : October 1, 2012

Jo Brown RVN, City and Guilds Cert VNES, describes the importance of appropriate diets, and how a bird can be switched to a new one.

Summary

THIS two-part article discusses the information that all veterinary nurses should be able to give to clients regarding the husbandry and diet of pet birds. In part one, diet, common diet mistakes made by clients and how to effectively switch a bird on to a more appropriate diet are covered. This is not as straightforward as you may at first think, but is entirely beneficial. Part two addresses the bird's environment, touching on lighting, cage furniture and the provision of suitable environmental stimulation.

Key words

bird husbandry, avian diet, malnutrition, overgrown beak

SADLY, many bird keepers in the UK have not yet caught up with modern avian husbandry practices. Indeed, the UK is well behind the USA in this respect and, in my experience, it is only really in the past 10 years or so that information has started filtering down to the general public about how to provide the correct diet and environment for avian pets.

Often it is only when a bird is presented to the veterinary surgeon with an illness or something as

simple as a nail trim that husbandry issues become apparent. Many issues remain undetected by the owners and, sadly, because birds are long lived they can really suffer if these problems are not addressed, or at least mentioned at the time of consultation.

In this article I will address the most basic things veterinary nurses can do to help provide pet birds with a better quality of life.

Wild animals in your living room

No matter how much we want them to be, or how tame they are, birds are not domestic animals. They have not evolved over thousands of years to interact with, and live alongside, humans as dogs and cats have. Even if they are bred in captivity and are hand reared, birds hang on to many of their wild traits and try desperately to exhibit normal wild behaviour in very alien domestic environments. This in itself causes major levels of stress to birds, not just physically but emotionally.

Birds are supposed to fly in large flocks and have complex social relationships. They have strong pair bonds and bonds between family and even friends. Social interaction is a huge part of the normal life of birds in the wild. Their exercise levels are huge as they fly for large distances every day in search of food. Birds' diets are incredibly varied, not just from day to day, but seasonally as they search their locality for food. We cannot even begin to imagine what, for example, a wild African grey would find to eat in a day. Birds are also exposed to plenty of natural sunlight in their wild environment.

Birds are usually a prey animal. They are predated on by other species and, as such, are naturally suspicious and may be very nervous in unfamiliar situations, especially when isolated (as many cage birds are) from others of the same species. They feel very much on their own, which is about as unnatural as it gets for a bird.

There is a video on YouTube that shows how the common budgerigar should be living – it shows large flocks of budgies flying wild in Australia (www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyfCMrqitWI). I often use this video to illustrate just how unnatural it is to keep budgies in a cage, on their own.

Another YouTube video shows scarlet macaws in free flight and feeding on natural clay, with parakeets and Amazons, which also illustrates their complex social relationships (www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7ox2DYLdgo&feature=relmfu).

The sad truth is that many caged birds in the UK are slowly going mad. Their emotional and intellectual needs are rarely met by bird owners and this, alongside restricted exercise, inadequate diet and lack of social interaction with their own kind leads to real psychological problems. These can result in “problem” behaviours, such as feather picking and excessive screaming. My wish is that in 50 years' time we will be looked on as barbaric for keeping birds as pets. However, they

can't really be put back into the wild and are living here now... so what can be done?

Thankfully, some small changes can make very big differences to a captive bird's life.

Diet

This is the first and most important thing that needs to be addressed when assessing how a bird is kept. Since the 1970s, when bird keeping became very popular in the UK, we have been feeding our birds on a sunflower-seed or millet-based diet. Pet shops sell parrots with bags of seeds, breeders start them off with seeds, young birds are fed seed by their parents, they watch all the other birds in their little flock growing up eating seeds and, therefore, they like eating seeds.

Malnutrition

However, according to its composition, a seed diet has been proven to be either excessive or deficient in the 32 essential nutrients required in a bird's diet. It is also associated with obesity, calcium deficiency, numerous vitamin and mineral deficiencies and very high levels of fat and cholesterol. All this adds up to a very unhealthy bird with a shortened lifespan ([Figure 1](#)).

Calcium deficiency itself can be fatal and many captive birds suffer from liver failure due to excess levels of fat in their diets. Having constant cravings for missing nutrients can also cause havoc with a bird's mental health. Human food is also not an appropriate avian diet. Wild birds rarely come across fish and chips or crisps. Trouble may arise because pet birds have seen their owners eating these things, so they will readily take them. A large percentage of eating behaviour in birds is learned from observation, and in the absence of another bird to learn from, they will start to see their human owner as their mate or flock member, which in itself can cause all kinds of psychological problems.

There are a few companies producing pelleted bird diets and, much like the complete dried diets for dogs and cats, some are plain pellets while others come in different colours and shapes ([Figure 2](#)). Companies may provide support for clients via excellent websites and one even an online bird nutrition course aimed at bird keepers.

Introducing a pelleted diet

I usually start by recommending one of the simpler pelleted diets, but the coloured diets can be useful. If you had a bird, for example, that only eats red things, he could pick the red pieces out and still be enjoying a balanced diet. I find this most useful for older or very picky birds. Also birds kept in aviaries with others seem to accept the coloured diets more easily.

The veterinary surgeon should always decide whether it is safe to attempt a diet switch. Very ill

birds should not be switched unless recommended by a vet because they may have much higher energy requirements. Trying to change the diet at that time could be disastrous. If the vet has agreed then the change can be implemented after the bird has been examined.

When addressing a caged bird's nutrition it is very important to know and understand that simply taking the dreaded seed diet away and replacing it with pellets will not be sufficient. Birds are complex creatures and will only eat food if they know it is safe. They learn what to eat in the wild by watching the hundreds of birds around them; if everyone else is avoiding the red berries they won't touch them, but if everyone is eating them then they will join in.

Providing birds with food they don't recognise and expecting them to eat it is unrealistic. They need to be convinced that it is safe to eat, which is where the owner comes in.

This process may take two minutes or two months. A lot depends on how readily a bird is accepting new things in its diet already. If it is fed a lot of fruit and veg already, for example, then it will be more likely to try something new. But all caged birds will need encouragement to try a new diet and sometimes you need to be a bit inventive. I had one client whose 20-year-old African grey would only eat sunflower seeds and it refused to eat pellets until the owner gave the dog a piece. Now it won't stop eating it, which shows that other methods can work alongside this. When choosing a pelleted diet, follow the manufacturer's guidelines as requirements between species will vary.

An example of a plan that I often follow for diet conversion is detailed below. Before beginning a diet change it's important to establish a strong feeding routine. For three weeks before starting the switchover it's a good idea to feed the bird at exactly the same time every day. When the pelleted diet is introduced start at the exact feeding time. Birds are clever enough to know exactly when that is supposed to be.

- Before you offer any new food, change the cage around. Do this on the same day you will be starting with the new diet. Move the perches, and make sure the food bowls are up high by the perches and not on the floor, as often seen in commercial bird cages.
- Never starve a bird into a new diet. The switch must be done carefully and I would recommend weighing the bird daily – ideally in the mornings before breakfast – to monitor any weight loss, and act accordingly.
- Be prepared to waste a lot of pelleted food until the bird accepts it.
- Pelleted food may appear expensive, but generally there is no waste. Birds do not require the same volume of pellets as a seed diet because there are no hulls that are discarded. The health benefits far outweigh any extra cost. To keep birds properly is not cheap.
- Do not feed any fruit and veg while the switch from seed to pellet is taking place; the bird will

always go for the more familiar food.

- Place the normal seed in the normal bowl. Place a tightly packed layer of pellets on top. The hope is in that picking up the pellet to throw it on the floor to get to the seed the bird will taste it. If the bird tastes the pellets it usually starts eating them.
- Offer seed only for an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening to allow the bird to eat. For the rest of the day offer pellets only.
- If the bird is used to having fruit and veg in a separate bowl, offer the pellets in that bowl instead.
- Offer pellets in a bowl high up in the cage and seed low down in the cage. Because of their wild instincts, birds do not like to eat from low down as they are more likely to be predated on. The safer, higher-up pellets may feel like a better option for the bird.
- Use a bird that already eats pellets as a role model.
- Sprinkle some pellets on to some white paper or mirror, or in front of a large mirror. The bird will be interested in what the friend in the mirror is investigating, and it may be enough to make it taste the pellets. White paper draws attention to the food and will ensure the bird notices they are there.
- Soak the pellets slightly to produce a porridge-like consistency. Many birds enjoy eating gooey things and seem to enjoy the mess they can make with it.
- Feed the pellets through the cage bars as a treat. Many birds are used to taking treats this way.
- Put some pellets on the side of your plate with your dinner, but make sure the bird doesn't see you do it. Eat your dinner as normal and take some of the pellets on your plate and give them to your bird. He is intelligent enough to think this is the same food as you are eating and may well give it a go.
- Feed your bird from a spoon or by hand as a treat or during training as a reward. Substitute his normal treats for a pellet instead.
- As soon as you have seen your bird eat and swallow a pellet you can start to reduce the amount of seed you are offering. Offer less and less seed each day until it is only offered pellets. Then feed pellets only (no fruit or veg) for six weeks to get it eating these happily.
- Once the six weeks is up, you can introduce some organic fruit and vegetables. These should be more for environmental stimulation than for nutrition. Nutrition has been addressed with the pelleted diet so choose things that are hard for the bird to eat. Only feed a teaspoon of fruit and veg a day alongside ad-lib pellets. See what is on offer at the supermarket and chose five different

things each week for the bird to try. The more you mix it up the better – don't be tempted to only get things because the bird likes them. It only likes them because it knows what they are; therefore, the more things you expose it to, the more likely it will be to try new things. Sweetcorn and pomegranate are excellent, as are peas in the pod, because your bird has to work harder to get the food and it is stimulating for him to work it out.

- Most fruit and vegetables are safe; however, never feed avocado and avoid feeding any single fruit or vegetable every day or in large amounts.
- Always feed fruit and vegetables raw.

I hope this article has highlighted why clients who buy off the shelf in pet shops, and then try it at home, are often disappointed because their bird won't eat it. I have found that most birds will eat most things if you can convince them it is safe to do so and take the time to introduce new things slowly.

- Part two will address the importance of the environment for caged birds.

Reviewed by Kate Everett, BVetMed, MRCVS, CertAVP