

Basic husbandry for cage and aviary birds – part two: best environment

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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 (VNT12.10), diet, common dietary mistakes made by clients and how to effectively switch a bird on to a more appropriate diet were 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, bird environment, overgrown beak

SUFFICIENT and appropriate lighting is of utmost importance for the health and welfare of cage birds. Birds kept indoors have no exposure to the useful ultraviolet B (UVB) light wavelength found in sunlight.

Even if kept right by a window, birds will not be exposed to UV light because glass and acrylic glass filter out UVB completely, so they are not getting what they need from the sun.

Different species are exposed to different UVB strengths in the wild, but provision of a bird lamp with 2.4 per cent UVB and 12 per cent UVA output will replicate natural sunlight.

The lamp should be fixed to the outside of the cage ([Figure 1](#)), where the bird is unable to chew on the wires, and should be switched on for eight to 12 hours per day.

It is very important birds get sufficient rest – at least eight to 12 hours in the dark – so when the light is turned off, that really should be sleep time for your bird. If it is in a busy part of the house, consider moving it to a quiet room to sleep, away from noisy televisions or radios.

Without UVB provision, birds cannot see properly. They do not see the same way we do. For a bird, being in a room with no UV light can be compared to sitting in a darkened room (despite it looking okay to us). A mynah bird's plumage looks black to humans, but to another mynah bird under full-spectrum light it is multicoloured.

Inadequate UV light (levels can be checked, as in [Figure 2a](#)) means that cage birds will not be able to absorb sufficient calcium from their diet, even if that diet is good (low calcium can prove fatal). Without a bird lamp, these creatures are being denied one of the most important things for their survival. My plea is to ensure all cage birds are provided with a bird lamp and to advise owners about their importance. In our practice we even use them for hospitalised chickens.

The enclosure

It goes without saying that a bird's enclosure at home should be as big as possible, but sadly, commercial cages seem to have been designed with humans more in mind than birds.

Cage birds should have as much time out of the cage as possible – ideally six to eight hours per day – and owners should have sufficient training to get the birds back inside. Training is a very important part of owning a bird, and having it controlled in this way is essential. The excuse I hear from many bird owners – that they don't let their bird out because they can't get it back in – is not good enough.

An outside play aviary for summer days is ideal for birds that are generally kept indoors. A double-door system ensures there are no escapees. The aviary should be made of non-galvanised material to avoid zinc poisoning from ingesting solder, and should not allow contact with wild birds or their droppings ([Figure 3](#)).

An indoor cage should provide numerous perches. Knobbly fruit tree wood is best to make perches from, as the birds can strip them, they offer exercise for perching feet, and are cheap to replace. Use apple or pear tree wood. Cherry wood is toxic to birds. Dowelling perches should be avoided, as should plastic and cement versions.

Cement is very abrasive on birds' feet and dowelling perches force the birds to hold their feet in one position all the time. Imagine doing that for 20 years.

Food bowls should be positioned high up. I rarely recommend using the low-down food bowls found in many commercial cages. By coming down to the ground to eat, a bird is making a choice between feeling completely safe and eating – so why ask it to make that choice?

Toys are a vital part of a bird's environment, but sadly, many still have the toys they were bought by their owners months before. It is very important to rotate them – I usually advise using two different toys per week. Cage birds are like young children, and become easily bored with toys. Allow toys that can be completely destroyed, as there is nothing more frustrating for a bird than an indestructible toy.

This is where you can get really creative – use a mixture of hanging toys and foot toys, and get a wooden bowl and stuff it full of things for the bird to pull out and destroy. Charity shops sometimes sell toddler toys that make loads of noise. These are great for supervised play with more intelligent parrots, and are a good, cheap way to entertain them – just avoid any with rubber tyres or metal parts.

When choosing or making toys, try to avoid metal. Instead, use more natural substances, such as raffia, undyed leather, cardboard tubes and nutshells, and try to factor in the wild behaviour of the species you are dealing with. Big macaw species will prefer harder, larger toys they can pick up with their feet, while small parakeet species love to hang from toys and chew at them. Some species spend a lot of time off the ground, so provide things for them to investigate and sift through.

Cage placement

The situation of the cage within the house needs very careful consideration. At no point should a bird be in the kitchen. There are too many hazards – airborne smoke, Teflon and fat particles from cooking are just three of the things that can cause real problems for pet birds. Ideally, I would suggest having the bird out and about in a busy part of the house during the day, and then retiring it to bed in a quiet part of the house in the evenings.

Humidity is important for birds. A humidifier placed in the room where the bird is kept is ideal, and regular warm sprays with water from a plant mister assists with feather health and grooming habits.

The cage should never be near a television set. Wildlife programmes with predators may seem extremely real to parrots, and loud noises often frighten them. If the parrot must be kept in a room with a television then at least have it as far away as possible. Remember that in its head your parrot is very wild indeed.

In addition, be careful with any other pets in the house. I cannot recommend keeping birds when there are cats and dogs in the house – there is too much potential for disaster and, unfortunately, I have seen more than one tragic accident involving the death of a beloved bird due to another family pet.

Companionship

The absolute best thing we can do for pet birds is to make sure they have a friend of their own species. For all birds, introductions must take place gradually and carefully, and I have to say that sometimes they never do get on well enough to share a cage. However, even a bird in the same room will provide some of the social requirements of these very complex creatures. In the best-case scenario you would have three or four of the same species sharing an aviary and interacting socially all day.

If you are unable to provide a bird with a companion, then you are going to be the only resource for social interaction your bird has – what a responsibility.

Toxins in the home

Many clients are unaware of toxins found in their home that can cause real danger, and sometimes even death, from a bird's exposure to them. Anything that smells strongly or releases odour into the air should be avoided at all costs. Air fresheners, scented candles and fabric fresheners all affect caged birds more than you would think. This is because so much of their anatomy is designed to be lightweight for flying and, thus, for fast intake and absorption of oxygen. As a result they are very susceptible to airborne agents. Smoking in the same house as a bird should be avoided.

Teflon poisoning from heating non-stick surfaces, such as saucepans or non-stick irons, can prove fatal. If a bird is kept in the house, the non-stick has to go.

Alcohol is also incredibly toxic and under no circumstances should it be given to birds. I know of a few parrots that are given some of their owners' wine. Whenever I hear this I am amazed that their bird is still alive.

Cage cleaning must be done with bird-safe products and not with human kitchen cleaners or similar. After cleaning, all cage furniture should be thoroughly rinsed.

If a bird looks sick, it should be considered an emergency. A bird, as a prey species, will always fluff itself up to look well in the presence of a predator (human) to avoid being attacked. When a bird no longer has the energy to do this, and starts actually looking unwell, it is usually a sign it is very unwell. Do not delay in getting treatment if this is the case, as they usually cannot wait until the next day to be seen by a veterinary surgeon.

This article underlines the very basic husbandry needs of pet cage birds in the UK. The internet can be a baffling place, and so much conflicting information is in the public domain. However, the information provided here is drawn from my 13 years of working with birds. There is much that can be expanded on and I am always available if there is anything you would like to ask, or that I can help you with (see details below). I would always advise that a bird is checked at the surgery annually, as for dogs and cats. Although they do not require vaccinations, they certainly require a health check. Many problems, if caught early, may be treated successfully.

- **My view is that we should try to make the UK a better place for pet birds.**

Useful online information

Practice website: www.sandholevets.com

Jo's bird consultancy website: www.chirpybird.moonfruit.com

Kate Everett's exotics CPD website: www.exoticismadeeasy.co.uk

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