



Feathered Companions Aviary

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CARE GUIDE FOR YOUR NEW FEATHERED COMPANION

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We want to encourage parrot owners to enjoy the quality of experiences that we know are possible with our avian companions.

Transitioning to a new flock

When a bird reaches a new home, it may feel a bit insecure for a while. It is tempting, because you are excited to get the bird, to overwhelm it with attention. Not only is it stressed from traveling, but it is also in a totally strange place. It needs to have time to get used to its new home and to “chill out.” Frequent visits, talking or singing to it in calm, reassuring vocal tones, as well as even offering a tiny treat if it will take it, will do wonders in reassuring the bird that its world hasn’t vanished forever, and that you are its new loving flock.

Usually, within a day or two, the bird will socialize with you and begins developing trust in the new relationship. Have everyone in the home who will be in contact with the bird visit quietly and positively, so that the bird will come to realize that everyone is a member of this new flock, not just one or two people. Since birds have a tendency to have favorites (like most animals and people), you can expect that your bird will show a preference, but you don’t want it to be a preference that excludes (with hostility) other family members. Some species are more prone to this than others, but all birds do tend to pair, so they will look to an individual in their new “flock” as their favorite.

Just like people, birds have individual personalities, and some will adapt quicker than others, just as some will be cuddlier than others. For example, conures are usually cuddly, but some are more so than others, and there may be differences in what type of contact they prefer—full body, under the wing tickling, heads only, etc. You can modify touchy-feely behavior to some extent, but you need to be patient with them and earn their trust. For example, it takes trust for a bird to willingly lie on its back in your hand, and if it is uptight, it likely won’t do it—and some birds will never do it. You have to develop your relationship with your bird with both of your personalities in mind!



Foods

Sprouting for living food

Sprouted seeds are one of the most nutritionally packed living foods a bird can eat. You can use sunflower hearts and any of a number of other seeds (human-grade only), such as lentils, mung beans, wheat berries, rye, etc. (NOTE: Sprout times can vary with freshness of seed as well as room temperature, from 36 to 48 hours).

Easy sprouting instructions for one or two birds [48 hour sprout cycle]:

- In the morning, put 1/4 cup hulled raw seed to soak in stainless steel bowl (in mild bleach solution or in dilute apple cider vinegar).
- Midday to late afternoon, rinse in a small colander and drain. Put colander on a small dish and cover with a cloth. Leave on kitchen counter. Rinse again at night.
- Rinse again in the morning, then at night, then morning and feed.
- You can make two day's worth at a time, and keep half in the colander (on a dish with cloth covering) and put in the refrigerator, then rinse the next morning and feed the second half.

Pellets

You can use whatever pellets you wish, or that your vet recommends, but transition to new brands gradually, if possible. Birds don't automatically recognize different looking foods as something edible. I use a separate dish for free choice of pellets (unless the bird rejoices in beak-sweeping it all out just for fun), but I do not feed only pellets. I also find that there is less waste with smaller pellets. For example, even though my conures and ringnecks will eat the conure-sized pellets, they will also waste more. That's why I usually feed the cockatiel-sized pellets. Mine are used to the fruit-blend, but some people don't want to feed colored pellets, and there are good alternate choices, e.g., uncolored Zupreem or Roudybush.



Lentil/split pea/rice mix for cooking

My birds are used to soft foods, such as the lentil/split pea/rice mix, during the winter months. You can cook up a batch (in the microwave), put it in small ice cube trays, freeze, then put in baggies, take one out everyday and put in food dish. Be careful about refrigeration of this, and don't leave in the cage longer than during the day, only a few hours if it's hot in the house. Because of potential spoilage, I don't feed this in the heat of the summer where air temperature is a factor and where I cannot take leftovers out after 3 to 4 hours.

Seeds, grains, dried fruits and veggies

You can use any good quality seed mix. Conures love seeds, so don't give free choice, but I feel they need some seed. I prefer the cockatiel blends, which are readily available in small bags. Do not use seed intended for wild birds, because it is usually not cleaned as well and could have contaminating mold spores or bacteria on it. I sometimes add dried fruit, such as raisins, as well as other seeds or grains, such as pepitas (shelled raw pumpkin seed), buckwheat, oat groats, flax seed, etc. Particularly when I am concerned about my seed source, I usually freeze seeds (not intended for sprouting) for a couple of days in case those pesky seed moth eggs are in them.

"Bird Bread"

There are many variations of "bird bread" on the internet. I make a healthy bread with pellets, seeds, and other goodies in it. You can bake in mini-muffin pans, or like I do, in a sheet cake pan. I cut into squares and put in baggies in the freezer until needed. If the bird bread has egg in it, you need to be careful about spoilage and not leave out longer than 3 or 4 hours during the day when the weather is very warm.



Treats

I keep unsalted, dry roasted peanuts around to give as treats and rewards only, for example, when putting them in their cage. My birds know the routine, and I seldom have problems putting them up—I always give them a treat when I put them in their cage (positive reinforcement). You could use sunflower seeds for this if you don't include sunflower in their normal seed mix—just so it's something special. They also like occasional small spiral or elbow dry pasta to crunch on, and I use this when I'm leaving the house ("pasta for bye-bye") to give them something to do while I'm leaving.

Fresh veggies and fruit

Although I feed fresh coarse chopped veggies (in food processor), as well as well-rinsed hot-water-thawed frozen peas, corn, and carrots daily, 2 to 3 times a week would probably be adequate. Examples of veggies are kale, mustard or collard greens, broccoli, etc., for greens, and carrots, squash, or cooked sweet potato for yellow. I also give a piece of fruit, usually apple, on top of the soft foods. Some birds like dried papaya (in moderation), and it is reputedly good for their digestion, but most of what you get in stores has sugar added, which is not good for them. A pet store sometimes has the unsugared, unsulphured type.



Socializing and Environment

WARNING: Do not use air fresheners (Glade, Fabreeze, scented candles, incense, etc.) in a room where you have birds. Their respiratory systems do not handle these well, and birds have died from exposure to these products.

Housing

I prefer powder-coated cages because of ease of cleaning. Your bird's cage should be large enough for it to have plenty of room to move around and "flap its wings." Primary concerns should be safety and containment. Be sure the bar spacing is not too wide for your bird, so it can't get its head through the openings. Examine feed doors and be sure a bird can't get trapped in that mechanism. For most conures and larger birds, be sure latches are secure and that the bird can't get to the latch. Slide-up feed doors are marginally acceptable (if they have latches on them), because many birds will work on those until they get them open, and they may escape or get trapped in the opening.



Toys

Because they are intelligent, birds require mental and emotional stimulation. Fortunately, through the imaginative inventions of bird-lovers, there are many wonderful bird toys on the market today. Determine what is appropriate for your type bird and vary the type and quantity in your bird's cage, as well as out of it. There are caveats about dangerous toys and toy parts, so you will need to research that, and above all, check the toys periodically for signs of wear, including strings that may wrap around toes, wing, or beak.



Eating with you

Being social, flock creatures, your bird will likely want to sample what you're eating. The main thing to remember is to limit salty and fatty foods, and allow no chocolate or caffeine. I also fix unsalted, unbuttered popcorn, set a bit aside for them, and then doctor the rest up for me! Also, do not let them eat from your mouth, as the human mouth has bacteria that can make a bird sick. Kissing on the beak is fine, but they sometimes try to get at your teeth or tongue, and that can expose them to bacteria which can make them very ill.

Quiet time and sleep

Your bird needs a good night sleep, just like a human child, 10 hours minimum, if possible, and having quiet time during the day to nap is also important. If the household is active and noisy, your bird should have enough quiet time to relax, and it's preferable that its cage is in a corner or on a wall, rather than in the middle of a busy room. It will adapt to a busy household, but needs time to do this and still needs good quiet/sleep time. This is where the sleep box is handy, because the bird can retreat to that to rest. Hang the sleep box high in the cage and with the open end facing direct lighting (so it's light during the day in order to not stimulate nesting behavior).

I strongly discourage allowing your bird to sleep with you! They weigh only a few ounces, and people usually weigh over 100 pounds—quite a size discrepancy! There are numerous accounts of someone rolling over on a bird in their sleep, or the bird getting caught under covers and suffocating—not worth taking a chance.

Calls

Birds call each other when not in sight, and it is normal for your bird to call you in the morning, when you come home, in the evening, etc. Reassuring with a calming voice that it's okay and you hear it, or with an excited voice when you come in and it is anxious to be with you, should minimize excessive screaming. Remember that birds are flock creatures by nature, and you are your bird's flock! Even if it has a lot of toys in its cage, it's not like another living creature with which to interact and, if desired by your bird, snuggle.



Wing flight feather clipping

I do a progressive wing feather clip on youngsters. Once they are totally comfortable with maneuvering, landing, etc., I work with them for recall, but some are more independent than others and a “baby clip” is necessary. I begin clipping the longest flight feathers, starting with two on each side; then over time, I clip one per side until they can fly, but not soar—level, short hops up, and long glides down—usually no more than 3 or 4 feathers on each side. As your bird matures and gets set in your routine (and hopefully, cooperative about going back in its cage), you can decide how much you want it clipped. I feel it’s better that birds go to new homes with some wing clipping, so that if they get startled, they can’t fly into windows, walls, or mirrors (or out doors). It does make them more dependent on you—but if you want a close relationship, it’s up to you to develop the trust that goes with it. In reality, dependence is forced upon them, but trust must be earned.



Advantages to some flight are

- (1) They can go from one person to another easily and enjoy more mobility.
- (2) You can more easily potty-train them as they can leave and go elsewhere and then come back to you; and
- (3) When they are ready to go to bed, they will often fly right back to their cages (or to you, depending on your bedtime habits).



Disadvantages of full flight are

- (1) The danger of someone leaving an outer door open or walking outside with the bird on the shoulder and them flying away, getting disoriented with the big blue sky outdoors, or being caught in midair by a predator, such as a hawk;
- (2) Panicking and flying into a window, mirror, wall, or sliding-glass door; and
- (3) Getting into something in the house they shouldn’t (e.g., a hot stove, electrical cord).

In other words, if they are flighted, you have to be doubly careful! At the very least, I recommend that you have 2 or 3 of the outer flight feathers clipped, depending on environment—they can still fly, but not nearly so fast, far, or well.



Deco-hole t-shirts

I buy t-shirts at a thrift shop (about \$1 each), as these guys like to chew! These are my “conure deco-hole” shirts. I put two shirts on at a time so that mine can not only chew on them, but also so that they can crawl between them to snuggle and sleep. I work on my computer, sit and read, or watch TV, etc., with a little bird between the t-shirts, either napping or with its head sticking out watching what’s going on around him. Not all birds want to do this, however, and some are most content on your shoulder and/or under your hair. Yes, I do let the smaller birds on my shoulder, but that privilege can be lost if the bird persists in nipping my face (e.g., during hormonal times).

Potty training

Start early, watch your bird’s body language for when it needs to poop, and reinforce going in a particular place. You can use a phrase (e.g., go potty, go poop) and praise them when they do. Most conures will do pretty well at this.

Helpful books and publications

There are many books these days which have excellent information, e.g., softbooks, such as *The Conure Handbook* (Martin), *Good Bird* (Heidenreich), *Birds for Dummies* (Speer and Spadafori), and *Guide to Companion Parrot Behavior* (Athán). These are also very useful in dealing with behavior issues and relationship enrichment!

"Some say they don't believe that Angels can be seen or heard. What a shame such blindness, what a pity such deafness, when the Song of Songs abounds and heaven's flyers are all around, only thinly disguised ... as birds." (Author unknown)

