

Creating a Safe and Happy Environment for Your Bird

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Pet birds are beautiful, intelligent creatures and welcoming one of these feathered treasures into your home is an exciting privilege. In addition to ensuring the physical health of your avian companion, it is your responsibility to create a safe, stimulating environment that also promotes his/her mental well being. Following are a few suggestions to help you get started on a long, healthy relationship with your bird.

Beginning with the basics, your bird needs a cage that is at least large enough for her to completely extend and flap her wings. There should be enough room for her to move around and jump from one perch to another. The bar spacing should be appropriate to the size of your bird. If they are too narrow, feet or legs may get stuck between the bars. If the spacing is too wide, your bird may try to escape or get her head caught between the bars. Make sure the cage materials are safe for birds. Look for a powder-coated cage, and avoid galvanized wire cages, or cages with any exposed solder at the joints. The metals contained in wire cages may be harmful to birds. Talk to someone familiar with the particular species of bird you own. Some birds are actually uncomfortable if they have a cage that is too large, so make your selection carefully! Other important features to look for when selecting a cage are a removable grate on the cage bottom to let droppings fall through out of reach, and an easily removable bottom tray to facilitate daily cleaning. The cage doors should be large enough for your bird to enter easily, but make sure they are secure and can't be opened by curious beaks! Place the cage in an area that is free of drafts, away from kitchen heat and cooking fumes, and out of heavy "traffic" areas in your home.

The "furniture" inside the cage is also extremely important. All pet birds need to have a variety of perching surfaces to keep their feet healthy and prevent problems such as calluses and "bumble foot". We recommend at least 3 perches of varying diameters and materials. For example, try using one manzanita branch, one rope perch, and one cement or orthopedic perch. Make sure the perches are appropriately sized for your bird so his grip is secure and he won't fall or lose his balance. Food and water dishes that can be easily cleaned are also important. Consider training your bird to drink from a water bottle. This prevents the bird from putting food or going to the bathroom in his water dish. A separate water dish or plant mister (spray bottle) can be provided for bathing.

Enriching your bird's environment with toys and other special objects is crucial to keep her entertained and comfortable. The species of bird you have, as well as your birds' individual personality and preferences, will help you determine the appropriate toys and furnishings. Some birds enjoy snuggling against soft plush toys, or hiding in plush "huts" or plastic slinkies suspended from the cage. A variety of toys should be on hand at all times. Larger birds will, and should, quickly destroy and dismantle toys – this can get expensive, so budget for replacing toys regularly! For most birds, we recommend placing at least three different toys in the cage, with several others on hand to rotate into the cage on a regular basis. (Shy birds will be distressed by frequent change, you must know about the species and your individual bird!) Provide a variety of materials and textures, puzzle toys and edible toys, and make sure all the materials are safe for your bird. Hanging toys and toys that can be held in the feet should be included. Supplying your bird with toys he is allowed to destroy will help prevent damage to your home and belongings that should stay out of beaks' reach. Mirrors are generally not recommended.

Environmental enrichment, of course, extends beyond the limits of your birds' cage. Establish safe areas outside the cage where your bird is allowed to be out, interacting with you and your family in a supervised setting. Play gyms and t-perches are commonly used. These provide areas for playing and climbing, and toys can be placed on the gym. Interaction with your bird is the most rewarding and beneficial means of providing stimulation. Use your imagination and create games and toys for you and your bird! When you can't be at home and your bird must stay in his cage, you can still be providing fun activities for him. Leave on the television or a radio, or play a tape recording of your own voice. Pre-recorded tapes are also available and can be used to begin teaching your bird to talk, and some birds enjoy listening to tapes of bird song and other natural sounds.

If your bird will be spending a lot of time outside the cage, it is a good idea to have her wings and toenails trimmed. Trimming the wings will prevent her from escaping through an open door or window and keep her safe from common hazards such as ceiling fans and sliding glass doors. Overgrown toenails can get caught in toys, towels or carpet. If you plan on taking your bird outside without his cage, we recommend training him to wear a small harness with a leash. Even with trimmed wings, most birds still have some flight capability and should not be outside without some restraint. Having a definite means of identifying your bird if he should get lost is crucial. If your bird has a leg band, memorize the number or keep it in your records. If she does not have a band, or you wish to have the band removed, a microchip or tattoo is recommended.

Clearly, keeping a companion bird is a challenge and there are many things to consider to ensure his health, safety and happiness. Before purchasing a bird, be prepared! Know something about the species of bird you are interested so you can meet his/her specific needs. If you have questions or problems with your bird, contact a veterinarian experienced with birds or an avian behaviorist. You and your bird will be together a long time, and like every relationship, staying happy will take a little work!