

Housing for Birds

When considering a housing arrangement for birds it is important to keep in mind how exotic birds would live in the wild. Parrots are especially social birds who typically travel in large flocks and fly miles a day. Clearly, any captive environment will be unable to compare with their natural environment. Despite the inherent short-comings of captive environments, it is still important to adhere to some minimum housing standards to provide a safe and comfortable space for the birds while in the shelter.

CAGE SIZING

The following cage sizing recommendations are based on the assumption that the accommodations will be short-term or temporary while the bird is awaiting permanent placement.

At minimum cages should be large enough for all birds to:

- spread and flap their wings in all directions
- jump from one perch to another
- climb the bars of the cage
- play with toys

Species-specific considerations

Small Birds (Parrotlets, Finches, Lovebirds, Parakeets, Canaries)

- Bar spacing should not exceed ½ inch (so birds do not poke their heads through)
- Cages housing small birds should measure at least one square foot.

Medium-sized Birds (Cockatiels, Small Conures, Quakers)

- Bar spacing should not exceed ¾ inch.
- Cages housing medium birds should measure at least one and a half square feet

Large Birds (Macaws, Cockatoos, Amazons, Greys)

- Bar spacing can be from ¾ inch to 1½ inch.
- The largest birds (Macaws and Cockatoos) do well in cages with 6mm bars spaced further apart.
- Large birds need roomy cages/aviaries in which their tails do not poke through the bars.
- Cages for singly-housed larger birds should be at least one and a half times the birds' natural wing span in all directions

Ideally all birds should have cages/aviaries large enough to accommodate flight and/or be provided with ample out of cage time in a bird-safe room for exercise.



CAGE MATERIALS & CONSTRUCTION

Cages should be sturdy, with bars that do not bend. They should have secure locks. Many large birds such as Cockatoos can open most locks, so padlocks are often recommended. Cages that use power-coated paint are ideal, as are stainless steel cages. Cages should be square or rectangular, not circular or cylindrical. Cages that allow outside-access to food and water dishes help keep staff from having to reach inside the cage to replenish water and food. However, they should be equipped with openings that can be securely locked.

Cages should not be made of or have traces of:

- Iron (which will rust)
- Wood (because birds will simply chew through it and it cannot be sanitized)
- Lead (due to heavy metal poisoning)
- Zinc (due to heavy metal poisoning)



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CAGE FURNISHINGS

A variety of perch sizes of varying thickness and material and of sufficient quantity, placement, and strength should be provided to allow all birds within the enclosure to simultaneously perch in a normal position without difficulty due to crowding or social aggression.

There should be enough food and water dishes to provide all birds housed in the cage with free access. Water and food bowls should be appropriately placed to limit contamination from droppings.

All cages should contain toys appropriate for the size of the bird(s) in the cage. Only use toys specifically made for birds. Materials such as plastic, acrylic, non-toxic metals, or wood can be sterilized and reused. Toys that are made from or contain parts such as cotton rope, sisal, vegetable tanned leather, or paper are safe but should be replaced before a new bird occupies the cage. Shredded or used toys can be given along with the bird to the adopter. The length of rope or string used in hanging toys should be short enough to avoid the possibility of a bird becoming entangled.

SOCIAL HOUSING AND CAGE PLACEMENT

If possible, birds should be housed near or with others of the same species, taking care not to overcrowd cages. All birds within a single enclosure should be able to simultaneously spread both wings and turn around without obstruction from objects or other birds. There should be at least 4 inches of perch space per small bird (finches, canaries, parakeets), 12 inches per medium bird (cockatiels, conures, lorikeets) and 24 inches for large birds (Amazons, greys, macaws, cockatoos).

Birds housed together should be monitored for aggression against other cage-mates (some birds can maim/kill each other if not monitored properly). If birds cannot be housed together they can benefit from the ability to see and hear other birds even of different species. The prevent injury; there should be sufficient distance between cages to prevent tails, beaks, and toes from entering another cage.

Remember that birds are prey animals and, as such, extra care should be taken to make them feel secure. For example, house birds away from the sight and sounds of predatory animals and avoid placing cages in the center of the room, on the floor, or in high-traffic or noisy areas. Ideally, place cages in an area that provides birds with a view of their surroundings and also allows them a section of the cage where they can retreat for privacy i.e. against a wall or in a corner of the room. For extremely timid birds, partially cover one side of the cage with a towel or a blanket to create a retreat area.

Cages shouldn't be placed on the floor, near cleaning supplies, or in front of air vents or other drafty locations.



Alexandrian Parakeets
Bonded pairs should stay together.

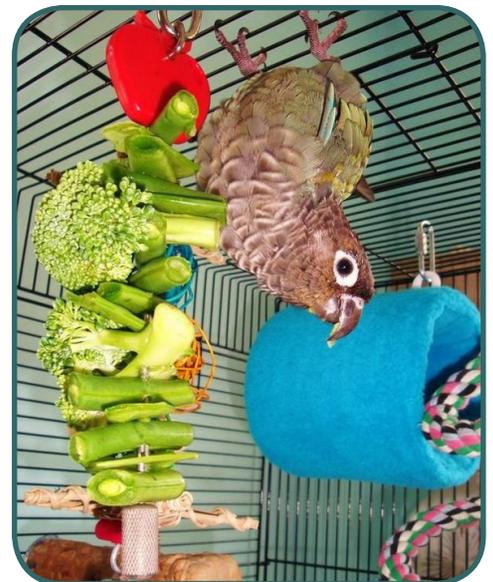
Foraging & play activities make for happier birds!



Sun Conure and Lovebird
Birds often pick their own companion.



Parakeets
Placing foods like leafy greens among bird toys encourages foraging.



Green Cheek Conure
A kebab made from fruit and veggies provides healthful nutrition and play!

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CLEANLINESS & SANITATION

Keeping a bird's environment clean is essential to her health. Because birds have very sensitive respiratory systems, mold, fungus, bacteria, etc., can be extremely detrimental. Respiratory infections can be costly to treat, and deadly to the birds. Birds are quite messy and cages often contain bits of food, seed hulls, droppings, and feather dust, all of which need to be removed on a daily basis. Below are some recommendations for proper cleaning and sanitation protocols.

Minimum Requirements

Once a Day:

- Clean and disinfect food and water dishes
- Change cage papers
- Spot clean cage gates and bars, and dirty perches and toys
- Change dry food

Twice daily, change water (and re-clean water holder, if needed).

Once weekly, birds should be given a spray bath.

Once monthly, clean and disinfect cage and contents.

Because captive birds are confined to relatively small living spaces, droppings often accumulate on cage parts and perches, and tend to contaminate food and water cups, resulting in bacterial proliferation and mold growth.

All cages, perches, food and water bowls, and other cage furnishings should be sterilized between occupants.

Cleaning and Disinfecting Supplies

Recommended: Bird-safe products such as Oxyfresh for cleaning and Avitech/Dent-A-Gen for disinfecting. These products may be sprayed on cages and cage parts while birds are still in the cages. These products can also be used to clean walls and floors. These products are available at major pet-supply stores, or through specialty catalogs, and on-line through bird supply websites.

It is important to remember that any surface that a bird can reach, and will likely put her beak on, should be cleaned only with bird-safe products or thoroughly rinsed to remove any toxic chemicals. Also cleaning products, including bleach, and air fresheners with fumes can be toxic to birds and should not be used in proximity to them.

Alternatives:

- Soap and water may be used to clean food and water dishes as well as cages, grates, perches and toys as long as each item is thoroughly rinsed as some soap may contain ingredients that are toxic to birds.
- Diluted chlorine bleach, one tablespoon per gallon, can be used to disinfect food and water dishes as long as the dishes are thoroughly washed afterwards to ensure that no bleach residue remains.

Food and Water Dishes

Recommended: Stainless steel cups. These are the easiest to clean and disinfect and resist scratches where bacteria can hide and thrive. This is particularly important for fresh food and water cups.

Alternatives: Ceramic and plastic dishes can be used for dry food.

Not Recommended: Water bottles. Although they prevent droppings from getting into the water, they are not recommended for shelter situations because they are difficult to clean quickly and disinfect thoroughly, and mold and bacteria can develop around the cap and seal. Water bottles are fine for home use.

Cage-bottom Covers (substrate)

Recommended: Newspaper (do not use glossy inserts as these pages could be toxic to birds if eaten), plain paper, or wax paper.

Not Recommended: Sawdust, woodchips, corncob, or shavings. Droppings and food permeate these materials and can lead to rapid bacterial and mold growth. This is especially important if you have cages without grates where birds will be on the bottom of the cages foraging.

Rules for Staff and Volunteers

1. Before and after handling birds, hands and face should be thoroughly washed (recommended to spray with Avitech/Dent-A-Gen).
2. Shower and change clothes before handling their own birds