



Zoo, Avian, Aquatic and Unusual Pets
Veterinary Consultancy

Dr Lance Jepson
MA VetMB CBiol MRSB MRCVS

Dr Tom Bailey
BSc BVSc MRCVS MSc PhD Dip ECZM
RCVS Specialist in Zoo and Wildlife Medicine



Caring for your parrot



Parrots have become popular pets due to their ability to mimic noises and speech. They are highly intelligent and sociable by nature meaning looking after your parrot properly will take effort and be time consuming. However all the hard work will be highly rewarding, giving you a very special companion.

Parrots can live for a number of years, depending on the species you have. On average in captivity, African greys can live between 50 – 70 years, Macaws 30 – 60 years, Cockatiels 10-20 years and Budgerigars 5-10 years. Ensure you are prepared for the length of commitment when considering your parrot species.

Here are some following tips for caring for your parrot:

Housing

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 advises as a bare minimum that a cage should be large enough to allow the bird to stretch its wings in all three dimensions. Ideally a cage should be much larger than this- as large as is feasibly and financially possible.

Aviary

- An outdoor aviary style allows for plenty of space and for parrots to live in sociable groups. This is usually made of wood and stainless steel with two layers of mesh being recommended. The floor is made up of concrete which is easily cleaned and the roof also made up of wire mesh or clear corrugated plastic. A sheltered area must be provided to protect from harsh weather and which can also provide shade in sunny weather.
- A double –door system should be used to gain access into and out of the aviary. This will hopefully prevent a bird from escaping during you exiting or entering.
- Inside plenty of braches should be provided (see branches) and a nest box or enclosed roosting area.
- Ensure the wire mesh is inspected daily for signs of damage. You do not want wild birds or rodents accessing the aviary as this could cause the spread of diseases.
- Position the aviary so that it is not in direct wind or sunlight.



Zoo, Avian, Aquatic and Unusual Pets
Veterinary Consultancy

Dr Lance Jepson
MA VetMB CBiol MRSB MRCVS

Dr Tom Bailey
BSc BVSc MRCVS MSc PhD Dip ECZM
RCVS Specialist in Zoo and Wildlife Medicine

Indoor cages

- Preferably cages should be made out of stainless steel. This is non-toxic and easy to keep clean.
- Should be large enough as stated above but your bird should also be allowed daily access outside the cage.
- Have a tray at the bottom that is easy to pull out so that droppings can be cleaned easily. Use of newspaper or kitchen towel on the bottom of the cage is usually recommended.
- Ensure the door is lockable-as very clever birds may be able to open their door and escape!
- Ensure you have a blanket to cover the cage at night time. This should cover two-three sides of the cage to darken the area. Covering the whole cage can reduce ventilation, please be cautious of this.
- Do not position the cage next to a window in direct sunlight or a warm area of the house where they will over heat.
- Do not position the cage in or near the kitchen where cooking fumes can be toxic.
- Do not place in your bedroom because you may be exposed to bird dander and faecal matter which could carry zoonotic diseases.
- The best room is normally the living room or a room of their own.
- To minimise fear of predator attack place the cage in the corner of a room for greater security

Perches

- Perches should vary in diameter in order to prevent pressure sores from forming and to allow the birds feet some exercise.
- The best in shop perches are usually made from hardwoods such as beech, mahogany and witch hazel.
- Natural tree branches can be used but they must be thoroughly disinfected as they could be contaminated by wild birds and spread disease.
- Safe branches include apple, pear, magnolia, and ash. To disinfect the branches wash them in dilute bleach or avian safe disinfectant and allow to dry completely before use. Please avoid using tree branches unless you can properly identify them as some may be poisonous.
- Avoid concrete perches as some birds may be tempted to gnaw at them causing stomach upset or mineral over-supplementation which leads to kidney disease.
- Do not cover perches with sand paper. People have done this believing it will keep their nails short. However, it leads to skin abrasions and wounds on their feet which become infected.
- Position the perches so that they do not allow the bird to defecate in their food or water bowls. Also ensure that the perches are not stacked on top of each other as this allows the birds to defecate on top of each other.



Zoo, Avian, Aquatic and Unusual Pets
Veterinary Consultancy

Dr Lance Jepson
MA VetMB CBiol MRSB MRCVS

Dr Tom Bailey
BSc BVSc MRCVS MSc PhD Dip ECZM
RCVS Specialist in Zoo and Wildlife Medicine

Enrichment

In the wild parrots would spend a great deal of time searching for their food and this is one of the reasons they have developed such a large brain. To reflect their normal foraging activity and to keep them stimulated we should provide them with various forms of enrichment. This means hiding their food around the cage or placing it in toys and puzzles. Try feeding whole food stuffs such as corn-on-the-cob or wrapping food in paper. See toys for some more enrichment ideas.

Toys

Parrots are highly intelligent and hugely benefit from the mental stimulation toys can give them. They should be swapped every few days and try to move them around daily to maximise their mental stimulation.

Safe toys:

- Use certified zinc free metal toys.
- Polished, stainless steel mirrors (Do not use human mirrors).
- Whole vegetables such as apples, pears, broccoli or carrots placed in various places around the cage.
- Pine cones, clean hardwood branches such as beech or mahogany. Fruit tree branches such as apple or pear. Cockatoos and Macaws enjoy stripping the bark off them. (Please disinfect any branches before giving, as mentioned under perches).
- Rye grass grown in a small dish may interest smaller parrots.
- Place favourite food items in hollowed out wood so that they have to 'work' for their dinner.
- Thick rope and closed chains may be used to suspend toys but do not leave them with them unattended as they can easily become entangled in them.

Unsafe toys:

- Human mirrors. They can have various types of lead oxide in their backing so present a lead toxicity risk.
- Open chain links. A bird's foot can easily become entangled in them.
- Bells with clappers inside. Some birds may destroy these and end up swallowing the clapper inside. Some clappers are made of a lead alloy, again presenting as a lead toxicity risk.
- Plastic children's toys. The plastics are often too soft and easily broken up and swallowed by the bird.
- Avoid placing plants in with your bird as many house plants are toxic.

Training



Zoo, Avian, Aquatic and Unusual Pets
Veterinary Consultancy

Dr Lance Jepson
MA VetMB CBiol MRSB MRCVS

Dr Tom Bailey
BSc BVSc MRCVS MSc PhD Dip ECZM
RCVS Specialist in Zoo and Wildlife Medicine

Training your parrot to complete various tasks will keep your parrot mentally stimulated and also prove useful in everyday life. You can train them to step up onto your hand to allow you to examine them and check for any early signs of illness. Train them to open their beaks, open their wings and lift each leg. This can also help with veterinary examinations as this may mean they require less handling by the vet which is less stress for your bird.

Training should always be done via use of positive reinforcement. Ignore any bad behaviour as any attention during an unwanted behaviour is still seen as attention by your bird. Please do not shout, hit or spray your bird with water to discourage bad behaviours. This only frightens your bird and will only stop a bad behaviour temporarily. Positive reinforcement is where they are rewarded each time they carry out a correct behaviour, if this is done continuously they will soon only know the correct way to do a task and incorrect behaviour will very rarely occur. A good tool to help with positive training is the use of a clicker.

Clicker training will allow your bird to understand when it has done something correct and that they will then receive a reward. They will associate the 'click' with something positive. For example if you ask them to step up and they do this first time with ease, immediately press the clicker and give them a reward such as their favourite treat. Continuously repeat this exercise, only clicking after they have done what you have asked and then giving a treat. Once they can do this task easily add in another task and so on.

You can also try target training with your parrot. This is where you have a 'target' or ball on the end of a stick. They must touch this before they get a reward. This may be useful for getting your bird to walk onto a weighing scale –we recommend weighing your bird weekly to check for any early signs of illness. Once your bird steps onto the scales and touches their target reward them.

Try to give your bird tasks daily to keep them mentally stimulated and to also ensure they are getting to spend time with you which is just as important.

Ultra Violet Light

Access to ultraviolet (UV) light, specifically UVB is essential for vitamin D synthesis and normal circadian rhythm, which helps to reduce stress and mental health problems. UVB light has now been proven to be particularly important for African grey parrots, especially as they grow. Without it they are unable to properly absorb calcium from their diet and this puts them at risk of developing health problems including seizures.

Specific UVB bulbs are now available for indoor kept birds and have known health benefits.



Zoo, Avian, Aquatic and Unusual Pets
Veterinary Consultancy

Dr Lance Jepson
MA VetMB CBiol MRSB MRCVS

Dr Tom Bailey
BSc BVSc MRCVS MSc PhD Dip ECZM
RCVS Specialist in Zoo and Wildlife Medicine

If you allow your bird access to natural sunlight through the use of an aviary during the day, remember that during winter they will need access to an indoor UVB light as well. In the UK the UVB is generally not strong enough during winter months or it is too cold for them to go outside.

Here is a useful link for further information on and the use of UVB lights for birds:

<http://www.arcadiabird.com/uv-lighting/>

Most parrots require 12-14 hours of sleep. Ensure to cover their cage at night time so that they learn when bedtime is. You can even use a specific 'bedtime' cage kept in a quieter room of the house. When they are taken to this they will learn it is time to 'go to sleep'.

Diet

Please see our additional diet sheet for further information. We recommend Harrisons diets as they are specially formulated for birds ensuring they contain the correct minerals and nutrients your bird needs in each pellet.

Take a look at their website for further information: www.harrisonsbirdfood.com

Companionship

Parrots are highly sociable and most would benefit from having a companion or living in a flock. This can help reduce some stress and behavioural problems related to only having human companionship.

Toxicities

- House plants such as spider or cheese plants.
- Caffeine, Chocolate, Avocado and Dairy products
- Fumes from Teflon pans can be lethal within minutes and are undetectable to our sense of smell. Avoid using Teflon coated pans and do not place your parrot in or near the kitchen for this reason.
- Fumes from frying fats can also cause lung odema and death. Again avoid placing your parrot in or near the kitchen.
- Candle fumes.
- Any sprays can also be toxic. Avoid using any sprays around your bird.

Wing clipping

Flying is an important natural behaviour for birds. It allows them to exercise which maintains a healthy cardiovascular system, relieve stress and has many other health benefits.



Zoo, Avian, Aquatic and Unusual Pets
Veterinary Consultancy

Dr Lance Jepson
MA VetMB CBiol MRSB MRCVS

Dr Tom Bailey
BSc BVSc MRCVS MSc PhD Dip ECZM
RCVS Specialist in Zoo and Wildlife Medicine

We do not generally advise wing clipping unless under very specific circumstances and our vets will be more than happy to discuss this with you.

Parrots may not realise they have lost their flight ability and when they try to fly they can fall and seriously injure themselves. Wing clipping may cause unnecessary stress.

Vet Visits

- A trip to the vets can be very stressful for your bird. Try to minimise that stress as much as possible. Follow these tips:
- Ensure they are used to be handled regularly. Train them to step up to your hand and be used to having all areas of their body checked over.
- Regularly touch their head and beak. It is useful to have them open their mouth for you. Feel down their body for any abnormalities or look for feather changes. Have them expand their wings for examination and get their legs and feet used to being touched- this is especially useful for nail clipping.
- Feel the muscle around their keel bone. Is the keel bone difficult to feel or is it quite prominent? This can tell us if the bird is over or under weight.
- Get your bird used to being weighed. Get them their own small weighing scales and train them to walk onto it weekly. This way you can monitor for any abnormalities and they may freely walk onto the scales when at the vets (which is very helpful).
- Have their carrier nearby. Visually at first, then when they are happy with it in their environment get them to walk in and out of it freely. Use their favourite food or toys to reward this behaviour. This way they should hopefully not associate the carrier with only a negative event.
- Get them used to seeing towels. Most birds are so intelligent that as soon as they see the towel at the vets they know it means they are going to be picked up and just the sight of it can stress them so getting them used to seeing one will help. Place the towel visually near the parrot's cage, use the towel to cover the cage and even place the towel inside the cage.
- Get your parrot used to syringes. Most medications we prescribe are oral and given into the mouth by syringe. Having something stuck into their mouth can be scary and if they are already ill can make trying to get them better very difficult for you. We recommended getting a syringe and placing this either in their mouth empty or with a bit of water and follow it up with a favourite treat. Then when it comes to actually medicating them they won't be frightened.
- Nail clipping. As mentioned above get them used to their feet being touched but also get them used to the noise before starting to clip the nails. The 'snap' from a clipper can make them jump.

Microchipping



Zoo, Avian, Aquatic and Unusual Pets
Veterinary Consultancy

Dr Lance Jepson
MA VetMB CBiol MRSB MRCVS

Dr Tom Bailey
BSc BVSc MRCVS MSc PhD Dip ECZM
RCVS Specialist in Zoo and Wildlife Medicine

Occasionally we have reports of parrots that have escaped and gone missing. Having a microchip means they can be successfully returned to you should they be found.

At Origin Vets, we use the smallest microchips available at just 8mm long - smaller size of a grain of rice - this is to ensure that there is minimal discomfort for your parrot when the microchip is inserted into the left pectoral muscle. This procedure is normally done using a minor anaesthetic. This is to ensure that your parrot stays still so that the chip can be inserted properly. We will register the microchip for you with all your details, but you must ensure that your details are kept up to date. If you need to change your details such as phone number or address then please contact the microchip company who can do this for you. We can provide you with details of how to do this.

Insurance

Unfortunately we can never predict what may happen to our birds so we highly recommend getting pet insurance. A monthly fee can give you peace of mind knowing your pet is covered for the best treatment should anything happen. There are many insurance companies available, so we advise contacting each of them to find a policy that is right for you. We advise a policy that will cover your bird for its whole lifetime, for chronic illnesses and for the maximum amount that is available. If this is not possible then covering your bird for as much as you can afford will give you peace of mind should an accident or emergency occur.

