

General Husbandry of Caged Birds



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Housing Considerations

Pet birds may sit on perches or on their cages while their owners are home to supervise them. They should be confined to cages while their owners are away, however, to avoid accidental injuries and other misfortunes. Unsupervised birds often get into trouble. Not only can they be terribly destructive to a home and its furnishings, but all homes contain objects that can be harmful.

Birds resting on open perches are usually content to remain there, and usually take flight only when frightened by a sudden movement or loud noise. Unfortunately, these “impromptu” flights are taken without a flight plan. The birds usually wind up crashing into walls, doors, windows or mirrors because of their confusion and poor depth perception.

Caged birds allowed unrestricted freedom in the home may eat house plants or bite electrical cords. They may chew on carpeting or other fabrics and swallow these materials, resulting in crop and intestinal impactions. Free-flying birds are also vulnerable to injuries from ceiling fans, hot stoves and toilet bowls. They may be attacked by pet dogs, cats and ferrets sharing the same household. It is wise not to underestimate the aggressiveness of our four-legged friends, and to restrict contact between them and pet birds as much as possible.

A major type of poisoning of pet birds is heavy metal toxicity, with lead being the most common. Lead is found in curtain/drapery weights and pulls, leaded and stained glass, and costume jewelry, to name some common sources. Most caged birds seem to love to chew on this soft metal. Poisoning results from eating even a small amount of lead. Lead poisoning can be successfully treated if diagnosed early enough.

Birds allowed unrestricted flight may escape through open doors and windows. Most bird owners have the mistaken notion that their bird would never fly away and leave them. Unfortunately, birds that escape become easily disoriented outdoors. This confusion makes it unlikely they will be captured or returned.

The location of the cage and/or perch in the home is important. Some birds thrive in areas of heavy traffic, where they receive lots of attention and are part of what is going on. Others seem to prefer more privacy and solitude.

A pet bird should never be kept in the kitchen. In addition to the obvious gas fumes, occasional smoke, and uncovered pots and pans, there is another, more dangerous threat. Super-heated Teflon and other non-stick pan coatings emit fumes that are deadly to all birds. This “accident” usually happens when someone inadvertently leaves a non-stick coated pan on a heated stove burner. The pan becomes hot, the coating overheats and it emits toxic fumes. Birds that inhale these fumes die quickly.

There is something else to consider when allowing birds unrestricted freedom within the home. Free-flying birds tend to assume a more dominant position in their relationship with people, and often become intolerably aggressive.

Wing Trimming

To be safe, all caged birds should have their wing feathers trimmed. The decision to deny a bird unrestricted flight (as in the wild) is subconsciously made by each bird owner at the time the bird is made a captive pet in the home. Wing trimming merely makes this confinement safer for the bird.

Flight feathers of both wings should be trimmed. If the bird takes flight for any reason, its descent to the floor is balanced and relatively controlled. Trimming the feathers on only one wing results in an unbalanced descent to the floor, often injuring the bird. Also, many birds can fly as soon as one to two flight feathers have grown out on the trimmed side.

Some owners prefer not to trim the wings of their smaller birds because their flying brings the owners great enjoyment. These birds have a smaller turning radius in flight than the larger ones, so they can usually safely fly about most homes. Another advantage of not trimming the wings of these small birds is that it allows them to escape when in danger or threatened by other pets in the home. However, it is generally best to keep your pet bird’s wings trimmed and to supervise them around other pets.

Trimming the wings is like trimming your fingernails. If done properly, the bird will experience no bleeding or discomfort, and will change his appearance very little. Trimming makes taming the bird easier and usually shortens the time for taming. Have an experienced veterinarian or technician do this and/or teach you how to properly do it.

Beak and Claw (Nail) Clipping

Caged birds live in a very “geometric” world, in contrast to their wild counterparts. Most surfaces that they perch on (perches, cage bars, etc.) are smooth and regular. Consequently, the claws and beaks of pet birds tend to overgrow, and the surfaces of their beaks also tend to become rough and irregular.

In the wild bird’s natural environment, this never arises because they are very active and wear down their claws on tree bark, rocks and other abrasive surfaces. Most caged birds need their claws trimmed periodically, in spite of gimmicks often used to keep them shortened. Sandpaper

perch covers, for example, do not prevent nail overgrowth but they do cause irritation and excessive wear of the soles of the feet. They also turn on the perch, making the bird feel insecure. These covers should not be used.

An emery board, nail clippers, or small nail trimming scissors can be used to shorten the claws of smaller caged birds. A rapidly rotating grinding stone is used to trim the claws of larger birds, and to shorten, shape and smooth the beak. You should not try to trim the beak of your bird. If you do try to trim the claws, you must have something on hand with which to stop any bleeding. A recommended styptic powder is Kwik-Stop, available at pet stores and most veterinarians. Corn starch or flour can also be applied to help with blood clotting if a styptic is not available.

If bleeding occurs while trimming the claws, do not panic. First, carefully restrain the bird. Next, squeeze the toe just above the claw (tourniquet effect). Then apply the styptic powder to the bleeding claw. Alternate the last two steps until the bleeding has stopped. Always seek veterinary help when your bird is bleeding or has bled. Bleeding always represents an emergency situation. The steps outlined above are first-aid procedures only and are not a substitute for veterinary assistance.

Leg Band or Quarantine Ring Removal

Leg bands and quarantine rings are often applied to the legs of caged birds for regulatory purposes or to help breeders to identify individual birds. Once the bird is sold, the band or ring is unnecessary and should be removed. Most limb injuries in caged birds involve bands, such as broken or sprained legs. Band removal should not be attempted by the owner. Only an experienced veterinarian or technician should perform this procedure.

Drafts

Contrary to popular opinion, drafts are not harmful to healthy pet birds. A draft is really nothing more than a slight movement of air accompanied by a mild temperature drop. A bird's feathers provide insulation against the temperature changes of what a draft usually represents. Of course, you should not place your bird's cage near an open window when you are not there to monitor more severe weather changes. Bird cages should also not be placed directly beside, in front of, or beneath air conditioning, heating and ventilation outflows.

Sick birds should always be removed from drafty circumstances to prevent heat loss.

Bathing

Many exotic pet birds originally lived in tropical climates where it rains daily or frequently. Birds typically take advantage of this by "showering" during a rainstorm or bathing in puddles formed by the rainwater. This keeps their feathers healthy, and maintains a brilliant sheen to the plumage.

Caged birds should also be allowed to bathe daily, or as often as is convenient. Some prefer to bathe in a small container, while others enjoy being sprayed with water. Regular tap water

should be used. Commercial solutions available for bathing offer no particular advantage and may, in fact, be harmful. Many owners enjoy taking their birds into the shower with them.

It is important to allow the bird to air dry in a warm room or in the warm sunshine. Hair dryers may be used, but they must be held at least 10 inches away from the bird to prevent burns. It is best to let the bird bathe in the morning so it is totally dry before going to sleep at night.

Covering the Cage at Night

Because of the insulating capacity of feathers, it may not be necessary to cover a bird's cage at night for protection from drafts, unless you live in colder climates. But there are other benefits to covering cages at night. It provides a regular period of privacy not usually allowed during the day. Also, it tends to keep the bird quiet in the early morning when it would otherwise become active and vocal. If you currently cover your bird's cage at night, continue to do so. If you have not done so in the past, you may try it. If your bird acts agitated, do not continue to cover it.

Hygiene

Good hygiene is an important part of bird husbandry because most birds are confined to a relatively small living space. Droppings often accumulate on cage parts and perches, and tend to contaminate food and water cups. This results in bacterial and mold growth.

Perches should be kept scrupulously clean at all times. Cage bottom coverings should be changed daily. Cages should be given a thorough cleaning at least once a month. Sanitizing products work best if the cages and perches are first given a thorough soap and water scrubbing to remove all of the major contamination. Diluted chlorine bleach can be used if thoroughly rinsed off afterwards.

Food and water containers should be thoroughly cleaned once or twice daily before they are refilled. The corners of these containers are the most common areas for bacterial buildup, so concentrate on those trouble spots while cleaning. If possible, use a dishwasher because its extremely hot temperatures aid disinfection. Several sets of food and water cups should be maintained and used interchangeably. Contamination of the water with droppings, uneaten food and saliva contribute to bacterial growth. Small numbers of these bacteria quickly multiply into millions of organisms in a water container, yet the water appears normal to you. These bacteria do not affect most people but can be devastating to birds if allowed to multiply.

Disease: How to Recognize It and What to Do

Most disease in caged birds is directly or indirectly related to malnutrition and stress. Malnutrition most often stems from what the bird eats, rather than how much it eats. Most are given enough food, but not enough proper food in the proper proportions. Stress results from any condition that compromises a bird's state of well-being. Examples include poor husbandry, inadequate diet, rapid temperature changes and trauma.

Owners must understand that birds tend to hide signs of illness. They can compensate for serious internal disease in such a way that they appear healthy externally. It is theorized that evolution has “taught” birds to hide signs of illness to avoid being prey.

Because of this disease-masking tendency, by the time an owner recognizes illness in a pet bird, it may have been sick for a week or two. Therefore, one cannot afford to wait and hope the bird improves. Be observant and act promptly. Learn to look for subtle signs of illness. Take special note of changes in your bird’s routine and habits. Call your veterinarian promptly if you suspect illness.

Following is a list of signs of illness easily recognizable by the concerned bird owner. Alone or in combination, they signify potential illness in your bird.

Signs of Illness

- Inability to perch (bird on cage bottom) -
- Bleeding (always an emergency)
- Open-mouthed breathing when at rest
- Balance problems
- Change in droppings
- Reduced or no appetite
- Weight loss
- Changed or no vocalization
- Fluffed up feathers
- Droopy wings
- Sneezing
- Discharge from nostrils
- Discharge from eyes
- Closing of eyes
- Swelling around the eyes
- Change in clarity or color of eyes

If you have any questions about this information or the health of your pet bird, PLEASE do not hesitate to call Ness Exotic Wellness Center for more information or to schedule an appointment.