

# Psittacine Wellness Management and Environmental Enrichment



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## KEYWORDS

• Psittacine • Wellness care • Environmental enrichment • Foraging • Pet birds

## KEY POINTS

- Client education is critical to the physical and mental well-being of the pet psittacine bird.
- Appropriate nutrition and diet conversion are keys to good physical health.
- The goals of environmental enrichment are to increase activity and promote a wide diversity of natural behaviors.
- Physical environmental enrichment helps to alleviate boredom by giving birds more activity choices.
- The welfare of the pet bird depends on the knowledge and motivation of the owner. Much is required to provide suitable mental and physical caretaking.

There are multiple challenges in keeping mentally and physically healthy psittacine birds as pets. Significant aspects of natural parrot behavior are denied to varying degrees for parrots kept as companion animals. Examples of these include flocking, social interaction with other birds, foraging on a variety of foods, and flight. Birds are social, loud, and messy. When kept in captivity, they deserve the owners' tolerance to exhibit these normal behaviors.

Many psittacine birds are long-lived and deserve continuity of quality care by familiar diligent caregivers. Their social interaction needs are demanding. Their intelligence requires intellectual stimulation. Inadequate care is an extremely important welfare issue and can have detrimental mental and health consequences. Pet birds should be provided with social companionship. Owners are often the only social interaction for a pet bird and must serve the functions of the flock. Examples include answering contact calls, playing,

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preening, and talking with the bird. Opportunities should be provided to involve the bird in family activities.

Welfare may be improved by appropriate environmental enrichment and changes in the social environment; however, such changes require that caretakers have sufficient motivation, knowledge, and resources to provide these essential necessities. When these requirements are not met, the bird experiences mental and physical suffering.

Veterinarians who treat birds have an obligation to be the pet's advocate. Bird-owning clients must be educated about crucial physical and mental needs of their special companions. Although exceptions exist and requirements vary among species, keeping birds as pets has resulted in serious welfare issues for these challenging pets. Birds may be unsuitable as human companions.<sup>1</sup>

All pets deserve the following 5 freedoms<sup>2</sup>:

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst (access to a healthy diet and clean water)
2. Freedom from discomfort (appropriate environment, including shelter and comfortable resting area)
3. Freedom from pain, injury, and disease (prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment)
4. Freedom to express normal behavior (sufficient space, suitable environment, and social interaction)
5. Freedom from fear and distress (conditions and treatment that avoid mental suffering) (Box 1).

## HUSBANDRY

### Nutrition

There is a plethora of information on diets for pet birds, and knowledge of the best nutrition continues to develop. Birds need a proper balance of carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins, minerals, and water. Detailed nutritional information is beyond the scope of this article. For further information on psittacine nutrition, consult "Clinical Avian Nutrition" by S. Orosz<sup>3</sup> and other resources.

Nutrition and enrichment are frequently neglected essentials of most pet bird owners. Often owners mistakenly believe they are providing suitable nutrition. Inadequate nutrition is a common source of health problems. It is not sufficient to feed birds what they need just to keep them alive; instead, they must be provided such that they flourish. Their health will be contingent on nutrition and enrichment.

#### Box 1

##### Tips for keeping pet birds happy

- Choose an appropriate species based on noise level, space requirements, and intelligence.
- When possible, choose a parent-weaned bird rather than a hand-weaned or unweaned bird.
- Follow a daily routine, providing meals, attention, and activities in a predictable order.
- Provide foraging opportunities.
- Use positive reinforcement for training.
- Provide a quiet area for a minimum of 10 to 12 hours of uninterrupted sleep each night.
- Provide daily opportunities for exercise (eg, flapping, running, swinging, flight).
- Regularly rotate or offer a variety of nontoxic, bird-safe toys.

*Adapted from Seibert LM. Husbandry considerations for better behavioral health in psittacine species. Compendium 2007;1–4.*

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