

Adding A Pet Bird To The Flock

Follow these tips when introducing new pet birds in your home.

By Chris Davis

Quarantine a new bird to protect existing birds in the flock from harmful diseases, like PBF. D.
Courtesy Christine Gonzalez, NV

Q: One of the downsides of loving birds is that there are so many wonderful ones out there, and we just can't keep them all. On the other hand, birds are smaller than many other companion animals and it is easier to keep two or three of them — unlike keeping two or three great Danes, for example. That does not make the adoption of multiple birds as simple as it may seem, initially.

I am currently owned by a 4-year-old yellow-sided conure, Baby, and a 3-year-old lutino cockatiel, Maggie. Both birds are shy. They do not interact with each other when out of their cages but are more interested in people.

We are about to adopt a white-bellied caique. When we do, we will buy a playgym for the birds. Is there a way to introduce the three birds so that they can be on the playgym together — supervised, of course. I don't need them to play together, but I want them to be able to coexist.

A: Whenever a new bird is adopted into a home where there are existing birds, it alters the dynamics of the entire flock. Although, most frequently, a new bird will be a welcomed and wonderful addition, sometimes the new addition can be a problem to the existing avian family. We can ease the transition for all involved and increase our chances of success with careful planning.

Birds are intelligent beings, full of emotions and feelings. They have their own ideas of how things should be, and that does not always include having another bird around. Many prefer being with humans and do not always assimilate well into a flock situation. Most, however, do enjoy the presence of other birds and can learn to share a space with them. This is done most easily when they are young. If your caique is a baby, it will be more inclined to accept your birds, especially if it was hand-fed around other birds. This does not, however, mean that Baby and Maggie will be crazy about him.

Ease Into The Transition

Pet birds accustomed to being in the middle of all activity need to have some warning of the changes that are about to occur. When expecting a new bird, prepare Baby and Maggie by placing the caique's cage in the spot you plan to keep it. Explain to them that another companion will be coming. Although they may not comprehend all of your words, they will understand that you are trying to explain a concept to them.

New birds should always be quarantined. Ideally, the period should be for about six months, although some people quarantine a new bird for about a month after a clean health check from an avian veterinarian. During that time, you can take your birds to the doorway of the room where the new bird is being quarantined, and cuddle and kiss your little buddies while allowing them to peek in at the caique. This will visually prepare them for the new family member.

Will Everyone Share?

As far as sharing the same playgym, this may not be possible; however, you can give it a try, especially if the caique is very young. Because you have three birds of various sizes, the concern should always be for the safety of the smaller bird, especially your cockatiel. [Cockatiels, because of their meek nature, should not be forced to play with a conure or caique — or any more-aggressive, larger bird — Eds.] Even if there is no intended malice, the sheer size difference alone can create problems. Birds have been blinded, had toes amputated and worse, when in the company of larger birds.

Baby and Maggie may not enjoy being on a playgym with each other — much less a new guy! I would see if your existing birds like being together on the gym first. They may simply coexist, ignoring each other, or they may begin to be friends — or they might be aggressive toward one another. If things are going smoothly, pick up the caique, and hold him while holding one of the other birds. See how they react. Monitor their behavior, and if you see anyone being aggressive toward the others, remove him to his cage.

My personal preference would be for you to purchase a gym to be used by each bird at separate times. Allow whoever is not on the gym to play on a smaller T-stand or hanging perch, rotating everyone during the time they are out. By rotating the birds, you stop any chance of someone being injured by another bird; also, they will not be territorial about the perches or gym, because those objects are clearly yours and by keeping them yours, you maintain the ability to stop the birds from misbehaving without confusing them.

Correcting a pet bird's behavior while it is on, or in, its exclusive territory can be a problem, but because you did not have a gym prior to the arrival of the new bird, there should be little territorial behavior on the part of your existing birds, and it should be relatively easy to see if they will get along. Eventually, they may all be able to play together with no problems, but do not force the issue.

Congratulations on your addition!