

## Bring Pet Birds Outside

### Set time aside during the day to bring your bird outside

*By Rebecca Sweat*

Be creative and find times of the day to bring your birds outside with you. Courtesy Daniella Slanina, California

In much of the country where there's humidity and insects to deal with, the best time to bring your bird outside is anywhere from mid- to late-morning to 4 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon to avoid mosquitoes (which could be carrying the West Nile virus). Of course you also have to be careful of the hot, midday sun, so if you do bring your bird outside during the middle part of the day, make sure it has some shade where it can get away from the sun.

What if you live in the Northeast or Midwest where you're snowed-in much of the year? "Parrots are not as cold sensitive as most of us think. If they are healthy, they can be brought outdoors on nice winter days for short periods," said Ken Welle, DVM, an avian veterinarian who practices in Illinois. Of course, cold temperatures are something birds need to be acclimatized to; you wouldn't want to suddenly take a parrot outside for a brisk January walk in Minnesota if the bird has never been outdoors before. This is something you should help it gradually adjust to, perhaps by taking the bird outdoors for a few minutes every day in the fall when the temperatures are cool but not cold, and then gradually lengthen the time outdoors in lower temperatures.

Certainly safety is an issue, so you should not leave your bird outside in its cage unattended. "It is necessary to monitor them to make sure they don't get too hot sitting in direct sunlight if they don't have access to shade," warned Julie Burge DVM, a veterinarian and bird breeder in Missouri. "Watch to make sure the bird isn't overheated." Furthermore, if you're outside with your bird you will be there in case your bird tries to escape and to ensure that other animals do not approach the cage. "It is easy for a stray dog or cat to roam in and attack a helpless bird. The presence of a human also helps deter wild birds that may carry parasites or contagious diseases if it lands near or on your pet's cage, attracted by food," Burge said.

Of course, in our fast-paced, busy world, setting aside a couple of hours every day to go outside with your bird may not be feasible. "Sometimes you have to be a little creative in how you make time to take your bird outside," said Illinois-based bird behavior consultant Michelle Karras. I let my parrots spend time in their outdoor cages each day in the summer while I'm doing yard work or gardening. Or I'll put them in a bird harness or birdie backpack and let them come along with me when I walk my dog."

That said, there are many people who work full time an hour or more away from home and simply cannot fit time outdoors into their weekday schedule. In that case, the next best bet is to provide your bird with full-spectrum lighting. Interestingly, a bird's vision includes the ultraviolet spectrum, so they can see the UV light that is invisible to humans.

"Full-spectrum mode can be put on a timer and provide as little as four hours per day, with the remaining light being non full-spectrum," said Gregory Burkett, DVM, an avian veterinarian in Durham, North Carolina. "Or it can be offered the full 10 hours without problem. There is a lifespan on these bulbs and they are expensive; burning them only four hours per day will increase their longevity."

Full-spectrum lighting comes in a variety of types, from grow lights for indoor plants and aquarium bulbs, to OTT lighting, white light and "Vita-Lite" bulbs. All of these imitate natural sunlight, allowing birds to absorb certain nutrients and vitamins as if they were outdoors.

If you opt for a florescent light bulb, choose a bulb that is advertised as "flicker-free" or that lickers at 120 hertz (cycles/seconds) or better. "The problem with a lot of fluoresent light bulbs is that they flicker," Karras said. "Humans don't see the flickering but birds, do and it can really bother birds for a while."

You may need to experiment a bit to see exactly how much full-spectrum light is right for your birds or what type of lighting they prefer, as well as what bedtime is best or exactly how much sleep they need. "If you're observant, your birds will let you know what they need," Karras said. "If you parrot's not getting enough sleep, you're going to see some behavior problems, and the bird might not look quite up to par. But on the other hand if you're getting your parrot out in the sun every day, if it's getting the rest it needs – it's going to be a lot healthier and happier. You'll be able to see the difference.