

## Measure Out Your Bird's Food

**Incorrectly measuring out your bird's food portions can lead to obesity.**

*By Rose Gordon*

With obesity on the rise, it is no wonder our birds — which often share our table habits — are facing the same crisis. More than 60 percent of American adults are overweight or obese, and kids in every age group are getting bigger, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Although no formal statistics exist to track pet birds' weight levels over the decades, many avian veterinarians, behavioral consultants and others with long-term experience in the pet bird community, say pet birds are packing too many grams.

Photo Courtesy of Lisa Duncan, Michigan. Parrots are typically drawn to foods high in carbs and fats, so regulate your bird's portions to prevent obesity.

Of the noninfectious disease problems he sees in his avian-only Bird Clinic in Santa Ana, California, Larry Nemetz, DVM, cites obesity as No. 1. Obesity can lead to many other problems, including fatty liver disease. Because a bird's liver is designed to store fat during times of starvation, it does an excellent job of retaining all those extra calories it isn't burning off, Nemetz noted. Avian obesity can cause respiratory problems, too, because the internal fat level gobbles up space. You might also notice ulcers or sores on your bird's feet from excess weight, or dull feathering and glassy eyes from vitamin deficiencies. A veterinarian might also look for type-2 diabetes and high cholesterol just as your primary care physician does at your annual exam.

### Super-Sized Meals

If your bird is losing the battle of the bulge, your avian veterinarian might recommend putting the bird on a strictly monitored diet — which is what Nemetz proposed to the owners of an Eclectus parrot that came in 250 grams past its healthy range. But most likely you just need to get the proportions right, experts say. Feed your bird the right foods in the right proportions and you can prolong its life, and even decrease behavioral problems, they've found.

"People think in human proportions in relation to birds," said Nemetz. Instead we need to think in bird proportions, which means measuring spoons, he said. "Good foods can be bad if eaten in the wrong quantities."

Feeding small amounts of many types of food gives your bird a better chance of obtaining the wide variety of nutrients it needs to sustain optimum health without it getting full on one type of food to the detriment of another, he added. For example, one Bird Clinic client came in with a sick cockatiel, and Nemetz asked what she was feeding the bird. The owner listed off a range of things, including scrambled egg, but when Nemetz asked to see the amount, it was somewhere in the range of 2 tablespoons of egg when it should have been a 14 to 12 teaspoon maximum. "Would you eat a dozen eggs?" Nemetz asked. "I would be sick, too, if I were that cockatiel."

Those who work with avian behavior — or the behavior of the birds' human owners, as BIRD TALK columnist Liz Wilson likes to say — often look at diet first, too. In fact, diet is the first thing Dianalee Deter, an IAABC-certified parrot behavioral consultant and co-author of "The Second-Hand Parrot" and "The African Grey Handbook," does when she enters a client's home.

Deter recalled one client who called for help with an unruly cockatoo. Deter looked at the bird's cage and found three dishes of food. One with pellets, another with a well-meaning bounty of vegetables (all untouched) and, in the third, the remains of a crockful of nuts.

With all the excess fat the bird was consuming, it's no wonder it was acting aggressive, she said. In most avian homes she enters, people overfeed their pets. Some have a week's worth of food in the cage, Deter noted.

Pamela Clark, an IAABC-certified parrot behavioral consultant and author, shares a similar sentiment. "I cannot tell you the number of times parrot owners have told me that their parrot loves pasta or rice or potatoes, etc.," she said. "Parrots typically are drawn to foods high in carbs and fats. If an owner takes his cues from the parrot and begins to offer increased amounts of these categories of nutrients, simply because the bird 'loves' them, you soon have a parrot who not only has some nutritional imbalances, but who begins to show behavior problems, such as aggression, that can be traced back to a diet that is too nutrient-dense."

### Tipping The Gram Scales

Whether we choose to use it or ignore it, portion guidelines do exist for humans, even down to the right amount of each food group in the form of the U.S. Department of Agriculture-issued food pyramid. You can even go online to the USDA website and type in your age, height, weight and daily exercise level (do my seated chair twists count?) to create a pyramid tailored to your individual needs.

Although they haven't made a pyramid for birds yet, the advice is much the same — and likely just as easy to ignore. The key to knowing if you're feeding too much is measuring out your bird's food portions and regularly monitoring its weight for fluctuations, Nemetz and others noted. "Once birds hit maturity, they [should] rarely fluctuate more than 1 to 5 percent of their body weight," he said. But, just like those extra 5 pounds in humans, the extra 5 grams in birds creep up gradually, over time, Nemetz cautioned, and, although you might not notice your bird's weight increase, your vet will.

#### So How Much Exactly?

Depending on the time of year, the individual bird's energy needs and the species, the amount to feed a pet bird fluctuates. Those in the field, however, have some general guidelines to offer. For his own birds, Nemetz knows how much each bird consumes in pellets and other foods, so he measures out those amounts each day. He also regularly weighs his birds and cuts back when he notices weight gain.

Nemetz recommends the following proportions for the foods in your bird's diet: 85- percent balanced pellet; 15 percent other foods, such as vitamin-A and calcium-rich vegetables and some fruits (sweet potatoes, kale dandelion greens, carrots, cabbage, endive, mango) legumes, whole-grains, seeds, etc. In this way, according to Nemetz, your bird should meet all four of the daily avian nutrient groups, which he lists as proteins, carbohydrates, fat sources and vitamins and minerals. [Learn more here.](#)

#### Around The Clock

Most of those interviewed feed their birds twice in a 24-hour period, leaving the core diet in the cage for most of the day and occasionally adding other samples throughout the day. Convenience might fuel much of this strategy — feed once in the morning before work and once after work — but Clark suggests there's good reason to follow this method.

"Whenever we try to make decisions about how we should care for our parrots, it often helps if we look at what we know or might imagine happens in the wild," Clark said.

"We know from observation that the majority of parrot species forage during two periods each day. I offer the first meal shortly after uncovering them in the morning. I offer the second meal in the late afternoon or early evening, at least two hours prior to bedtime, to allow for plenty of foraging time." In addition to the meal, which is frequently Clark's special salad mix, her birds have pellets available at all times.

Deter, who "errs on the side of feeding extra vegetables," said that if bird owners are worried about their birds going hungry, they should string fresh greens from the top of the cage, such as broccoli bunches or even a carrot, rather than offer extra carbohydrates or fats. "These items won't throw off the balance of the diet," she said.

Clark, too, sees an overabundance of carbohydrates and fats in birds' diets, but she cautions against restricting certain foods. "I think there is a general tendency to underfeed when it comes to quantity, simply because owners don't understand a parrot's instinctive method of eating," she said. "It is normal for a parrot to pick up a piece of food, take one bite out of it and throw the rest downward. The amount we feed must allow for this innate tendency. When I feed the salad mix, I feed each parrot a heaping cup of the mix. They probably only eat 18 of this, but the entire cup is necessary, in my experience."