

Bird Food For Psittacula Parrots

Find out what parrot foods to feed the Psittacula parrots.

By Rebecca Sweat

Every couple of weeks, Connie Fettig heads down to her local supermarket in suburban Chicago and fills up her shopping cart with corn bread mixes, fresh broccoli, bell peppers, sweet potatoes, corn on the cob, romaine lettuce, bags of brown rice, dried black beans, frozen mixed vegetables, raw almonds, unsalted pistachios, canned garbanzo beans, apples, bananas, oranges, grapes, raisins, canned peaches, peanut butter, bran cereal, whole-wheat spaghetti, whole-grain crackers and cracked wheat bread.

Is she a big eater? Does she have a husband with a humongous appetite? Perhaps she has a lot of hungry children at home?

“No” to all those questions, Fettig replied, “but I do have four African ringnecks, an Alexandrine parakeet and three moustached parakeets. Probably at least half of what I put in my shopping cart is for them.”

She loves her birds and takes the responsibility of feeding them very seriously. “I load up their food crocks with a variety of healthy, fresh foods every morning,” Fettig said. “I also give them pellets, and they’ve got that in their cage at all times. But it’s the table foods like beans and rice, cooked veggies and peanut butter sandwiches that they gobble up the fastest.”

Fettig’s birds are members of the Psittacula parrot genus — a group of 14 long-tailed parakeet species noted for having either a colored ring around their neck or a dark stripe running through their chin area.

By Gina Cioli/BowTie/Courtesy Omar’s Exotic Birds

Psittacula parrots, such as this Indian ring-necked parakeet, eat a variety of seeds, fruits and flowers in the wild.

The Psittacula species most commonly kept as pets in this country are the plum-headed parakeet (*Psittacula cyanocephala*); moustached parakeet (*Psittacula alexandri*); Derbyan parakeet (*Psittacula derbiana*); Alexandrine parakeet (*Psittacula eupatria*); African ring-necked parakeet (*Psittacula krameri krameri*); and the Indian ring-necked parakeet (*Psittacula krameri manillensis*).

If you keep any of these parakeets, you might buy a lot of the same foods that Fettig does for your birds. If you do, chances are your birds are doing pretty well. Like any parrot species, Psittacula parakeets enjoy fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, legumes and nuts, and benefit greatly from the nutrition these foods provide. There are many excellent formulated diets on the market that provide good nutrition to these birds as well.

What Psittacula Parakeets Eat In The Wild

Psittacula parakeets have a wide home range, from Africa and through the Middle East to almost the entire Asian continent, from India, Sri Lanka and Nepal, to Myanmar, Thailand, China and Indonesia.

Wild Psittacula eat a variety of fruit, vegetables, nuts, seeds, grain, nectar, blossoms and even an occasional insect or worm. Exactly what they consume, however, depends on the time of year and what is available in their particular locale.

An African ring-necked parakeet in Egypt, for instance, may eat seeds, fruit, vegetables and flowers that are different than what an Indian ringneck in Singapore might eat, just because the flora in these two nations is quite different. Birds living in the same region might even eat a varied diet from one month to the next. There might be fresh fruit available during mid-summer but only dead insects, dried-out seeds and bark to eat by late autumn.

“Ringneck parakeets are opportunistic omnivores,” noted Richard Nye, DVM, a veterinarian in the Chicago area with an exotics practice. In other words, he continued, “they’re going to eat whatever types of food sources they can find in their environment, including both vegetative and animal products.” If the parakeet is picking at a bud and an ant gets in the way, the bird might eat the bud and the ant, he said.

No one knows everything a Psittacula eats in the wild, but there are certain foods that are known staples. “There are a lot of rice paddies where many of the Asian parakeets live,” observed Florida veterinarian and BIRD TALK columnist Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP, Avian Practice. Often times the birds go into the rice paddies and raid the farmers’ crops, she said. The parakeets also feed off the fruit in orchards, the wheat and maize found in farmers’ fields

and the produce growing in vegetable gardens.

Psittacula that live away from rural towns and closer to wilderness areas were observed eating wild elderberries, grass seeds, chestnuts, dandelion greens and weed and wild flower blossoms .

It's worth noting that many of the Psittacula species have a harder time finding food than others. The Alexandrine parakeet, for instance, comes from Indonesia where it is tropical and wet and there is plenty of foliage year-round. However, the African ringneck lives in the dry, arid climate of sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan and might have access to a steady supply of food only during the winter rainy season . The Derbyan parakeet comes from the high elevations of the Eastern Himalayas and Tibetan Plateau, and may only have a large selection of food during the summer. When food choices are slim, Nye said, "These birds are not picky. They will eat whatever they can just to survive."

Food Recommendations For Psittacula Parakeets

The variation in what the different Psittacula parakeets eat in the wild makes the ideal diet for these birds unknown. Also, many of the native foods that Psittaculas eat are plants that are unique to Africa and Asia and aren't available here in the United States.

For those reasons, veterinarians generally recommend pet owners feed their Psittacula a commercially-manufactured, formulated pellet as the base diet. "Pellets are as balanced and complete nutrition as we know with the state of avian nutrition today," Wissman stated. The smaller pellets — designed for conures and cockatiels — are ideal for Psittacula parakeets.

Exactly how much of a bird's diet should be pellets? This is the type of recommendation that varies from veterinarian to veterinarian. Some say 60 to 70 percent of a bird's diet (by volume) should be pellets; others up the percentage to 80 or 90 percent. In general, you should make pellets the majority portion of your bird's diet. Healthy table foods, fruits and vegetables, seeds and treats should make up the remaining portion of the diet.

Avian veterinarian Jeffrey Jenkins, DVM, of California, suggests you include some foods that will be challenging for your bird to eat. "Foraging is a natural activity for Psittacula parakeets," he said. "If you make it so they have to forage for some of their food, that's a lot better than if you just put everything in a bowl for them all the time."

Some ideas: Wrap up nuts in paper and tie them, and then offer this to your birds in a cup. Give your birds whole bunches of broccoli rather than cutting it into bite-sized pieces for them. Hang bunches of romaine lettuce from the roof of your birds' cage, so they'll have to hang upside down to eat it. Provide peas in the pod rather than shelled peas.

"Supplementing your bird's diet with foods that have an aspect of going out and searching for food and spending time doing that is very healthy for the bird psychologically, because the bowl of pellets is boring," Jenkins said.

You might also want to cook up some special foods for your birds. Ohio breeder Kelly Robinson cooks up birdie muffins for her pairs of Derbyan, Indian ring-necked, moustached and Alexandrine parakeets. She uses a commercial corn bread mix and then adds hand-feeding formula, egg shells, chopped fruit, mixed veggies, millet and small nuts. She pours the batter into cupcake pans, bakes it and then freezes it.

"When I want to feed one of these muffins to my birds, I take one out of the freezer and microwave it to thaw it," Robinson said. "It really works well, especially if you're in a hurry and don't have time to do a lot of cooking, but still want to give your birds something nutritious."

There are also some wonderful supplemental foods available on the market. Tom Wilson of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, has an African ringneck named Gizmo that goes "absolutely nuts" when he is served up a bowl of one of the cook-and-serve bird food mixes like Beak Appetit or Kitchen Creations. "Gizmo likes all the varieties, but especially the ones with pasta in it," said Wilson. "He'll start squealing like a pig when he sees me coming with the food."

The supplemental portion of your bird's diet is also where you can introduce some foods to your birds that are similar to what they would be getting in the wild. For example, you could provide chestnuts, fresh berries, dandelion leaves (as long as the lawn you pick them from isn't treated with pesticides), and corn-on-the-cob (which would be similar to the maize found in Africa). There are also many flowers you can grow for your birds.

"Flowers are a natural food for Psittacula parakeets, and can be a good supplemental food in their diet," noted Jenkins. He puts large half-barrel planters filled with hibiscus bushes in his walk-in aviary. "The birds love eating the flowers and the leaves too," he said. "They'll pretty much decimate the hibiscus plant down to the stub. Then I pull it out and put another

one in there while the one that had been chewed up recovered.” You could put a whole potted plant in a bird's cage or aviary if it is large enough, or just put one flower in the cage at a time on a treat holder.

Of course, some plants are toxic and unsafe to give to parrots. If you want to give bird-safe flowers to your parrot, Jenkins suggests you talk with your veterinarian to see which are bird-safe. There's a long list of flowers that are OK for birds to feast on.

Sometimes it's fun to give your birds food that you know they just really enjoy. Barry Schwartz of New York has an African ringneck named Sam that “goes crazy” over dried jalapeno peppers. “He pins his eyes and really relishes it,” Schwartz said. “He's usually gotten it eaten in seconds.” Sam also likes dehydrated mango or papaya bits, bell peppers and table foods. “Sometimes I'll share my dinner with him,” Schwartz said.

It's fine to give your birds treats, Wissman said, “as long as they're still eating the healthy stuff. The pellets should be the bulk of their diet. You don't want to feed so much of the other foods that your birds fill up on that and they're not eating their pellets.”

Best Diet For Breeding Psittacula Parakeets

If you're breeding Psittacula parakeets, follow the same dietary guidelines already mentioned, while “beefing up” the diet a little. Avian veterinarian Gregory Burkett, DVM, of Durham, North Carolina, recommends you feed a breeder pellet to your birds when they are feeding chicks. These pellets are generally higher in fats, protein, calcium and other nutrients to supply the parent birds with what they need to feed the babies.

Prior to breeding season, Burkett recommends your birds have plenty of foods and treats. “This will sometimes stimulate them to go to nest,” he said.

That works for Robinson. When breeding season approaches, she feeds a special cereal and seed mix to her birds (which they eat in addition to their base diet of pellets, fruits and vegetables). First, she puts together a mix of cereal, raisins, dried papaya, dried pineapple, banana chips, kibble corn, almonds, walnuts, dates and popped corn. She combines this cereal mix with a seed mix — half and half — and gives it to the birds right before breeding season. “It encourages them to breed when they have a ready access to lots of food,” Robinson said. She also gives this mix to the breeding birds while they are feeding babies — just to make sure they have a large supply of food to feed their chicks.