Try A Free-Flight Aviary

Create a natural habitat for your free-flying pet birds with a bird aviary.

By Bob & Liz Johnson

An aviary can give your pet bird room to stretch its wings.

Contrary to popular opinion, we have found that birds do not lose their pet qualities when given space to fly. They do become less codependent and more self-directed, but they still enjoy interacting with people. They seem to enjoy sharing the same space with their owners, which is why we prefer walk-in type habitats rather than suspended flights. A non-domineering relationship develops, and people and bird become co-inhabitants rather than captor and captive.

Create A Habitat

To create a free-flight habitat, buy a walk-in aviary or cage, or utilize an existing enclosure such as a spare room, a porch, an enclosed or screened patio, a gazebo or even a garage. A portion of one of these spaces can sometimes be sufficient, depending on the number and size of your pet birds.

Never keep your bird on a screened porch or patio unless you have secured it with heavy wire mesh. Even if your bird is in a cage, a predator can tear through the screen and grab your bird. We have heavy wire mesh over the outside of every window of our house.

Another area to utilize, if you have very small birds, is the top of the walls where they meet the ceiling. You can build an enclosure that attaches to the wall and the ceiling coming out from the wall and down from the ceiling about 2 or 3 feet, extending completely around the room. This should be attached to a small, walk-in sized enclosure that you enter to interact with your birds. Another space-saving possibility is to construct an oversized bay window enclosed with wire and screen that can be opened or closed according to the weather.

Indoor-Outdoor Habitat

An indoor-outdoor habitat consists of a room with a window or door leading to the outside. The birds can fly into an outdoor enclosure during the day and back into the room at night to sleep with the window or door closed in cold weather.

The outdoor enclosure can be any size, from a window box attached to the wall outside the window to a large free-flight rain-forest-size enclosure. The inside part of the enclosure can be anything from a window box attached to the wall inside the window to the entire room. The most important factor in any habitat design is that it has easy access for you to enter and interact with your birds.

Protect the room comprising the interior portion of a habitat with sheet metal paneling, especially any wood trim. This is true also for any part of the outside wall to which the birds have access.

Wire Basics & Other Aviary Essentials

If you build a free-flight aviary, utilize construction materials that are appropriate for the types of birds you have or will have. Most enclosures use some form of wire mesh. Do not let price be your primary guide, because no matter how cheap it is, it can be very expensive if it does not do the job you are using it for. If you are building an enclosure to house a variety of species, you must use wire that will accommodate the largest species. The strength of the wire is a factor of both the gauge and the size of the opening. The larger the opening, the more leverage that can be brought to bear, to bend or break the wire.

The wire serves four purposes:Keeps birds inside,Keeps predators outside,Serves as a medium for birds to climb and play on, andIf installed properly, enhances the rigidity of your framework.

The key factor for keeping your birds in the enclosure is the strength of the wire. A welded wire with ½- by 1-inch or 1- by 1-inch openings will generally accomplish more of what you want from a perimeter wire. Less than a ½- by 1-inch opening presents the risk of a larger bird getting its toe caught when flying off from the wire. Greater than a 1- by 1-inch opening offers more leverage for the bird to bend or break the wire, and you would need to use a heavier gauge wire.

A 16-gauge wire will safely house birds up to Amazon size. You need at least 14-gauge wire for birds larger than

Amazons up to blue-and-gold macaws and at least 12-gauge wire for greenwings and hyacinths. For those who prefer to use ½- by 3-inch wire for greenwings and hyacinths, the added leverage would require a minimum of 10-gauge wire.

Although a woven mesh will keep your birds in and predators out, it does not offer a comfortable medium for the birds to climb and play on, nor does it add rigidity to the framework. In fact, if proper tension is not kept on it, a bird can pinch or catch a toe in it.
Stainless-steel wire has been available now for quite a few years, but the price is still prohibitive for the average person. Although stainless steel would be your best choice, galvanized steel has been in use for a long time and, with a few precautions, it will safely do a good job for a lot less money. If you do decide to use galvanized wire, get a brand that is galvanized after welding. Most are not.

I have tried a number of brands and like the Aquamesh wire made by Riverdale Mill. This wire is galvanized after welding. The first and most important precaution to take when using galvanized wire is to be sure the wire you use is heavy enough so your birds cannot tear it up, which may be fatal if a bird breaks off a piece of wire and swallows it.

Before using galvanized wire, weather it for about a month, and then go over it with a wire brush and white vinegar to remove any loose zinc powder or burrs. Also keep your bird's calcium level high, and give it some apple every day. Calcium blocks zinc absorption, and the pectin in the apple helps to flush out zinc as well as many other toxins. (Actually, zinc is an essential mineral in small quantities.)

Never use wood except for perches, swings or toys that you don't mind having chewed up. Especially never use treated wood for anything.

Aluminum square tubing made for screen enclosures works well for the perimeter framework because you can screw the wire mesh to the inside using ¾-inch, No. 10, hex washer head, self drilling (tek), sheet metal screws and just roll in the screen on the outside. Other possibilities to consider would be the framework kits used for shade houses, greenhouses or carports.

You could also construct a framework out of PVC pipe, PVC conduit or galvanized steel pipe or conduit. The most important thing to consider when choosing is can you adapt your choice to meet the minimum standards necessary for a successful habitat? Get several estimates for the framework and screen from screen enclosure companies. Because they buy the materials wholesale and prefab the entire structure at their plants, they can often build the entire framework with the screen at about what you would have to pay for the materials to build it yourself.

Aviary Size & Location Considerations
You need sufficient space to prevent overcrowding for the number and types of birds you have. This is especially important if you have more than two birds or if the birds are not extremely compatible. Overcrowding can cause psychological stress, creating arguments and fights resulting in injuries or death.

A good minimum to strive for is 2.2 cubic feet for each gram of the total number of birds in your enclosure. The length of your habitat will be the limiting factor in allowing your birds to fly. For a bird to attain a sustained flight, the habitat must be long enough for it to fly in a straight line for at least two seconds. To allow for continuous flight, the habitat must be wide enough so when the bird reaches the end of the habitat, it can circle around and fly back without having to stop and restart. This means a length of at least 10 to 12 feet for parakeets and 50 to 60 feet for hyacinths, and a width of at least 5 to 6 feet for parakeets and 30 to 40 feet for hyacinths.

Any outdoor habitat or outdoor portion of a habitat should have a location, design or camouflage that prevents passers-by from knowing that it is there. In addition, get a good security system to prevent theft.

Protection From Elements
Your habitat design should offer protection from the elements, such as rain, wind, sun, cold, heat, etc. An indoor/outdoor habitat pretty much takes care of this problem, as it gives the birds a choice when outdoor conditions become uncomfortable. Most birds love to take a bath in the rain, but after about 10 or 15 minutes they start looking for a way out. They also like to sunbathe for short periods of time but prefer being in the shade during the mid part of the day.

Doorways
Although an outdoor habitat should have direct access to the house, it will probably have a door opening to the outside also. Any openings to the outside should have two doors in series spaced far enough apart so that the first door can be closed before the second is opened. The outer door should be secured with a double-cylinder deadbolt lock.

Food & Water
Include multiple food and water locations throughout the habitat. (If you have several birds, one may decide to guard the food dish and not let anyone else eat.) Make healthy foods available to your birds in many interesting ways. For instance, plant a sprout garden either in the ground or in a planter and cover with wire mesh about 1 or 2 inches above the dirt. This allows the birds to eat the sprouts as they grow, but they cannot dig in the soil and destroy the seedbed. You can also attach (by tying or impaling on a nail) various fruits and vegetables to the trunks or branches of the trees for your birds to find and eat.

Shelters — Nest Boxes
Do not place boxes or small enclosures in a free-flight aviary with more than two birds unless you are certain the species of birds to inhabit it are colony dwellers, such as quakers and some species of cockatoos. Even though you may intend them for shelter or sleeping quarters, most birds usually perceive them as nest boxes, and they can become very territorial and aggressive. If, however, your intent is to breed a pair of birds, then a nest box in a free-flight habitat for just that pair will help promote healthier and happier parents, and thus healthier and happier babies.

The No. 1 problem most people have with parrots are their neighbors. As a precautionary measure, have walls, trees and bushes placed appropriately around your house and habitat to absorb sound before it reaches your neighbors.