

Pet Bird Cage Questions

11 questions and answers pet bird owners commonly ask about pet bird cages.

By Susan Chamberlain

1) Does it really matter what type of pet bird cage I get?

The main things to consider when selecting a pet bird cage is your bird's size and personality. What does personality have to do with it? If your pet bird is a mechanically inclined cockatoo or an escape-artist conure, you'll require a pet bird cage with more security features. For a bird that loves to climb, a pet bird cage with numerous horizontal bars is essential.

2) Is it OK to buy a used pet bird cage?

Used pet bird cages in antique shops or at garage sales may have been repaired or repainted with questionable materials, or the former occupant may have succumbed to a contagious disease. Without knowing the pet bird cage's history, it's better to assume the pet bird cage is unsuitable for your parrot.

Likewise, a cage from an antique or department store can also be questionable. The ornate cages found at these venues are likely manufactured as decorative cages and are not intended for use with live birds. Such cages may not be sturdy enough for your pet, and ornate details may trap little toes, necks and wings. The materials used in decorative cages may be toxic to pet birds as well, and in general, these cages are simply not very practical, especially when it comes to cleaning.

3) Are imported pet bird cages safe?

It can be risky to purchase a bird cage manufactured in another country, because the rules governing use of lead and other toxic metals may be less stringent than in the United States. However, many cages are manufactured overseas according to the specifications of United States cage companies. Imported cages manufactured under the auspices of recognized manufacturers from developed countries (U.S., Canada, Germany, Great Britain, etc.) are generally up to safety standards.

If you have questions or doubts, phone or e-mail the manufacturer directly. Inquire about the presence of lead or zinc in welds, paint and bars. Ask your retailer about product guarantees. Network with other pet bird owners, and ask your avian veterinarian for specific advice.

4) Why do pet bird cages come in different finishes?

In the late 1970s, when the exotic bird hobby became increasingly popular as a result of the availability of hand-tamed, domestically-bred young parrots, it was difficult to find suitable cages for large birds. Black wrought iron was a typical offering, and rust was a typical complaint.

Manufacturers responded to the rising demand for cages by using various materials, such as cold-rolled steel in their manufacture. Various methods of finishing these cages evolved in response to customer preferences, and the powdercoat process (a method of electrostatically applying paint to metal) became quite popular due to the durability of the finish and the variety of colors available. Pet bird owners were now able to coordinate cage colors with their parrots or home décor.

"Hammertone" finishes that blend metallic paint with a color have the advantages of durability and beauty. They also don't show dirt as quickly as some other finishes. Nickel-plated and brass-tone cages have been longtime favorites as well, and some colored metallic finishes are now available, as are high-gloss, powdercoat decorator colors. These painted finishes are quite durable, but some eventual wear and tear is to be expected. Beak inflicted damage may occur at the points where your bird climbs in and out of its cage, and friction from hanging toys may also cause wear.

Daily cage maintenance helps to preserve whichever finish you choose. Keep the pet bird cage clean and dry, and the incidence of rust, discoloration and corrosion is greatly reduced.

Because pet birds are often lifetime companions, people demanded cages with a "lifetime" finish, and the modern choice is stainless steel. It is corrosion resistant and presents a nice, clean appearance. It suits almost any décor. Rust is not an issue here, although stainless steel still requires regular cleaning and maintenance. Should your stainless steel need repair at some point, consult a welder experienced with this type of metal, as it requires a special welding process.

5) My pet bird cage finish is chipping. Can I just touch it up?

How badly is the cage chipping? Some wear and tear is normal because pet birds use their beaks to climb about their cages. Abrasions from hanging toys and some deterioration from splashed water and flung food can also contribute to a less-than-perfect finish. If the damage is minimal, touch-ups work wonders.

Contact the cage manufacturer for paint recommendations and perhaps a small bottle of touch-up paint. Some cage companies will re-powdercoat your cage for you. Or, paint metal cage trays, cage aprons and other smooth parts with a paint that states it is "nursery safe when dry" intended for use on metal. "Nursery safe" means that the paint has been approved for use on children's furniture and accessories. Read label instructions prior to use.

Prepare the cage for painting by sanding the affected area, and then wipe with a paper towel moistened with white vinegar. Do not use paint in proximity to your pet bird. Wait for good weather, and paint in a well-ventilated garage or outdoors. Be sure fumes do not permeate your pet bird's living area. Although it may be nontoxic when dry, such paints may be harmful to your bird if inhaled. Permit the paint to dry for at least 48 hours before moving your bird into the cage, so be prepared to have a secondary cage on hand.

I never paint cage bars, as these are the most likely of all cage parts to be chewed. Even if the paint is nontoxic when dry, pet birds must not be allowed to ingest non-food products. Nontoxic refers to humans, and most paints and chemicals are not routinely tested on pet birds, so it is impossible to guarantee safety.

6) The pet bird cage is in good shape, but the door latch is broken. Can the manufacturer fix it?

Replacement parts for pet bird cages may be difficult to come by in your local pet shop, but some manufacturers make them available. Your retailer may be able to order the part for you, but be prepared to wait. Many retailers order through distributors, and the distributor will have to order the part from the manufacturer if it is not in stock.

Alternatively, contact the manufacturer to see if the part is available, and if you can purchase it directly. If welding is necessary, take the cage to a professional welder who will use, and certify, lead-free materials. Make sure all resulting welds are smooth and unobtrusive.

Save yourself undue hassle by purchasing replacement parts (such as extra dishes, perches, gratings and trays when available) when you buy your cage so you'll have them on hand.

7) What can I do to remove poop that seems to be cemented onto the pet bird cage?

A treatment with an enzyme or citrus-based cleaner will often soften the stubborn lump to the point where it can be removed. I've had good results by soaking a cotton ball in either cleaning agent and placing it on the gunk for about 20 minutes. White vinegar also does a good job. Steam cleaning machines and pressure washers are helpful, too. There are also bird products available designed specifically for keeping the cage clean. Often the best defense is prevention. Wipe the poop away everyday, before it has time to cement, and you'll save yourself time in the long run.

8) The pet bird cage no longer matches my décor. Can I paint it a complimentary color?

It is impossible to guarantee that any paint you purchase is absolutely safe around birds. Contact the manufacturer to see if it's possible to have the cage repainted at the factory.

Unless the cage is a standout horror against your new color scheme, why not attempt to incorporate it into the room somehow? Add a few pillows that are the same color as the cage. Coordinate toys and cage accessories with the colors in your room. With a little creative thinking, I'll bet the cage will look better than you've imagined.

9) How does the type of pet bird cage I choose affect my pet bird?

Pet birds require spacious pet bird cages for both physical and psychological health. Small, flighted birds need room to fly to and fro, and larger birds require space for wing flapping, playing with toys and performing avian gymnastics. Long-tailed species require cages tall enough to comfortably accommodate the long feathers.

Choose the largest pet bird cage you can afford and comfortably accommodate in your home. Be sure the bar spacing is narrow enough to prevent the bird from sticking its head between the rungs, but wide enough apart for the feet to span the bars. Prevent toe and limb trapping by avoiding cages with convergent bars (those that have wider openings at one end and become narrow at the other). Allow space inside the cage for additional dishes, toys, perches and other accessories.

When selecting a large pet bird cage, ask whether it is welded or "knock-down." Welded cages are generally one piece, while the knocked-down variety are typically assembled at home. Assemble the cage in the room where it is to

be used. A fully assembled cage may not fit through a narrow doorway. Avoid surprise by measuring ceiling height, floor space and the width of interior and exterior doorways, and compare the measurements with cage dimensions. Don't forget to allow room for protruding feeders and flared cage aprons.

10) Is there any such thing as a mess-free pet bird cage?

In a word, no. Pet birds eat, shed, bathe, chew up their toys and produce more droppings than you might think possible. Even if all this detritus were fully contained inside a cage, the cage itself would still require regular cleaning.

The good news is that some pre-planning and regular maintenance can shorten your cleaning chores. Choose a cage with as many mess-containment features as possible, and then maintain that cage scrupulously. Get rid of messes while they're small. Wash bottom gratings at least once a week. Wipe cage aprons daily. I use a solution of white vinegar and water to keep my stainless steel cages shiny and clean. (Never use metal polish on cages, as the ingredients can be harmful to your bird.)

Use an electronic air filter or a window fan blowing out of the house to further reduce dust in your home. Keep extra dishes and perches on hand so you can replace soiled ones quickly.

11) How can I tell if a pet bird cage is safe for my pet bird?

Shop for a cage that doesn't have sharp edges or sloppy welds. Examine the edges of plastic and metal trays and enclosures to be sure they have been buffed to smoothness. Be sure that bar spacing is appropriate for your bird and that the bars and welds are sturdy enough for the occupant of the cage.

A removable grating is an important feature; be sure it fits properly. The cage should have secure locks on doors and feeder access ports to prevent escape. Avoid flimsy cages with loosely fitting components. Inquire about the finish on the cage and avoid those of questionable origin.