

Super-Sized Bird Cages For Macaws

The wings, tails, beaks and other factors affect the bird cage you choose for your large pet birds.

By Rose Gordon

Macaws are the giants of the parrot world; they have giant wings, giant tails, giant appetites and giant mandibles. When choosing housing for your large macaw — whether it's a cage, indoor flight or an outdoor aviary — bigger is always better. The bigger the housing, the less likely your macaw is going to become bored and possibly exhibit negative behaviors.

But there's more to consider than just cage size, such as

Wing span and tail depth: The hyacinth, blue & gold, scarlet, green wing, blue throat, Buffon's, red front and military need room to stretch. They have a wing span of 3- to 4-feet long. They also have long tails that need to be able to clear the cage bars. As a bare minimum, make certain your macaw can flap its wings without touching the sides of the cage.

The minimum cage size for a macaw is 30-inches deep by 48-inches wide by 60- to 72-inches high, Wilson said, but she prefers a larger cage. Something twice as large is ideal, and a "true flight cage" allows the bird to fly, Wilson said.

The depth of the cage is most important, according to Joanne Abramson, an author of *The Large Macaws: Their Care, Breeding and Conservation* (www.raintreepublications.com) and a macaw breeder for 29 years. "Most cages are 24-inches to 30-inches deep in order to accommodate [our] doorways," Abramson said, but this isn't deep enough.

Beaks of Steel: Large macaws are strong and possess powerful beaks. A green wing can chew through its cage bars if the bars are not strong enough. This is why stainless steel is often considered the material of choice for macaw cages.

Csaky, a macaw breeder for 20 years with a specialty in hyacinth and scarlet macaws, said the material is less important than having a "sturdy" well-constructed cage. "If the welding is done well, then the bird should be OK," said Csaky. Square tubing might be better constructed, but welding is easier to clean, she added. Csaky recommends bars with a diameter of a quarter inch and a spacing of 1 1/2 to 2 inches. Two-inch spacing can make it easier to see the bird through the cage bars, but 1 1/2-inch spacing is better for their beaks, which they use to climb around the cage. "Wider spacing is harder on their beaks."

Keeping your macaw entertained and providing a large enough cage can reduce the bird's desire to chew its cage apart, Abramson said. "The larger the cage, the less likely they're going to go through it."

Busy Beaks: Macaws should have a variety of toys, including those designed to be destroyed and replaced, such as soft woods, in order to keep their beaks in top shape.

But don't crowd the cage. A bird should be able to comfortably turn around without hitting its head on a toy, and it must have easy access to food and water dishes. If you can't see your bird behind its toys, it has too many.

Big Birds Equal Big Mess: Using easy-to-wipe down material in both indoor and outdoor macaw housing is the key to keeping mess to a minimum. Tile, linoleum, glass, concrete and plastic all make good choices. Having a drain in your aviary can make cleanup as easy as turning on the hose. Plastic office chair mats help keep the area around cages from becoming damaged.

Perches/Placement: Provide a variety of perches to keep the large macaw toes in shape. Young birds may be a little "dorky" and awkward, Wilson said, so provide at least one perch that the bird can get all of its toes around for a sturdy grip — anywhere from 1 to 2 inches in diameter. Birds also benefit from a flat perch, which they can rest on.

Perches hung at a vertical incline encourage exercise too. Wilson hung stainless-steel chains from the ceilings to the cage for her boarding macaws to play on. "They love to hang on the chains and flap their wings." You can find these at a hardware or boating store. Wilson prefers soft woods to manzanita, because soft woods encourage chewing and are easy on the bird's feet.

Food & Water Dishes: The stronger the better is most macaw owners' mantra when it comes to choosing food and water dishes for their birds. Csaky employs a unique approach to providing food and water dishes. She uses stainless-steel dog dishes with straight sides as food dishes and then attaches them with a screw to stainless-steel holders she has specifically designed for her macaws. Her food dishes are 8 inches in diameter and 3 inches deep.

Wilson encourages her macaw Sam to work for her food. "I don't want things to be too easy." She hides treats, such as a nut, within a cardboard box, within a box, within a box and then hangs it from the top of the cage. "It takes her about an hour to get to it," Wilson said.

Outdoor Aviaries: An outdoor aviary offers macaws more room and access to sunshine, but there should always be a shaded area, and water misters help too. There are many options for building an outdoor area for your birds: Choices include an aviary housing a number of birds, an occasional romper room where your macaws can get some much needed exercise or stacked flights or cages that house pairs of macaws. When moving your macaws outdoors, take the appropriate steps to protect them from theft, weather and predators.

Co-mingling Species: Keeping the large macaws with small macaws, such as yellow collar, Illiger's and Hahn's, is not recommended. When combining species in a flight, there are several factors to consider, according to Abramson: size, compatibility and diet need to be thoroughly thought out. Most large macaw species will be OK to house together, Abramson said, but hyacinths have specific diet needs, including high-fat nuts that won't be met by a food dish aimed at a scarlet macaw. It is impossible to keep one bird out of another bird's food, so house hyacinths separately, she suggested.

If your birds have spent out-of-the-cage playtime together, you probably have a general idea whether or not they will be compatible in a single flight. Do they preen each other, or do they lunge at each other?

Csaky's scarlet and hyacinth macaws are housed in separate cages or flights but are allowed out together in a community bird room. Generally, they aren't that interested in one another, she said. "A large flight can be a very good idea," Csaky said. "But you don't want to flock birds if you can't observe them." Csaky has video surveillance cameras in both her bird rooms in order to watch over their activities. Through trial and error, moving individual birds in and out of different groups, you can determine which birds and which groups of birds are going to make good flock mates.