

Think Inside & Outside the Bird Cage

Popular housing accessories for your bird

By Susan Chamberlain

Your bird should spend some time outside of its cage each day.
Photo Courtesy Matt & Jessica Lofstrom, California

1. Dishes: Cages usually come complete with dishes and a perch. The rest is up to you. Buy extra dishes when you purchase the cage so you'll have the right size on hand when you need to replace them. Additional sets of dishes also enable you to change food and water quickly each day.

2. Perches: A round, wood dowel perch is standard equipment with most cages. Birds, however, need a variety of perching surfaces to ensure good foot health. They can develop sores on the bottom of their feet if they are made to stand on a single perch all the time. Add a rope perch, a concrete half-perch and one or two wood perches of varying diameter and shape, such as manzanita or grapewood. A concrete perch will help keep the tips of your bird's nails blunted, and it also offers beak honing benefits. The additional perch can be a swing or ladder, as long as it provides another choice of footing for your pet.

3. Toys: Toys are not optional — they are a must-have. Your bird needs playthings for physical activity and mental stimulation. Parrots, from budgie to macaw size, love to chew. Provide your pet with satisfying wood playthings, along with some plastic and rope toys.

Choose toys with safety in mind. Examine each plaything as if you were a bird looking for trouble. Be sure the size of the toy is appropriate for your bird. Check to be sure chains are smoothly welded. Avoid toys with "S" hooks and small, removable metal or plastic parts that might be swallowed. Some bird owners remove bell clappers so there is no possibility of their birds swallowing them. "Jingle" style bells are unsafe because birds can get toes and beaks trapped in the openings.

Supervise your bird to be sure it can play safely with new toys. Foot toys (toys the bird can hold in its foot) are usually quite safe, because there is nothing for the bird to get tangled up in. Rotate toys frequently to maintain avian interest. Discard rope, cloth and leather toys when they become heavily soiled or frayed.

4. Swings & Ladders: It's so much fun to watch your bird sway back and forth on a swing or wind its up and down a little ladder. Both provide excellent opportunities for exercise and diversion from a fixed perch. Swings are available in basic wood dowel models, in natural wood, textured plastic and rope, or even concrete. Some are embellished with toys and chunks of wood for chewing.

Often, because the swing is the highest "perch" in the cage, your bird will use it as a nighttime roost. Rigid, spiral ropes (sometimes referred to as "boings") make great cage accessories, too. Birds enjoy climbing on them, and the irregular surface is good for their feet. Avoid placing dishes or toys directly beneath perches or swings. Locate them out of "bombing" range.

5. Bird Cage Covers: Whether or not you elect to cover your bird at night is a personal decision. Some birds recoil at the sight of a cover, and many owners simply elect not to use them, but there are good reasons to use one. A cover helps protect the bird from nighttime drafts. It may offer protection from flying insects in areas where gnats and no-see-ums prevail. Covering the cage lets the bird know that it's time to rest and often provides a sense of security.

Cage covers are available in many sizes, colors and fabrics. Dark colors will induce your bird to sleep a bit later in the morning, thus giving you the option of doing so as well. Choose a cover with a smooth surface. Don't use towels for cage covers, as your bird may get its toes trapped in the terry cloth loops. Shake your bird's cage cover outdoors to remove dust and dander, and wash it in scent-free detergent at least once a month. Birds are affected by dust, too.

6. Sleep Tents & Hideaways: Have you seen those little fabric sleep tents? Many birds — especially caiques, conures and lovebirds — love to climb inside them to sleep. If there's room inside the cage, install one for your bird, but monitor it closely for loose threads and fraying. Birds sometimes chew on the fabric, and some have become trapped in the fibers. Some species, such as cockatiels, may get too territorial with a sleep tent or hideaway. If your bird becomes territorial and aggressive, it is exhibiting breeding behavior and the sleep tent or hideaway should be taken away.

7. **Cage Liner: Paper or litter?** You'll see different types of cage litter used in the bottom of cages in pet shops. Sometimes this is used as bedding for baby birds or to give a neat appearance at the bottom of the cage. If you elect to use a litter product, choose a dust-free variety. (Do not use cedar shavings, especially with young birds, as cedar contains an irritant called plicatic acid.) Be sure birds are separated from litter by a grating so that they cannot eat or scatter the product.

Litter is not an excuse to avoid cleaning the cage. You must be diligent about removing waste every single day and completely changing the litter every few days. Consult your avian veterinarian for further advice about litter products.

Pre-cut cage tray paper is available in pet shops, and it is usually somewhat moisture repellent to protect the cage tray. Pre-cut paper is convenient and easy to use.

Many bird owners use newspapers in the bottom of the cage, and often have questions about its safety. The inks now used in regular newsprint in the United States are not harmful, but if birds are permitted contact with the newspaper, the print can rub off on their feathers.

8. **Playgym:** Ideally, your bird should spend some time outside its cage each day. Supervise this time out on a stand or playgym. Offer new toys and treats during this time. Avoid overcrowding the cage with accessories by installing some of them on the gym instead.

9. **Entertainment:** Television can be entertaining for many birds. Cartoons, animal programs and even soap operas provide interest, especially when you're not home. Your pet may surprise you with some cartoon sound effects or some lines from a soap opera. (I recommend soaps because the somewhat slower pace of dialogue may make it easier for your bird to pick up a few words.) Classical music can be soothing to birds, so turn the radio on or put in a few CDs before you leave the house.