

Basement Bird Rooms

Convert your basement to a bird room with these pet bird tips.

By Susan Chamberlain

Create a safe bird room in your basement with this list of basement dos.
Courtesy Janice Moore, NY

When I was a child, I loved to go over to my friend's house and visit the breeding pairs of budgies her dad kept in their basement. Several rows of cages — illuminated by fluorescent lights — ran the entire length of the basement room while the birds flitted about. I remember little about the basement habitat, except the tile flooring and an exhaust fan in the wall of the room.

Now that I look back on it, I realize that Mr. Vena did several things right with the tools he had to work with at the time. The fluorescent lighting possibly emitted some full-spectrum light, which is necessary for vitamin-D3 synthesis and helpful for successful breeding. The hard floor was easy to clean and reduced the risk of mold and mildew, and the fan pulled dust and dander from the room to improve the indoor air quality.

We've come a long way since then: Electronic air filters, full-spectrum lighting made especially for birds, green building materials, carbon monoxide alarms and other equipment abound. Is it feasible, however — or even safe — to keep your pet birds in the basement or in a remodeled garage? The answer depends on a variety of factors.

Basic Basement Concerns For Pet Birds

People often convert these spaces into media rooms, dens or additional bedrooms. However, these rooms can be problematic, especially for birds. Lack of heat and sufficient lighting are two potential problems. Appliances located in the basement or garage — a boiler, hot water heater, washer and dryer — can produce fatal chemicals, gas emissions and possible back blasts from the furnace.

The severe weather experienced in some states has taught us that few places remain safe from flooding. Below-grade basements might also be prone to seepage, especially if you live in an area with a high water table or lots of rain. Dampness breeds mold and mildew, which often cause health problems in birds as it does in humans.

Basement Dos For Pet Birds

1) Instead of using carpeting, wood and laminates, install floor tile or paint the concrete floor to reduce the risk of mold and mildew in any basement. Glazed ceramic tile works better than quarry tile and other porous surfaces because it does not require periodic sealing. Rugs and carpeting are the worst choices for flooring in a basement. Imagine trying to restore a rug after a leak or flood? Even under the best conditions, carpets collect mold and dust. Dampness causes laminates and wood to warp, rot or harbor moisture, making these also poor choices.

2) To further reduce exposure to dust and mold, remove items that collect these toxins. Store clothing and household items in another area of your home.

3) Get a sump pump for emergencies, and keep a shop vacuum available to remove water that seeps in after heavy rains. Your local home-improvement store likely carries an alarm that detects flooding, which will warn you before the situation becomes critical.

4) When painting or installing tile, use the least toxic products available. Products with low volatile organic compound, or VOC, emissions prove safe for enclosed spaces, but carefully read the cautions on product literature and follow directions. Remove your birds from the renovation areas, and open basement or garage windows to air out the area for four or five days before moving the birds back into the room.

5) Improve the air flow in your new bird room with the use of ceiling fans or new tower-style fans. An electronic air filter removes particulate matter from the atmosphere. Keep windows open for ventilation. Be cautious when using exhaust fans, because they can draw exhaust fumes, cooking fumes and emissions from boilers into rooms. Install exhaust fans at the source of the pollution rather than in your bird's area. Leave a window open for ventilation in the furnace room, even during cold weather.

Formaldehyde is used in some construction materials, even in carpeting, and exposure to these fumes can result in

headaches, respiratory problems and flu-like symptoms in people. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency literature, the most significant sources of formaldehyde in homes are particleboard and plywood products that contain urea-formaldehyde, which are routinely used as sub-flooring and in cabinet construction.

6) Seal particleboard with primer or enclose it in a laminate to reduce emissions, and air out the affected products for a period of time before bringing them into your home. Better yet, choose formaldehyde-free products.

7) When heating your birds' new space, evaluate your present system. You can install baseboard heating that runs from your boiler to the new room, or install a new duct for hot air heat. Forced hot air tends to be dry, so use a humidifier in conjunction with such systems. Humidity helps to remove particles in the air.

Radiant heating installed under a floor or on walls is a good source of gentle, even heat. You can purchase radiant heat panels as supplementary heating for your bird's immediate area from AviTech Exotic Birds. The unobtrusive white panels can be mounted to the wall behind a cage for additional heat during cold weather or whenever supplemental warmth is required.

8) Birds need natural light for health and vitality. Place basement-dwelling birds where they will receive some window light and enjoy an outdoor view. Install skylights in a renovated garage for overhead light and ventilation. Supplement this light with full-spectrum lighting, which comes in a various forms, such as portable lamps, cage-mounted models, ceiling-hung and swag-style fixtures. Check wattage limitations on all fixtures before installing bulbs or tubes.

9) Consider installing a burglar alarm if there is outdoor access to the new bird area. A darkened garage could make an easy target for thieves. Also formulate a plan to rescue your birds in case of fire or natural disaster.

10) In ground-floor living, you'll need to invest in rodent-resistant storage space for bird supplies and food. I like light colored floors because they make it easy to spot insects or droppings from possible rodents before an infestation becomes overwhelming. Ideally, we stop such invasions before they begin, but again, we must be extra cautious when using pesticides indoors — or out — if we share our homes with birds. Sprinkle a diatomaceous earth product around the base of your home to stop crawling bugs. Seal cracks and crevices against mice, and clean up small messes before they become big ones.

11) Keep converted bird room cleans by investing in a utility sink for washing bird dishes and accessories, a refrigerator for storing fresh food and at least one trash can with a lid for disposal of cage tray liners and other bird debris. Luckily, a ground-floor room makes it easy to roll cages outside for power washing.

12) Decorating a new bird area can be fun and practical. Move a computer, television or exercise equipment into the new area, so you're likely to spend time with your basement- or garage-dwelling birds. Turn the TV on or play mellow music for the birds when you're out.

13) If birds will be out of sight and earshot for significant periods of time, use a baby monitor so you can hear sounds of alarm in the basement or garage. Video surveillance and webcams are great ways to check on your pets, and you can find simple systems at electronics and baby supply stores.

14) Turn your bird's new habitat into a tropical paradise by painting jungle murals on walls, or decorate it with a wall hanging, bird portraits or posters from BIRD TALK. Use water-based or acrylic paints, and allow the paint to dry completely with the windows open before returning birds to the area.

There's a lot to consider when renovating a space for your birds, but convenience for you and the safety and happiness of the birds are of paramount importance. Your imagination and your budget will dictate the rest.