Birds and Gas Fireplaces

The only parrots that should be allowed near gas fireplaces are fake parrots

By Susan Chamberlain

Smoke and toxins from a gas fireplace could harm your bird's sensitive and complex respiratory system.
Courtesy Matt & Jessica Lofstrom, CA

Q: We were thinking about buying a natural gas, vent-free fireplace. Are these safe to use with birds in the same room? We have a sun conure and a Hahn's macaw. Your help is appreciated.

A: I usually receive questions from readers about the safety of fireplaces, wood stoves and heating appliances during the winter, when people are pressured to make quick decisions due to severe weather. It's spring, so there's plenty of time to make an educated choice before the next heating season. As with any appliance that generates heat, some pre-purchase caution may ultimately save you and your bird's life.

Perilous Placement
Prevailing opinion suggests that we do not house our birds in kitchens. Birds have sensitive and complex respiratory systems and feel the effects of airborne pollutants and toxins faster than we do. Kitchens contain temperature and humidity extremes as well as potentially harmful fumes from cooking and cleaning products. Possible smoke from burning foods are common in kitchens and may also adversely affect birds.

Faulty fuel lines or pilot lights on gas stoves, possible emissions from cookware or appliance components coated with nonstick polymers (polytetrafluoroethylene-PTFE) and preservatives add more ingredients to a potentially deadly recipe.

How Does It Work?
To understand how a "vent-free" fireplace works, compare it with a gas stove. Both produce an open flame and "vent" into the room instead of to the outdoors. These fireplaces do not have exhaust vents and are connected to a gas line. They may operate on propane or natural gas, similar to your kitchen stove. Following the line of thinking that would preclude you from housing your bird in the kitchen, it would be prudent not to locate your bird in a room with a gas fireplace.

Some birds live in or near kitchens with no ill effects. I have a friend whose caiques are kept in the same room as a gas fireplace. Are these people lucky that their birds haven't succumbed to fumes, or are they extra vigilant when using gas and other appliances around their pets? Let's explore our options:

The first thing to check when contemplating the purchase of a vent-free gas fireplace is whether building and fire codes in your state and town permit home installation. Although many models are marketed to do-it-yourselfers, it is advisable, and may even be required by building codes, that you have a licensed plumber connect the gas line.

Is a gas fireplace less safe than your gas stove? The BTU output of a gas fireplace is greater than that of a household gas stove, and therefore will deplete more oxygen than would the stove. Heat-generating devices typically lower the humidity level in the home, but gas appliances may actually increase humidity to undesirable levels.

High levels of humidity contribute to the development of mold and mildew as well as to icing on windows during extremely cold weather. If fuel combustion is compromised due to faulty adjustment of gas and air mixture, or through contact of logs with flame, deadly carbon monoxide may result and be dispersed throughout your home.

According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission's (CPSC) booklet, What You Should Know About Combustion Appliances and Indoor Air Pollution, oxygen depletion sensors are required on unvented gas fireplace heaters made after 1982. The sensor automatically shuts off the gas if the oxygen level in the room drops to 18 percent. Some models also include carbon monoxide detectors.

Think Safety
The ultimate safety of any combustion appliance in your home depends on the quality of the product and correct usage. Is it certified by the Underwriters Laboratories (UL) or the American Gas Association (AGA)? Is the appliance the proper size for your home? Is your home well ventilated? My friend with the caiques has a large, well-ventilated, high-ceilinged house and uses the fireplace only for short periods of time; hence her birds have not been affected.

Use extreme caution when running any fuel-burning appliance inside mobile homes, campers and tightly sealed or super-insulated new or renovated homes. (Vent-free appliances may not be approved for use in such dwellings in your area; check with local authorities.) Fumes and gases will not readily escape such “buttoned up” structures. Open a window for ventilation when such appliances are in use. Read and follow product instructions carefully.

Are any components of the fireplace coated with nonstick polymers or other chemicals that may outgas when heated? Fumes from over-heated nonstick surfaces maybe deadly to birds. Other chemicals and anti-corrosives possibly used in the production of stoves and other appliances may be toxic to birds.

Retailers may not be well informed about the safety of fireplaces in proximity to birds. Contact the manufacturers directly for technical questions. Ask for a Material Safety Data Sheet, which lists products used in the manufacture of the appliance. You can often download such data sheets online. A good place to begin your search is www.ilpi.com/msds.

Check with the CPSC (www.cpsc.gov) for complaints and recall information. Keep in mind, most household products are not routinely tested on birds; therefore manufacturers cannot, with certainty, claim that they are safe for use around birds.