

Outdoor Safety For Birds

Keep your bird safe while outdoors and prevent it from flying away

By Susan Chamberlain

Put your bird in a carrier or use a harness and leash before you take your bird outside.
Courtesy Linda Costello, Ohio

Birds are different than dogs. They don't live to please their human comrades but insist that we serve them. And even the most devoted companion bird may refuse to acknowledge our pleas to "Come back!" or "Get down here!" as it soars skyward.

The prognosis for recovering an escaped bird is not good. Still, many of us take our birds outdoors with us on a regular basis. However, how safe is it?

Although birds benefit from natural sunlight and fresh air, there are drawbacks: Predators, including cats, dogs, hawks and other critters may find a brightly colored, naive newcomer irresistible. So, constant, close supervision is essential to any pet's outdoor experience. Disease-carrying insects may be prevalent. West Nile virus is of particular concern. Confine your bird to a screened-in area in mosquito-prone regions, or refrain from taking it outdoors altogether. Smoke from barbecues and campfires may be harmful or deadly to your bird. Burns are also a risk if birds are permitted free reign near cooking areas. Swimming pools, beaches and lakes are drowning pools for pet birds. Sunshine is great, but provide a shaded area where your bird can seek shelter. Even tropical birds may suffer heatstroke. Lawn chemicals, parasites and diseases shed in droppings of wild animals — including wild birds — may be present in parks and backyards. Don't permit your bird to forage in the grass. Avoid busy streets; a startled bird may propel itself into traffic. Exhaust fumes from motor vehicles contain chemicals and carbon monoxide. Don't expose your bird to polluted air. What's all the fuss about? Don't people in warm climates keep birds outdoors in aviaries? Yes they do, but experienced aviculturists are usually aware of the hazards and take steps to manage or avoid them. Once you've become aware of the dangers in your geographic area, you'll be ready to consider taking your bird outdoors.

Use Common Sense

Every pet shop proprietor has a story about the customer whose bird flew away when it was being carried in for a wing-feather trim on the person's shoulder! Parrot Rescue, Inc. in New York got a call from a man whose bird had previously escaped and been retrieved. The man brought it outdoors again "to see if it could still fly," and he called for help once more! A blue-and-gold macaw traveling on its owner's shoulder in New York City was startled by traffic noise, took off and was appropriated by a passerby not once, but twice. Situations like these are preventable. Confine your bird to a carrier before you take it outdoors, or use a harness attached to a leash to keep your pet with you.

Carriers and travel cages are available in pet shops and through mail order pet supply companies. Every bird should have one. Veterinarian Gregory Burkett, who owns The Birdie Boutique in Chapel Hill, N.C., insists that new bird owners purchase a carrier or travel cage at the time they bring their pets home with them. My own birds sometimes use their travel cages as nighttime sleeping cages and as safe havens on the rare occasions I take them outside.