

## Playstands, Lighting and Detergent

**How do you create a secure playstand? How much full-spectrum lighting does your bird need? Is detergent safe?**

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We're shedding some light on the benefits of full-spectrum lighting and cleaning up some questions about the safety of automatic dishwashing detergents. We're having some fun too ... the first question is from a reader who admired a playstand scene in BIRD TALK.

When I read your November 2004 issue of BIRD TALK (P. 52), I noticed a fun

playstand that my birds and I would enjoy. Do you know how to make something like that? It's for Jilly and Spike's birthday on September first.

The playstand you're admiring looks like a lot of fun for the Senegal parrot playing on it! The photograph doesn't reveal the entire stand, so it's difficult to tell if it's homemade or manufactured specifically for pet birds. Whatever the case, it certainly appears that the bird's human companion has embellished it with plenty of toys and accessories.

The first thing to consider when fabricating a play gym for your bird is size. Do you want a tabletop or freestanding model? How big is your bird? Make sure your design allows for adequate tail room!

A playstand can be as simple as a T-shaped perch screwed into the bottom of a pizza pan, or as elaborate as you care to make it. Many bird owners elect to purchase pre-made stands and then customize them with toys, climbing ropes and screw-in perches.

Make your stand sturdy enough to bear the weight of an active bird. Athletic Amazons and playful African greys are capable of rocking a lightweight stand from side to side. Consider the weight and beak strength of macaws and large cockatoos when choosing materials for your stand. A stand for a big bird requires a substantial base and sturdy perch supports.

Safety first! Birds are curious, playful and intelligent. Because of their beak dexterity, they have the ability to dismantle an entire household. Whether you're making a stand from scratch or adding to a pre-made model, choose your components carefully. Avoid galvanized screws, nails, staples and tacks. Most contain zinc, a component of the galvanization process, which is poisonous if ingested. Some manufacturers forego the use of small metal parts altogether, because birds can swallow them if they dislodge them from the structure. Instead, they drill out the base and perches so that they fit together tightly. When using eye screws to attach toys and swings to perches, be sure they're too big for your bird to swallow. Use locking nuts where necessary, and install them in recessed holes to make it more difficult for birds to gain access to them.

Never use pressure-treated, stained or pre-painted wood to make your bird's stand, as the toxins in these finishing products can be harmful. Your pet will inevitably chew on parts of the stand, so use safe wood products like milled pine or maple. Do not use pine branches; the sap or "pitch" is sticky and contains compounds that may be harmful if ingested. Pine is softwood, however, and hookbills with a penchant for chewing can destroy it easily. Clean, unsprayed, natural maple, eucalyptus and fruit tree branches can be used for perches on your bird's stand. You can often purchase manzanita and lengths of other natural wood at pet shops. PVC pipe is a popular material for making perches and playstands. Be sure to sand or score PVC so your bird will enjoy firm footing. Some choices for the base of the playstand are formaldehyde-free particleboard or plywood or a slab of Formica® for easy cleaning.

Many birds, like Bogart, my red-lored Amazon, quickly learn to climb off their play stands and go marauding through the house. Even though Bogart's stand has a flared apron around it, he devised an escape plan. He hangs from the very end of the apron with the tip of his beak and flays his legs around until he reaches the leg of the stand! Build some safety features into your stand. A pedestal base where birds are unable to grab onto the legs of the stand makes sense. Recess the legs of the stand enough that birds will not be able to grab them and climb down. I like to place tabletop gyms on folding snack tables ... the base of the gym extends out over the snack table a bit, and the birds are unable to gain access to the legs.

Have fun adding toys, swings and climbing ropes to your bird's new stand. Select these items with as much care as you use with in-cage accessories. Supervision is the best way to ensure your bird's safety. Do not leave your bird alone while it is out on its stand.

Martha Hardison wrote to ask about supplementary lighting for her pet birds:

I would like to see something on full-spectrum lighting, like how close does the bulb need to be from my birds to do any good, but not harm them? I know many people do not have adequate windows for their birds, and I would like to know of ways to use full-spectrum lighting. Right now I have a 60-watt (I believe) full-spectrum in a stand and sitting in the middle of the room with four cages about 3 to 4 feet away from the bulb. Am I doing any good?

When a friend moved to Colorado from Southwest Florida, her birds went along and appeared to be fine until her male Eclectus parrot began to go bald. Another friend, who lived in New York, complained that her Vasa parrot's feathers were gradually turning white. When I moved from New York to Florida, my Amazon parrots became noisier than ever, and my pair of Senegal parrots became interested in breeding. All these changes were related to the amount and intensity of daylight available to the birds. The birds in the north were suffering from the lack of natural, intense daylight, while my birds were stimulated by the sub-tropical Florida sunshine.

Have you ever noticed how tired a houseplant looks after a few months in a dim corner? How do you feel during winter's shortened daylight hours? Many people experience Seasonal Affective Disorder, or S.A.D., a feeling of depression and general despondency associated with winter's abbreviated daylight hours. Birds are affected by light, too.

Natural light is required for your bird's feather condition, breeding success and the synthesis of Vitamin D. Some people have credited supplementary, full-spectrum lighting with stopping feather plucking. Birds in outdoor aviaries get all the natural light necessary to convert the Vitamin D in their food to its chemically active form, Vitamin D3. Vitamin D is necessary for the absorption of calcium, but it can be toxic if overfed. Indoor birds, deprived of bright, natural, unobstructed (even by window glass) light may need a vitamin supplement or diet containing Vitamin D3 and a source of full-spectrum, artificial lighting. (Check with your vet before incorporating vitamins and supplements into your bird's diet; supplements may be inadvisable if your bird is eating pellets.)

What is "full-spectrum" lighting? By adding colors to the gases in the fluorescent tubes, more colors of the "spectrum" are emitted by the lights. "Full-spectrum" is the term used to describe lights that emit colors, including ultra-violet, that are found in actual sunlight. It is the ultra-violet light that activates Vitamin D.

There are no standards for exact amounts of ultra-violet light required by pet birds, but they seem most sensitive to wavelengths between 350 and 700 nanometers. Although it not an exact science, increasing the hours of artificial, full-spectrum lighting by 30 minutes per day, up to a maximum of 16 hours, often stimulates breeding behavior and egg production, while shortening the hours of light may reduce undesired egg laying. Under normal, non-breeding conditions, most birds will benefit from 3 to 4 hours of artificial sunlight daily.

The recommended distance of the lamp from your bird will depend on the wattage of the light. Contact individual light manufacturers (several are listed below) and your avian veterinarian for specific advice. In addition to health benefits, full-spectrum, fluorescent lighting is very economical. It uses less electricity than incandescent lighting, and it enhances your bird's colors beautifully!

Avi-Tech Exotic Birds

Avilite full spectrum lights and lamps

[www.avitec.com](http://www.avitec.com)

JWR EXOTIC BIRD AIR SYSTEMS

JWR Rain Forest full spectrum natural light and stand

<http://www.aircleanerforbirds.com/>

OTT-LITES are available in pet shops and through mail order sources; visit: <http://www.ott-lite.com/>

Not all supplementary lighting is recommended for use with timers or dimmers. Consult packaging information or call the manufacturer for information on specific bulbs/tubes.

Bird Talk reader, Tristana writes:

I am writing as a concerned bird owner. In the recent issue of Bird Talk (Jan '05, pg. 4) "Poison Safety" lists fabric softener sheets and automatic dishwasher detergent as potentially toxic to our birds. I am sure other readers were as shocked as I to find that dishwasher detergent is toxic to our birds, as I've been under the impression for years that washing our bird's dishes in the dishwasher was safe and effective. If you have any further information regarding this, please let us know.

Automatic dishwashing formulas may contain phosphates and chlorine, which could be potentially harmful to your bird. It is unlikely that your pet would be adversely affected from having its dishes washed in the dishwasher as long as the dishes are not cracked, crazed or otherwise porous, and detergent residue is thoroughly rinsed from the bowls.

There are several ways toxins find their way into your bird's system: ingestion, inhalation and absorption. Do not permit your bird to come into direct contact with dishwashing detergent or other household chemicals. Inhalation of powders or vapors or ingestion of the product would likely cause some adverse effects. Skin contact with powder or liquid preparations may result in blisters or irritation.

According to Professor Anthea Stavroulakis who teaches at Brooklyn Community College in New York, it is impossible to issue a blanket warning about dishwashing preparations because any potential toxins would likely be specific to the company and the chemicals used in the dishwashing formula.

Check out Seventh Generation Natural Automatic Dishwasher Detergent Free and Clear. It is non-toxic and biodegradable and is chlorine and phosphate free. You can find this product at [www.drugstore.com](http://www.drugstore.com). Bear in mind that your bird must not be permitted to eat or play with any household chemicals or cleaning preparations, including fabric softener sheets. I also advise against using these sheets when drying your bird's cage cover, as your bird may be sensitive to any chemical residue or scent remaining in the fabric.