

Stainless Steel, The New Black?

This sleek, modern material has transformed bathrooms, kitchens and now bird cages.

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By Anastasia Thrift

Dry Clean Only – No Way!

Steel yourself — cleaning stainless is painless. The Specialty Steel Industry of North America (SSINA) lists these tips on its website www.ssina.com. It emphasizes is that a clean water wash and wipe is the best method for cleaning stainless steel. If you must use something else, follow these rules.

- Fight fingerprints with this bird-safe solution. Make a paste of baking soda and water and spread on cage bars with a soft rag. Rinse with warm water.
- Don't scratch that! Steer clear of steel wool and carbon steel brushes; toss abrasive cleansers. These may be the only things that will lead to rusting stainless steel, by cutting into the surface and exposing chromium and nickel beneath.
- Say yes to organic solvents. Stay away from these verboten ingredients: Chlorine, acetone, methyl alcohol and mineral spirits.
- Fearlessly take a hose to stainless steel for major cleanings and don't fret over water that escapes the drying towel. Surgical/Medical Grade stainless steel is meant to never rust. Learn to love the words "Corrosion resistant."

Fashionistas and feathered friends alike know that stainless steel is more than a passing fad in the cage-making world. Strong, immaculate and gorgeous, these models are no waifs. Call it Industrial Chic — or just smart — stainless steel is here to stay.

"It fits the modern home," said Andrew King, owner of Kings Cages, which began manufacturing stainless-steel models in 2001. "The trend really took off about two or three years ago." Kitchens featuring sleek, brushed-aluminum ranges, ovens and refrigerators began showing up in the late 90s and continue today. Many new kitchens are fabulously outfitted in these materials, and picky bird owners can't clash.

"We started making them in 2002, when the kitchen trend was taking off," said Carol Frank of Avian Adventures. Back then, Avian Adventures ordered two models out of eight to be stainless steel. "We asked our factory as an afterthought, 'Why don't we try makin' 'em stainless steel?' We definitely noticed their popularity." Now, all eight Avian Adventure

models are available in stainless steel.

The pages of BIRD TALK (or as we say, Bird Vogue) are glinting with pictures of stainless-steel cages. Notice their sleek lines, their ease of coordination with any decor and their promise of a long and fulfilling relationship. Strong bars won't bend and higher-grade metals resist rust. Stainless steel is with you for the long haul, and in bird years, that means something.

More Bling For Your Ka-Ching

Your pockets may hurt at the mere thought of shelling out for a stainless-steel cage, which is sometimes twice as expensive as others. Paying the initial cost is daunting to some, true, but not paying for a new cage in a few years is thrilling to all.

"Stainless steel is the only thing that is bird-proof," said King. "The bird industry has grown tremendously, and more people have become interested, informed. People learned that birds have beaks, and beaks can chip paint."

Off-The-Rack Sizing

Who's In Steel Style?

Cage and accessory hawkers confess that consumers are mad for stainless steel. A poll of online retailers reveals the percentage of species living large with this hot metal:

Large (macaws, cockatoos) – 61%

Medium (Eclectus, African greys) – 30%

Small (conure, cockatiels) – 9%

"It's durable when the larger birds get chewing," said Martin Howley of Quality Discount Cages. "About 95 percent are bought to house the larger birds, but the smaller ones make up part of the larger number."

Figures courtesy Bird Cages 4 Less and Quality Discount Cages.

Stainless-steel cages will house your large parrot in a chic chateau, instantly turning it from Amazon to Glamazon. But it's not just big beaks that wreak havoc — small birds dig these new digs as well.

Frank says that although her stainless-steel cages are mainly sold to macaw owners, other bird owners are following suit.

“Our stainless-steel Chiquita model [cockatiel to Amazon size] was No. 1 for us last year.” Fashion can’t forget petites, after all.

“I love the cage,” said quaker parrot owner Lynne Muse of Minnesota. “[Kiwi] was in the same type of cage, but powder coated. I traded up to the stainless-steel about seven years ago, and it still shows no wear and tear.”

Brenda Piper of Massachusetts gradually added stainless-steel cages for her flock — 28 quakers and four large macaws. “We needed the double-welded cage because our macaws’ strong beaks could easily bend or snap the bars on many cages. Then, because we found out how easy they were to clean, we asked for cockatoo-sized cages with smaller bar spacing.”

“The quakers definitely benefit, as does my poor husband who has to clean the cages,” Piper continued. “If people can afford them, they are well worth the extra money.”

Unleaded, Please

When you say “Hello” to stainless steel, you can kiss chipped paint goodbye. That’s not just fashion-forward thinking — that’s protection for your bird’s health. That paint your parrot chipped on its cage? It could wind up as a snack. Nuts and bolts made with zinc are just as powerless against determined parrots; stainless-steel cages are typically made of all-weld construction without lead or zinc.

And there are more health benefits to stainless steel. It can be completely disinfected, and it will not rust. That’s why it’s used for human surgical instruments. “Surgical Grade” or “Medical Grade” aren’t just buzzwords. When they’re used to describe the grade of stainless steel, you know you’re getting the very best.

“With people learning more about avian diseases, they want a cage that is easy to clean completely,” King said. “And these cages are.” Cleaning is so easy, you may ditch your wire brush like a bad date.

Beauty & Brains

Because of the health perks, your vet’s probably hip to this trend. It’s common to find vets who use stainless-steel cages in their practice.

Dr. Larry Nemetz, an avian-only vet in Southern California, opened his own store called Birdstuff this year and sells cages solely in stainless steel. Manager Donna Garrou explained where their decision came from:

“Saffron, our toucan, is a ‘wet’ bird. Not only does she bathe often and eat a lot of fruit, her droppings are very wet. Sometimes she’d rust out a cage bottom in only seven months.”

After seeing stainless-steel cages at a show, Garrou gave one a try. Three years later, Saffron is sitting pretty in a rust-free cage. But that's not all. "Really, what might be the best thing is that they're so easy to clean." Garrou can hose down a cage and not worry about upbraided paint or lingering water that will lead to rust.

Branching Out

Stainless steel is big — but it can be small, too. Cockatiels and quakers already seek shelter in the smaller cage models. Now ringstands and playgyms are joining the ranks of stainless-accented accouterments.

"We make a bird rest shelf — like a little corner shelf. It's so cute," said Frank, clearly charmed by the lure of this metal. Avian Accents also makes stainless-steel playgyms and a full recreation center, which Frank said is for the "real die-hard stainless steel fans."

Toys are showing up in stainless style, too. Macaw mandibles are no match for the bells and foot toys popping up on bird store shelves.

At the end of the shopping day, though, the cages remain the most revolutionary items in stainless-steel style.

"In a nutshell, it's the safety and it tends to be more economical in the long run," Garrou said. The initial cost can be a shock, true, but if you don't have to replace it as often as other cages, stainless steel can be the perennial classic in your bird's wardrobe.

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