

Top 3 Bird-Owning States

BIRD TALK readers chose Florida, California and Texas as their favorites.

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By Rose Gordon

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People keep companion birds throughout the United States, from Florida to Alaska, but is there one state that it is better, or easier, for bird owners? When asked by BIRD TALK, pet owners, breeders and veterinarians repeatedly listed Florida, California and Texas as the three best states for birds. Why? Access to avian veterinarians, bird-oriented clubs and shops and a steady stream of sunshine topped the list of the most important factors for bird owners.

The Sunshine States

Many avian veterinarians suggest frequent bathing and direct sunlight (not filtered through a window) promote healthy plumage -- which, of course, are easier to obtain in "sunshine" states.

Dr. Bridget Ferguson, DVM, ABVP, who has an 8-year avian practice at Holly Street

San Diego, California
Courtesy of San Diego's Convention and Visitors Bureau
Pet Hospital in San Carlos, California, said that "weather is a big factor." She mentioned southern states including Florida, Southern California and Texas as being the favorable places to raise birds.

BIRD TALK reader Jillian Baptist of Florida voted for her home state. "Florida is hands down the best state to live in when you are a bird owner -- especially near the coast. The temperate climate and high humidity keep my birds' feathers in top condition." Baptist adds, "I can grow organic veggies and fruits in my own backyard."

Access to the proper food items needed to raise a bird should be a top priority for bird owners, Laurella Desborough, vice president of legislative affairs for the American Federation of Aviculture (AFA) and a resident of Florida, said. Access to a knowledgeable avian veterinarian, however, is just as critical, she pointed out, citing an incident with one of her own birds that suddenly came down with zinc poisoning. The bird, thanks to a quick avian vet visit, is still alive and is now a successful breeder.

The Association of Avian Veterinarians' online member listing confirms that Florida, Texas and California all have a high number of avian certified veterinarians. They also have schools working on avian research, such as Texas A&M and UC Davis. Many popular pet bird conventions take place in these areas, such as the National Parrot Festival in Houston, Texas, and the sheer number of bird owners mean plenty of shows and bird club activities every weekend.

Brenda Schroeder, a BIRD TALK reader in Southern California, believes that California has it all. She answered: "California! Huge community of bird owners, excellent vets, wonderful weather."

Jeff Downing, editor of the American Dove Association (ADA) newsletter and a resident of Maryland said, "The ADA averages 700 members throughout the United States. Our top three states as far as members are California, Texas and Florida. Most species of doves require warm, arid climates and these states require less management during cooler times of the year." He added that large breeders are also typically located in warmer states.

The water tower and John Hancock buildings in Chicago, Illinois. Despite the cold weather, readers voted for several Midwestern states as their favorites. Courtesy of Chicago Office of Tourism Despite Chilly Temps, Midwest Is Popular

Although southern states were judged more favorable for bird owners, the Midwest region had its fans too.

Lisa Pajkos, president of the Northwest Indiana Bird Association said, "In northwest Indiana, you have access to Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin where some of the best caged-bird shows take place." She added that avian care is just a short car ride away. "Within a 25-mile radius anywhere in northwest Indiana, you have access to at least two certified avian vets. When the avian vets in Indiana cannot provide appropriate care, a short 50 miles away in Chicago is one of the best exotic animal hospitals."

Although weather can be troublesome in the northern areas, Connie Larson of the Greater Chicago Cage Bird Club said there are ways around it. "Because weather is so bad in the winter, we don't have the number of breeders that Florida or California have. However, our bird specialty shops ship in babies and

finish hand-feeding, so variety is still very good."

"Minnesota is one of the best states to own a bird since resources for pet bird owners are many," says Mary Karlquist, president of the Minnesota Companion Bird Association. "We have an exceptional veterinarian college here in Minnesota with a fantastic avian program. We have many veterinarians in Minnesota that specialize in avian medicine. We also have two manufacturers of pet bird pellet(s) located in Minnesota."

Dr. David Kersting, DVM, adds that having an avian behaviorist nearby can be just as important as a veterinarian is. His 17-year-old practice, Bird Medicine and Surgery in St. Louis, Missouri, counts birds as 80 percent of their clientele, and he said he's been "dealing with a lot of biting, aggression and feather picking." As a result, seven years ago, his practice implemented a one-on-one behavior modification program both for baby and adult birds as well as their owners.

Trouble in Paradise?

Of course, not everything is perfect in these popular states. Dr. Ferguson said that exposure to parasites could be particularly problematic in Florida, Georgia and Southern California. Warm, damp areas often exacerbate the problem, however, exposure to ultraviolet light will kill a lot of bacteria, she added.

Dr. Kersting warned that during the warmer months, exposure to West Nile virus could be a problem for birds outdoors. "We deal with the West Nile along the Mississippi," he said. "I recommend avoiding mosquito feeding hours. Take your bird out on sunny days, after 11 [am] and before 4 [pm]."

There is also the danger of natural disasters, such as the hurricane season in Florida and the fire season in California.

All States, All Good

But what if you don't live in one of these states? What if you live in Maine or Florida was voted the best state for bird owners, because of its beautiful weather and outstanding bird community that includes a number of avian vets. Courtesy of the City of St. Petersburg Montana? As Howard Voren, president and founder of the Organization of Professional Aviculturists, said, "There's no bad state to own a bird. If you have a healthy, happy bird, it doesn't matter."

For some, maneuvering around weather is just as normal as the seasons changing.

BIRD TALK reader Mary Rahl said, "Living in the Northeast, I would not say this is the best climate to keep birds but since moving is not an option, we make the best of it and are prepared for what winter throws at us."

Desborough said, "I don't think weather is so important." She added that breeders of larger species such as macaws, may find the southern states "more desirable" for housing, but that a pet owner shouldn't have a problem elsewhere.

Dr. Laura Wade, DVM, ABVP of All Creatures Hospital -- the first animal hospital specializing in avian and exotics in western New York -- said that any state can be a good choice as long as "the inside environment is good."

During winter months this may mean keeping the thermostat a little higher, but temperature is one of the easiest things to adjust for your birds. "I have [members] in Alaska that own birds, people in Florida that own birds -- they're all sitting in a 78-degree house," Voren emphasized.

There are steps you can take to ensure the well-being of your bird even if you don't live in one of the "sunshine" states. Frequent bathing, access to full-spectrum lighting for a few hours a day and possibly a humidifier can help during the winter months, Dr. Wade said. A spray mister might help in extremely dry but warm areas, such as Arizona.

Locating an avian veterinarian before an emergency is important. Birds USA, published by the editors of BIRD TALK, includes an annual directory to avian veterinarians. Another good resource is the Association of Avian Veterinarians' Vet Look-up, available at www.aav.org.

City-Dwelling Birds

Cities often attract more specialists, such as avian veterinarians and avian behaviorists, making them desirable places to live. Unfortunately, urban areas where housing is often closer together can be problematic for people with larger, noisier species, such as cockatoos and macaws. Larson of the Greater Chicago Cage Bird Club says it this way: "Homes tend to be close together, making for trouble with noisy birds and nosy neighbors."

With rising prices in most housing markets, it can be difficult to obtain an affordable home with the space necessary for large and noisy parrots. In California, the median price of a single-family home in October 2004 was \$460,370, according to the California Association of Realtors. California, of course, has numerous expensive, coastline properties, yet, the House Price Index published by the Office of Federal Housing Enterprise Oversight, shows that the price of a single-family

home is rising significantly throughout the United States, particularly in Nevada, Hawaii, California, Washington, D.C. and Rhode Island.

Quaker Update

Many states ban the ownership of Quakers.

Banned

Tennessee

California

Wyoming

Connecticut

Georgia (breeding OK)

Hawaii

Kansas

Kentucky

Pennsylvania

Rhode Island

With Restrictions* Maine and New Jersey require a permit (which is not always granted).

* Ohio requires that pet Quakers have their wing feathers trimmed at all times.

Source: Quakerville (www.quakerville.net).

Check with your state, because these laws can change. Is My Bird Illegal?

Legal issues, which all pet owners face, are a third factor when considering the best state for a bird owner, aside from climate and access to services and supplies. Many laws are enacted to protect the rights of animals and pets, such as safe transport and housing requirements; space and cleanliness inspections in pet stores; mandatory shots that can reduce the spread of disease; and anti-cruelty laws.

Other laws seek to restrain the way people keep pets, however, and birds are among those animals regulated.

Noise ordinances, common in most local governments' code of laws, often single out birds as potential noisemakers. If you've been up close to a playful macaw or a cockatoo, you might understand this reasoning.

Exter, Pennsylvania, a township in Berks county, specifically says you may be fined for "Owning, possessing, harboring or controlling any animal or bird which howls, barks, meows, squawks, or makes other sounds continuously and/or incessantly for a period of ten minutes or makes such noise intermittently for one-half hour or more to the disturbance of any person at any time of the day or night..." Houston, Texas, Cleveland, Ohio and Summit Township in Michigan are just some of the other towns that have similar noise ordinances.

Some local municipalities have laws limiting the number of pets allowed in each household; although these usually apply to dogs and cats, there have been some cases of legislation that limit the number of birds each person can own. For example, in Blaine, Minnesota, residents are allowed to own no more than three domestic pets of any one type (birds included). Dr. Ferguson said that her town restricts the number of each species of bird she can own, but she is able to keep a hawk head, two different kinds of conures and a Lady Gouldian finch, among others.

Breeders, or hobby aviculturists, thinking of building an outdoor aviary should be aware of any laws restricting the construction of outdoor structures. Many states have laws requiring a license to breed or sell birds. There are also laws that prevent birds from being shipped in or out of them without a permit N Rhode Island, for example.

Parrot behavior consultant, Sally Blanchard, and Diana Holloway, president of the Amazona Society, at the Houston Parrot Festival. Courtesy of Houston Parrot Festival New Jersey, has gained a reputation for being extremely restrictive toward bird owners. African greys, macaws and sun conures, among other species, are not legal without first applying for a permit. Budgies, cockatiels, zebra finches and several other species are legal to own without a permit. There is also a ban on producing hybrid birds. See www.state.nj.us/dep/fgw/pdf/permregs.pdf for more information.

BIRD TALK reader Angel Brown of New Jersey believes that "New Jersey is one of the most restrictive states in regards to which species are outlawed and our permit fees." But she adds, "I live in southern New Jersey and we do have access to many avian certified vets."

Other laws include requiring birds to be banded, restricting the sale of unweaned birds (California) and not allowing domestic birds to be loose outdoors. Pigeons and doves are often regulated by laws written for farm birds.

Most states, however, require birds have a clean bill of health when crossing state or country lines. Carry a recent health certificate from your veterinarian while traveling. Some states may have additional restrictions, so find this information out before you leave. You might want to carry a record of ownership as well, according to Desborough.

Dr. Kersting said that in addition to travel regulations, Missouri requires that any bird with psittacosis be reported to the health department.

Although a sunny climate and access to an urban area with avian supplies and veterinarians may make life as a bird owner easier, there are ways to get around these complications. As one BIRD TALK reader put it: "The best state to own a bird is a state of responsibility, sensitivity and love," said Sarah Cordish of Jerusalem.

Rose Gordon is the assistant editor of BIRD TALK. She resides in Southern California and has counted a cockatiel, a

lovebird and numerous budgies among her flock.