

Ready For Pet Bird Ownership?

Before taking the first step toward pet bird ownership, look at what you'll be getting into.

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Courtesy Anne Schindler, California

Choosing to share your life with a companion pet bird calls for a long-term commitment. That's why you should never purchase a pet bird or adopt a pet bird as an impulse buy.

Choosing to share your life with a companion bird calls for a long-term commitment. That's why you should never purchase a bird or adopt a bird as an impulse buy. The decision needs to be well thought-out and well researched.

All too often, people sell or give away pet birds because the relationship didn't work out. This usually happens because these owners did not fully research the type of pet bird they were buying or adopting and did not understand all of its needs. Consequently, the pet bird became frustrated or upset and developed behavioral problems.

Commitment

Some people adopt pet birds because they believe pet birds are easier to care for than a dog or cat. They believe that by merely providing some seed, fresh water and occasional cage cleaning, the needs of a bird are met. In reality, birds are very social animals, highly intelligent and need regular interaction.

You must commit to interacting with your pet bird on a regular basis. Pet birds require periods of activity outside the cage (except canaries and finches, which can remain in the cage if provided spacious accommodations). Birds that are not given quality time can become emotionally frustrated and develop bad habits such as feather picking or aggressive behavior. This is especially true of larger birds, which generally require more attention.

Expense

Smaller parrots, such as conures, have become more popular recently due to their relatively lower purchase cost, and their wonderful personalities. However, while the initial costs may be high for a larger bird (cost of the bird, cage, toys and initial veterinary examination), long-term care costs are not that expensive. Considering the longevity of these birds, it may be a small price to pay for many years of companionship. Nonetheless, prospective buyers must understand the financial responsibilities of bird ownership and be willing to take them on.

Housing Restrictions

Before choosing to adopt a pet bird, find out about possible pet restrictions where you live. Does your apartment or condo allow pets? If so, are there restrictions against birds? If you rent, check your lease to make sure birds are allowed, and see if a pet deposit is required.

Noise

Some birds are notorious screamers, and, all birds make some noise. Research the type of bird before you buy to determine its "noise potential." Apartment and condo dwellers could have problems with their neighbors if they have a larger, vocal bird, such as an Amazon or macaw.

Size

Make sure you have adequate space for the type of bird and an appropriate-sized cage. A large bird and cage might be too overwhelming for some living spaces. Birds require freedom and activity outside of the cage, too. Bird owners should provide ample time and space for regular activity outside the cage.

Other Animals

If you have other pets at home, potential exists for a tragic encounter. Even though your dog or cat is a sweet, loving pet, never allow your bird out with other animals unless all are carefully supervised. Too often, fatalities or serious injuries occur to birds because of attacks by other pets. Cat bites or scratches, no matter how harmless they seem, can be fatal to a bird.

A major cause of injury to pet birds is attacks by other pet birds. Some birds become jealous or territorial, and look upon other birds in the home as intruders or rivals. Removed toes and severely injured beaks often result.

Injuries can also occur when one bird is loose while the others are caged. An aggressive, or simply curious, bird may land on a cage and attack the bird inside, biting at the toes and beak. The reverse can occur when a loose bird lands on the cage of an aggressive bird and is attacked. Monitor all of your birds closely to make sure that they don't fight with each other.

Children

Children need to understand that birds have powerful beaks and will bite. Larger parrots might sometimes give a quick "test bite" and should not be trusted around small children. Even a small nip can cause significant damage to a child's finger, ear or eye. If a child is too young to understand the dangers of sticking his or her fingers in the cage, the cage should be "child-proofed" placed out of a child's reach. This will also prevent the bird from developing a fear of hands.

Allergies

If you or someone in your household is allergy-prone, find out if birds may be a problem. Certain birds, such as cockatoos, cockatiels and African greys, produce more dust and dander than other birds and are more likely to cause allergic reactions in sensitive individuals. However, any bird has the potential to trigger an allergic reaction. Another condition, hypersensitivity pneumonitis (or bird keeper's lung), is caused by an allergic response to aerosolized proteins from avian fecal matter. This condition can lead to scarring of the lungs.

Cleaning

Good hygiene is one of the most important aspects of pet bird care. Dirty food and water cups are a potential source of infection for a bird, as are dirty cages with caked-on fecal matter. Likewise, dirty, dusty cages have the potential to cause illness or allergies in people.

Keep your bird's cage and equipment clean to help reduce the risk of disease for both you and your bird. Make the commitment daily to change the cage linen, bedding, and food and water cups daily.

Nutrition

Malnutrition is one of the most common problems seen in pet birds, especially vitamin-A and calcium deficiencies. Hepatic lipidosis (fatty liver) and other conditions related to high-fat diets are also common in pet birds.

Learn the nutritional needs of the species you plan to purchase. Give clean, fresh food, properly stored, that provides a balanced source of nutrition. A good diet provides better resistance to disease and the best chance for a longer and healthier life.

Talking Ability

Many people want a bird that talks. Even if a particular species is known for talking, no guarantees exist that an individual bird will talk. However, a bird doesn't have to talk to be interactive, affectionate and capable of communicating with you.

Longevity

Pet birds have a wide range of life spans, and some of the larger birds can live as long as humans. Parrot ownership is a long-term commitment, and arrangements should be made for the care of a bird if its life span may exceed that of its owner.

Experience

If you have little or no pet bird experience, consider a smaller species — large birds can be more challenging. Once you have mastered the care of a smaller bird, you can consider adding a larger bird to your household.

Before you do this, make sure you can control a large bird. Large birds can become aggressive if they learn to dominate an inexperienced owner. In these situations, the relationship between bird and owner will deteriorate. Experienced bird owners generally do better with larger birds, because they are usually better prepared to deal with behavioral issues as they arise.

Bird Sources

Pet birds can be purchased from several different sources, such as pet stores, bird breeders, bird shows and marts, as well as bird adoption groups and other pet bird owners. Exercise caution, check references, and do as much research as possible before you buy. Ask for a written guarantee at the time you make the purchase. Written bird guarantees often require that the bird be checked by an avian veterinarian by a certain period of time. This is to ensure the bird is healthy at the time of purchase because it could be harboring a disease that is not outwardly apparent. If the bird becomes ill outside the guarantee period and was not examined by a vet, the seller is not obligated to refund your money or replace

the bird.

Quarantine

When a bird is placed in a new environment, the risk of disease transmission is great. If the new bird is carrying disease organisms, they may be shed when the bird becomes stressed. If this happens, the disease may be transmitted to other birds in the household.

To protect your established flock — and the new bird — isolate new birds for at least 30 days. Even if a newly purchased bird has received a clean bill of health by an avian veterinarian, you should still follow the 30-day quarantine. A condition may be incubating and could develop later.

When quarantining a new bird, house it in a different room, preferably with a separate air flow. Wash equipment separately, and, after handling the bird, wash your hands thoroughly before touching other birds.

Veterinary Care

Yearly physical examinations are strongly recommended for all birds and should include blood work, oral swabs and fecal examination. Being prey animals, birds are good at hiding illness until it is far advanced. Learn the signs of illness in pet birds, and seek veterinary care if you suspect illness in your pet. If symptoms of disease are ignored or unrecognized, a bird can become so ill that recovery is difficult.

If you are prepared before you buy, your experience with bird ownership will be a positive one. You'll find that pet birds make highly intelligent, interactive and loving companions.