

Find the Perfect Pet Sitter

Make Sure Your Bird Is In Good Hands While You're Away

By Rebecca Sweat

Knowing that you have a competent person caring for your pet bird will make your time away from home less stressful and that much more enjoyable. Here are ways to find someone you can trust:

The Professional Pet Sitter

You can arrange to have the pet sitter come out to your home once, twice or three times a day. The sitter will clean out cages, provide clean water and food, and even play and cuddle with the parrots.

Questions to ask: Ask how many times each day will he/she come to your home, how much time will he/she spend during each visit, and if he/she will interact with your bird. Find out what steps are taken to prevent the transmission of disease. (Viruses can be shed onto clothing, hair and shoes, so pet sitters should shower and change after leaving one home before going to the next.) Ask for proof or documentation showing that the sitter is bonded and has commercial liability insurance. On average, most professional pet sitters charge around \$12 for each half-hour visit.

Friends And Family

Of course, some birds actually enjoy going somewhere while their owners are on vacation. You may have a friend or relative who gets along well with your bird and would be happy to let it stay with him or her while you are on your trip.

Boarding Facility

Another option is to board your bird at a professional facility. This could mean taking your bird to a pet shop or veterinary clinic that offers vacation care to pets. There are also bird boarding facilities in some parts of the country.

Ask the facility staff how often the cages are cleaned, the type of diet fed to birds in its care and how often the water is changed. Ask if the birds are taken out of their cages for exercise and how often are the birds checked on weekends and holidays. Does the facility take steps to prevent the spread of disease? If the facility provide cages they should be at least two times the bird's wingspan. Fees vary, but most facilities charge around \$10 a day to board small-to-medium birds and \$15 a day for large birds.

Get Referrals

- 1) Ask other bird owners, your veterinarian, local bird clubs or local pet stores for recommendations. What did they like and dislike about the service.
- 2) Get a referral from a professional pet sitting association such as PSI or National Association of Professional Pet Sitters (NAPPS). For the names of PSI member pet sitters in your area, call the PSI locator line at (336) 983-9222, or visit www.petsit.com. For a list of NAPPS member pet sitters in your area, call their sitter referral line at (800) 296-PETS or go online at www.petsitters.org.

It may be necessary to arrange pet care two or three months in advance to ensure the caretaker you want will be available.

Seal The Deal

Have your parrot meet the pet sitter to see how the caregiver interacts with it and whether or not he or she is truly comfortable handling your bird. Questions to ask include:

- 1) How did you get involved in the pet care business?
- 2) What is your professional background and experience with birds. (What species are you familiar with, how extensive is your knowledge of avian diseases and dietary requirements?)
- 3) What do you believe is the best way to restrain a parrot, to handle excessive noise and to correct a biting bird, etc.
- 4) Are you associated with an avian veterinarian who can provide emergency services?
- 5) Do you provide a written service contract spelling out services and fees?
- 6) What happens if you become ill — is there a backup person?

Get a signed contract that states what services you will be receiving and how often they will be provided. Make sure the contract lists the itemized charges for each service.

Before You Go

1) Provide a detailed, written list of instructions with the caretaker. List the amount of food and water to give, the name and dosage of any medications, favorite toys or activities, as well as the phone numbers of the hotel(s) you'll be staying, your veterinarian and a friend who knows your pet.

2) Give your veterinarian the name of your pet sitter, too, and a signed letter authorizing treatment of any unexpected illness while you are away. When you return home, call your sitter to let him know you've arrived.

Should They Stay Or Should They Go? If your parrot is used to you being home most of the time, he may not do well with someone coming by just once a day for 15 minutes.

Behaviors such as screaming, feather picking, self mutilation and nail biting can all be the result of a bird being left in a cage with little or no interaction for several days. The single-kept parrot that is used to lots of human interaction may be better off having a live-in house sitter or staying with a friend or a boarding facility where it can be around people most of the day. Older parrots that are used to a quieter lifestyle and less interaction with humans or untame, "hands-off" species of birds usually do fine just having a pet sitter come by. Or, you may own multiple parrots — each with their own cage but are still able to "chatter" with one another — and they would be okay staying at home with a drop-in caretaker.

If you use a come-to-your home pet sitter, have that person come by two or three times each day — once to clean out cages and provide fresh water and food, and then once or twice again that day to check on the birds.