



Guide to Bird Care



CONGRATULATIONS on your newest family member!

We would like to thank you for choosing to adopt from the Animal Welfare League QLD and want to equip you with all the information you should need to create a happy, healthy and lasting relationship with your new bird.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR BIRD

Birds are beautiful, highly intelligent creatures and for many years have been wrongly labeled as “low-maintenance” pets- but nothing could be further from the truth! The AWL receives many unwanted pet birds through refuges simply because people are unaware of individual bird’s needs. Every bird is unique and it is very important that you are aware of the specific needs of *your* pet.



The bird you have chosen will either be a “Companion Bird” or an “Aviary Bird”.

Companion Birds

Companion birds are those which have bonded to a person and require a large amount of time with their ‘companion’. They often have spent their life indoors as part of the family. They enjoy human company, may be often hand tamed and depending on their age and history, can continue to be trained. Many parrots will commonly imprint on one member of the family or may tolerate females over males or visa-versa. All members of the family should be aware of the bird’s needs, behaviors and training.

Aviary Birds

These birds have been born and raised in an aviary and have had little or no human interaction other than feeding and cleaning. They will need a large protected aviary outside with room to fly short distances. They may also need the companionship of other birds (specifics will be outlined for each bird).

Sex Determination

Some species of birds exhibit sexually dimorphic colourings meaning that you may tell their sex from their colouring or patterning e.g. Indian Ringnecks or Budgies. For those that are not, the sex of the bird can be determined by a specific DNA blood test.

Species

Different species of birds have different care requirements including varied diets, enrichment needs and housing requirements- just like dogs and cats! Familiarising yourself with your bird's species will not only allow you to provide them with proper care but also give you an insight into their behaviour, natural diet and the history of the species and the requirements of your new pet. .

Budgerigars & Cockatiels - Small Domestic Native Parrots



Budgies and cockatiels are both small parrots native to Australia. These are the two most common species of birds kept as pets. They are both very social breeds of parrot and do well in pairs or with company. They are intelligent birds that require a variety of enrichment to keep them happy, healthy and entertained, and can be taught to talk and whistle. Cockatiels in



particular are great mimics especially with noises like the ring of a phone, an alarm clock or any other frequently heard tune. Like all parrots, they will be inclined to be noisy at dawn and dusk, and will trash anything that can be chewed up with their strong beaks. They are seed eaters who enjoy a variety of seeding grasses, native weeds, fruit and vegetables, and formulated pellets to keep them healthy.

Life Span: 15 – 20 years depending on diet and husbandry

Lorikeets- Small Domestic Native Parrots



The clowns of the parrot world. Lorikeets, like most parrots, are cheeky, inquisitive, playful and occasionally adorably idiotic which, when combined with their spectacular colours, make them popular as pets, despite their loud screeching at dusk. There are over 30 species of Lorikeet worldwide that can be kept as pets, but the 3 most common in Australia are the Rainbow, Scaly Breasted and the Red-Collared who are Australian Natives.

Special requirements: Unlike other parrots, lorikeets are not designed to eat seed, they require a special diet of Lorikeet and Honey eater mix, Lorikeet pellets and soft fruit. As a result have particularly liquid excrement which can be objectionable to some. They are not suitable to be kept with other kinds of parrot species due to their specialist feeding requirements.

Life Span: Scaly breasted- up to 10 years

Rainbow- approx 15 years
Red collared – 15-20 years

Small Exotic Parrots (Conures, Lovebirds, Ringnecks, Quakers etc)



Conures: These beautiful little parrots originate from Central and South America, but in type, temperament and behaviour they are not unlike the smaller Australian parrots. Gregarious and playful with a lot of personality, these guys need lots of attentions and plenty of enrichment. Be aware that conures have very loud, screeching voices for a bird their size and they aren't afraid to use it!

Life Span: anywhere from 10-35 years



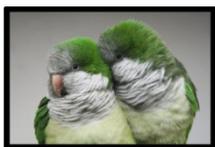
Lovebirds: Lovebirds are a very social animal and do best when kept with others of their kind. Because they are such social creatures, they are determined to establish their place quite literally in the pecking order, regardless of what form their "flock" takes: it might be other birds, pets or people! For this reason, they can be a bit bossy, demanding and commandeering. They require lots of enrichment to keep them busy. They are cheeky little devils that are a delight to those prepared for their extra personality, but difficult for those who are looking for a quiet, docile pet.

Life Span: 10-15 years



Indian Ringnecks: Indian Ringnecks are in general not particularly affectionate by nature and therefore can cope with minimal attention for a time - but this doesn't mean they can be ignored! Like all parrots, these guys are social creatures and need lots of enrichment and interaction to be healthy and happy - and there are always individuals that are just as affectionate as other parrots. There are some that believe the reason for their supposed 'indifference' is that they have always been bred for their beautiful colour mutations rather than their qualities as a pet. They are generally very stable and can bond strongly with their chosen people. However, if they are not socialised correctly the female will actively chase away anyone else from her chosen person while the male will just avoid them.

Life Span: 25 - 30 years on average, with ages of up to 50 years sometimes being achieved.



Quakers: Originally from South America, the Quaker Parrot is a highly social bird with complex social structures and moderate noise levels (for a parrot). They are inquisitive and cheeky, often "talking" with a raspy, chattering voice although their ability to mimic human speech is said to be excellent. They frequently bond very closely with just one person in their human family and are very loyal to that person. Internationally, they are known for their sweet, affectionate personalities and their comical antics but don't be fooled

they can be very naughty and can be very protective of their “domain”. They are recommended as good beginner birds if the bird has been hand-reared. They are weavers in the wild and will build intricate structures if provided with lots of ropes and vines suspended and left loose in their cage.

Life Span: 25-30 years



Large Domestic Native Parrots (Cockatoos, Galahs, Corellas)

This group of birds are desired more for their personality than looks. Cockatoos are globally renowned if well socialised as being among the cuddliest parrots you can keep; Galah’s are goofy, playful and loyal and



Corella’s are considered the best ‘talkers’ of our domestic parrots and also the best biters!.

They are all well known for being vocal: they will scream at dusk and dawn and often when they get excited during play. It's a good idea to make sure that nobody within earshot is going to mind a screaming parrot being around before taking one on, checking with your neighbours and council bylaws is always a good start. These guys are much like the

working dogs of the bird world - you must put their energy, intelligence and curiosity to use, because failure to do so will only lead to bad things for you and your bird.

They require a lot of time and enrichment to keep them busy while you are away.

They like a varied diet of seeds, seeding native grasses, fruit, vegetables and branches to chew; they even like the odd grub! They are very long lived and require a significant commitment to take care of them: these aren't a short-term pet!

Thinking forward to what happens after you are gone is important for their future.

Life Span: Cockatoos: 70 – 100 years

Corellas: 50-60 years

Galahs: 30-80 years

Large Exotic Parrots (Alexandrines, Macaws, African Grey)



Alexandrine: Despite their comparatively large beaks, they are generally regarded as a very gentle bird and their affectionate disposition is well known. Alexandrines aren't suitable for absolute beginners, but they do make great pets for experienced and not-so-experienced bird owners alike. Like any parrot they do require a considerable amount of time and commitment from anyone considering adopting one. They can be quite noisy and need to be thoroughly and consistently socialised all their life or they will develop issues like aggression, feather plucking and/or become one-person only birds. They are very intelligent and can be trained to do a number of tricks using food rewards; they require a lot of enrichment to keep them entertained.

Life Span: Approx 30 years



Macaws: Not common in Australia and especially not in shelters, these birds require special permits to keep and are definitely NOT for beginners. If handled incorrectly, Macaws can become very aggressive and inflict significant damage. Their size means they are capable of dismembering digits like fingers, ears and toes!

Life Span: 50 + years



African Grey: Not especially common in Australia but growing in popularity above all else, these birds require commitment and stability. African Greys are very intelligent and bond very strongly with just one person, so it is vital to keep them well socialised all their life to prevent them from becoming shy and introverted with other people or aggressive. An exotic bird license is required to keep this species.

Life Span: 50-90 years

Finches and Canaries



These are grassland birds that do better with lots of horizontal space rather than vertical space. They can be quite shy and easily excitable. They make quaint, inoffensive pets that usually do not upset the neighbours so are suitable for most households. There are 18 native species that can legally be kept as pets in Australia, plus a few imported species such as the Canary and Java Finch (aka Java Sparrow). Finches usually do better in outdoor aviaries rather than indoors, but mouse-proof wiring is important to keep rodents out, or they will eat baby birds, eggs and even the birds themselves!

Special requirements: Grasses to hide/play in, Pesticide free grass and grass seeds such as chickweed, canary, millet and palm.

Life Span: 6-8 years

Your Bird's Homecoming

Your new companion has just been through a life changing experience, some enter the AWL with no prior history with their confidence and trust shattered. They are dealing with a new environment, new people, new diet and often nothing familiar from home. You, as their new parent, will need to take things slow and be very patient in this transition period as they may exhibit behaviours that they normally would not display due to fear and uncertainty. Time and effort will be rewarded but a lot of patience in the interim will be required. You have only just met and you do not have a trusting relationship yet- trust has to be earned!

Follow these points to kick start your relationship in a positive way:

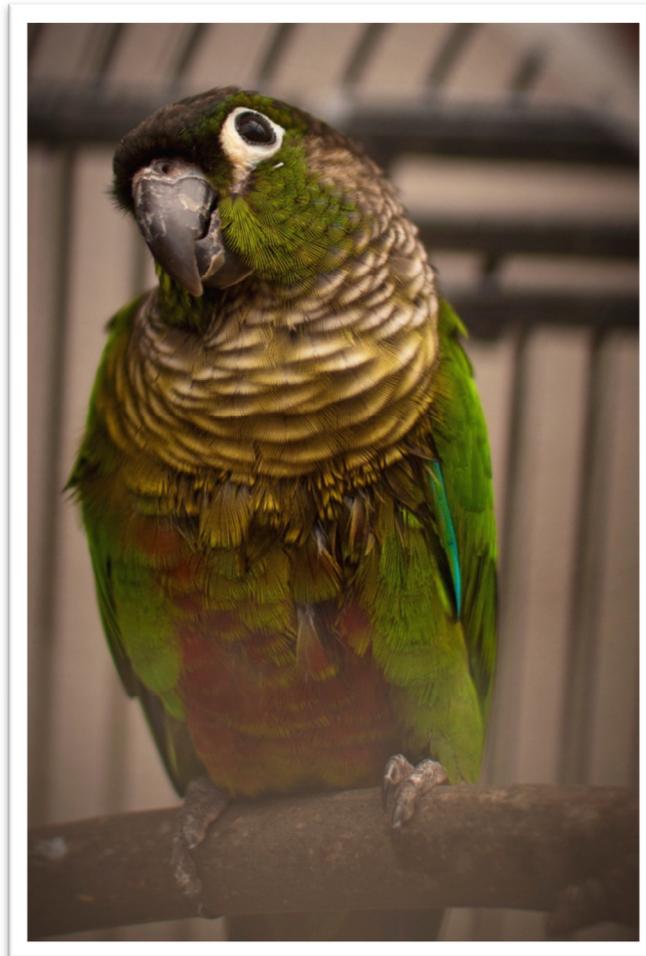
 Set your bird up in an appropriate cage in one place i.e. lounge or kitchen (for more information on housing suggestions see page 10) providing plenty of positive toys and healthy treats. Be aware that some bird's particularly older parrots that have never been provided with toys, will never play, they may also not recognise some food items; offer a variety until you find things they love.

 Take it SLOW! Do not rush into trying to make your bird do tricks or step

up; it will take months to build a relationship.

- ✍ Allow the bird time to observe and adjust to your daily routine- Parrots LOVE routine, and need to sleep at least twelve hours a night, cover at dusk and uncover at dawn. A lot of behaviour problems can be caused by not enough sleep.
- ✍ Hand feed the bird healthy treats that they only receive from you to form a positive association with you

ABOVE ALL ELSE: TAKE IT SLOW!



Introducing Birds to Each Other

As with introducing your new bird to your home, introducing your new bird to an existing bird is all about taking it **slow!** Remember every bird is unique and there is no typical length of time it will take for them to be comfortable in each other's company. It could take anywhere from a week to 6 months- you just need to stay positive and be patient.

NEVER put new birds into the same cage straight away!

Birds are very territorial and will not welcome a stranger into their home and territory without getting to know them first.

- ✍ You will need 2 cages to start with set up in the same room. Start with the cages a distance away from each other and gradually bring them closer together. This way the birds can see each other but cannot get to each other.
- ✍ Make sure both birds have places within their cages where they can hide, this can be in the form of browse or a cloth hanging in the cage.
- ✍ When you feel the birds are ready and safe to meet, allow them to meet in a neutral territory under strict supervision.
- ✍ Once the birds have had plenty of time to get used to each other and seem comfortable in each other's company you may allow them to be in one cage together. Where possible try to allow them to instigate this themselves.
- ✍ **CONSTANT SUPERVISION MUST BE PROVIDED AT THIS TIME.**
- ✍ Do not leave the birds together unsupervised until you are 100% sure they will not harm one another. Be sure there are plenty of places for them to hide from each other and get away.



DIET

Birds in the wild derive nourishment from a large variety of natural foods, which vary seasonally and regionally. Unfortunately, it is not possible to completely replicate the natural diets of parrots in captivity. A well-nourished bird will live longer, be more resistant to disease and be a generally happier member of a family.

***** Seed alone is NOT a balanced diet for any parrot species*****



Seed Eaters (Cockatiels, Budgerigars, Cockatoos and other Parrots)

Birds that are adopted through the AWL Qld should still have seed included in their diet as most will have not known anything else. The transition to a healthy more balanced diet needs to be done over a period of months and in some cases with older parrots they may never recognise pellets as food and will need a combination of both pellets and seed for the rest of their lives.

Seed-based Diets

The seeds commonly fed in seed mixes are not the usual seeds that parrots would eat in the wild. They are excessively high in fat and deficient in many vitamins, minerals and protein. Although some of these deficiencies can be corrected by adding other foods to the diet (such as pulses, vegetables and some fruit), birds tend to select only certain items, leading to malnourishment. Most seeds (especially sunflower seeds) are a favourite of birds because they contain up to 49% fat – that's more than a Mars Bar! (17%) They should only be offered as a treat and are great rewards in training sessions.

Soaked or sprouted seed is an alternate to dry seed and one that most parrots will take to readily, it is readily available in most pet stores always follow the instructions on the pack.

Pellets

Pelleted diets are an alternative to seed-based diets, because the birds are forced to consume the entire, balanced diet rather than to preferentially selecting certain items. Please see page 16 if your bird needs to undergo the conversion process to pellets.

Nectar Eaters (Lorikeets)

Lorikeets are very special as they are NOT seed eaters. Their diet in the wild consists of mainly nectars and pollens. In captivity they should be offered good quality commercial wet and dry lorikeet mix twice a day. Wet mix should be mixed fresh daily and needs to be changed regularly as it spoils easily in hot weather. Lorikeets will eat seed if given no other alternatives which can be very detrimental to their health. They should also be offered native flowers such as bottlebrushes, grevilleas and eucalyptus blossoms, and a small amount of soft fruit.



Other foods to offer:

For most parrots excluding Lorikeets 80% of the diet should be pellets with 20% being vegetables, fruits and a small amount of nuts and seeds. This ratio should be 60% pellets, 40% others for cockatiels.

Generally darker vegetables are considered more nutritious.

Recommended vegetables:

- Capsicum
- Zucchini
- Broccoli
- Squash
- Carrot
- Beans, peas and other pulses.
- Spinach, kale and Bokchoy

Recommended fruits- Fruits should make up no more than 5% of the diet.

- Kiwi fruit
- Strawberries
- Blueberries
- Grapes
- Small amounts of apple
- Melons
- Passionfruit

NEVER FEED AVOCADO, ONION, RHUBARB OR GARLIC (THESE CAN ALL BE TOXIC)

AVOID – celery, iceberg lettuce, excessively watery fruits – these are not toxic but are too diluted to be nutritious.

Converting your bird to pellets

Converting your bird to a pelleted diet is very beneficial but should always be overseen by an avian vet and monitoring your bird during this time to avoid complications is essential. Your bird will need to learn to identify pellets as a “food” that they can eat.



Weight: A pair of digital kitchen scales can be used to monitor your bird’s weight each morning before changing the food (an empty weight). Any weight loss in excess of 1% per week is excessive.

Droppings: A normal dropping has three parts – urine (liquid), urates (white) and faeces (brown or green). A bird eating sufficient food will have “full droppings”. They have bulk and volume and contain an adequate component of faeces. Empty droppings (birds not eating enough) are small and may only contain urates and urine and minimal or small volumes of faeces.

Amount eaten: Monitor the food dish to see how much of the pelleted diet was eaten. Each day the birds should be given fresh pellets in a container, placed in a favourite perch or position in the cage. Vegetables, greens and a small amount of fruit can also be placed in the cage as well. At the end of the day, if an insufficient amount of food has been eaten (using the above indicators), the bird should be allowed access to the normal diet (in a different container to the pellets) for no longer than 30 mins. After that time, the normal diet should be removed, leaving the pellets, vegetables and fruit. Alternately a combination of pellets and seed should be offered to begin with particularly for older birds who have been on total seed diet, slowly reducing the amount of seed over a period of time.

***Never starve your bird to make it eat pellets!
This can result in serious complications.***

Other things that may help:

Birds like to eat as part of a flock; meal times can be used as a stimulus for the birds to eat pellets. Don’t have the normal diet in the cage prior to meal time as this advantage will be lost.

For birds used to hand-fed treats, pretend to eat the pellets yourself and then offer the pellets by hand.

Budgerigars will often peck at the pellets if placed on a mirror or on the floor.

Praise the bird for eating the pellets.

When to attempt a diet change

Never change the diet of a thin or sick bird or your new bird when it first comes home – the stress of the diet change may be too much to tolerate. Feed thin or sick birds their usual diet until they have recovered, then look at changing the diet to a better one. It may take up to 4-6 weeks to fully convert a bird over to pellets, so ensure that you have the time and patience available for monitoring the bird during this time.

Housing

Imagine spending the rest of your life in a room the size of a toilet. This is how a lot of caged birds spend their entire lives! Make sure that the housing you provide your bird with is suitable for its size and allows the bird to move freely about its cage. Whether your bird is a companion bird or an aviary bird will influence the size its cage needs to be, however **NO CAGE IS TOO BIG!** The cage should be large enough your bird to express its natural behaviour, house enrichment items including branches of native browse with enough room left to stretch its wings, and move around the cage freely and must be sheltered from complete direct sunlight, wind and rain.

****** If purchasing a new cage of galvanized wire, to eliminate the risk of heavy metal poisoning, you must rub it down with neat vinegar and a scrubbing brush before rinsing with water. The cage will also need to be cleaned daily with an avian disinfectant to ensure all food particles and faeces are removed.

You will need perches for your bird to sit and walk along. Plastic or dowel perches are detrimental to feet conformation and are best replaced with natural tree branches as these provide greater exercise for the feet. Varying shapes and sizes are best being wide enough that the toes do not wrap all the way around the perch. Be sure that you are using non-toxic branches that are free of pesticides or chemicals.

Enrichment

Birds are very intelligent animals requiring mental stimulation and interaction on a daily basis. Keeping them occupied reduces unwanted behaviours, reduces stress and helps keep them happy and well-balanced pets. The majority of behavioural issues such as feather plucking, screeching, aggression and self-mutilation, often arise due to poor enrichment leading to boredom and stress.

Environment

In the wild large parrots will chew through branches and on bark daily. It is important that they still have this option in captivity. There are several native tree

branches that can be offered to your bird. It is important to check with a horticulturalist that the species you are offering your bird is non-toxic. Some favourite plant species are: Yellow Gum and Ironbarks, Casuarinas, Coastal Tea Tree, Firethorn, Honey Myrtle. Natural branches can also be used as perches. They should last anywhere from one week to a month depending on thickness and should be replaced as required. Chewing is a natural healthy habit and can also be encouraged with native flowers, gumnuts and pine cones (collected away from major roadsides).



Toys

There are a multitude of commercially available bird toys. The most important thing is to ensure that the toy is a suitable size for your bird. There are toys available that you can hide food in, which allows them to investigate and explore. Make sure these products are non-toxic.

Foraging

In the wild birds spend hours each day foraging for their food. It is important that we replicate this in captivity to give them a similar amount of mental stimulation and problem solving activities making them 'work' for their food. There are many different easy ways in which you can do this. A couple of examples are:



- 1) Placing food in cardboard boxes (tape removed), brown paper bags, used envelopes, egg cartons etc. so the bird has to rip into it to get food
- 2) Commercially available puzzle toys

3) Foraging bowls- a bowl filled with different bird safe items (i.e. no toxic paints) with small amounts of food hidden in the mix. Things to include can be wooden beads and sticks, shredded paper, Popcorn, small foot toys, Wooden shapes, paper kitty litter, millet etc.

Training

Just like dogs, birds require training to make handling easier, vet checks less stressful and to improve your relationship and understanding of each other. Training is also an excellent way of providing mental enrichment and stimulation. The only way to successfully and humanely train any animal is through positive reinforcement training. This is rewarding the behaviours we do want and ignoring those that we don't.

Bird Body Language

Being familiar with and respectful of bird body language is an essential element to becoming a good bird owner. Knowing how your bird is feeling will allow you to be more sensitive to their needs and wishes. This will in turn create trust and allow them to bond with you on a greater level. Having a good knowledge of your bird's body language is also very important in noticing when something is wrong and may allow you to detect illnesses in their early stages.

When reading body language we must always remember to look at the big picture! Individual behaviours by themselves can mean a number of different things and need to be paired with other behaviours to understand their true meaning.

For example: 'Pinning' or 'Flashing' (when a bird rapidly dilates and enlarges its pupils) can be a sign of excitement, fear, aggression or great interest in something. We need to be able to read this in the context of other behavioural markers to understand exactly what our bird is trying to tell us.

We could not possibly hope to teach you all about body language in this booklet but strongly recommend doing your own research into the topic.

One of the foremost Parrot Behaviourists in the world Barbara Heidenreich has produced a very informative DVD called 'Understanding Parrot Body Language' and has an educational blog called Good Bird Inc.

Keeping Your Parrot Healthy!

Birds are flock animals. In a flock any sick bird is viewed as being a threat to the safety of the rest of the flock. As a result, all parrots will hide or “mask” signs of illness until they are too weak to do so any more.

This makes picking up signs of illness in early stages very hard and usually by the time a bird looks obviously sick to an owner they are usually extremely sick. This makes annual check-ups and testing extremely important for our pet parrots.



Health check-ups are recommended for all newly purchased birds



Annual check-ups are recommended for all parrot species



Newly introduced birds should initially be quarantined for a period prior to introducing to an existing bird.

Is my bird sick?

Signs of illness in birds can be very subtle. Most birds will start to show signs of illness in a “comfortable” environment. I.e.; sitting alone in their cage at home you may notice less vocalisation; reduced or lack of food intake, less preening and playing. The bird may also start to look “fluffed” when not disturbed. Their feathers will be fluffed up and they will look sleepy. If any of these signs are noticed (even if your bird perks up and looks normal when you disturb it), this is the time to go to the vet ASAP. By the time your bird is fluffed most of the time, your bird is extremely ill.



Identification

The majority of birds that arrive in shelters and pounds as a stray are never reunited with their owners because they are not identified. To avoid the heartbreak of losing your new companion, identify your pet via these forms of identification:

- ✿ A microchip is permanent identification. Remember to keep your personal details up to date as a microchip is useless if the phone number attached is disconnected! To get your new bird micro-chipped, contact your avian vet.
- ✿ A leg band stating that your bird is micro-chipped is also a good idea as a visual marker- check with your avian vet whether they have these available.

Important contacts for Birds

Specialists in Avian Veterinarians

- Bob Doneley, University of Queensland Veterinary Medical Centre
Avian and Exotics Service Gatton, QLD, (07) 5460 1788
- Deborah Monks, Brisbane Bird and Exotics Vet
Kessels Rd, Macgregor, (07) 3420 6773
- Dr Peter Wilson, Currumbin Valley Veterinary Service
1596 Currumbin Creek Rd Currumbin Valley QLD 4223, (07) 5533 0381
- Dr Michael Woodcock, Vet Lounge,
5/2 Sierra Place Upper Coomera QLD 4209, (07) 5502 3333

For a full list of Avian Veterinarians in Queensland see Association of Avian Veterinarians website at www.aavac.com.au