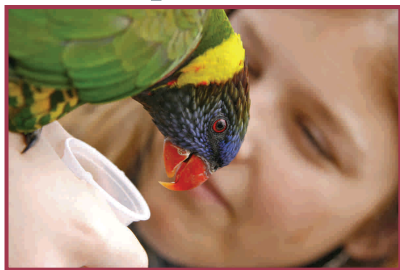


Pets are an important part of American households. Your bird-owning experience will be most enjoyable if you carefully consider which bird best suits your family, home, and lifestyle. Unfulfilled expectations are a leading cause of pet relinquishment, so invest the time and effort to ensure the years with your pet bird are happy ones.

What's special about birds?



Humans have been fascinated by birds for centuries, with a variety of species kept as companion animals in cultures around the world. They can make wonderful additions to households, especially if there is limited space or family members are allergic to other animals.

What are you looking for in a pet bird?

How many?

Most people obtain pet birds for companionship. Having just one bird increases the odds that it will bond with, and be responsive to, its owner. Some birds, such as canaries, appear to do best when kept singly. Other birds, such as finches, are happiest living in small groups.

Training a bird to talk

Prospective bird owners are often interested in birds that can learn to talk, but choosing a bird solely on that basis may not be realistic as some birds may not respond to your efforts at training. With patience, however, some pet birds learn to speak a variety of words and phrases. Some parakeets (budgies) and cockatiels will learn to talk, while African Grey and Yellow-naped Amazon parrots can potentially develop an extended vocabulary.

Appearance

Pet birds come in many sizes — ranging from finches with a wing span of just a few inches, to macaws whose wing span can be up to four feet. Bird feather hues range from natural grays, yellows, reds, and greens to unusual color combinations resulting from selective breeding. (While unique colors are often produced by inbreeding, there have been medical problems associated with this breeding practice.)



Life span

When considering a bird as a pet, remember that the life spans of birds vary widely. Parakeets live an average of six years, but can live as long as 18 years. Cockatiels live five years on average, but many have lived for more than 30 years. Finches live an average of four to five years, but life spans of three times that have been documented. Even canaries that live an average of eight years have been reported to live for 20 years. Recorded life spans for larger birds (e.g., parrots, conures, macaws, cockatoos) range from 20 years to more than 100 years!

Personalities

Birds have a variety of personality traits. Parakeets make excellent pet birds as they can be kept singly, in pairs, or in small groups in a flight cage. Parakeets are friendly and relatively easy to tame if obtained when young. Cockatiels are usually active and cheerful birds. Small- to medium-sized parrots such as conures and large parrots like Amazons, African Greys, macaws, and cockatoos have unique personalities that require more time and effort by their owners to ensure their social and behavioral needs are met. Young, weaned birds are frequently easily tamed and trained. Some suggest that if a person is interested in a large parrot, he/she should get a smaller parrot as a “starter bird” to learn about their needs and behavior. However, a responsible bird owner doesn't assume that these smaller birds will require less skill, knowledge, and commitment.

What are the special needs of birds?

Whatever species of bird you consider, it is important to learn about its daily needs (see *Preparing for your Bird*). Both a bird's physical and behavioral needs must be met. For instance, hook-billed birds (e.g., budgies, parrots), regardless of size, need to chew. Some species can become aggressive and their beaks can inflict serious injuries. Some birds bond strongly to their owners and become stressed when left alone, so ensuring their welfare may be difficult. While some birds appear to want constant companionship and enjoy being handled, others, such as canaries and finches, react negatively to being handled. With such diverse behaviors, it makes good sense for a prospective bird owner to locate a

veterinarian in the community who sees birds on a regular basis and ask for advice on recommending a species of bird to complement his or her lifestyle.

Does a bird fit your lifestyle?

Although a caged bird may appear to be a low-maintenance pet, this is definitely not the case — *all* birds need regular care and attention. If cleanliness is a priority for you, a bird may not make a good pet. Birds will drop feathers, dust, and food from their cages, and generally cannot be housetrained. If you live in an apartment, a caged bird might make noises that bother your neighbors. Most birds do not respond well to being left alone for long periods of time, and finding someone to care for your bird when you travel could pose a challenge. Finally, consider that birds with long life spans could outlive you.

Who will care for your bird?

Before welcoming a companion bird into your household, you and your family must commit to being good owners. Although children should be involved in caring for the family's bird, it is unrealistic to expect them to be solely responsible for its welfare. An adult must be willing and able to supervise the bird's care to ensure its physical and behavioral needs are consistently being met.

Can you afford a bird?

The price of a small bird may be minimal when compared to the costs of housing, feeding, accessories, and veterinary care. Larger birds usually come with a higher price tag, with some species costing several thousand dollars.



Where can you get a bird?

Pet shops that specialize in birds are often good sources and can offer you guidance on the care of your new bird. Birds may also be available from shelters and rescue groups; however, potential owners should carefully question the caretakers of these birds to determine why they were relinquished. Prospective owners of adult birds are cautioned to obtain their bird from a reputable source to ensure that its history does not include destructive behavior, excessive noise, or feather picking. The best source for a large parrot is most often a

reputable breeder. Local companion bird clubs or avian veterinarians are also good sources of recommendations. Be aware that there is risk involved when purchasing a bird sight unseen (e.g., from the Internet). Wherever you purchase your pet bird, the seller should allow its return within a reasonable period of time if it is found to be sick.

What should you look for in a healthy bird?

There are some physical features that you should look at when deciding whether or not to purchase a particular bird. For example: the bird's eyes should be bright and clear and there should be no discharges from the eyes or nostrils; its feathers should be in good condition, clean (free of droppings), and never ruffled or puffed up; and legs, feet, and toes should not be excessively scaly. Watch the bird's behavior; it should not be tail bobbing (tail feathers moving up and down in a pumping action). Birds that appear sleepy should also be avoided, as this may indicate illness.

Preparing for your bird

All breeds of birds need a balanced diet (an all-seed diet is not balanced), clean water, suitable caging, appropriate light, proper sanitation, and regular veterinary check-ups. Some birds may also need to have their wing feathers clipped periodically. Here are some general tips for proper housing of your pet bird:

- Birds with unknown histories should not be placed in cages with birds already living in the household until they have been quarantined for an appropriate length of time. Consult with your veterinarian about the recommended quarantine period.

- The cage should be set up with appropriate food and water in advance of bringing the bird home. Initially, feed your bird that same food that was fed by the seller. Any food changes should be made gradually.



- Birds should not be kept in cages that restrict their ability to fly, climb, or walk around; however, if this is the bird's environment, it must have access to an adequately sized exercise area, outside of the cage, for several hours each day.

- The cage should be designed for easy removal of dishes and droppings and be free from hazards such as cleaning fumes or cooking odors that can sicken a bird.
- Cages should be placed away from drafts, and at eye level or higher so your bird will feel more secure.
- Perches should allow maximum horizontal flight, be sized appropriately for the bird's feet, and provide good footing.
- Nest containers are important for multiple birds — especially finches.



— A Final Word —

The best reason for obtaining a pet bird is a desire to bring an intelligent, sensitive animal into the household. Once you have prepared yourself and your home for a companion bird, you are on your way to enjoying an amazing relationship.

For more information about pet birds, visit:

American Veterinary Medical Association

www.avma.org

Association of Avian Veterinarians

www.aav.org

American Animal Hospital Association

www.healthypet.com/library_list.aspx?id=3



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What you should know about Selecting a Bird



CARING FOR ANIMALS
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