

## Unfamiliar Species as Your Companion Animal

If you have never had a particular type of animal before, and have failed to do proper research, you are probably in for a few nasty surprises: Rabbits are voracious chewers and aren't always easy to litter box-train. Even clean ferrets and rats have an odor that some people find offensive. Sugar gliders need a very specific, and somewhat complex, diet. Horses are particularly high-maintenance, requiring a lot of time, effort, and expense. While people think of pot-bellied pigs as easy-care *miniatures*, considering an adult "farm" pig can weigh around 800 pounds, a 110-pound pot-belly is still a larger pet than many individuals can handle. The list goes on.

Before you adopt or rescue any unfamiliar species, *do a lot of research*. And, that doesn't mean look up a couple of websites, or ask one friend who had that animal as a childhood pet. Do *extensive* web-browsing on animal welfare, pet care, and enthusiast sites. (Avoid breeder sites, even if they purport to have care information. Chances are they won't be up-front about any negative traits the animal has.) Ask friends who have had the species what their experiences were – good *and* bad.

Ask your vet if he/she has experience with this type of animal. Ask if he has any advice on keeping one as a companion. Find out if the diet is particularly complicated or specialized, and if the species has a tendency toward certain illnesses or injuries (like tumors or joint problems). Ask if they have any regular healthcare needs (such as teeth cleaning or grooming).

Some good places to start are:

- **Humane Society of the US** (HSUS) [www.humanesociety.org](http://www.humanesociety.org) Search for the particular species.
- **ASPCA** [www.aspca.org](http://www.aspca.org) Search for the particular species.
- **Best Friends Animal Society** [bestfriends.org/Resources/Pet-Care](http://bestfriends.org/Resources/Pet-Care) Click "Other Animals."

Birds are a perfect example of animals ravaged in the wild, indiscriminately bred in captivity, purchased on impulse, inadequately researched, commonly neglected, and increasingly surrendered.

### Bird Resources

- Born Free USA's wild animal website, **More Beautiful Wild**, which has extensive information about the captive bird situation – [www.bornfreeusa.org/mbw](http://www.bornfreeusa.org/mbw)
- A program of Born Free USA, **National Bird Day** has information on caring for a captive bird – [www.nationalbirdday.com](http://www.nationalbirdday.com)
- Information from **HSUS** on caring for birds AND an informative exposé on the world of captive birds – [www.humanesociety.org](http://www.humanesociety.org) Search for "captive parrots" or "captive birds" and click on the first result.

## Is a Bird Right for You?

Many people are instantly attracted to the beauty and grace of birds, and this attraction can mean a desire to keep a bird as a companion. When considering whether or not a bird is right for you, keep in mind that parrots -- no matter how many generations have been bred in captivity -- are still very much a wild animal. The behaviors that can so frustrate, even infuriate, us humans are in fact well-suited to the survival of the various bird species. The screeching and biting, for example, are excellent modes of defense in a jungle or forest. Not so much in a suburban living room.

The preening (and resulting dander, dust, and down) is a normal and healthy social activity for birds. It may annoy us to feel a constant need to vacuum and dust, but for a bird it is merely business as usual. Some bird species can be very messy with their food, rooting through their dish and even tossing some to the floor. (A number of species will *intentionally* throw or drop food *because they know it aggravates you.*) Bird cages need consistent and thorough cleaning due to dust and food build-up and the obvious fecal droppings. Because some birds dip or drop their food in water prior to eating, water dishes need to be regularly cleaned of food film, and not simply filled up.

Birds go through changes as they mature, not unlike human adolescents. Someone who acquires a baby or very young bird may be shocked to see their once-lovable pet turn into a moody and aggressive creature. Springtime can especially bring out these hormonal changes in behavior. The desire to "nest" and protect one's territory is a strong instinct in all animals, but birds seem particularly touchy. (Think about the dive-bombing mockingbird you often see outside in spring and summer!)

Many parrots (of all sizes and species) have a habit of choosing one individual family member as their favorite. At times it goes as far as treating the human as a mate -- trying to feed the person (which involves regurgitation), performing courtship rituals, nesting, and attempts at mating. For whatever reason, the opposite can also be true. A bird may take an instant disliking to one person, or develop negative feelings over time, and you may never know why. All you know is you're getting bitten every time you even come close to this animal, who is supposed to be your friend.

Some species are more "tightly wound" than others. The Cockatoo is one such species. These large exotic birds require more devotion, more work, and more understanding than many other species. They can be very demanding of your time and attention. Each bird species can have quite different needs in terms of nutrition, cage type, playtime, sleep, and training. Even toys and perches can be an issue (especially if they're the *wrong* size or type).

If you are accustomed to caring for a dog or cat and think a bird can't be that much different, think again. All pets have needs and they all must be treated as the living beings they are. But, some animals just require more than others, and if you have never been exposed to living with a bird -- particularly one of the parrot species -- you have no idea what you are in for. Just as first-time rabbit guardians often don't realize the extent to which their new companions chew and destroy, so it is with inexperienced bird keepers. Parrots love to chew, shred, gnaw, and otherwise mutilate. (Even a small parrot can lay waste to a large book in mere hours, a tissue box in under an hour.)

You may be used to trimming your dog's nails, but would you know how to properly (and safely) trim a bird's nails, much less a beak? The majority of bird owners should go to an avian vet or avian care specialist to have nails, and particularly beaks, trimmed. Which brings us to one of the most important considerations: Do you have access to, and can you afford, a qualified avian veterinarian? Even a vet who is an expert with dogs and cats may know little about the specialized treatment of birds. Because avian veterinary medicine is a specialty, you can expect to pay more for it.

Cage cost is another financial consideration. To be brutally honest, cages are expensive. Can you afford the *size needed* for the type of bird you want?

*Another very important factor to consider is if you smoke.* If you do a bird is most definitely not appropriate. All animals are negatively affected by tobacco smoke, but birds in particular are susceptible to its effects. In addition to breathing and overall health problems, many birds will obsessively preen in an attempt to rid themselves of the smoke. The result can be severe feather plucking.

As you can see there are multiple considerations before rushing out to obtain a parrot or other bird. *Please consider the matter **seriously**, research it **thoroughly**, and discuss it with anyone who lives in the home, **then** make your decision.*

## **Companion Birds – Wild at Heart**

Whether captive bred or wild caught, exotic birds are not domesticated animals. Domestic animals are animals that have been bred for hundreds of years to live in the care of humans and are distinct from their wild ancestors. Birds commonly kept as pets are no different than their wild relatives -- they are the native species of other countries.

Those who acquire birds as companion animals soon discover that parrots, including lovebirds, budgerigars/budgies (parakeets), and cockatiels, are noisy (vocalizing -- squawking, chirping, talking -- is an important part of any parrot's social communication), messy (birds eat continually throughout the day, dropping and discarding bits of food everywhere), and can be destructive (birds are instinctively programmed to chew and shred wood, whether it is a perch, toy, picture frame, or furniture; birds will also chew electrical cords, paper, and curtains).

While parrots are also sociable and extremely intelligent -- they have been compared to human toddlers in the needs of their emotional and social lives but, unlike children, they never progress beyond the "toddler" level -- confinement in cages can lead to neurotic behavior, excessive screaming, feather plucking, self-mutilation, and other destructive habits. Birds are meant to fly and to be with other birds. Very few people can provide for the special needs of exotic birds or comprehend the seriousness of a commitment for the life span of the birds, which depending on the species can be 20 to 70 years or more.

### **How Many Caged Birds?**

A 1998 article appearing in the Journal of the American Veterinarian Medical Association, regarded as the most extensive demographic study of pet birds conducted to that date, estimated the U.S. pet bird population at 35-40 million. While this estimate of "pet" birds is lower than estimates for companion dogs and cats, the population of dogs and cats has remained relatively stable over time while "pet" bird populations have skyrocketed in recent years. According to the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC), there were 60.8 million cats and 52.1 million dogs in 1990, and 66.15 million cats and 58.2 million dogs in 1996. In 1990, there were 11.6 million "pet" birds and 40 million by 1996 -- an increase of 244.8%!

### **Captive Breeding**

One of the most common assertions made by breeders is that captive breeding is necessary to keep parrots from becoming endangered. Breeding parrots in captivity is not going to save the species in the wild. Most birds are bred outside any official conservation program, and the vast majority of birds bred in captivity are bred for purely commercial purposes. Captive breeding fails to address the leading causes of wild bird population decline -- habitat loss, pollution, and the pet trade. Moreover, captive release programs are nonexistent for most species and are largely unsuccessful in practice.

Breeding contributes to overpopulation since it results in breeding more baby birds for the pet trade. Breeding facilities often resemble nothing more than warehouses of birds for production purposes. Breeder birds are routinely placed with a mate in small cages with nothing more than water, food, and a nest box.

Many breeders and stores will sell unweaned baby birds, claiming that finishing the weaning process by the purchaser will "guarantee" a hand-tame bird. Nothing could be further from the truth. Building a nurturing relationship with a parrot begins when the bird, no matter what his or her age, learns to trust. The reality is that many birds who have not successfully completed weaning may not learn to eat on their own and can actually starve to death. Many baby birds suffer or die from physical injuries such as burned or punctured crops (stomachs) and infections from inexperienced hand-feeders. Unweaned chicks are sold because hand-feeding is labor-intensive; it is far more profitable to sell the chicks quickly despite the risks to the young bird.

Most of the thousands of birds sold each year by the pet trade go to buyers who do not have accurate expectations about living with a bird. Frustration, disinterest, or concern lead many people to minimize or abandon their responsibility of caring for their birds. Many birds spend their days isolated and confined to their cages. Others bounce from home to home as "owners" tire of them, and some are abandoned at local shelters and bird rescues, or set free to fend for themselves. Most humane societies do not accept birds. Unlike abandoned cats and dogs, abandoned birds generally do not roam the streets as strays or establish feral colonies. Although unwanted exotic birds is a growing problem, it remains a hidden crisis.

**Go to [www.humanesociety.org/news/magazines/2013/03-04](http://www.humanesociety.org/news/magazines/2013/03-04) (or just go to [www.humanesociety.org](http://www.humanesociety.org) and search for No-Fly Zone) for an in-depth look at life for captive wild birds.**