

Chapter

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Keeping a Talking Bird

We're guessing that since you picked up this book, you have some interest in keeping a talking bird. If you have the right situation and personality, that can be a really fulfilling choice. Certainly, talking birds are interactive companions who enliven a household. Be careful and consider all the facts, though. Companion birds require a lot of attention, and you will have to provide it.

IF YOU HAVE A BIRD

It's possible you already have a bird whom you want to teach to talk. If that's the case, we have information for you that will tell you which species of bird are likely to talk and which aren't. You might take a look at these lists to see whether your bird is one of the species that talks readily. If he isn't, you need to decide whether you want to make any great effort to teach a bird who has low potential (not because of his individual personality but because of his species). If you do, we discuss various methods of training birds to talk, and one of them still might work for your bird.

If your bird is one of the great talkers, you might want to assess his individual potential. His age, history and what talking capability you want are all factors that will make a difference in your success. Please read on and enjoy finding your answers.

IF YOU DON'T HAVE A BIRD

For those of you who have not yet acquired a bird, this is a good time to look at your options and get a bird who will be more of what you want. Most of the birds who talk are some type of parrot. Not all parrot species are talkers, though. Some birds are justly famous talkers, such as African Grey Parrots and Budgies (often called Parakeets), while others, such as Ravens, really don't have much to say. One expert on Ravens specifically discouraged us from considering Ravens, because they have

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limited vocabularies and (despite what Edgar Allen Poe might think) “nevermore” is not one of their natural calls. There are also a few legal problems with keeping native species that eliminate Ravens and Crows from consideration in the United States.

A really good choice for a talking bird who isn’t a parrot is the European Starling. They are not expensive (free if you can catch one), legal to keep in most areas, talk well and have a great history on the stage. Starlings are an introduced species in North America, where they were imported for roles in Shakespearian plays. North America has about 200 million Starlings. Mother Nature isn’t likely to be discouraged by the taking of just one, if you offer the bird a good home.

The other part of the equation is you, your home and your family. Parrots demand a lot of attention and demand it loudly. They are neither for the timid nor for the traveling salesman who can’t offer them enough attention. Please read this chapter all the way to the end and consider what it says about bird care before buying or accepting a bird. You could save yourself (and your bird) a lot of grief, and enhance the enjoyment you can get from having a talking bird.

It’s your choice. And, as you can see, there are plenty of things to consider about what kind of bird you want. It’s always easier to get a bird after you have prepared for it. Buying a bird and then trying to find appropriate housing, food and care usually result in temporary measures becoming permanent, to the detriment of your bird. In the long run, “temporary measures” usually result in more work and cost for you as well.

BIRD CARE

Bird care is the first consideration when buying a bird. If you find you don’t have the resources, both time and money, to care for a bird—please don’t get one. Birds are flock animals by nature, and any bird who is social craves to find his place in a flock and needs a lot of social interaction. If you take a bird from his place in a wild or captive flock and put him in your home, it’s your responsibility to provide for his social needs. This is the single greatest area of failure for first-time bird owners. They don’t have enough time to interact with their bird.

On the other hand, a family full of kids who are interested in and taught how to interact with a bird can provide a great surrogate flock. They can even teach the bird how to talk and leave you with just providing the food and cleaning up the mess. Yes, in some ways birds are typical pets.

The Cage

Except perhaps for the cost of the bird and his first wellness veterinary visit, the cage is the greatest setup cost of keeping a bird. Cages vary so much in size and style that we won’t make any attempt to recommend any particular cage, except to offer some tips on what your bird needs.

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First, the cage should be big enough. Your bird needs to fully stretch his wings once in a while, and a cage should be at least big enough to accommodate that need. If you know what kind of bird you want to buy, get some idea of how wide his wingspan is and multiply that by at least one and a half. The cage should be at least that big in one of its horizontal dimensions.

The height of the cage is usually not a problem in the cages that are commercially available, but it should allow your bird to climb on the sides without hitting his head when his tail is near the floor. Your cage can't be too big. Birds are natural athletes, and if you offer your bird space enough to fly and play inside his cage, he will appreciate it.

You should take some time buying a cage. A cage is an investment in your bird's home. The cage you choose will make a great difference in the amount of effort you will need to spend giving your bird proper care. When you buy a cage, have a place in mind in your home where the cage will go. Take all the measurements of this area to the store to help you buy a cage of the right size.

The next consideration is basic cage construction. It needs to be well made without any sharp protrusions or edges. Many birds have leg bands that can catch on sharp bits or wire protrusions. Unless you are buying from a well-known manufacturer that backs up its cages with a money-back guarantee, carefully inspect the exact cage you want to buy. It's an easy way to avoid later problems.

Any openings on the cage should also be carefully considered. This includes the spacing between any bars and all access to feeders and waterers—if your bird needs to stick his head through the cage wall to reach food and water in containers that hang from the outside of the cage. These spaces should be either large enough for the bird to easily stick his head through (obviously, they need to be large to access food and water) or small enough so the bird can't get his head through at all. Openings that are about the size of the bird's head allow the bird to force his head through, but it may not be easy for him to extract his head from the opening. Birds stuck this way die every year as they struggle to get loose and break their necks. Fortunately, most cage manufacturers recognize this problem and build cages to avoid it.

It is convenient for you to have access to food and water dishes from outside of a cage. Look for this feature. It can be especially helpful if you have a friend, family member or pet-sitter care for your bird in the future.

Other cage considerations include the presence of a playpen on the top and a seed catcher that collects some of the mess around the bottom of a cage. Try to find a cage that is easy to clean. Paper liners fit most easily in square or rectangular cage pans. You'll have the easiest time cleaning cages with deep pans for cage paper. We leave it to you to do some good shopping that will enable you to look at all the options and decide whether they fit into your life. They all have their good and bad points.

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DIANE GRINDOL

Will a bird fit into your household and your lifestyle? With the joys of bird ownership come the drudgery of cleaning up, cleaning a cage and offering fresh food and water daily.

Perches

Proper perches are essential, since birds spend most of their lives, even while asleep, on their feet. Most cages come with perches made of round, even dowels, which you will want to change for more appropriate perches when you get your cage home. Dowels, with their hard surface and uniform size, put the same stress on a bird's feet all the time. There is no chance for the bird to change his position on the perch to allow one part of his foot to take the stress while resting another part. It is much better to use small branches from trees as perches, because a branch is uneven along its length and enables your bird to find the position that works best for him at any time.

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Depending on where you live, finding perches can be an outing and a lot of fun. Find a place where chemical sprays are not used on the trees or on the ground, and seek out the branches of the size you want in your cage. There is nothing like a walk in the woods picking up a few sticks for your bird!

There are many woods that can be used for perches, although some are thought to be toxic or to have other problems. Redwood, for example, is believed to cause problems in the guts of birds if they ingest some splinters, because the wood doesn't degrade the way many other kinds of wood do. It's a good idea to use local woods that come from sources that aren't likely to be sprayed with something that will harm your birds. Also, collect wood from a location well away from roadways where cars emit harmful fumes. Ask local veterinarians, bird club members or pet shops what they suggest or use.

Perches should be placed in the cage in such a way that the bird does not perch directly above his food or water. This will help keep droppings out of the food and water dishes.

Cage Placement

This is a far more important matter than it might seem at first glance. There are many things to consider about placement of a cage. Never place a cage too close to a source of heat or in a draft. This might seem obvious, but some sources of heat are not so easily identified unless you take a little time and think about them. A vent from a heat and cooling duct can be a problem. In the winter it might be too hot for your bird to endure all the time; in the summer it might chill a bird who can't get out of the airflow.

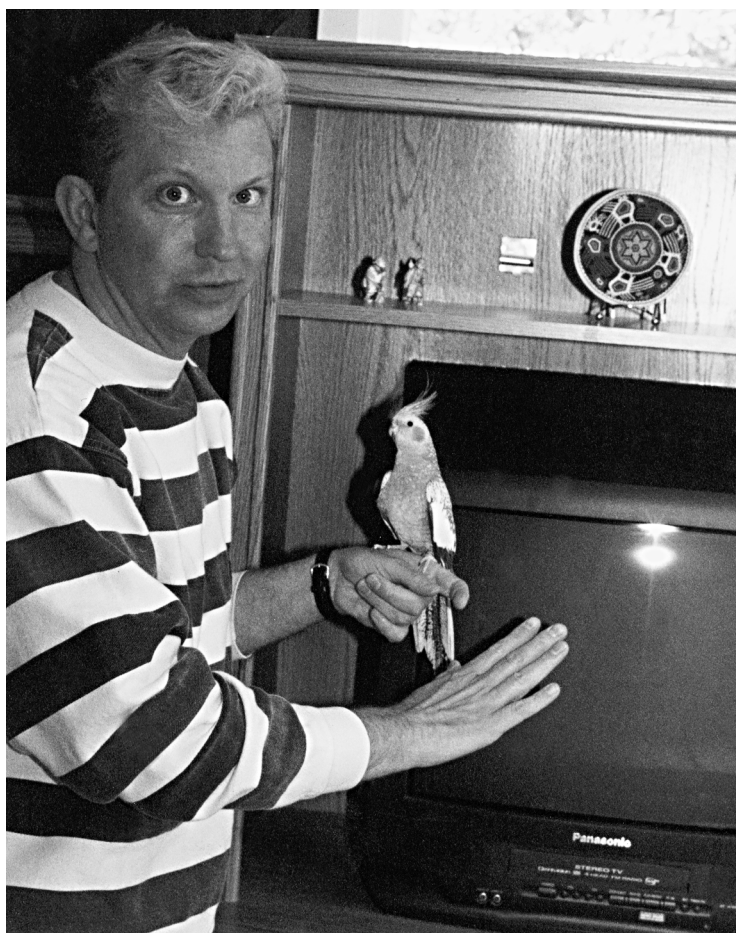
Many kinds of appliances also generate a lot of heat. Things like dishwashers, clothes dryers, stoves, refrigerators and freezers can generate a considerable amount of heat that can be unbearable in the long term.

One of the more common sources of heat people provide to their birds as an act of kindness is the sun in the winter. But many birds die from the heat of the sun when they are placed in a south-facing window just to let them "get a little sun." A bird should never be left in the direct sun without a way of getting into the shade. A bird should only live near a window if there is an eave or awning over it that prevents direct sunlight from heating up his living quarters.

Keep the Cage Away From Noise

Many people have suffered greatly from placing their bird's cage near a source of noise. One of the really big problem areas is the television. Birds are vocal and social animals who like to be heard. The first impulse of such a creature is to be louder than anything around him. That includes the television, stereo, radio, washer, dryer, vacuum cleaner . . . you get the idea. The bird will compete for your attention even when you're watching your favorite evening program. Occasional

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Place your bird's cage in a location where human members of the flock provide socialization but not near noisy appliances like the television. A bird will compete with the appliance for your attention, at the same or a louder decibel level.

vocal competitions with appliances might be fine but to hear only your parrot when you want to hear something else can really damage a relationship.

Water

Water is easily provided. The main consideration is that it needs to be clean and offered in a way that keeps it clean, or else the waterer needs to be cleaned regularly. One of the ways to keep water clean is to provide it in a drinker with a reservoir that feeds into a tube the bird can drink from. The tube usually has a ball or a peg and valve system that keeps water from flowing until the bird touches it with his tongue or beak. These drinkers are relatively inexpensive and make providing clean drinking water easy.

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The other way to give your bird water is with a water dish. These usually need to be cleaned and refilled several times a day. Birds have a tendency to put things in their water dish and foul the water. Anything left wet at room temperature has the potential to grow bacteria. Bacterial growth may magnify the number of pathogenic bacteria to levels that can infect your bird. So clean water is essential.

Water should be offered without additives, unless directed by your veterinarian. There are vitamin and mineral additives available in pet supply stores that are meant to be added to a bird's water, but we do not recommend them, since they can provide a medium for the growth of bacteria. Vitamins and minerals are better provided in food than in water.



Prepared diets are available for companion birds. They offer nutrition in every bite, including essential nutrients not found in seed mixes. Now for the commercial message (Tom doesn't know I'm adding this): African Grey Popeye is eyeing a bowl of Roudybush mini-pellets.

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Food and Feeding

There are a number of ways to feed your bird. Some of them are a lot of work and others are as easy as filling a feed dish. All of them can be made wholesome, although feeding a variety of foods cafeteria-style makes this more difficult.

The easy way to feed a bird a wholesome diet is to buy a good prepared diet at the pet supply store. These come in a variety of forms that include added vitamins and minerals, eliminating the need to supply additional vitamins. In fact, many of these foods are best used without the addition of supplements, since the additional vitamins and minerals can lead to toxic levels or imbalances.

It is best to choose a mix that doesn't allow your bird to choose one seed or item in preference to another, because when he picks out his favorite, he may be ignoring other foods with important nutrients. Some of the fortified seed mixes claim to be adequate for your bird, but this is based on the assumption that the bird eats all the food presented to him, rather than choosing just a few items.

The best food to use is a formulated diet without added colors or fragrances. Many people worry that this kind of prepared diet doesn't offer enough variety to provide their bird with adequate environmental stimulation. This is easily solved by adding fresh vegetables or fruit in an amount equivalent to the amount of prepared diet your bird eats each day. The amount of energy (calories) in this much fresh vegetables or fruit is about one-twelfth that provided by the prepared diet, because fresh vegetables and fruit are mostly water. This means your bird will still



Offering a variety of fruits and vegetables to a companion bird provides mental stimulation and variety. Because of their low-caloric content, these kinds of treats do not upset the balance of the basic diet. (This is Aztec, a Blue-Headed Pionus.)

need to eat almost the same amount of prepared diet he ate before you added fresh fruits and vegetables—which means their addition will not greatly imbalance the diet. But it will keep your bird from getting bored with his food.

Do not add high-fat foods such as sunflower seeds or peanuts, except as occasional treats. These will greatly reduce the amount of the prepared diet your bird eats, and that means he will be eating fewer essential nutrients.

If you choose to feed your bird a seed mix or a mixture of fruits, vegetables and table foods, you will have some difficulty making sure your bird is getting a complete diet. Seeds, by themselves, are deficient in a number of nutrients, including some B vitamins, vitamin A, trace minerals and calcium. In the short run this may not be a problem, but eventually a deficiency of at least one of these causes some medical problem. It is best to feed at least some of the food as a prepared diet that includes the essential nutrients at the appropriate levels.

Wet Foods

One of the difficulties with feeding a diet made in your kitchen is that it is usually wet. Wet food has a tendency to spoil, particularly on warm days. This includes fresh fruit, vegetables, sprouts and a variety of cooked items such as beans and hard-boiled eggs. Care must be taken with these foods to make sure they are removed often enough to avoid spoilage.

Some of the same pathogens that cause food poisoning can be harmful to birds and will result in a sick or dead bird. On a warm day, wet food should be left out only for about four hours. Whatever is left over should then be discarded and the food dish cleaned. An alternative way of feeding wet food is to give your bird just as much as he will eat in about 20 minutes and then allow him free access to a dry prepared food.

Foods to Avoid

There are some foods that are not good for birds. While it has often been suggested that the birds we keep can eat anything we eat, this is far from the truth. It is best to forget the idea that what is good for you and what tastes good to you is good for or tastes good to your bird. Some foods are just not digested well or may lead to a moderate upset of the gastrointestinal tract, and others are poisonous to some birds.

Some of the things to avoid just because they are not good to feed to your bird regularly or in large amounts are sources of sugar (unless you have a Lory or a species of bird who normally eats a lot of sugar). Sugar is a good substrate for the growth of yeast, which is a common infection of the mouth and the rest of the gastrointestinal tract in birds. Avoiding sugar will reduce the chance of infection. If your bird happens to become infected, see your veterinarian, follow her instructions, and remove sugar from your bird's diet for the duration of treatment.

Some milk products are not good to feed to birds in large amounts. The sugar in milk is lactose. Birds cannot digest lactose, and large amounts of it in the gut

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tend to ferment, leading to diarrhea. Some dairy products that are high in lactose are dried skim milk and whey. Cheeses and yogurt are low in lactose, although many cheeses are high in fat.

Two things that should never be fed to birds are chocolate and avocado. There have been avian deaths associated with both of these foods. It is interesting that neither of these is consistent in its effect on birds. You will find people who feed both with no ill effect, but there have also been some cases in which the effects were clear—and deadly. We don't know the reason for these differences, but there is no reason to take a chance with your bird.

Food Treats

There are a great many foods you might want to offer your bird occasionally. Foods that are too high in fat for regular consumption, such as peanuts or sunflower seeds, make good treats when fed in very limited amounts. Other possible treat foods contain sugar, such as many baked goods or candies. When you offer them to your bird by hand, you can regulate how much he gets each day.

Even though we recommend a prepared diet for your bird, we don't want to leave out of the picture the idea that feeding is part of the human-bird bond. It is a good idea to offer treats once in a while and to offer them from your hand. Just keep the amount small enough to avoid upsetting the nutritional balance of the prepared diet you are feeding.

The act of feeding your bird can be an adventure for both of you as you explore new vegetables you find at the supermarket. Even standard vegetables can be presented in new ways. Try threading veggies or fruit through cage bars near your bird's favorite perch. Try skewering them on a bird kabob. Try cooking and mashing yams or sweet potatoes for a warm, soft treat. Carrots can be sliced, diced, chopped, grated or served whole. Corn comes on or off the cob, frozen, canned or baked into a corn muffin mix. Broccoli can be served raw or steamed, and you can slice the stem, buy grated broccoli or put a whole floweret in the cage for different presentations. Birds love to scoop out the inside of treats like pomegranate or grapes. Dark green, leafy greens are the healthiest for you and your bird. Check out kale, beet, Swiss chard, dandelion or collard greens for a change of pace. Warm foods such as cooked rice, pasta, mashed potatoes, beans or lentils are a good occasional treat. Cereals with no added sugar or salt and air-popped popcorn are good snacks.

PROVIDING TOYS

Bird toys are essential for your intelligent friend. Commercial toys come in many styles, shapes, colors and textures. Unlike our dog and cat companions, birds see in vivid color and so appreciate this variety. Your companion will appreciate a variety of toys, though not necessarily an overwhelming number. You can add variety by rotating toys into and out of a cage weekly or monthly. New research has



Treat Foods for Birds

- Apple
- Asparagus
- Bread (whole grain)
- Broccoli
- Cabbage
- Canteloupe
- Cereal (whole grain, without added sugar or salt)
- Collard Greens
- Corn on the Cob
- Crackers (baked, without added salt)
- Dandelion Greens
- Grapes
- Kale
- Leaf Lettuce
- Lentils
- Oatmeal
- Oranges
- Parsley
- Pasta (dry or cooked)
- Pomegranate
- Popcorn
- Raisins
- Rice
- Rice Cakes
- Sprouted Legumes
- String Beans
- Sweet Potato
- Swiss Chard
- Yam
- Zucchini

shown that birds may anticipate a toy change daily as much as they anticipate receiving fresh food daily. Plan on some toys being chewed to pieces, while others will last longer.

You can buy toys and play gyms or stands for your bird, or make your own. Objects such as wooden peg clothespins, Popsicle sticks and stainless steel flatware are toys too. A roll of toilet tissue or adding machine tape can supply endless entertainment, as can bottle caps or empty bottles with a safe rattle inside, such as dried beans or lentils. Provide toys that hang, as well as a toy basket filled with loose or foot toys, either inside the cage or in a play area in your home.

HOME ALONE

Your bird will probably spend some time alone. Human beings are imperfect parrot companions in this way. In the wild, a parrot would spend all of his time with his flock or with his mate. It's no wonder that intelligent and sensitive parrots can develop neurotic behaviors such as feather plucking when they're caged and left alone for long periods of time. You can help by doing your best to provide a stimulating environment for your companion bird.

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One way is to let your companion bird watch wild birds as they forage and flit about outside. You can do this if you have a window with an awning that does not have direct sun coming in. Hang a bird feeder near that window, or provide a bird bath or natural plantings that will attract wild birds. Some bird feeders actually attach to or fit in windows for an up close and personal visit by wild birds.

Plan to rotate toys daily, weekly or monthly. Turn one food cup into a toy box with loose foot toys for your bird's entertainment.

Birds like the kind of entertainment we do. They will enjoy staying in a home with the radio or television on. Many people make sure their parrots get a chance to watch cartoon shows meant for children. It won't hurt to have your potential talker watching *Sesame Street*.

If yours is a latchkey bird because you go to work every day, you can provide a social break for your bird by arranging a pet-sitter visit or by making arrangements for birdie day care. Sometimes it works well to take a bird to work with you. You must make sure a bird who goes to work is not a huge distraction, is welcome and is safe. Any environment with fumes or chemicals is not safe for a bird. Hair salons and dry cleaners, for example, could not safely host a bird.

Birds need to spend some time chewing. For cockatoos and macaws, that's mandatory. Offer fresh, washed branches from safe trees, Popsicle and craft sticks, cinnamon sticks, dry pasta, rolls of newspaper or junk mail. Materials to shred are a great way to keep a bird busy. Provide newsprint, a whisk broom, raffia, palm shredding products or a roll of toilet tissue. Smaller birds will tear into toasted oats strung on a shoestring.

Diane is an advocate of getting a "pet" for a companion bird to watch. These include active small birds, such as Canaries or Finches. Her own birds enjoy watching the resident guinea pigs and have been entertained by a fish tank.

In the wild, birds don't have food handed to them ready to eat. No drive-throughs. Food in the wild comes in packages, such as grains with hulls and seeds with shells, and the food location must be discovered by foraging. Wild birds work at finding and extracting their daily rations from what the forests or grasslands provide. You can have an occasional foraging day for your bird. Hide food, put it into containers that must be destroyed, supply a pine cone with goodies stuck in it. Put peanuts in a toilet tissue roll and pinch the ends. Hide food under paper and in the corners of the cages. It's creative and fun for you to provide this entertainment for your parrot, and it will keep him busier than a full, accessible food bowl.

VETERINARY CARE

Before you buy a bird, find a good avian veterinarian. You can ask where to find one by asking at pet supply shops, bird stores, local bird clubs and zoos.

An avian veterinarian has a practice in which she sees a significant number of birds. A veterinarian who is willing to see birds but seldom actually sees any is not an avian veterinarian. You need to understand this clearly, because good courses

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in avian medicine in veterinary schools were uncommon until a few years ago. Many veterinarians have little or no experience with birds, and birds differ significantly from mammals.

You need to have a relationship with your avian veterinarian, even though you may see her only once a year. Your veterinarian is your primary source of health care for your bird.

Once you have located your avian veterinarian, call and ask some questions. You can shop around for avian veterinarians, just as you would for anything else. You may be able to find a good supplier of birds through your veterinarian and be able to confirm that the supplier or breeder stands behind the birds she sells.

You will also want to know the cost and the details of a well-bird checkup. Ask for a detailed breakdown on what the costs include. If you don't intend to breed your bird, it may not be essential to know the gender (which can involve a lab test). The main things you are looking for in a well-bird checkup are specific difficulties with your bird such as broken bones, congenital difficulties or disease. As



Finding an Avian Veterinarian

An avian veterinarian is a veterinarian who has bird clients. Any veterinarian can call him or herself an avian veterinarian. If you can get a referral from another veterinarian, a bird club member or a bird breeder, that is the wisest way to choose a local avian veterinarian with experience.

You can also find one by searching for veterinarians in your area who belong to the national professional educational association for veterinarians interested in learning more about bird health, the Association of Avian Veterinarians (AAV). For general information about the AAV, see www.aav.org. To find a veterinarian who belongs to AAV, go to www.aav.org/vet-lookup or contact them at:

Association of Avian Veterinarians
P.O. Box 811720
Boca Raton FL 33481-1720
Phone: (561) 393-8901
Fax: (561) 393-8902
E-mail: aavctrlofc@aol.com

A certified avian veterinarian is one who has obtained certification from the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners (ABVP). These are officially called Board-Certified Avian Practice Specialists by the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners. They have passed a rigorous test regarding avian health. There are only a few certified avian veterinarians, compared to the number of veterinarians who treat birds. There certainly are competent and talented avian veterinarians who are not, or not yet, certified avian veterinarians. For a list of certified avian veterinarians, see www.birdsnways.com/articles/abvpvets.htm.

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prey animals, birds often don't show signs of illness. There will be some cost for lab tests to determine the health of your bird.

If you find any significant problems, you should be able to take your bird back for a refund or another bird. Don't believe you have to accept a pet who is going to cost you a lot for ongoing veterinary bills. You should be able to get a healthy, vigorous bird for your money. If you are told you can't, buy somewhere else.

Get Some Advice

You should get a fair amount of advice from your trip to the vet. Ask questions and make sure you have an emergency phone number and the name of an alternate vet to use when yours is out of town. Ask for the title of a good book on the care of birds. There are several. Get some first aid instructions for the most common problems, too.

SAFETY ISSUES

Besides the poisonous foods we have already mentioned, there are some potential hazards for birds in the home. Some of them may be a bit of a surprise.

One big hazard is the toilet. Most talking birds are not designed to bathe in water more than an inch or two deep. Any time they bathe, they need a way to easily get out of the water without risking drowning. This is good news in a household with women. Not only should everyone put the toilet seat down when they have a bird, they should put the lid down as well. That should take care of two problems at once.

Other open sources of water can also become drowning hazards. Smaller birds have drowned in a coffee cup filled with water. So be careful about what you leave out uncovered.

Non-stick surfaces are a major hazard to birds if the non-stick material is overheated. Materials that include non-stick surfaces are cookware, ironing board covers, ironing boards, self-cleaning ovens (when the self-cleaning feature is operated) and some heating lamps. Overheated non-stick materials give off a gas that is immediately toxic to birds. You can lose an entire household of birds to this gas in just a few minutes. Usually the birds die so quickly that there is no hope of offering any medical attention.

There are many poisons in our environment that need to be avoided. Birds do not have any innate ability to detect or avoid these materials. Treat your bird as you would a child in your home and prevent him from coming in contact with toxins.

Lead is an obvious problem that we have been dealing with for years because of its toxic effect on children. Some older homes have lead-based paint, and birds can eat chips of it and be poisoned. Stained glass uses lead compounds to join the pieces of glass, curtain weights often are made of lead and costume jewelry and the seals on older wine bottles often contain lead. None of these materials should be available to your bird. It might seem that curtain weights or the joints on stained



Having a companion bird in the household can influence your choice of cookware. Overheated non-stick surfaces kill birds instantly. To avoid this hazard, many bird owners pass up cookware with non-stick coatings, such as the pans on the left, in favor of cast iron, stainless steel and glass cookware, such as the pots and pans on the right. Audubon, a male pearl Cockatiel, approves of this choice.

glass might not be available to a bird, since they are enclosed or part of a bigger construct, but parrots will make short work of these things and get to the lead quickly.

Poisonous Plants

Parrots and some other kinds of birds are attracted to anything that can be chewed, including all the plants in your home. There are a number of poisonous plants commonly found in homes, and birds don't seem to be able to tell the poisonous plants from the rest. The bottom line here is that you should either eliminate the poisonous plants from your home or take responsibility for keeping your birds out of them. Be aware that keeping curious birds out of plants is a tall order.

Philodendron and dieffenbachia are two common poisonous houseplants. Most palms and ferns are safe, but it is always good to confirm plant safety with a poison control center or your avian veterinarian.

Holiday decorating can also introduce poisonous plants to the home. Poinsettia, holly and mistletoe are all poisonous. It might be better to limit holiday decorations to non-toxic materials such as fruits, nuts and pine branches.

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OTHER PETS

Birds, dogs and cats can interact either peacefully or with disastrous results, and the problem is not always with the dog or cat hurting the bird! Dogs and cats are predators in the wild and have not lost all of their instincts for hunting just by being in your living room. Small birds are particularly susceptible to harm from cats.

Larger parrots, some even as small as Cockatiels, will, on occasion, take the aggressive role. Cockatiels have been known to bite cats and inflict enough damage to require veterinary intervention. Larger parrots will often define a territory that they see as theirs. Usually this is their cage, but a T-stand can include some of the area around it as part of the bird's territory. We know of at least one case in which a cat resting in the parrot's territory had a rude end to her nap. The parrot deliberately climbed down from his perch, walked over to the cat and bit her. The cat screamed with pain and never came into the parrot's territory again.

Any time a cat breaks the skin of a bird, it should be considered a veterinary emergency. Cats have bacteria in their claws and mouth that spread rapidly in a bird's bloodstream. Your companion bird needs to receive antibiotics to stop this poison from harming him. If you choose to keep birds and cats, be aware of the risk and be prepared to take action if it is warranted.

The bottom line on all this is that *all* your pets need supervision when they have access to one another. Even birds will fight with each other and need to be separated. Most of these problems yield to common sense. We're sure you have plenty of that.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- A cage should be large enough to allow your bird to spread his wings and climb on the side of the cage without touching his feathers side-to-side or top-to-bottom.
- The perches in your bird's cage should be uneven branches, not round and uniform dowels.
- Never place the cage near excessive heat, cold, draft or noise.
- Clean water should always be available to your bird.
- Wet foods should not sit out longer than four hours.
- Chocolate and avocado should never be fed to birds.
- Establish a relationship with an avian veterinarian.
- Eliminate toxic materials and hazards from your bird's environment.