

Chapter 1

Meet the Parrots

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 - ▶ Reflecting a bit on parrot behavior
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Welcome to the wonderful world of parrots. Okay, it may be wonderful, but it's not utopia. There's a lot to know and a lot to do in order to make a parrot happy and keep it healthy in the average home. This chapter gives you an overview of this entire book and shows you where to look for the important information you'll need to get started with parrots.

An Introduction to Parrots

If parrots were human, they'd be supermodels. They'd want their spring water and their carrot sticks, and they'd want them *now*. Parrots are beautiful, temperamental creatures that need a lot of handling from a good manager — that's you, the parrot's guardian — to make sure they're treated right (Figure 1-1). It's in the fine print of the parrot's contract: You will do the bird's bidding, and you won't ask any questions.

Well, doing the bird's bidding sounds a little un-fun, doesn't it? I don't mean that you're the bird's servant, though it can sometimes feel that way. What I mean is that parrots have a lot of requirements that need to be met *or else*. The *or else* means high veterinary bills, a very unhappy parrot, and perhaps even a dead bird. The *or else* isn't a place you want to go.

You have to feed the parrot right, house it right, and give it your full and total attention. You have to provide it with toys, friends, things to do, health care, and everything else it needs. It's a complicated companion, far more so than a dog or cat. If you read this book cover to cover, you'll have a great handle on how to properly care for your bird.

From pet to companion

The first and most important thing to know about parrots is that they're not like other pets. They're *companions*. And you're not the owner. You're the *guardian*. This is the vocabulary I use throughout this book. The language you use to describe other people is how you perceive and relate to them, and the same goes for the language you use to describe the animals in your life. You can find out more about this in Chapter 2.

A little bit of wilderness

Having a parrot in your home is like bringing a little bit of the rainforest, grasslands, or plains inside. A parrot is a wild animal and always will be, no matter where it lives. When you live with a parrot, you have the unique responsibility of caring for a truly natural creature, one that hasn't been domesticated in any way. Captive parrots and wild parrots share the exact same instincts. See Chapter 11 for more details on how instincts inform your parrot's behavior.



Some parrots are indeed easier to care for than others. Which parrot you choose should depend on how much space and time you have. There's never really enough time in the day to give a larger parrot the attention it wants. Smaller parrots, such as parakeets and lovebirds, are often kept happily in pairs, which is a great option. Large parrots love each other's company as well. Since parrots are social, flock-oriented animals, they like to be together. Chapter 3 gives you the lowdown on which parrot species might be right for you (Figure 1-2). Chapter 4 shows you how to choose a healthy parrot from the right kind of place.

Figure 1-1:
These tame
budgies are
wonderful
companions
and are as
close to
officially
domesti-
cated as
parrots get.



Photo by Priscilla Schmidt

Figure 1-2:
Parrots
have some
funny
behaviors,
like this
caique
eating a big
cookie with
one foot.



Photo by Shari Markowitz

Home Tweet Home

The average home must be modified to accommodate a parrot, whether it's a little budgie or a large macaw. You've got to parrot-proof your home the way you'd kid-proof it for toddlers. Parrots can get into even more trouble than toddlers, because not only can a parrot open the cupboard under the sink, but it can also get up to the cupboard above the refrigerator. It can eat through drywall, pick at the chipping paint near the window, and dunk itself in the toilet. It can get outside and never come back again. Parrot-proofing is crucial. See Chapter 7 for parrot-proofing ideas.

Making birdy comfortable

After you've parrot-proofed, you've got to find acceptable housing for your bird. In parrot circles, the idiom *bigger is better* is applied to bird cages, aviaries, and habitats. Birds are meant to fly, so it's great if you can offer a safe flying space. Flying is essential for healthy respiratory, muscular, and skeletal systems.



Where you place the bird's housing is also crucial. Parrots like a secure spot close to a wall, out of drafts, and in a room where there's a lot of traffic. It's a lonely and miserable bird that's relegated to the garage or a back room. Chapter 5 gives you lots of housing do's and don'ts.

Parrot paraphernalia

Once you've decided on housing, you need a lot of parrot paraphernalia. Fortunately, manufacturers of birdy stuff have gotten incredibly creative over the years, and there's a cornucopia of parrot accessories out there that will make your bird more comfortable, give him things to do, and perhaps even save his life. Check out Chapter 6 for your parrot shopping guide.

Parrot Care 101

There's a lot more to know about parrot care than tossing some seed and water into a cage and hoping for the best. Those days are over (thankfully). Much research has been done on parrot health and nutrition in the last couple of decades, bringing parrot people to a new level of awareness and allowing parrots to live longer, healthier lives. Though some species of parrots are long-lived, some with a lifespan of more than 80 years, most don't even make it past a decade. The information throughout this book shows you how to ensure that your parrot lives out its full lifespan. Most people think that budgies (parakeets) only live a few years. With the proper care, budgies can actually live to be well over 15.

Health care

Parrots are complex organisms that have very different systems than humans do. Things that don't bother humans at all can kill a bird instantly. For example, the fumes from nonstick cookware, avocados, and aerosol sprays are deadly for birds. But by far the most deadly thing for birds is lack of proper health care. Getting your parrot to a certified avian veterinarian is crucial to keeping it healthy and alive. Check out Chapter 10 for more information on illness. While you're at it, don't skip over Chapter 9: grooming.

Nutrition



By far the deadliest thing for most parrots is poor nutrition. A parrot that's suffering from vitamin and mineral deficiency has a weakened immune system and is susceptible to many diseases and ailments, not to mention behavioral problems. Read Chapter 8 for a lot of good tips on proper parrot nutrition.

Parrot Behavior

It's too bad parrots don't come with owner's manuals — well, until now. You've got a great one in your hand. But as with just about everything, you're going to learn about parrot behavior by trial and error. If your parrot bites you, hopefully you'll figure out what caused the bite and won't repeat the events leading up to the incident. Chapter 11 gives you some insight into wild parrot behavior and why your “wild child” behaves the way it does.

Normal behaviors

Some behaviors that seem really odd are actually quite normal. You can't try to understand parrots by using human intuition. It's very easy to anthropomorphize parrots, giving them human qualities. They definitely do some things that seem quite human. But for the most part, the things they do are all part of a complex communication that's really designed for other parrots. From body language to vocalization, your parrot's behaviors all mean something. The key is to get inside that feathered head and figure out what the parrot is trying to tell you. Check out Chapter 12 for more on normal parrot behavior, body language, and vocalization. Chapter 15 is all about parrot intelligence and will help you understand your feathered pal as well.

The parrot monster

Some of the behaviors that are normal for parrots can be annoying or baffling to their human guardians — screaming, plucking, biting, beak banging — it's enough to make a human guardian pull her own hair out. Because parrots aren't really meant to be kept inside a home, they can come up with some terrible behaviors due to frustration and loneliness. Chapter 14 fills you in on how to handle birds gone wild and gives you options for getting help.

Parrot Pals

Most people want a tame, hands-on parrot companion. Some people do have *watching only* birds, generally the smaller parrots, but when it comes to the medium to large parrots, it seems that guardians are really looking for a friend. That's great, actually, because parrots bond well to gentle, kind humans who have their best interest at heart and behave accordingly. But remember, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. You can't just *intend* to do right by your parrot — you actually have to walk the walk.

Making friends with your parrot

Check out Chapter 16 for advice and step-by-step tips on taming and training that will help you make good friends with your parrot and help you have the correct expectations. Most relationships go bad when expectations exceed actuality. In a parrot/human relationship, it's usually the parrot that loses, which is pretty tragic for him. This chapter helps you learn to create trust and a lasting bond with your bird.

And baby makes three

Breeding parrots is not a great idea, for a variety of good reasons. First, there are way too many homeless parrots already, most in shelters or sanctuaries that are full to capacity. Second, breeding birds is a risky business — your veterinary bills will far exceed any money you make, and you put your parent birds in danger of illness and death, not to mention how delicate the babies are. And finally, the endeavor is one of the most time-consuming things you'll ever undertake.

That said, some of the smaller birds — such as budgies, lovebirds, and cockatiels — have a healthy following of hobbyists who do breed them for show (Figure 1-3). If you're interested in this, or you just want to find out how your parrot came to be, check out Chapter 17.

Figure 1-3:
Baby parrots are cute, but breeding them is best left to people who are experienced. Also, there's a shortage of good homes for parrots, so check out a local parrot rescue organization before you breed your birds.



Photo by Mary Jo Yarberry

A Caveat to the Wise

Hundreds of books about parrot care and behavior are on the market, and there are hundreds of Web sites. Everyone has a slightly different way of doing things and a slightly different parrot philosophy. There are different parrot *camps*, each with its own intense convictions. I try my best here to offer you a variety of viewpoints. Mainly, I focus on what has worked for me all these years working with parrots, both my own and those of my clients in my care and behavior practice.

You're not going to find absolutely *everything* you need to know about parrots in this book. This book is a great primer to get you started on the right foot, and even intermediate and advanced parrot people will find some valuable information here. In any case, you're going to run into situations that you may not know how to handle, and perhaps you'll remember something from this book that will help you deal with the problem or at least point you to a good reference where you can get some help.

