

- » Appreciating the history of the human–bird relationship
- » Considering whether owning a bird is right for you

Chapter **1**

Birds and Humans: It's Only Natural!

Who among us hasn't looked up with awe and even envy at the sight of a soaring hawk or the V formation of migratory waterfowl? Who hasn't smiled at the clever capering of chickadees or the luminescent colors of a hovering hummingbird? And what about the sweet song of the canary or the clever mimicry of the parrot? For as long as our collective consciousness can remember, we've shared our environment with birds, creatures of myth and magic, soaring spirits who remind us of a dimension beyond our own. Look up, they remind us, and in so doing we gain both perspective and inspiration.

Perhaps humans have always wondered what it would be like to bring birds closer to us, out of the heavens and into our lives. And in response to the immense and primeval appeal of these flighted creatures, we've done exactly that, enjoying their song and their beauty in our homes. Ancient civilizations in China, Egypt, and Rome, among others, found pleasure in bird keeping, a joy that follows us to modern times as more people than ever discover the benefits of sharing their lives with avian companions. According to the latest statistics from the American Pet Products Association, approximately 5.7 million U.S. households live with a pet bird.

But have we done birds any favors by taking them under our wings? Clipped and caged, often admired more for their ornamental presence than for their companion qualities, these marvelous creatures are too often sold short. When we treat them with less respect than they deserve, we can make our birds miserable and sick, and we deny ourselves the full pleasure of their company. Even worse, through greed and ignorance, we decimate their numbers in the wild, driving some incredible species to extinction in our quest for their uniqueness and their habitat.

Fortunately, knowledge of how to properly care for pet birds — physically *and* emotionally — has grown in the last several decades, thanks to pioneering avian veterinarians, researchers, breeders, and bird lovers themselves who are no longer satisfied to allow birds to be second-class compared to pet dogs or cats. We're part of an evolving society that increasingly appreciates the creatures with which we share our world.

The changing times are exciting, and by buying this book you're claiming your interest in becoming part of the new and improved perspective on pet birds. Finding out how to care for them properly is a wonderful first step on the road to bird keeping. First steps lead to lots of new territory, and in this chapter we help you explore a promising trail of information.



REMEMBER

As with all companion animals, doing your homework is essential to success as a bird parent. You need to know what you're getting into and where to find the bird of your dreams. And you need to know how to care for your bird and what to do when things go wrong (and they will, sometimes!). So, don't rush! Enjoy discovering details about birds, and you can expect to be better prepared for the time you bring home a bird of your own.

Getting to Know the History of Birds

Birds For Dummies isn't a history book, and we aren't historians — and we certainly don't want to bore you! But we think some historical perspective is both important and interesting. And besides, sometimes looking back helps clear the vision of what's ahead. So, read on! We promise: You won't face a test at the end of this section.



BIRD TALK

Because birds have been a big part of our lives and cultures for so long, many of the words we use when we talk about our feathered fellows are ancient in origin, derived from *avis*, the Latin word meaning “bird.” Count in this group the words *avian* (having to do with birds), *aviculture* (the keeping of birds, especially for breeding purposes), and *aviary* (a place to house birds). And what about *aviation*, *aviator*, and *avionics*? You got it: When you see the letters *avi-* at the beginning of a word, you can figure a connection to birds or to one of their most notable qualities — flight!

Food, feathers, and (finally!) friendship

Our earliest ancestors didn’t have the luxury of enjoying birds as pets — they needed them for food, and they hunted birds and collected eggs to meet their most basic sustenance needs. Before long, though, humankind started to realize the benefits of *domestication* (changing wild creatures so that they not only provide us with food, but also serve as helpers and companions). These changes began 10,000 to 12,000 years ago and haven’t stopped since. The worldwide growth of fried-chicken fast-food chains is just a modern milestone on the road that began in the jungles of Asia, where people first discovered the tasty ancestor of domestic chickens, the red jungle fowl.

Domestic fowl were admired and worshipped for their fertility, their courage, and even their role as the earliest alarm clocks. With so much going for them, birds quickly graduated to a place of honor for their nonmeat attributes — their beauty became reason enough to keep them around.

Although many of the world’s cultures are horrified at the very idea of eating dogs and cats, the use of birds for food is nearly universally accepted (with the exception of individuals who abstain for philosophical or religious reasons). Why is it that some birds are prized as family members and others are best appreciated when served with orange sauce? We don’t know, but in Chapter 2 we show you how some of the birds we routinely consider “food” really have decent pet potential!

Humans’ enduring involvement

People keep birds today for many of the same reasons Egyptian pharaohs or ancient Romans captured them — for beauty — as well as for some reasons bird fanciers of times past probably never gave much thought to. Figuring out what attracts you to birds can give you an understanding of the trade-offs you can live

with (and those you can't). And those realizations are bound to set you up for success in choosing your avian companion.

The beauty of birds

Let's face it: Humans are plain. Oh sure, we have some different skin tones and different hair and eye colors, but put us next to birds, and we have to admit to being pretty dull. And that's probably one reason why humans appreciate the beauty of birds and why our history with them in close company spans hundreds of years — we just want to be able to gaze upon (or wear) their glorious feathers.

Is it any surprise that some of the more popular pet birds are also the flashiest? The beautiful macaws — the scarlet, the blue-and-gold, and the giant blue hyacinth — are breathtaking to behold, as are their glorious smaller relatives, such as the dazzling sun conure, with a beautiful complement of sun-yellow feathers. And non-parrot species are not to be left out! Just consider the beauty of some of our fancy chicken and waterfowl breeds, as well as prize pigeons. Even smaller birds are prized for their plumage. From a simple singer discovered on a far island, the canary has been bred into all kinds of fancy feathered forms.

The lust for beauty spelled extinction for more than a few species of birds, ruthlessly slaughtered for feathers to adorn ladies' hats in the last century — as many as five million a year died for their plumage. Among the victims: one of the only two parrot species native to the United States, the Carolina parakeet. By the turn of the century, groups such as the Audubon Society were working to stop the killings. Too late for the Carolina parakeet, though: The last one died in the Cincinnati Zoo in 1918.



TIP

How beautiful do humans consider birds? So much that if you're trying to attract attention to a product or service, a picture of a bird typically works wonders. The eye-catching potential of birds makes them popular with the folks in the advertising and marketing businesses. Fans of the sketch comedy TV series *Portlandia* may recall the catchphrase "Put a bird on it," satirizing the trend toward avian motifs. Brian, who always has his eye out for birds, has noticed that about a quarter of the booths at veterinary conferences use birds in their displays, even if birds can't use the products!



TECHNICAL
STUFF

The Latin term *rara avis*, meaning "rare bird," is often used to reference an unusual or unique person or object. Roman poet Juvenal is credited with it in a sentence describing "a bird as rare upon the earth as a black swan."

Of song and speech

Birds use song and mimicry to protect their territory, warn of danger, and attract mates, and throughout history, their fascinating music has also engaged a human audience. Such birds as the canary and the singing greenfinch have long been

prized for their song, and the members of the *Psittaciformes* order — otherwise known as parrots — are so well known for their vocal talents that they’ve inspired a figure of speech. (To *parrot* something means to repeat it, whether you’re a bird or a human being.) Even finches such as the ones shown in Figure 1-1 keep up a companionable twittering.



FIGURE 1-1: The lively sounds and antics of little birds like this shaft-tail finch add to their wide appeal.

Photograph courtesy of Claudia Hunka, Your Basic Bird (Berkeley, California)

The breeding of canaries dates to the 16th century, and humans’ relationship with wild-caught parrots is traceable to even earlier times. Ancient Greeks and Romans fell in love with parrots, so much so that a trained one was considered more valuable than the slave who trained him. A favorite phrase to teach a Roman parrot? Why, “Hail the Emperor!,” of course.

Some 1,800 years later, companion birds were still found in the highest halls of government. Yes, the White House. James and Dolley Madison brought their “green parrot” with them to the Executive Mansion, Thomas Jefferson kept mockingbirds there, and Andrew Jackson had a parrot named Polly known for her (pardon the pun) “fowl” language. John Tyler had a pet canary he called Johnny Ty — nothing like naming a bird after yourself — and, of course, Abraham Lincoln is known for the earliest of the presidential turkey pardons. An admirer sent James Buchanan two bald eagles, whom he sent to live at his home in Pennsylvania. William McKinley had a parrot named Washington Post, known for

whistling “Yankee Doodle.” Calvin Coolidge may well have had the greatest number of presidential pets, including four canaries, a thrush, a goose, a troupial (the national bird of Venezuela), a mockingbird, and a “yellow bird” named Goldy. Dwight Eisenhower’s parakeet, Gabby, died while he was in office and is buried on White House grounds, as is Caroline Kennedy’s pet canary.

Recent research strongly suggests that birds don’t, in fact, merely parrot, or repeat, what they hear — some understand the words they’re saying. The work of Dr. Irene Pepperberg and her African grey, Alex, changed everyone’s understanding of the intelligence of birds. Sadly, Alex passed away in his sleep at the young age of 31, as a result of *atherosclerosis* (hardening of the arteries), but his legacy continues to be a guiding light for us all. Alex didn’t just talk — he had the ability to identify objects and colors and understand concepts such as “bigger” and “smaller.” You can learn more about him at the Alex Foundation (www.alexfoundation.org).

A charming companion

Although birds have lived as part of the human family for tens of thousands of years, the here and now may be the best time to enjoy an avian companion. Laws enacted to conserve birds in the wild and to stymie the worst sins of the importation trade (in which thousands upon thousands of birds died, either in transit or after entering the public realm as pet birds) have put the focus on breeding. The birds who come out of the best breeding programs make the very best quality pets, better than any Caesar could have known.

CLOUD: A THERAPY BIRD

Our flying friends can be much more than companions in our homes. Birds have made a place for themselves as our helpers as well. Pet birds help children with autism improve their social skills, gain self-confidence, and develop trust. Parrots have helped people with disabilities manage stress and anxiety. Some emotional support parrots have learned to recognize stress in their humans and to say calming phrases that help them to relax or overcome anger. And although they aren’t as common as therapy dogs or cats, therapy birds bring joy to patients in hospitals, residents of nursing homes, and children in schools.

Cloud, a ringneck dove (shown in the nearby photograph), was handled by humans — including kids — from the time he cracked out of his shell. He grew up to be a docile, friendly bird who was especially used to interacting with children. His owner, Daleen

Comer, was involved in pet therapy visits, and she thought Cloud would be a natural for the children's reading program. She trained him to wear a flight suit (think of it as a bird diaper) and created a special basket in which he could ride and be secure. To help prepare him for making visits, she began taking him places: the bank, the dry cleaner, the pet store, hobby shops. He wasn't afraid of anything. When Cloud was 2 years old, she had him evaluated by Pet Partners to see if he was suited to the work, and he received a perfect score.

They started making visits to the library and then weekly visits to classrooms. Cloud, now 12 years old, sits on his blanket on a table at school. Kids take turns coming up to see him, give him a treat, and read to him to practice their skills with a noncritical listener. He attends programs where students learn about the differences between therapy animals and service animals and demonstrates how therapy animals can help people. College students at exam time also benefit from his stress-relieving presence. Comer says Cloud is an ideal partner for the communities in which they visit and hopes he has several more years of bringing happiness to people.



Photograph courtesy of Daleen Comer

Socialized since infancy to see humans as part of their “flock,” many of today’s pet birds have companionship potential that can amaze anyone who believes the old stereotypes about wild-caught birds. Every bit as beautiful as their wild relatives, breeder-raised babies are loving and intelligent, and improvements in what we know about their care keep them healthier than ever before. Our newfound knowledge, combined with centuries of experience and perspective, means that if you educate yourself to care for your pet, you can expect a phenomenal relationship — better than you may have imagined when you decided to become a bird owner. The depth of a healthy and interactive relationship with another living being is immense. Birds can certainly be a part of our lives and we a part of theirs.

Deciding If You’re Ready for a Bird

Pet birds bring so much to their owners’ lives — color, song, speech, and a relationship that, at its best, approaches what you would find with a mate or a child (and, at its worst, approaches what you would find with a mate or a child). And that, for some people, is the problem. Birds give as good as they get. Sometimes birds are a joy to live with, and other times, they’re a big pain in the tail feathers.

Having a bird in your home is different from having a dog or a cat (we have both). Birds are birds, unique and magical in their own right. To be ready for them, you have to be open to their own feathered flavor of magic.

Having a bird is more rewarding than you could ever imagine. We believe that learning to share life with a bird can make most of us better people. When you understand your bird’s wide range of nonverbal communication, your own communication skills are enhanced, making you more sensitive and better able to interact with others (of all species).

But living with a bird isn’t easy. For your own sanity, and for the health and happiness of the bird you hope to introduce to your world, you need to ask yourself whether you’re really up to the challenge. Forewarned is forearmed, after all.

Putting in the time

Forget any notion you ever had about birds being low-maintenance pets. Canaries and finches can fall loosely into that category, although even those species require more attention than you may expect, but the same can’t be said of all the other birds we love as pets. From budgies to cockatiels to the flashiest of macaws, birds can be — how shall we say this politely? — *demanding*. You can’t just put them in

a cage, change the papers, add food and water, and ignore them. They won't let you.

Most of the birds people keep as pets are highly intelligent and very social. People often have denied them the company of their own kind and the stimulation of an appropriate environment. We ask them to be happy with us — and they *can* be, but not without effort on our part. And effort takes time. When you take one of these sentient beings into your life, you must take responsibility for her health, happiness, and welfare. If you're not prepared to spend that time working with your bird, training your bird, providing healthy social interaction for your bird, and allowing your bird plenty of supervised out-of-cage time to enjoy, you're going to have an unhappy bird. An unhealthy bird. A biter. A screamer. A feather-picker. And it doesn't need to be that way.

Cared for properly, birds can be as time-consuming as dogs. Really. They need to be loved, handled, trained, fed, and cleaned up after — a lot! If you don't have that kind of time and energy, reconsider choosing a bird as a companion unless you're sure you'll enjoy the pleasant sounds of a *charm* of finches (*charm* is the delightful term for a group of finches), who prefer the society of their own kind rather than interactions with humans.



REMEMBER

With any relationship, the more you put into it, the more you get out of it. The same is true when it comes to birds. The more time you spend with your bird, the more loving and socialized she'll be — and the more time you'll want to spend with her as a result! But don't forget to grant these individuals the opportunity to be just that: individuals. Their personalities and their likes and dislikes vary just as much as ours do. Not all birds are suited to all people and living circumstances. In this regard, think of them as feathered humans.

Another aspect of time that you need to consider when it comes to birds: longevity, yours and theirs. Healthy pet parrots can live for *decades*, which requires a major commitment to such companionship. In general, the larger the parrot species, the longer the life expectancy. For example, the large macaws can live 70 to 100 years or more, while the little budgerigars rarely will live to be 20 years old.

Can you imagine spending most of your life with a pet? Are you able to plan for the pet who outlives you? These issues are very real for bird owners, and you need to factor them into your decision-making. Some pet trusts, which ensure that pets are cared for after an owner's death, can be in effect for up to 150 years — a must if you have a long-lived pet such as a macaw, Amazon parrot, or tortoise.



TIP

For help in understanding an older bird and in keeping her healthy, check out Chapter 11.

PARAKEETIS TYRANNOSAURUS?

One of the more unusual aspects to consider when taking a bird into your life: This association is likely to be the closest you'll ever get to sharing space with a dinosaur. Although scientists once figured that reptiles were next of kin to dinosaurs, they now believe birds are even closer. Birds are descended from a small meat-eating dinosaur that walked on two legs. The link between the two was made with the discovery of *Archaeopteryx* (meaning “ancient wing”), a Jurassic-period fossil of a creature that was part bird and part dinosaur.

If you have a hard time making the leap between birds and dinosaurs (the word *dinosaur* means “terrible lizard,” after all, not “terrible bird”), check out the foot of an ostrich sometime — but not closely. The claws alone may give you *Jurassic Park* jitters. Scientists have learned that many of the dinosaurs once considered to be reptiles actually had feathers. Based on fragmented DNA recovered from a T. rex fossil found in the United States, one published study found that the closest living relative to a T. rex is, yes, the chicken! We love that.



Photograph courtesy of D. Davidson Harpur

Shelling out the bucks

Birds are expensive to care for properly, much more so than most people anticipate. The price of acquiring a bird itself can run from the inexpensive for finches, canaries, and budgies to the monthly-salary figures some people are willing to shell out for large, flashy parrots. And that's just the beginning.

Safe, roomy caging isn't cheap, nor is a proper diet of pellets and fresh foods. Preventive veterinary care to keep your bird healthy is a pricey must, and if your bird gets *really* sick, be prepared to dig deep. All these aspects of care must be factored in, along with such necessities as toys, which a large parrot can go through with awesome efficiency. It all adds up.



TIP

Throughout this book, we note places where you can save money without cheating your bird. A good place to start is with your choice of bird. Although many people are drawn to the largest and most colorful of parrots, some of the other species are less expensive to acquire and maintain. We highlight these alternatives in Chapters 2 and 19.

Dealing with the noise and mess

To hear some people tell it, the best tools for anyone who wants to keep a bird are earplugs and a handheld cordless vacuum. And it's true: Some birds can give a rowdy rock band a run for their money when it comes to decibel levels and the ability to trash a room.

Some of the problems are natural and normal, and some are caused by humans, but either way, the potential for noise and mess is an important consideration when you're thinking about a bird.

But then again . . . these problems shouldn't stop you, unless peace, quiet, and a clean house are the things that matter most to you in life.



TIP

For a better handle on which birds are noisiest, see Chapter 2. For ways to minimize mess, see our cage and cage setup information in Chapter 4.



REMEMBER

We're not trying to put you off bird keeping. But we believe in the importance of understanding potential problems *before* you take the plunge. The best attributes a bird lover can have are the same as a good parent — love, patience, structure, and a good sense of humor. You'll need them all! But the payoff . . . oh, it's grand. (And unlike being a parent to a human child, you don't have to save for a college fund.)

A BIRB IS A BIRD IS A BIRB

Who doesn't love birbs? No, we're not misspelling that. *Birbs* is an affectionate term used on the Internet to refer to our feathered friends. What qualifies as a birb? According to Audubon (www.audubon.org/news/when-bird-birb-extremely-important-guide):

The subreddit [r/birbs](http://www.reddit.com/r/Birbs) [www.reddit.com/r/Birbs] defines a birb as any bird that's "being funny, cute, or silly in some way." Urban Dictionary [www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=birb] has a more varied set of definitions, many of which allude to a generalized smallness. A video on the YouTube channel Lucidchart [<https://youtu.be/FpCX1BWA6do>] offers its own expansive suggestions: "All birds are birbs, a chunky bird is a borb, and a fluffed-up bird is a floof."

Birb, borb, or floof, we love them all. #BirbsForever