



TEN THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW BEFORE ADOPTING A BIRD



1. Birds are not domesticated animals. Domesticated animals are animals who have been bred for thousands 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.
2. Chlamydiosis (psittacosis) and avian tuberculosis can be transmitted through the air from birds to humans. These diseases can cause significant illness, especially for people with compromised immune systems. Birds also continually shed “feather dust,” or particles of feathers, which may aggravate asthma or other respiratory conditions in some people. Many homes with birds have HEPA-type air filters in rooms with birds to control allergies from bird dander.
3. Parrots, including lovebirds, parakeets, and cockatiels, are noisy and messy, and can be destructive. Vocalizing (squawking, chirping, talking) is an important part of any parrot’s social communication. Birds may eat small amounts continually throughout the day, dropping and discarding bits of food everywhere. 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.
4. All parrots have long lifespans. Depending on species, they may live 20 to 50 years or more. Caring for a bird is often a life-long responsibility.
5. Parrots are extremely social animals, and have been compared to human toddlers in their emotional and social needs — but, unlike children, they never grow up.
6. Birds are active and inquisitive and must be provided with ample room to move about and play. An indoor or sheltered outdoor aviary or a flight-safe room (windows covered, no cats/dogs, no ceiling fans, etc.) that will allow the bird(s) to fly is good for exercise. Birds with clipped wings can get exercise by climbing, swinging, and flapping, if provided with ample space, toys, and climbing structures.
7. All birds need a varied diet — not just seeds or pellets, but grains, beans, fruits, and vegetables, too.
8. Light exposure and sleep are very important to birds. Birds need exposure to UVA and UVB rays from direct sunlight (windows block necessary UV rays) or full-spectrum lighting to synthesize the vitamin D necessary for bone health. Birds should have a minimum of 8 to 10 hours of darkness and quiet each night.
9. Birds are very sensitive to air quality. Unlike humans, a bird replaces nearly all the air in his lungs with each breath. Because no residual air is left in the lungs during the ventilation cycle of birds, they transfer more oxygen and more pollutants during each breath. Birds should never be exposed to tobacco smoke, chemical fumes (hairspray, cleaners, etc.), or Teflon-coated materials. Exposure to some toxic inhalants can cause immediate death; chronic exposure to other toxins can lead to premature death.
10. Birds need medical care from a veterinarian who specializes in birds. Proper vet care for birds can be expensive. Your vet will probably recommend a complete examination and diagnostic tests when you first acquire your bird. In addition, she or he will probably recommend annual well-bird examinations. Smaller birds require the same vet care and regular examinations.

THE TRUE NATURE OF PARROTS

by Denise Kelly, Joan Rae, and Krista Menzel

Parrots: Wild at Heart

More than 300 species of parrots, ranging from budgies, cockatiels, and conures, to the larger Amazons, macaws, and cockatoos, are found the world over, from the rainforests of South America and the islands of the South Pacific and the Caribbean, to the deserts and grasslands of Australia and Africa. In the wild, parrots live in flocks and can fly up to thirty miles a day. They spend hours foraging for a variety of natural foods, playing together, mating, raising their young, and chewing on tree branches to exercise their beaks. A macaw flying 200 feet above the jungle canopy screeching to its flockmates is a fascinating and breathtaking sight.

Captive-bred parrots are not domesticated animals like cats and dogs. They are wild creatures only a few generations out of these native habitats. Even under the best of circumstances — a home with plenty of physical stimulation, toys and objects to play with and chew, a proper diet, and companionship with humans — life in captivity is still a pale shadow of the life that parrots were meant to live in their natural habitats.

The average captive parrot spends 10 to 12 waking hours a day confined to a cage and is fed a monotonous diet of manufactured bird foods. Many are denied the opportunity to fly because their wings have been clipped to keep them “under control” and to prevent them from hurting themselves by flying into walls and windows, chewing on household objects, and getting into other hazards. Few are kept in groups with their own species.

Eventually, the restriction of a parrot's natural desire to fly and forage and to have the companionship of other birds can manifest itself in neurotic behavior such as excessive screaming, pulling out feathers, and even biting. Most people cannot cope with the long-term challenges and responsibilities of caring for these essentially non-domesticated animals who are physically and psychologically adapted to live in the wild.

The Challenges of Parrots as Companion Animals

Parrots kept in captivity are still wild animals by nature. Their natural curiosity, sensitivity, intellect, playfulness, and ability to form close ties with humans can make them wonderful companions for those who are able to care for them properly and provide an environment compatible with a parrot's natural lifestyle. Unfortunately, the same characteristics that make parrots so intriguing are the very ones that make them extremely difficult to live with as companion animals. Many parrots find themselves homeless, as their natural behaviors and needs clash with human expectations.

Unlike dogs and cats, parrots clearly choose whom they wish to form strong bonds with. You may love your parrot, but he may not necessarily offer you unconditional love in return.

In the wild, parrots live and travel in flocks and maintain constant contact with their flockmates, using loud calls as a means of communication when out of visual contact. To avoid separation anxiety, which can manifest in behavioral problems in a captive environment, birds require hours of daily social interaction with their human companions as well as with other birds. There is no such thing as a quiet parrot!



PHOTO: Wild Connection

Professionally trained bird shows can lead people to view parrots as objects of entertainment and decoration, and raise expectations that a parrot will perform similarly at home. Sadly, the fact that parrots can communicate with people in human language has also become their curse. Many parrots simply do not learn or choose to speak.

Birds are meant to fly and to be with other birds. No bird is meant to be caged. Confinement in cages can lead to neurotic behavior, excessive screaming, feather plucking, self-mutilation, obesity, and other destructive habits.

Parrots are mischievous and territorial. They sometimes view others — even family members — as intruders and can display jealousy toward them. They'll often resort to aggression to keep intruders away from their mate or chosen human or to protect their domain. As prey animals, birds can be naturally suspicious and defensive around strangers or in unfamiliar situations.

A parrot's beak is the equivalent of a human's hands. Birds use their beaks for a variety of activities that enable them to survive. They use their beaks to eat, to preen, and to feel and hold objects. They also use them for aggressive and defensive behaviors. In the wild, the beaks of macaws and cockatoos are powerful enough to chew through tree branches and excavate a nest in a tree trunk; in captivity, their beaks are no less powerful. Parrots do not know the difference between a sanctioned bird toy and their homes' woodwork, so they can do great damage if left unsupervised.

In the wild, parrots spend a great deal of time foraging for a highly varied, seasonal diet. Because of the different nutritional needs of the various species, individual tastes, and the tactile and social nature of eating, feeding a parrot is not as simple as feeding a dog or cat. It requires daily dedication to purchasing, preparing, and serving a variety of vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, pellets, and "people foods" such as pasta, rice, and beans.

Parrots in their natural habitats drop the remains of their food to the ground, thus feeding creatures below and distributing seeds. In your home, they treat your carpet as the forest floor.

Birds have extreme sensitivities to products not otherwise considered dangerous to cats and dogs. Among these are many household cleaning products, personal care products, candles, air fresheners, building materials, paints, glues, plants, foods, and especially toxic fumes emitted by non-stick coated household appliances and tools such as cookware, self-cleaning ovens, hair dryers, irons, and heaters. People who live with birds must be very careful about the products they use in their homes.

Many of the larger species of parrots can live up to 80 years in captivity. Parrots are a lifetime commitment — the equivalent of caring for a special-needs child for the rest of his or her life.

The reality is that not all parrots talk, not all parrots choose to bond with humans, not all parrots are tame, not all parrots want to amuse and please people on command. However, all parrots do bite, do scream, do chew, do make messes, and do demand intensive care and interaction. Terms like "hand-tamed," "hand-raised," "hand-fed," and "domestically-bred" are misunderstood. They often mislead uneducated consumers to assume they are getting a companion animal who is tame, loving, well-behaved, and will not bite.



PHOTO: Animal Protection Institute

Like other exotic, wild animals, parrots usually fail to fulfill most people's expectations as companion animals because their natural instincts, needs, and behaviors conflict with ours. Misinformed mass marketing, production breeding, and the trendy attraction and availability of exotic pets in our country are compelling more and more unprepared people to acquire birds on impulse. When parrots don't live up to their expectations, people often become disenchanted and want to rid themselves of the responsibility of caring for these birds. Consequently, the number of birds entering the pet trade only to be misunderstood, abused, neglected, and abandoned is soaring.

A growing number of bird rescue, adoption, and sanctuary organizations are facing the challenge of caring for the parrots discarded by those who were unprepared for the commitment required to share a home with a long-lived, non-domesticated animal. They are also attempting to slow down the influx of birds into an already saturated market by educating potential "parrot people" on the realities of sharing their lives with a parrot before they choose to acquire a bird. To help the homeless parrots already in the system, these groups also encourage and facilitate the adoption of older birds into knowledgeable, well-prepared, loving homes, or, in special health or behavior cases, into sanctuaries to live out their lives on their own terms.

Like other exotic animals, all captive parrots display many traits and needs — crucial for survival in their native habitats — that are not considered to be positive "pet qualities" in most human homes. Unfortunately, the realities and difficulties of living with parrots are not yet common public knowledge. As long as an uneducated demand continues, breeders will obligingly supply the misinformed market with birds that, sadly, will often end up neglected or discarded.

However, if the demand decreases, so will the supply! Public education about the true nature of parrots by knowledgeable individuals and organizations may compel inexperienced people to think twice before bringing a bird into their home. With a thorough understanding of how a parrot will impact their lives, only people who can meet a bird's needs will choose one as a companion. Only then will all parrots kept as companions be truly wanted and appreciated for the wild animals they are, the pet market's demand for baby parrots decrease, and will the homeless bird problem become a thing of the past.

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