

# Bird Care



*Congratulations on your new pet! Your sensitive, intelligent companion will introduce you to a world of cheerful song and brilliant plumage.*

## BACKGROUND AND RECOMMENDED SPECIES

ASPCA experts recommend several species for first-time companion bird caretakers. They have very different personalities, so you'll have to do a little research to find the bird that best fits your family's lifestyle.

- **Zebra finches** are big on color and low on maintenance. These small, hardy birds are relatively inexpensive and have an average lifespan of seven to ten years. They are not as social with their human caretakers as other species are—so if you're looking for a bird to be your good buddy, they may not be right for you. Finches do need company of their own kind, however, so you must keep at least a pair.

- Did someone say cheerful and chirpy? Meet the **canary**, a super singer with similar care requirements to the finch. And like finches, canaries do not enjoy human handling. However, most canaries don't like to share the same cage—but one bird kept alone as a pet will be quite content with care and attention from you.

- If interaction's a big attraction, consider **budgies** and **cockatiels**. Budgies, commonly though erroneously known as parakeets, are the most popular avian species kept as pets—and with good reason. This gentle friend will enjoy perching on your shoulder, and can be taught to mimic words and household noises. Great first birds for children! At 11 to 14 inches long, cockatiels are about twice the size of budgies and have an average lifespan of 12 to 15 years. They're smart, love to be doted on by their human families, and often are willing talkers.

## COST

When you first get your bird, you'll need to spend about \$75 for a cage. Food runs about \$75 a year, plus \$30 annually for toys and treats.

The ASPCA recommends that you get your bird from a responsible breeder or, better yet, adopt one from a shelter or avian rescue group. Call your local shelter and search on sites such as [Petfinder.com](http://Petfinder.com) and [Avian Rescue online](http://AvianRescue.org) for birds in need of loving homes.

## HOUSING

Always buy the largest, most well-constructed cage you can afford. No matter the species, your bird will need a cage that's large enough for her to stretch her wings and fly short distances. A typical cage for small birds should be about 25 inches tall and 25 inches from front to back. To prevent escape or injury, the bars on the cage should only be .4 inches apart—a little larger than the tips of your fingers. Note that canaries and finches prefer a cage that's wider than it is taller, while parakeets and cockatiels like tall cages with horizontal bars they can climb. And don't forget perches, please! You'll need to install several, at varying heights—and do make sure that one is level with the food dishes.

Line the bottom of the cage with plain paper or paper bags cut to size. Newspaper is fine, as long as it's been printed with non-toxic, soy-based inks. You'll need to change the paper daily.

Where should you set up your bird's new home? Location is everything. Place the cage in a warm, bright part of the house, close to where the action is but away from all drafts and direct sunlight, and off the floor. Avoid setting up the cage in or near the kitchen at all costs. Birds are extremely sensitive to fumes, and those from self-cleaning ovens and Teflon-coated cookware, if overheated, can be fatal.

## DIET

Although seed has been the traditional staple of a bird's diet, most experts recommend pelleted food as the way to go. Seed mixes provide variety, but they do not always provide optimum nutrition, and are definitely on the messy side. We recommend a high-quality pelleted food that's formulated for your bird's species.

Be sure to offer fresh veggies and fruits to your bird every day. Dark, leafy greens are packed with vitamins, and many birds also enjoy carrots and broccoli. Common fruity faves are apples, pears, melon and kiwi. Take care to remove any uneaten food after a couple of hours, and please do not give your bird avocado, cherry pits, rhubarb or apple seeds.

Fresh, cold water should be available at all times. Change it at least once a day, preferably twice.

### **EXERCISE AND TOYS**

If your cockatiel or budgie has been properly tamed and trained, she'll need at least an hour of exercise out of the cage in a safe, enclosed room every day. She may just want to hang out on your shoulder, or enjoy the time to explore. Be sure to always secure the room first by shutting all windows and doors, and cover any windows or mirrors so your bird cannot accidentally fly into them.

Even though finches and canaries do not take to handling and do not need time out every day, they will appreciate a revolving selection of toys—as do cockatiels and budgies. Small birds may enjoy ladders, swings and mirrors with bells, and wooden chew toys are great for keeping beaks trimmed. Check out what's available at the pet supply store, and just make sure that the toys you select are safe and appropriate for your bird's size and species. They should be labeled accordingly, but don't hesitate to ask if you are unsure.

### **GENERAL CARE**

A thorough cleaning of your pet's cage is required once weekly. Remove and wash the cage tray and perches, and wash the area around the cage. Make sure all toys are clean and damage-free, without loose or broken parts that could hurt your pet. Once a month, you'll need to clean the entire cage with a disinfectant solution. Rinse well, and dry everything before returning your bird to his cage.

If you have a budgie or cockatiel, you can begin to hand tame your bird after the first few weeks of getting acquainted. First, open the cage door and insert your hand; talk softly and reassuringly to your pet as you offer him a little treat, such as a piece of air-popped popcorn or a sunflower seed. Be patient, this may take a few sessions! Once your bird trusts you enough to take food from your hand, you can pass a perch or thin stick into the cage and gently press it against your pet; with time, he should hop up onto the stick. After that, you can work to get your bird to step from the stick onto your finger.

You can help keep your pet's plumage looking perfect with a bath as often as he likes it. Put a shallow dish at the bottom of the cage and see what happens. You'll probably want to schedule bath time just before you plan to change the paper, however.

### **VETERINARY CARE**

To keep your bird in good condition, ASPCA experts recommend an annual visit to the veterinarian. Weight loss or gain, often an indicator of illness, will be checked, and any necessary tests can help the vet monitor your pet's health.

Please don't wait to schedule an appointment if you think your pet is sick. A bird who is not feeling well may fluff out his feathers or sit quietly on the floor of his cage with his eyes closed. Other symptoms that something's not right with your pet include a change in the consistency, frequency or color of droppings, sneezing, coughing, blocked nostrils, labored breathing and a crusty beak or eyes.

### **BIRD SUPPLY CHECKLIST**

- Well-constructed cage, at least 25 inches tall, wide and deep, with several perches
- High-quality pelleted food
- Species-appropriate safe toys (lots of 'em!)
- Plain paper or "non-toxic" newspaper for cage bottom

### **ASPCA**