



Keeping Your Parrot Healthy: Feeding

Introduction

Birds in the wild have evolved to utilise the nourishment from a large variety of natural foods, which vary seasonally and regionally. Unfortunately, it is not possible for us to replicate the natural diet for our parrots in captivity. A well-nourished bird will live longer, be more resistant to disease and generally a happier member of the family. Seed alone is NOT a balanced diet.

Seed-based Diets

Seed on its own is primarily either carbohydrates (eg millet) or fat (eg sunflower seed) and lacks a number of vitamins and minerals, as well as protein. Although the nutritional deficits can be balanced to a certain extent by adding other foods to the diet (pulses, vegetables, some fruits), birds will tend to select only certain items, leading to malnourishment.

Pellets

Pelleted diets are a better alternative to seed-based diets, because the birds are forced to consume the entire, balanced diet, rather than to preferentially select certain items. We recommend Passwells Crumbles and Parrot Pellets, and Dr Macs Organic. Both brands are committed to ongoing research, and they update their formulations when new scientific information becomes available.

Converting Your Bird to Pellets

To avoid excessive weight loss or other complications, your bird will need to be monitored throughout the conversion process.

There are several parameters to observe:

- **Weight:** A pair of digital kitchen scales can be used to record your bird's weight each morning before changing the food (an 'empty' weight). Any weight loss in excess of 1% per week is excessive.
- **Droppings:** A normal dropping has three parts – urine (liquid), urates (white) and faeces (brown or green). A bird eating sufficient amounts of food will have 'full droppings'. These have bulk and volume and contrast markedly with the 'empty' droppings done by a bird that is eating insufficient food. An 'empty' dropping has a very small faecal component that is very dark green or black, or has only urates and urine, with no faeces at all.
- **Amount eaten.** Monitor the food dish to see how much of the pelleted diet has been eaten.

Each day, the bird should be given fresh pellets in a food container, placed adjacent to the bird's favourite perch. Vegetables and a small amount of fruit can be placed in the cage as well. At the end of the day, if insufficient amounts of pellets have been consumed (using the above parameters), then the bird is allowed access to the normal diet (in a different container to the pellets) for no more than 30 minutes. After that time, the normal diet is removed, leaving the pellets, vegetables and fruit.

NEVER STARVE YOUR BIRD TO MAKE IT EAT PELLETS. THIS CAN RESULT IN SERIOUS COMPLICATIONS. Any weakness or illness, or abnormal behaviour should result in immediate replacement of the normal diet before phoning us for advice.

Other Tricks

- Birds like to eat as a flock, so use human mealtimes as a stimulus for the bird to eat their pellets. Don't place the normal diet in the cage just prior to mealtimes, as that stimulus will be wasted.
- For birds used to hand-fed treats, pretend to eat the pellets yourself and then offer the pellets by hand.
- Budgerigars will often peck at pellets if they are scattered on a mirror on the floor.
- Praise the bird for eating the pellets.

When to Change the Diet

NEVER change the diet of a thin or sick bird – the physiologic stress of diet changing may be more than they can tolerate. Feed thin or sick birds their usual diet (even if poorly balanced) until they have recovered, and then look at changing the diet to a better quality one. It may take up to 4 to 6 weeks for a bird to fully convert to a new diet, so ensure that you have the time available for monitoring the bird for that duration.

What Other Foods Can I Offer?

For most parrots, we recommend that pellets be 80% of the total diet, with the remainder being vegetables, fruits and a small amount of nuts and seeds. Cockatiels should be fed no more than 60% pelleted diet.

Generally the darker the vegetable, the more nutritious it is. Recommended vegetables include corn, capsicum, zucchini, broccoli, squash, tomatoes, sweet potato, pumpkin, carrot, beans, peas, other pulses. Vegetables should make up approximately 10-15% of the diet. AVOID celery, iceberg lettuce, excessively watery fruits (these are not toxic, but are too dilute to be truly nutritious). Recommended fruits include kiwi, strawberries, blueberries, grapes, small amounts of apple, melons and stone fruits (but remove the stones first). Fruits should make up no more than 5% of the diet.

NEVER FEED AVOCADO, ONION, RHUBARB OR GARLIC (THESE CAN ALL BE TOXIC).

