



Groupe Vétérinaire MONVET Inc.

**BIRD GUIDE**



# WHO ARE BIRDS?

## Introduction

There are about 10,000 species of birds around the world! Among them, many are kept as pets. In Quebec, the most popular belong to three orders: the psittaciformes, the passerines and the columbiformes.

The **psittaciformes** are probably the most popular. This order includes parrots, parakeets, and lovebirds.

The **passerines** are also frequently encountered. Canaries and finches, among others, are part of this order.

The **columbiformes** are gaining popularity and include pigeons and turtledoves.



Each species of bird should be considered as unique, each with its own needs, although all species share many similarities. This guide is intended as a source of general information. To get more details about your own bird, do not hesitate to consult your veterinarian.



# FEEDING

## Overview

The exact nutritional requirements of each species of bird are unknown, but some general recommendations can still be made. While it may be interesting to diversify their diet, it is not useful to do so because birds have a natural tendency to sort through their food. Thus, what they prefer to eat usually does not fulfill their nutritional needs. It has even been shown that wild birds' diets, in their natural habitat, is unbalanced most of the time.

Making the transition to a more balanced diet can be challenging. To achieve this goal, you must persevere and be patient. Each new food must be introduced in small amounts. Also, by associating it with a game or a social interaction (eg. family meal), you can facilitate your bird's acceptance of it. Do not hesitate to be very demonstrative, even theatrical, and taste the food in front of him!

Wild birds spend a lot of their time searching for food. This is known as foraging and it is something that even birds in captivity should practice to keep them entertained and stimulated, which in turn can help prevent certain problems from appearing. For example, food can be hidden in different places like in toys or in puzzles whose complexity will vary according to the bird's species and his experience.

## Particularities

The following recommendations can be applied to a wide variety of domestic bird species, although there are some exceptions. This is the case with **lorises** and **lorikeets**, among others, whose needs vary greatly from the majority of psittaciformes. For more information concerning these species, please consult your veterinarian.



# FEEDING

## Seeds

Because seeds' nutritional content is very much unbalanced, mixed seeds shouldn't be offered to pet birds as a primary food source. Indeed, they are typically rich in fat and lacking in proteins, minerals and vitamins. Furthermore, because birds shell the seeds without swallowing the husk, they do not profit from the nutrients found in it.

Some seed mixes also contain feed or other vitamin and mineral supplements. These blends are useful when transitioning, but still beware of picky birds!

Nevertheless, it is not necessary to completely remove seeds from your bird's daily rations. However, they should be given only in small to medium quantities or as treats.



## Feed

Bird feeds show many advantages compared with seeds. First, because they are made of, among other things, seeds, vitamins and minerals, feeds better fulfill birds' average nutritional needs. Second, since they are uniform, birds can't sort through them. Finally, feeds really help in preventing many health problems.

Consequently, the feed should represent on average 75% of the food consumed by birds. However, this proportion can be adjusted according to the size of the bird (eg. 50% for canaries, 80% for macaws). Once again, it is important to distinguish between a food offered and one that is eaten.





# FEEDING

## Fruits and vegetables

Vegetables should be the second most important source of food. Those that are rich in vitamin A should be prioritized. For example, dark green vegetables (eg. parsley, spinach) are often preferred by birds and are very nutritious. Yellow and orange ones (eg. peppers) are also excellent choices.

Fruits should be offered also, but in smaller quantities (except with lorises and lorikeets). Small berries are particularly nutritious. Canteloups, mangos, and apricots are other good choices and are considered to be better than apples and raisins for example.



**NB: AVOCADOS ARE TOXIC FOR BIRDS AND MUST BE AVOIDED.**



Fruits and vegetables should not be left in their dishes for more than 4 hours because they waste quickly.



## Others

### Nuts

Large parrots (eg. macaws, cockatoos) in particular need to have nuts (eg. almonds, walnuts, cashews) on a daily basis in order to fulfill their protein and fat requirements.



### Germinated seeds

Passerines and columbiformes like germinated seeds in particular. This food can thus make up a good portion of their diet that isn't occupied by the feed and vegetables.



# FEEDING

## Table food

Various foods can be offered to birds in small quantities, preferably as treats. Beware of bread and pasta, which provide very little nutrients and promote weight gain. Any salted, sweet, and spicy food is to be avoided.

Just remember that table food, like fruits and vegetables, is perishable and should not be left in the birds' dishes for more than 4 hours either.



## Insects

Passerines like to eat insects. Those can be given occasionally as a treat.



## Toxic foods

On top of avocados, certain foods are prohibited for birds because of their potential toxicity. Here are a few examples: chocolate, coffee, onions, garlic, and salted foods (eg. chips).

Other foods such as peanuts and certain types of corn are often contaminated by toxins. Thus, it is best also to avoid them.



# GENERAL CARE AND PREVENTIVE MEDICINE

## Screening tests

Screening for certain infectious diseases is recommended when acquiring a new bird, especially if there are other birds in the home. Numerous tests can be done using a blood sample. For more information regarding which test should be done on your bird, please contact your veterinarian.

## Quarantine

A quarantine period of 30 to 45 days is recommended when acquiring a new bird, especially if there are other birds in the home. This means that the new bird should be kept isolated in a room that is completely separated from other pets. To prevent transmission of a possible infection, it is important to use products and material that will be reserved exclusively for the care and maintenance of this bird and to wear protective gloves and clothing. During the quarantine, the bird should be closely monitored to detect any potential signs of disease and treated rapidly as needed.



## Bathing

Most birds enjoy bathing or showering each day! Some birds will do it in a water bowl, whereas others prefer running water. More hesitant birds can be gently sprayed. In general, clear water is good enough for grooming. For soiled feathers, a mild baby shampoo may be used, followed by a good rinse.

## Nail clipping

Claws can be cut and/or filed as needed. It is important not to cut the nails too short to avoid bleeding. Although perches made of cement or covered in sand paper can wear out and shorten the claws, they should not be used as they also wear out the skin under the feet

## Beak trimming

Birds, in general, do not need to have their beak trimmed. However, if there is a malocclusion or a generalized health problem, the beak can grow abnormally and make it necessary for it to be trimmed. It is preferable to consult your veterinarian before attempting a beak trimming on your bird.



# GENERAL CARE AND PREVENTIVE MEDICINE

## Ring removal

Closed rings are means of identification used by breeders for birds born in captivity. These rings can be removed by your veterinarian in order to prevent, among other things, injuries to the leg due to friction or constriction.

## Weight

A follow-up of the bird's weight can help detect early signs of disease. Indeed, even a subtle weight loss can be an important indication to consult your veterinarian. For example, a loss of only 2 grams can be significant for a parakeet.

Keeping track of the bird's weight can easily be done at home, but make sure to use a scale that is accurate to a minimum of one gram (eg: kitchen scale). It might be easier to weight him if you place him in a holed plastic container or on a perch.



## Feather clipping

Deciding to clip birds' feathers or not is a personal decision. Indeed, many people prefer that their birds' feathers be kept short to prevent them from flying, thus limiting risks of accidents while they roam freely in the home. If you decide to go ahead with the procedure, make sure that your bird already knows how to fly.

Also, the bird still needs to be able to hover. Consequently, only the primary feathers should be cut. Furthermore, it is important to avoid cutting any growing feathers, as they will bleed, and to make sure that the cut is symmetrical. You can contact your veterinarian for more information on this matter.

## Vaccination

Despite the many infectious diseases that can affect domestic birds, vaccines are not routinely given to them. However, vaccination can still be considered for some diseases in very specific contexts. You can consult your veterinarian for more information on vaccination.

## Surgery and sterilization

Sterilization and other elective surgeries are not routinely done in domestic birds, unlike in pets. Nonetheless, many surgeries can still be performed if there is a health problem requiring one. In that case, it is better to consult a veterinary bird specialist.



# ENVIRONMENT AND BASIC CARE

## The cage

### Location

The cage should be in an area where there is no draft, while still being properly ventilated. It is important that the bird be close to his owner(s) in the day, but he should be kept in a location that is dark and quiet for at least 12 hours at night.

### Dimensions

The ideal size of the cage depends on the size of the bird(s), the number of birds that will live in it, the birds' lifestyle, and the available space in the room or home. Generally speaking, it is better that the cage be as large as possible, especially if the bird spends most of his day there.

At the very least:

- The cage should be wider than taller;
- Its length and width should be at least twice the distance between the extremities of each wing when they are fully extended;
- Its height should be at least twice the distance between the top of the bird's head and the end of his tail.



### Perches

Birds enjoy having several perches placed at different heights in their cage. Make sure though that the perches are far enough from their bowls (to avoid contamination from droppings) and the bars (to avoid damaging their tail feathers). Although their use is widespread, perches that are rough, made of cement, and covered in sand paper should be avoided, as previously indicated. It is better to use perches that have only slightly irregular surfaces (eg. pesticide free wood branches, ropes, etc.) in order to reduce the risk of injury to the birds' feet and to replace them regularly when they are worn and dirty.



# ENVIRONMENT AND BASIC CARE

## Toys

Toys are a necessity, especially for parrots, to climb, chew, think, and play! Toys made of wood, cardboard, or cord are preferred, whereas metallic ones (eg: bells) should be avoided because they can harm the birds. It is important to provide them with different types of toys and change them regularly (or do a rotation), in order to keep the birds' interest alive. Parrots in particular enjoy swings and puzzles. Beware of plastic birds and mirrors though, because they cause spawning problems in some birds.

## Litter

Instead of using a clumping cat litter or corn litter, it is best to cover the bottom of the cage with paper or cardboard and to clean it, as well as the bowls, every day. The cage itself should be cleaned thoroughly once a week. Moreover, the bird should not be in the same room while chemicals are being used and the material should be rinsed abundantly thereafter.

## Outings

Most birds enjoy spending free time outside of their cage. This allows them to exercise, stimulates them mentally and encourages social interactions with other family members. During these outings, make sure that the environment is safe and provide constant supervision to prevent the bird from getting access to toxic products and coming in contact with dangerous objects (eg. fan, oven, toilet, etc.) or certain animals (cats, ferrets, etc.). It is important to make sure that all the doors and windows are closed. For more adventurous birds, outdoor outings can be considered either in their cage or with a harness adapted to their size.



## OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL TOXIC PRODUCTS

Due to the fragility of their respiratory system, birds are highly sensitive to products that are in the form of aerosols such as perfumes, tobacco smoke, carbon monoxide, and polish or alcohol vapors.

Also, products containing chlorine (eg. bleach) or ammonia should be avoided when birds are present, as is the case with polytetrafluoroethylene pans (eg. Teflon®), which are particularly harmful to birds, especially when they are heated.

Finally, heavy metal poisoning (eg. lead, zinc, copper) is frequent in birds and typically causes neurological, digestive, and urinary problems. Many objects containing metal are present in the environment (eg. batteries, lamps, rubber, plaster, old paints, coins, plumbing, light bulbs, some pet toys, etc.).



# PARTICULARITIES IN BIRDS

Birds are very different from other animal species being kept as pets and having feathers instead of fur is just the tip of the iceberg! Many of these differences can be associated with particularities specific to birds.

## Longevity

Birds' lifespan varies a lot from one species to another. Whereas smaller species can have a lifespan of approximately only 10 years, some larger ones can live up to 80 years. This is an important detail to consider before adopting a bird, as it is a long term commitment! Indeed, changing owners can be an ordeal, especially for parrots. Thus, it is best for them to stay with the same one all their life.

## Flight

The species of birds that are commonly kept as pets all have the capacity to fly. Although this is certainly beneficial to them, it can also increase the risk of injury in the house or facilitate their escape outdoors.



## Metabolism

Birds' metabolism is higher than other mammals' of similar weight given the amount of energy required to fly, among other things. Consequently, their oxygen needs are higher and they require a constant supply of nutrients and calories. Because of that, fasting can prove to be rapidly damaging in some cases. Furthermore, even though their respiratory system is very efficient, it is also more sensitive to air pollutants.

## Feet

Unlike other pets, birds stand only on two legs and spend a substantial amount of their day, even at rest, in the same position. This means that all of their weight is carried on their legs all the time, aside from when they fly of course. Obesity and poorly adapted resting surfaces can therefore contribute to the development of leg problems, such as *pododermatitis* (feet infection).

## Spawning

Like hens, female birds can lay eggs even if there are no males around. Even if spawning is normal, it still significantly increases the females' nutritional requirements and makes them more sensitive to the negative effects of malnutrition. Moreover, some females can lay eggs excessively, thus increasing the risk of nutritional deficiencies and potential complications everytime an egg is laid. It is important to note that the lack of spawning does not mean that the bird is a male!



## PARTICULARITIES IN BIRDS

### Sex

Determining a bird's sex can be challenging. In many species, a physical exam is not enough to determine the sex. Fortunately, many methods have been developed to make this easier. Without a doubt, the simplest and most efficient one is DNA sexing, which can be performed on a blood sample.

### Behavior

Being prey animals, birds are easily stressed in the presence of other individuals, of any species, or when they are exposed to new situations. They also have a tendency to hide any weaknesses and signs of disease. Thus, birds can be sick and not let it show.

Birds share their time between four basic activities: eating, interacting with their roommates, grooming, and sleeping. An imbalance in the time spent doing each activity is likely to cause certain behavior problems to appear.

Birds are social animals and the majority of species live in groups. Although it is not uncommon for a few individuals of the smaller species to share the same cage or room, it is not the case for large parrots. For them, it's their owners that are a part of their group, so regular and healthy interactions between the two species are a must. While parrots generally tolerate being handled better than passerines and columbiformes, these species still appreciate human contact.

Birds are very intelligent beings, but this is likely more obvious in parrots. Indeed, many species of parrots are capable of solving simple puzzles and certain species are even able to speak and answer questions being asked to them in a considered manner. To keep them engaged, these birds require daily intellectual stimulation. To this end, using positive reinforcement with yours, meaning rewarding him for his good behavior, will make it easier for him to learn some tricks and will give you an opportunity to establish a special bond with him!



## PARTICULARITIES IN BIRDS

### When should you consult a veterinarian?

A veterinary exam is recommended as soon as the bird is acquired, followed by an annual exam to check his health status. Furthermore, it is important to consult your veterinarian between annual exams if he develops one or many of the following symptoms :

- Bleeding
- Seizures
- Difficulty spawning
- Loss of balance, paralysis, weakness, or falls
- Inability or refusal to perch
- Listlessness or drop of energy level
- Abnormal posture
- Ruffled or soiled feathers
- Change in behavior
- Respiratory difficulties (eg : loud breathing, open-beak breathing, exaggerated respiratory efforts, tail flailing)
- Decreased appetite
- Weight loss
- Change in the droppings' appearance<sup>1</sup> (eg: change in color, diarrhea, increased urine production, presence of non-digested food, etc.)
- Change in voice

<sup>1</sup> The term "droppings" refers to all bird excreta - urine, urates and stools – which are commonly simultaneously evacuated.





## HEALTH RECORD

### WEIGHT MONITORING

DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)	WEIGHT (G)

### IDENTIFICATION

DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)	DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)
NAME	
DATE OF BIRTH	
SPECIES	
SEX	(METHOD OF DETERMINATION: _____ )
RING NUMBER	
MICROCHIP NUMBER	
DATE OF ADOPTION	

### DIET

BRAND OF FEED (QUANTITY)	TYPES OF VEGETABLES (QUANTITY)	TYPES OF FRUITS (QUANTITY)	SEEDS (QUANTITY)	NUTS (QUANTITY)	OTHERS (QUANTITY)

### SCREENING AND DIAGNOSTIC OF INFECTIOUS DISEASES

DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)	TESTS	SAMPLE TYPE	RESULTS/INTERPRETATIONS



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