

Wilmette Pet Center

"the place for people who love pets"

Bird Brain (Or Understanding Our Parrot Friends.)

Many people are attracted to the bright colorful feathers of our parrot friends. They often don't stop to consider the amazing intellect and incredible personality that exists behind those wings! While many people consider the term "bird brain" and insult, we can think of no better compliment (unless it's being a mutt).

Birds are smart. There is a lot going on in that beautiful head. They are some of the few animals that can figure out puzzles (like the cockatoo that took the key off the wall to undo the padlock that keeps him in his cage), and many species are well known for their ability to not only mimic human speech but some have been shown to be able to answer simple questions and string together words to form sentences. They don't have to use their brains to forage and survive in the wild, so we can make use of this to train them to do a lot of cool tricks.

What often surprises people is how affectionate parrots can be. It should not be, though, as they are very social animals, living in huge flocks. They are very tactile, and many love to cuddle and preen their owners.



Percy, enjoying a good scratch

Let's take a look at what is needed to care for parrots:

Socialization – This is one of the most important areas of bird care. Parrots are extremely social animals, and need a lot of interaction with their flock. This is not an animal that you keep in their cage, give them food and water, and expect all to be well. Birds kept like this quickly become bored, leading to self destructive behaviors and loud screeching.

Socializing your parrot is not a terrible chore! This is some of the most fun you'll have with your pet, and is why they make such amazing companions. Clicker training is a fantastic way to spend time with your bird. Similar to clicker training with dogs, by spending the time and attention to teach your bird some tricks is a great way to socialize your bird; it's also rewarding having a beautiful animal that does cute tricks to wow your friends. To clicker train your bird, you associate any good behavior with a click and positive feedback – be it a caress, a toy, or, most effective, a treat. Over time, they begin to think of the click as the reward, and you use that to reinforce certain behaviors and actions. Check out [this great article](#) on *Clicker Training For Small Pets* by Joan Orr and Teresa Lewin (the principle works for birds too).

Diet – Like all of the animals, the healthiest diet is one that includes a lot of variety. The old fashioned seed mixes are nutritionally unbalanced and, fed over a very long lifetime, can lead to major health problems. Pellets should form the basis of your bird’s diet, mixed with a lot of fresh foods. Provide lots of veggies and dark leafy greens – anything healthy that you’d eat, offer your bird. Parrots also love fruits, although each bird will have their own preferences and favorites. Pastas, both cooked and raw, can be great treats and offer variety in their diet, and a variety of nuts can be used as training treats..



Avoid offering your bird anything with processed sugars, caffeine, alcohol, and fatty foods like avocados. Their bodies are very tiny and their systems cannot easily handle these substances.

If you have a seed addict, check out our care sheet “[Having a Healthier Bird](#)” for tricks and tips on switching their diet to a healthier mix.

Cage size – As we always say, go for the largest your budget and space can handle. There is no cage too large (just make sure their heads cannot fit between the bars); the more room the better! Choose cages with playtops (or provide a table-top play gym for exercise) for more socialization. Besides spending a lot of their time in this cage, you need plenty of room to hang their toys and perches.

Do I have enough toys? If you’re asking that question, the answer is probably “No”. Birds love, and need, toys. It is vital for their mental and emotional health. Birds love to pick and chew, rip and shred, so provide them with toys that fill this need. Hard wood and coconut shells are excellent for larger parrots with powerful beaks. Softer woods and grass or raffia make perfect toys for smaller parrots. Check out the small animal section for some great toys for birds, including sea grass twists and Oxbow’s Timothy grass bungalow. Paper towel tubes, cut in half and stuffed with ECO Bedding and their favorite treat rewards them for chewing and tearing.



Birds that do not have enough toys will begin to be screamers, looking for attention, and will start to pluck feathers out from boredom. The best way to prevent your parrot from getting bored is to rotate their toys. Keep a tool box full of toys and change them out on a regular basis. Add one or two new toys to the mix to keep it new, and be sure to hide fresh treats for them to find.

Height – Birds like to be up high. It’s a lot safer for them, as they’re out of the reach of predators. For some birds, though, it can cause problems. A lot of birds get very aggressive and like to bite when they’re on someone’s shoulder. It’s especially risky, as they’re near the face where they can cause some harm. Having a hand suddenly come into their space, especially when we can’t see their body language, can also make the more likely to bite.

Not all birds get aggressive when on a shoulder. For many, it's a great way to get some cuddling time and affection with your bird. As long as they're gentle, many birds can be allowed time on your shoulder. Keep in mind the one problem with a bird on the shoulder: poop on your back. Birds tend to poop every 15 to 20 minutes. A lot of people wear an old shirt to catch the droppings. You can time it and put your bird back on their stand until they do their business. It's also to potty train your bird and teach them to either go on command or over a certain surface. Clicker training is really useful to teach this behavior.

Grooming – most birds take care of their feathers, but in our somewhat drier homes, we can help by giving them a mist a couple of times a week. Aim a spray bottle up in the air so that a fine mist of water drifts down on them. Spray them until they are damp. Many birds will start dancing and fanning their wings out and really get into it. Using a shower perch lets you spend more time with your bird and helps hydrate their skin. Some birds prefer to do what I call the “hokey pokey” bath, usually in their water bowls. They stick one leg in, shake it off, they stick one wing and shake it all about.

Misting your bird helps keep the feathers clean, and, during molting season, can help reduce irritation from the new feathers coming in. When pin feathers are present, many birds love it if you take your fingers and roll and break up the waxy covering; this is what birds do when they preen each other, and it really makes your parrot feel part of your flock.



Pin feathers coming out. They just look uncomfortable.

To clip wings or not to clip? There is a lot of debate in the bird community about whether you should cut a bird's flight feathers. It is true that a bird's respiratory system is tied into its flight muscles; the very act of flying helps them breathe better. It's obviously natural for birds to fly. And yet they are not living in the jungle, and there are a lot of reasons for trimming a bird's wings in our home. Windows present the greatest risk to our parrots. The birds sees the sky, trees, and thinks they can just fly straight to them, but this invisible barrier suddenly stops them. Toilets, dishwashers, pots on the stove, and ceiling fans can all present potential risks to flighted birds.



Besides safety, there is another great reason to trim your bird's flight feathers: attitude. If they don't want to do what you want, they just fly away. They get to make all the decisions for themselves. When your bird can't fly, they're dependent on you to get around. This tends to calm some birds down, as they have to keep you happy to get what they want. More importantly, it means that you're spending more focused time with your bird. That extra attention serves as a reward for good behavior for your bird.

Many people have flighted birds, and never have a problem. It only takes one time, though, for the bird to fly into the wrong place to regret

not having trimmed their wings.

Trimming a bird's wings is not painful, as we only cut the flight feathers, those responsible for creating lift. It's like getting a haircut. The feathers do re-grow during their bi-yearly molt, so this needs to be done twice a year. It's very important to keep an eye on their flight, as the flight feathers can grow in well enough for flight before you even notice. Many an owner has been surprised when Polly suddenly takes off! Most people check the wings when they bring them for their monthly nail cuts, especially in the spring and fall when most birds start to molt.

Nails and beak – Nails need to be trimmed on a regular basis. Doing so keeps the quick – the blood and nerve supply for the nail – from growing long and lets us keep the nail permanently short and comfortable. Plan to trim the nails every 4 – 6 weeks, and make sure you have styptic powder on hand. It'll stop any bleeding and prevent infection should you nip the quick.

Provide perches with varying diameters, and use calcium perches to help keep nails trimmed. If all the perches are the same size, leg muscles can begin to atrophy; varying sizes keeps their legs healthy. Calcium perches can help keep your bird's nails short as they scrape along the rough surface.

Beaks rarely need to be trimmed, as they routinely grind them down themselves and by playing with toys. If you find your bird's beak routinely grows long or misshapen, take them to your avian vet, as beak problems can indicate issues with their liver (such as fatty liver disease, the result of feeding a diet too rich in seeds.)

If you don't feel comfortable doing these trims yourself, bring your bird by and let us do it! For just \$10, we'll do any trim needed!

If all of this makes you think that caring for a parrot is a tremendous amount of work, it shouldn't be. A happy, healthy, well-behaved parrot is such a joy that the time spent to give parrots a great life is time that enriches our own lives. I shouldn't be such serious business.

Having a parrot in your home is tremendous fun. So don't forget to clown around with your feathered friend, laugh at its antics and enjoy a life gone to the birds!

