



## **Large Bird Husbandry**

Large pet birds, such as Macaws or Umbrella Cockatoos, are gorgeous, intelligent, and make wonderful pets. Cockatoos are sexually dimorphic; males have a black or dark brown iris, and females have a light brown or red iris. These birds can provide decades of companionship, as they can live anywhere from 40-60 years in captivity.

### **Housing**

Cockatoos require tall cages, with vertical bars spaced about 0.5in-0.75in apart. The cage should be at least 2ftLx 2ftWx 3ft tall. They will also need to have welded locks and feeder locks, as they are notorious escape artists and are very adept at opening doors. The bigger the cage, the better; any caged bird will be much happier and healthier if they have plenty of room to spread their wings and play.

Macaws require large cages with vertical bars spaced about 0.75in- 1.5in apart. Their cage should also allow ample room to spread their wings and play. It should be at least 48in L x 36in W x 60in tall – again larger is always better.

Regardless of what kind of bird you have, the cage should have a tray at the bottom lined with either newspaper or paper towel. It is beneficial for bird's feet to provide a variety in the sizes and types of perches. Perches should not be placed directly above food and water dishes in order to avoid contamination. Sandpaper perches are irritating to the feet and not recommended. The thickness of perches should range between 5/8 of an inch to 2 inches.

Birds are very sensitive to a wide array of toxins; it is for this reason that the cage should not be in a room anywhere near the kitchen. Chemicals from non-stick pans, self-cleaning ovens and other kitchen items are potentially lethal to birds. You should never use a scented candle or an aerosolized, anti-odor spray (Glade, Febreze etc.) either, as these are also highly toxic.

You should also provide frequent baths for your bird. They enjoy bathing and grooming themselves, and it helps them maintain proper hygiene. You can do this by providing a shallow dish with water or some birds prefer misting with a spray bottle or in the shower. At night you should cover their cages with some sort of light proof material. This makes them feel more secure, and it makes them more docile at night.

Birds are extremely intelligent and need a lot entertainment to be happy. Bored birds are more destructive towards themselves (plucking feathers etc.), their cage, and their owners. It is for this reason there should be a variety of toys available to your bird. Ladders, wooden blocks, and bells all make excellent toys. Cardboard or wood blocks are an inexpensive toy you can give your bird to destroy as well. Be careful with rope toys and fabric hammocks. If they start to fray,

they should be removed as soon as possible because your bird can become ensnared and injured loose strings. Toys should be rotated every 3-7 days to prevent your bird from becoming bored with them.

Birds will have a much higher quality of life if they have a large amount of interaction with their owners every day. Before taking them out of their cage for any reason, be sure to make sure the room is safe: unplug any electronic devices so that they don't get electrocuted if they were to chew on a cord; close the drapes or blinds on all the windows so they are not tempted to fly into them; and shut off all fans, especially ceiling fans. Birds can be injured from dogs or cats, so they should not interact with or should be very closely monitored when near any dogs or cats while they are outside the cage. Providing an area with a perch for your bird will provide a sense of security while it is outside the cage. Birds should always be closely supervised when outside of their cage.

### **Feeding**

Your bird's diet should ideally consist of 80% pelleted food, 15% fruits and vegetables, and 5% treats. Some vegetables that are safe to give your bird include: radishes, turnips, mustard and dandelion greens, kale, cooked sweet potato, parsley, peas, green beans, peppers, cauliflower, broccoli, collard greens, corn and cucumbers. Acceptable fruits include apples, berries, kiwis, mangos, cantaloupe, honeydew, bananas, pears, and grapefruit. Any seeds or pits should be removed before giving fruit or veggies to your bird. Seeds and nuts are very high in fat and if given in excess can cause health issues, so they should only be given occasionally as treats. However, some macaws need a higher fat diet than other birds. You should consult with your veterinarian with any questions regarding your pet's diet. Fresh water should be offered daily. Some tips for switching your bird to a pelleted diet:

- Offer only pellets for a portion of the day. Birds can be picky and may refuse new food options when first offered. By allowing your bird to try only the pellets for a portion of the day, allows your bird time to adjust while still making sure they are eating what they are used to.
- Wet the pellets down. Sometimes making the pellets into a sort of damp mush, may make it more appealing for your bird to try initially. Eventually you can transition into completely dry.
- Offer in a smoothie. You can blend the pellets into a mixture of veggies and fruits to mask the pellets. Sometimes if you were to try your own version of the smoothie (without the pellets) at the same time, it may make your bird more willing to try this new food.

Brands of pellets we recommend:

- Mazuri
- Zupreem
- Lafeber
- Roudybush
- Harrison's

## **Cleaning**

Maintaining a clean environment for your bird is of utmost importance. The cleaner the cage is, the healthier the birds tend to be. Newspaper, paper towel, or a combination of both makes the best substrate for your bird for that very reason. They are absorbent of any waste and are very easy to add or remove to the cage. This bedding should be changed daily to prevent any buildup of waste. The cage should be fully cleaned regularly with a commercially available bird cage cleaner or a very dilute bleach solution. Ensure the cage, perches, dishes and toys are thoroughly rinsed and allowed to dry completely before your bird is allowed contact.

## **Enrichment**

While keeping birds as pets can be a very rewarding experience, larger birds need extra enrichment in their lives in order to really thrive. Birds are very social animals and spend a lot of time in the wild socializing with other birds, preening, vocalizing, flying, and foraging for food. When placed in captivity, these normal behaviors cannot be accomplished in the same way. Here are some suggestions to enhance the quality of life of your captive bird companion.

- **Foraging!** : There are a ton of foraging toys available for purchase, or you can make your own. In the wild, birds spend roughly 80% of their time foraging for food. When we simply place their food in a bowl in front of them, it discourages their natural instincts to work for their food. Start by having your bird search for something very high value and ideally move toward eventually having your bird forage for all food items.
- **Appropriate Interactions:** - It is important to note that there are appropriate and inappropriate ways to interact with your pet bird.
  - **Inappropriate:** Avoid cuddling or stroking the back of your bird and try to keep physical contact to only the top of the head. This kind of inappropriate contact stimulates the bird reproductively/hormonally and can lead to behavior issues and physical ailments later in life.
  - **Appropriate:** Instead, try training your bird with positive reinforcement techniques. You can even use clicker training for these tricks! Try teaching flying from one area to another area on demand, moving toys, talking, etc. to strengthen your bond with your bird.
    - When training, be consistent – this includes all household members
- **Allow your bird to be a bird:** Consider allowing your bird to keep its full wings for flight. Just make sure to ensure your home is a safe space for flying (i.e. turn off ceiling fans, close windows and blinds). Flying is what birds are meant to do, and it has physical benefits as well. This helps expend energy as well as decreases chance of heart disease and increases cardiovascular health.

Consider the above lifestyle choices to ensure your feathered friend has a long, happy, healthy life.