

Guidelines for Selecting a Pet Bird

Peter S. Sakas DVM, MS

Niles Animal Hospital and Bird Medical Center

7278 N. Milwaukee Ave. Niles, IL 60714

(847)-647-9325 FAX (847)-647-8498

Considerations Before a Bird is Selected as a Pet

There are several important aspects related to birds/bird care that one needs to consider before they select a bird as a pet. All too often people are selling or are giving away birds because the relationship was a poor one. The rapidly growing number of pet bird rescue and adoption organizations opening throughout the country evidences this. Even worse, birds die due to inadequate and improper care. These owners did not fully research the type of bird chosen and did not understand all the needs. The birds become frustrated or upset and develop behavioral problems. Avian veterinarians spend a great deal of time trying to solve behavioral problems with clients and their pet birds. Pet bird counselors and bird behaviorists are becoming more plentiful as there is a growing need for assistance in the understanding avian behavior for the pet bird owner.

Purchasing a bird should not be an impulse buy. It needs to be a well thought out and well researched decision. There are several important aspects related to birds/bird care that one needs to consider before they select a bird as a pet. Evaluate these various considerations before making the purchase of a pet bird.

1) Commitment

It must be understood that owning a bird involves a significant commitment of time. Many people purchase birds because they believe that they are easier to care for than a dog or cat. They feel that by merely providing some seed, fresh water and cleaning the cage occasionally the needs of the bird are met. Birds are very social animals, highly intelligent and they need interaction. Birds are not merely an ornament to keep in a cage and admired from afar. Bird owners must make the commitment to spend time interacting with their bird on a regular basis. Birds require periods of activity outside the cage (not as important in very small birds such as canaries or finches). Birds that are not given quality time can become emotionally frustrated and develop bad habits such as feather picking or aggressive behavior. This is especially evident in larger birds, which are more personable and require more attention. If the potential bird owner understands the commitment and can devote the time then a bird may be a good choice for them.

2) Expense

Smaller parrots/conures have become more popular recently due to their lower cost and that they are wonderful, interactive pets. Many people are reluctant to make the significant financial commitment to purchase a large bird. However, while the initial costs may be high (cost of the bird, cage, toys and initial veterinary examination) long term maintenance costs are not that expensive. Considering the longevity of these birds it may be a small price to pay for many years

of pleasure. Nonetheless, the prospective buyer must understand the degree of the financial burden and be willing to take fiscal responsibility to provide the best for the bird. Do not be 'penny wise and dollar foolish.'

3) Housing Restrictions

Before someone makes a decision to purchase a bird they must determine if there are any housing restrictions pertaining to pets. Does their apartment/condo allow pets? If so are there restrictions against birds? Renters should check their lease and also see if an animal deposit is required.

4) Noise

Some birds can be quite noisy or are notorious screamers. The variety of bird should be researched as to its 'noise potential.' Apartment/condo dwellers could have problems with their neighbors if they had a large, vocal bird. It is unfortunate when bird owners are faced with getting rid of their bird or moving out of their apartment/condo due to complaints by neighbors which precipitated action by the landlord or 'condo association.'

5) Size

Is there adequate space for the type of bird and cage desired? A large bird and a large cage could be too overwhelming for some living arrangements. Birds require freedom and activity outside the cage for good mental health. Bird owners should provide ample time and space for activity outside the cage on a regular basis.

6) Other Animals

If the prospective bird owner has other pets at home there could be the potential for a tragic encounter. They must make the commitment to monitor their pets. Even though their dog, cat or ferret is a sweet loving pet, the bird should never be out with them unless carefully supervised. Too often there are been fatalities or serious injuries due to attacks by other pets. Cat bites or scratches, no matter how innocent they seem, can be fatal to a bird unless veterinary care is provided. A major cause of trauma to pet birds is attacks by other birds in the household. Some birds can be very jealous or territorial and look upon other birds in the home as intruders or rivals. Quite often toes are bit off or beaks severely traumatized when the aggressive bird lands on the cage of another bird and attacks. The converse can occur when a bird lands on the cage of an aggressive bird and is bit while climbing outside on the cage bars. In multiple bird households if the birds have periods of freedom and are able to fly it is strongly recommended that they be closely monitored for any potential confrontational situations.

7) Children

Birds are wonderful pets to have around children; however, certain precautions must be taken. Children have to understand that a bird will bite and that their beaks are powerful. Sometimes the larger parrots might give a quick 'test bite' so large parrots should not be entirely trusted around small children. Even a small nip could cause significant damage to their small fingers, ears or eyes/eyelids. If a child is not old enough to understand that they must stay away from the beak then the cage should be 'childproofed' so that they cannot stick their fingers between the bars. The cage can also be placed strategically so the child cannot reach it. Some birds enjoy the noise and commotion produced by children. In fact, these birds are quite often as noisy as the children

are. Other birds that tend to be more subdued may have problems coping with rambunctious children.

8) Allergies

Feather allergies are fairly common so allergic individuals need to determine if they are allergic to birds. Certain birds such as cockatoos, cockatiels, and African greys produce more dust/powder from their feathers and are likely to cause allergic reactions in sensitive individuals, however any bird has the potential to do so. Another condition exists, termed hypersensitivity pneumonitis, which is caused by an allergic response to aerosolized proteins from the fecal matter of birds in allergic individuals. If a person is allergic they need to evaluate their sensitivities to birds before making the purchase.

9) Cleaning

One of the most important aspects of pet bird care is good hygiene. Filthy food and water cups could be the source of infection for the bird. Dirty cages with caked on fecal matter could also serve as a source of infection. Dirty, dusty cages could have the potential to cause illness or allergies in people. Clean cages and utensils reduce risk of disease for both bird and bird owner. The bird owner must be willing to make the commitment to regularly change the cage papers/bedding and clean the food/water cups. It is also very important the birdcage gets a thorough cleaning periodically, a special challenge when there is a large bird and large cage involved.

10) Nutrition

One of the most common conditions seen in pet birds is malnutrition. A seed and plain water diet is inadequate for pet birds. Bird owners must educate themselves as to the nutritional needs of the variety of birds that they have or plan to purchase. A balanced source of nutrition that is clean, fresh and stored properly must be provided. Good nutrition will provide birds with better resistance to disease and a longer/healthier life

11) Veterinary Care

Regular veterinary care should be provided for birds. Yearly physical examinations are strongly recommended, including bloodwork and fecal examination. New birds should be checked by a veterinarian soon after purchase within the guarantee period provided by the seller. Bird owners should learn the signs of illness in pet birds and seek veterinary care if illness is suspected. Birds are actually hardy creatures but if diseases are ignored (or unrecognized) the bird can become so ill that recovery is difficult. It is a responsibility of pet bird ownership that regular veterinary care is provided

12) Longevity

There is a wide range of life spans in pet birds. Some of the larger birds have life spans that are equivalent to humans. Realize that keeping a parrot as a pet will be a long-term commitment. Arrangements should be made for the care of birds if its life span exceeds that of the owner.

13) Talking Ability

Many people want this characteristic in a bird. A good talker is quite often a noisy bird and can frequently be aggressive, especially macaws and Amazons. Even though a bird is supposed to be a talker there is no guarantee that it will. It should also be noted that birds that are noted for their talking ability are more expensive than birds with limited speaking ability. A bird that is not a good talker does not make a less desirable pet, they are still very interactive, affectionate and communicate to the owner in their own fashion. Nonetheless, the ability to speak is a very fascinating attribute of pet birds and quite often why people want them as pets.

14) Experience

Past experience with birds or the lack of should dictate what type of bird one should consider as a pet. If a novice, a smaller bird is preferable as large birds can be quite challenging. Once the care of a smaller bird is mastered than a larger bird could be considered. If unable to control a large bird it could become very aggressive as it begins to dominate the inexperienced owner and the relationship deteriorate into a dissatisfying one. Experienced bird owners will do better with larger birds.

15) Source of Bird

There are many different places where pet birds can be purchased. Exercise caution, check references, do as much research as possible before the purchase and make certain some type of written guarantee is obtained.

- **Pet Store/Breeder** The most common sources of pet birds. Quality pet stores and breeders will sell quality birds and stand behind them. Deal with reputable sources and check references. At the time of purchase a written guarantee should be provided. Read the guarantee carefully and follow any recommendations. Quite often the bird is guaranteed if is checked by an avian veterinarian in a prescribed period of time. This should be done to insure the bird is healthy at time of purchase. Birds may be harboring disease that is not outwardly apparent. If the bird becomes ill outside the guarantee period and was not examined the seller is not obligated to stand behind the guarantee.
- **Bird Show/Flea Market** Some breeders sell their birds here. Deal with reputable sources. Obtain a written guarantee and a contact phone number if is a problem develops.
- **Previously owned birds** If the bird is older it may have a behavioral problem, some undesirable traits or a medical problem. The sale should be contingent upon a veterinary examination and a written guarantee obtained. Obtain a medical history and as much background information as possible.
- **Bird Rescue Organizations** There are many reputable bird rescue organizations in existence now which will obtain unwanted pet birds and work with them so that they can be loving, avian companions. Each group has their own set of qualifications for adoption and you should abide by their rules if you want to one of their birds. These groups are a good source of birds as you are providing a home for a pet that was, for whatever reason, unwanted and can now be placed in a nurturing environment.

- **Questionable origin** These include birds sold from motel rooms or off the streets. Birds from these sources should be avoided; as there is a good chance that they were smuggled and could be carrying disease.

16) Which Type of Bird?

It is all a matter of preference as each bird has its own special attributes/attractions. Research as many characteristics as possible pertaining to the variety of bird that will be potentially purchased. Both the positives AND the negatives must be critically evaluated to determine if the bird will be a proper choice. Experienced bird owners, breeders, pet stores and avian veterinarians should be called upon to offer recommendations. After careful evaluation of needs/wants, personal capabilities and housing situation then an intelligent decision can be made. It is so unfortunate when someone has to give up a bird because it was a poor match at the start due to poor planning - both the owner and bird suffer.

17) Baby Bird - Purchase Already Weaned or Hand Feed at Home?

Baby birds are a pleasure as they are affectionate, very tame and interactive. Baby birds can be purchased that are still being fed formula (hand feeding) and this can be continued at home. This has great potential for problems if a person is not skilled with birds. Due to the problems that can occur with hand feeding baby birds, many breeders no longer sell baby birds that are unweaned. Novices should get a weaned baby bird. If there is a desire to hand raise, then spend time with the breeder/pet store and practice hand feeding under their guidance before it is done at home without supervision. Newly weaned birds, even though not on hand feeding any more are still as affectionate.

Conclusion

Hopefully these basic guidelines will be helpful when you decide to purchase a bird. However, there are numerous birds that people are selling or giving away because the relationship was a poor one. Even worse, birds die due to inadequate and improper care. These owners did not fully research the type of bird and did not understand all the needs or were just too inexperienced for the variety of bird they purchased. With proper preparation you will engage in a long, wonderful relationship with a highly intelligent, interactive and loving companion animal.