

Some Tips on Buying Pet Birds

Peter S. Sakas DVM, MS
Niles Animal Hospital and Bird Medical Center
7278 N. Milwaukee Ave. Niles, IL 60714
(847)-647-9325

Throughout the years in avian practice I have come across some unfortunate situations related to the sale/purchase of pet birds. There are several serious considerations to be made during the transaction and I would like to offer some recommendations that will assist you in the process.

1) Deal with a quality breeder/pet store/rescue organization

This cannot be emphasized this enough! The avicultural community has numerous quality bird breeders, pet stores and rescue organizations - the problem is finding them. Reputation is very important. In each particular community certain names of breeders/pet stores come up repeatedly as excellent sources of birds. Occasionally if someone is looking for a particular type of bird that may not be very common they may need to go outside their home state. The key is to deal with a well-established source with excellent references. Although a long standing reputation is preferred there are very motivated, successful breeders that may have been in business for a relatively short period of time. A good means of finding quality sources of birds is through local bird clubs, checking with local avian veterinarians or pet shops. Some large scale operations will advertise in national bird fancier magazines. Gather as much information as possible on the potential sources. Prepare a list of questions and speak with the breeder/pet store/rescue organization until a good comfort level develops with them. Quality sources of birds may be more expensive initially, but in the long run the care that went into their raising and the support received afterwards will make the purchase well worth it.

2) If it's too good to be true, it probably is!

There are quite often questionable sources of birds that will sell them at prices much lower than the prevailing rate. Beware of people selling birds out of motel rooms, flea markets or 'on the street.' Quite often these birds are smuggled or possibly even stolen. If suspicious of such questionable situations contact the local USDA office. If the seller claims that the birds are hand-raised check for a closed band on the leg of the bird. These are complete metal rings that are slipped over their leg when they are young and as they grow the band will not be able to slide off. Older birds that went through the quarantine process will have the standard USDA band, a C-shaped band with three letters and three numbers on the band (such as ABC 123).

If the bird being purchased has no band be suspicious. Sometimes bands are removed because they can be irritating to a bird's leg, but some type of documentation should be made available. It is recommended when a veterinarian removes a band from a bird the type of band and number should be recorded. This should be kept in the medical record and documentation given to the client. Some breeders do not band, however, they will keep records which so that the development of the bird can be followed.

The risk of purchasing a smuggled bird is that these birds are more likely to carry disease. A disease that strikes fear into the hearts of bird fanciers everywhere is Newcastle Disease - a viral disease that affects the nervous system and can affect birds of all varieties. It was this disease that led to the institution of the USDA quarantine system to prevent its introduction into this country. There are still occasional outbreaks, usually traced to smuggled birds. I personally diagnosed a case about nine years ago in a bird that was part of a group smuggled into the Chicago area. This bird was a spectacled Amazon that had its head bleached yellow to make it appear to be a 'baby double yellow-headed Amazon,' purchased for \$200 off the streets. Quite a bargain!! There is a great risk if such a bird was purchased and placed in a collection of birds. If the bird had Newcastle Disease and placed with other birds the virus could spread. These other birds could then develop the disease leading to the development of neurological signs and death. If the USDA traced this bird to a particular collection, they would test all the exposed birds for Newcastle Disease. If any of these birds tested positive the birds could be confiscated and destroyed. Another disease that smuggled birds might carry is psittacosis (parrot fever), a human health hazard that could get cause illness in anyone who had contact with the bird.

Another caution is that occasionally birds are being sold inexpensively because they may have some sort of problem. If an owner is giving up a bird, question them extensively as to the circumstances. Quite often they are legitimate reasons, lifestyle changes, personality conflicts, etc. But sometimes it can be that the bird has been determined to have a medical/surgical problem and they are trying to 'dump' the bird or birds.

It is essential that when purchasing a previously owned bird to obtain its medical records and the sale should be contingent upon a physical examination by an avian veterinarian. If they are reluctant to have this done then there should be reluctance to purchase the bird.

3) Get it in writing/Obtain a guarantee

As the TV judges say on those court shows, 'Get it in writing!' This is so very important. The seller of a bird should give a reasonable and fair guarantee that both the buyer and seller should sign. It will serve as a legal document if any unforeseen problems develop in the future. Abide by the conditions of the guarantee. If there is a time frame outlined in the guarantee in which the bird should be examined by an avian veterinarian it should be done. All too frequently the situation has occurred when a new bird is brought in for an examination because it has become ill after being in a new home for 1-2 weeks. The questions are then raised, When did the bird get sick? Was it sick when it was purchased? Did it get sick in the new home? Who is responsible for the cost of medical treatment? With bacterial infections, this 1-2 week period post purchase cannot be definitely linked to a pre-existing condition because such an infection could easily develop in this time in the new environment. If the bird had been checked within a few days post purchase and there was increased bacteria present then it probably was a prepurchase condition. A written guarantee that contains such a time provision protects the buyer, because the quality breeder/pet store will stand behind their bird if such a condition is determined and will take responsibility for treatment or replacement. Verbal agreements are not enough. Many times both sides claim that certain promises were or were not made, so it is best to have them laid out clearly and agreed upon at purchase time. With the presence of many types of avian diseases, especially some of the deadly viruses, the more support the buyer has from the breeder/pet store the better.

4) The sale should be contingent upon an examination by an avian veterinarian

This was alluded to earlier when discussing the purchase of a previously owned bird that was being sold 'dirt cheap.' It is recommended that any newly purchased bird be examined by an avian veterinarian. A thorough physical examination should be performed and various tests conducted that are necessary to insure that the bird being purchased is healthy. If any problems are found in the initial examination the breeder/pet store should be consulted as to the appropriate course of action. They may want to treat the bird themselves, possibly have the purchaser do the treatment and they will pay for the medication or in the case of more serious problems have the bird returned. Make sure that there is a provision in the guarantee relating to an examination by an avian veterinarian and what would be done if a problem was found.

5) Play close attention to the seller's advice

Some people may think that they know it all when it comes to birds, but do pay attention to any information that the breeder/pet store has to give about the bird. If the bird is being hand fed they should provide the formula (or tell what type) that was used during hand feeding. They should discuss the current feeding schedule and also a weaning plan to be enacted when the bird is to be converted to self feeding. If the bird is already weaned the buyer should be informed of the type of food and any additives which are currently being provided. For example, if the new bird was a seed eater and immediately placed on pellets in the new home it might starve due to unfamiliarity with the diet. Let the bird acclimate to the new environment with familiar food and, if so desired in the future, convert to a better balanced diet after it is doing well. Prepare a list of questions or concerns and go over them with the breeder/pet store before the bird is taken home. They should respect any questions that are asked and take the time to answer them fully. It is a good idea to write these questions down because in the excitement of taking the bird home key questions might be forgotten.

6) Baby Birds/Hand feeding birds

Unfortunately purchasing a newly weaned bird or hand feeding a baby bird has the potential for disaster for those who are unfamiliar or unprepared for unique circumstances related to these types of birds. Having a baby bird is like no other experience. The birds are sweet, affectionate and develop a wonderful bond with people. If the bird is hand fed by the new owner some feel that this bond can be further strengthened. However, hand feeding can be dangerous if done improperly and some breeders/pet stores will not sell any birds before they are weaned. A weaned baby bird still will develop a strong bond even if the new owner does not actually do the hand feeding. If a person is determined to hand feed a bird they should be prepared to make a commitment and learn the proper technique so that the baby bird is never placed at risk. Fortunately, many breeders do not sell unweaned babies because of the problems that can result from an inexperienced person engaging in hand feeding. Some concerns/problems that have been encountered with the purchase of baby birds are discussed below.

a) Is the bird really weaned?

Occasionally a young bird will be sold as newly weaned, however, when the bird is placed in a new environment it may become 'apprehensive' and revert back to 'babyhood,' not eating on its own and preferring to be hand fed. Monitor the food intake of the new bird. Sometimes the bird is

not really eating and may be playing with the food. If the bird eats seed it may be cracking the hull and not swallowing the seed. A pellet eater may be pulverizing the pellet to powder but not eating. The best means of monitoring the food intake is evaluating the droppings - what goes in has to come out. The droppings should have a substantial fecal portion. Check the droppings at the breeder/pet store before the bird is taken home. Develop a feel for what is the normal appearance and number of droppings for the bird. A change in the number and appearance in the dropping could indicate a problem. If the droppings are all white or have scant fecal matter then perhaps the bird is not eating enough. If this is the case then the bird may need to be hand fed again until it begins to eat on its own. Check with the breeder if this occurs for suggestions. Do not assume that because the bird is weaned that it will continue to eat well in a new home. Play close attention to the eating habits. Avian veterinarians could recount several instances while in practice where baby birds come into the hospital critically ill and emaciated because the bird was not eating enough on its own. These unfortunate birds are starving to death due to the inattention or inexperience of the owner evaluating the eating habits of the bird.

b) Purchase a scale

A scale is probably one of the best purchases that could make if a baby bird is obtained (or an adult bird for that matter). To help protect the investment it is almost a necessity with newly purchased baby birds. Baby birds should be weighed each morning with an empty crop before feeding at the same relative time. Excellent, inexpensive scales can be purchased that can provide accurate weights in grams. A slight weight fluctuation daily is normal; however, a steady weight decline is a cause for concern. A decline when the bird is being weaned is normal, but a rapid drop could indicate that the bird is being weaned too quickly. These weights should be recorded and trends noted. Weighing the bird regularly and monitoring the droppings are two excellent means of monitoring the baby birds during the stressful transition from being hand fed to eating on its own.

c) Practice hand feeding with the breeder/pet store

If a person desires to hand feed a bird it is imperative that it can be done properly, a mistake or carelessness could lead to injury, sickness or death. It cannot be emphasized enough how important it is to practice hand feeding the bird under the watchful eye of the breeder before it is taken home and done without assistance. It would be ideal if the breeder/pet store would allow the new owner to prepare the food, check the temperature and feed the bird under their guidance a few times until the necessary skills are developed, especially if a novice to the hand feeding process. The same formula the bird was raised on should be used initially (it can be changed later if preferred) and have it the same consistency the breeder uses. If the diet is suddenly changed or the consistency is different, the bird may refuse to eat it. Food that is hotter or colder than the bird is accustomed to could lead to a refusal to eat. Once again, evaluate temperature ranges with the breeder. Another word of caution - if the food is too hot there is a risk of burning and damaging the crop, so check each syringe full after it is drawn up to be sure it is not too hot, especially if the food is microwaved, due to the uneven heating produced.

Performing the actual hand feeding under the direction of the breeder is preferred so that the bird becomes familiar with certain positions and handling during the feeding process. If the positioning of the bird or the hand position during feeding is different than it is accustomed to it may refuse to eat. Doing this in front of the breeder will enable them to offer assistance with the proper

technique that the bird was used to during the hand feeding process. Due to improper handling or accidental overfilling of the crop, the bird could aspirate food into the trachea/lungs and either die suddenly or develop aspiration pneumonia. That is why training by the breeder is important to safeguard the health of the bird.

d) Obtain a copy of the feeding schedule and the amount fed

The breeder/pet store should tell how often the bird is being fed, what diet is used and how much is given at each feeding. Also a reasonable plan should be put together so that there is a protocol on how to wean the bird as it begins to eat on its own. If the bird was being fed 30cc three times a day by the breeder and now that the bird is home and only taking in 10cc twice a day this could be a potential problem - especially in young birds that are not eating anything on their own yet. Occasionally when a bird is in a new environment it becomes so stressed that even though it was eating on its own or doing well on one feeding daily, it may not be eating well enough to maintain condition. In a case such as this the number of feedings may need to be increased or the 'weaned' bird might need to be hand fed until adjusted to the new surroundings. Once again monitoring weight and droppings are useful means in evaluating dietary intake. Be sure to get as much information as possible from the breeder/pet store related to the bird and its feeding schedule/plan. Stay in contact with them if there are any difficulties or concerns, so that the well-being of the bird can be insured.

7) Isolate any new bird to your collection for at least 30 days

One of the most common mistakes people make is that they do not isolate a new bird that is introduced into their collection. There is a great risk of disease transmission when a bird is placed in a new environment because if disease organisms are present when this bird is stressed there can be shedding of these organisms with transmission to other birds in a collection. With the existence of deadly avian diseases it is a risk not worth taking. Another consideration is that when the new bird is in the environment and stressed it might potentially pick up a condition that already exists in one of other birds. This condition may be at a level low enough so it will not cause disease in a healthy unstressed bird, but the new arrival with lowered resistance could be at risk. Even though a newly purchased bird had been given a clean bill of health by an avian veterinarian it is still imperative that it be isolated for the prescribed period because some conditions may be undetectable or may be incubating only to develop 1-2 weeks after introduction into the new environment. Small birds such as parakeets and cockatiels should be isolated as well. People feel that these small birds can be placed with others right after purchase. Serious disease can exist in these birds as well. Another cause for concern is that quite often these birds can carry parasitic infections such as Giardia that is readily transmissible to the other birds in a collection. It is recommended that they are given an examination prior to introduction to other birds, including the evaluation of a FRESH fecal for the presence of parasites.

The isolation period for 30 days does not mean that the bird is merely kept in a separate cage. The bird should be kept in a separate room, its utensils washed separately from those of the other birds and after it is handled hands should be washed thoroughly before handling other birds. It is heartbreaking if birds in a collection pick up a disease from a newly introduced bird which could have been prevented if proper husbandry techniques were followed. There have been numerous instances of situations, where people who knew better, caused diseases in their birds due to

careless introduction of a new disease carrying bird that appeared healthy externally. The 30 day period is suggested because if the bird has a disease condition it will most likely break with the disease within this period of time, especially as it is being stressed in the new environment. It is not enough to have the bird near other birds then isolate it when it shows signs of sickness because in many disease conditions the shedding of the disease organisms is occurring before clinical signs of disease are evident. Unfortunately this isolation period cannot guarantee that once completed that a bird is not a potential source of disease for the other birds. Certain birds can be carriers of disease, such as psittacosis, and show no outward signs. Certain other diseases can persist in a bird for long periods of time, such as Proventricular Dilatation Syndrome, and cause outbreaks years later. However, the best that can be done is preventing as much risk as possible so the 30 day isolation period is essential. Hopefully as the years pass the great level of avian research will be continued so that veterinarians can continue to have new diagnostic tests and treatments available to battle the diseases that ravage the pet bird population.

Conclusion

I hope these comments prove useful if you or one of your family/friends is planning to purchase a new bird. If I scared you a little bit then I accomplished one of my goals. Bird ownership is quite a responsibility and one that should not be taken lightly. There are many potential dangers that you need to be aware of and you should be prepared before making the commitment of tending to the care of these wonderful companion animals.