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How to Feed Your Bird

Bird Nutrition

Correct bird nutrition is a difficult goal to achieve. Although bird nutrition has been studied extensively, it is very difficult to provide a captive bird the diet that they would otherwise obtain in the wild. The professional opinion of what to feed a captive bird is constantly changing, but the current consensus is somewhat species dependent. Pellets offer more complete and superior nutrition than birdseed. However, birdseed can be provided in small portions, and your bird's favorite seed can be removed from their food bowl and utilized to positively reinforce desired behavior.

A key factor in bird nutrition is food volume. What is important is not what you offer, but what your bird eats out of what you offer. Giving a bird too much seed will enable them to select certain seeds over others, compromising the nutritional completeness they would otherwise receive when eating all seed types. Birds will often select the high fat seeds leading to deficiencies in certain vitamins, as well as obesity. This concept can be equated to a person provided free access to pizza and spinach. A person will continuously select the pizza over the spinach unless the volume of pizza is restricted such that the person is forced to ingest the spinach in order to meet their caloric needs while simultaneously balancing their nutritional needs.

At AEAC, we recommend and are a distributor of [Harrisons Bird Food](#), the only certified organic pellet available on the commercial market. It offers superior nutrition to your bird and is widely accepted by many bird species. It comes in a variety of pellet sizes, pellet composition, and pellet flavor. Fresh fruits and vegetables should also be made available to your bird. Birds can consume a wide range of foods, although foods high in fat, sugar, caffeine, or avocado and chocolate should be avoided.

Converting a Bird to a Pelleted Diet

When initially converting your bird to a pelleted diet, offer free access (not volume restricted) to a bowl of pellets every day and provide a separate bowl with seeds every other day. The proportion of seeds made available should be 1 LEVEL (not a heaping) tablespoon of seed per 100 grams of bird. However, some birds are more stubborn than others, and will continue to reject the pellets.

It is important to weigh your bird on a daily basis to ensure that they are not losing too much body weight over a short period of time. In addition, the bird's stools should be evaluated. A bright green color to the feces can indicate that the bird is not receiving enough



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nutrition. However, colored pellets will often turn the color of the feces green or pink, depending on the color of the pellets. Also evaluate the proportion of feces in comparison to the urates (white portion of the stool). A lower proportion of feces to urates also can imply that the bird is not receiving enough nutrition.

Contra-Free Loading

Contra-free loading is a concept that describes how birds prefer to work for their food than to be provided with food within a bowl. In the wild, birds spend 8 hours a day foraging and flying, approximately 50% of their time. Foraging provides mental stimulation that they would otherwise not receive while housed within a cage with a bowl of food, leading to boredom and often undesired behaviors (i.e. feather destructive behavior).

Shredding newspaper and putting it on the bottom of the cage and then hiding the seed/pellets within the shredded paper will provide great mental stimulation for your bird while satisfying their foraging instincts. Another technique that can be utilized is putting the seed/pellets into a water bottle with a small hole in it. The bird will spend time either rolling the water bottle to get the seeds or increasing the size of the hole in the water bottle in order to reach into the water bottle with their beak more effectively.

Nutrition-Related Diseases

Hepatic Lipidosis

A common nutrition related disease in birds, particularly with budgerigars, is hepatic lipidosis, or fatty liver disease. Hepatic lipidosis is a consequence of a high fat diet, seen most often in birds fed too much of a seed-only diet. The liver becomes overwhelmed with the fat load and begins to store the excess fat within vacuoles, compromising the functionality of the hepatocytes or liver cells. Signs of hepatic lipidosis include overgrown beaks and nails with black streaks, anorexia, lethargy, loose stools, yellow urates, and/or a distended abdomen.

Birds with hepatic lipidosis run the risk of falling and fracturing their liver/keel. In order to treat birds with hepatic lipidosis, the bird is put on a milk thistle and lactulose regime, as well as a lower fat diet to help them lose weight. As long as the disease process has not been occurring for a long period of time, the damage to the liver is reversible.

Vitamin A deficiency

Vitamin A deficiency results in cell dysfunction that can ultimately lead to organ dysfunction, most commonly affecting the kidneys. Signs of vitamin A deficiency can include



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feather loss, high volumes of urine relative to feces and urates in the stool due to kidney disease, sneezing due to upper respiratory infections, and choanal or mouth infections. An injection of Vitamin A can treat vitamin A deficiencies; otherwise, supplementation can be achieved by giving orange-colored vegetables, such as carrots or sweet potatoes.

Hypocalcemia

Hypocalcemia is most frequently seen in birds that are either growing or females that are egg laying. As a consequence of hypocalcemia, birds can develop pathologic fractures, such as folding fractures. If your female bird is displaying reproductive behavior or if you have a young and growing bird, it is best to provide free access to a cuttle bone or to crush up Tums and sprinkle them over their food.