

Characteristics of Pet Birds

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Introduction

The avian practitioner should be familiar with the common varieties of pet birds seen in practice. The knowledge of the characteristics/attributes of each type is useful in understanding their medical conditions, behavior and suitability as a pet for a particular circumstance. Quite often clients use the avian practitioner as a resource when determining an appropriate pet bird for their lifestyle and experience level. If a species is scheduled for an appointment that the veterinarian is unfamiliar with, it is beneficial to consult an atlas prior to the visit to learn the basics; scientific name, country of origin, identifying features, and number of sub-species. Occasionally the owner will have misidentified their pet and the veterinarian should be able to correctly identify it.

The following discussion covers the more common varieties of pet birds and some general attributes of each type. These comments will hopefully prove useful when attempting to evaluate the pluses and minuses of each of the common varieties of pet birds. The discussion is based upon years of experience dealing with the many species as a veterinarian treating these birds and also as a bird owner. Some people may differ with the evaluations and arguably there are wide differences among individuals of the same species. The key point is that familiarity with the attributes of each type of pet bird is very important for the successful avian practitioner. The pet owner also needs to evaluate these factors in the selection of a pet, a poor choice could lead to a frustrating relationship for the pet owner as well as the bird. Understanding birds aids in treatment, behavior counseling, and assisting the client in the selection of the right type of bird.

Finches

The smallest pet birds seen in avian practice are the finches. There are many different varieties, usually with beautiful coloration. Certain varieties are sexually dimorphic. Some less common finches can be quite expensive. Finches do not talk but are quite vocal, although not very loud. They seem to do well if other finches are around, and usually bird fanciers who own finches usually have several. Their life span is relatively short, commonly 8 to 10 years. In the author's practice some finches have lived more than 17 years. Finches are great pets for people who want a beautiful, relatively quiet pet that does not require large amounts of time involvement or handling.

Canaries

Canaries used to be the most popular variety of pet bird years ago. With the advent of hand-raised and more interactive birds their popularity has declined. Male canaries are noted for their beautiful song; however, not all male canaries are good singers. Female canaries do not sing; hence the price differential between males and females. Male canaries sing to attract a mate, so quite often placing another bird in the cage could stop their singing. Canaries will usually stop singing during their molting period which can last several months. They are a somewhat nervous type bird, which can be difficult to hand-tame, so usually they are minimally handled and kept

caged. If obtained at a young age, they can be hand-tamed and will be an affectionate pet. Due to their high strung nature, canaries can become easily stressed during handling and may appear to 'faint.' It is quite unnerving to a veterinarian when they open their hand and see a bird just lying prone or breathing heavily and not moving. Always watch canaries carefully during any procedure which requires handling. The life span of canaries can be 10 to 12 years. The longest-lived canary in the author's practice was a bird that lived to be 19 1/2 years old. Canaries are desirable for their beautiful song so people who want a great singer should choose a male. Females can be sweet, affectionate companions if singing ability is not a consideration. They are easy to care for and are a good 'starter' bird.

Budgerigars (commonly termed parakeets)

Budgies are the type of bird most frequently seen in most avian practices. They are inexpensive, animated, playful and can be very affectionate if hand-tamed. Budgies are surprisingly good talkers and usually possess large vocabularies with the ability to speak in sentences. Male budgies seem to have a greater propensity to talk than females. Budgies are very social and will bond readily to people. Placing a mirror or another bird in the cage with a budgie might cause it to bond with the cagemate and become less social with the pet owner, possibly reducing the likelihood of the bird talking. Budgies are very intelligent and many owners are able to teach their birds to perform elaborate tricks. Another variety of budgerigar seen in practice is the 'English' budgie. These birds are significantly larger (most budgies weigh in between 30 to 40 grams while English budgies weigh usually 50 plus grams). Some people feel that these birds are calmer, sweeter and seem to be better talkers. They are also more expensive. An unfortunate characteristic of budgies in general is their predilection to develop neoplasia (cancer) and suffer an early demise. Some feel that budgies have the highest rate of neoplasia of all vertebrate animals. Life span ranges for budgies generally are considered 10 to 12 years, however, due to the circumstances of disease or neoplasia, few ever achieve longevity. In the author's practice a female budgie laid a clutch of eggs which all hatched and developed normally, when she was eighteen years old! Unfortunately she died shortly before reaching 19 years of age. Budgies are excellent pet birds because of the amount of 'bang for the buck,' their interactive nature, their playfulness, and the ability to be good talkers. They are fine birds for beginners.

Cockatiels

Cockatiels have surged in popularity through recent years and for good reason; they are outstanding pet birds. They have been termed 'a big bird in a small bird's body' as they possess many desirable attributes of larger birds despite their small size. They breed readily, are easily hand-raised and are therefore readily available. Many bird breeders began developing their skills initially working with cockatiels. Hand-raised cockatiels are very interactive and affectionate birds. They are very social so even a non-hand-raised bird can be tamed with patience. Cockatiels can talk (males are more likely to speak), although they do not usually have a wide vocabulary, their words may be somewhat garbled and not especially clear. They do have an outstanding ability to whistle and are able to carry an extended tune. There can be periods of time when they become very vocal and somewhat noisy but overall they are not an unusually loud type of bird. Their social and affectionate nature, coupled with their readiness to breed, can cause some annoyances. When cockatiels become sexually mature they can develop a sex drive which can be seasonal or year round. They can become somewhat aggressive during this period and quite often display mating behavior, such as masturbation, on favorite toys, food/water cups,

perches and even upon the owner. Males in reproductive condition can become quite territorial and 'feisty.' Female cockatiels are notorious for egg-laying behavior, stimulated by the bird owners or a favorite toy/object with no presence of a male cockatiel required. Some female cockatiels can become quite prolific egg layers, with the resultant risks of egg binding or other reproductive disorders. Cockatiels can live for more than 20 years. There are several in the author's practice that have lived until their mid-twenties and one lived to be thirty. Cockatiels are an excellent choice for a first bird. Hand-raised birds are the best choice as they are instantly affectionate; others may take a little work. They are great for kids, as cockatiels possess a sweet nature and are not as intimidating as a larger bird. They are also longer-lived than other small birds, which can ease some of the heartbreak of pet loss.

Lovebirds

The name can be misleading, as lovebirds can be quite aggressive. They are frequently responsible for attacks on other birds in a collection, damaging beaks or amputating toes. A young, hand-raised bird will make an affectionate pet. Peach-faced lovebirds seem to make better pets, black masks and Fischer's do not do as well. If a pair is placed in a cage together, they will become 'love birds' with each other but 'attack parrots' if anyone else approaches their domain. Lovebirds are not noted for talking ability, nonetheless, they can be very vocal. In the author's experience the lifespan of lovebirds ranges from the middle teens to the early twenties. A lovebird can make an excellent pet, but it is preferable that it is hand-raised, as taming others can be difficult. A single lovebird is recommended as it will bond closely to the pet owner, a pair of lovebirds will bond to each other and could become quite aggressive. Exercise caution whenever lovebirds may have access to other birds as, good-natured or not, they tend to be very aggressive towards other birds and engage in unprovoked attacks.

Small Parrots

A current trend in pet bird ownership has been towards small parrots. Factors include their lower cost, smaller caging and space required, increased availability, the success of breeders hand-raising these varieties, producing desirable, tame pets and the appealing attributes of each type of bird.

Quaker/Monk Parrots

These adaptable birds are considered pests in some parts of the country. In the Chicagoland area, for example, there are huge nests and extensive colonies of quaker parrots that live wild outdoors surviving the harsh winters. It is rumored that these birds had escaped from a quarantine station years ago and now have become well-established in various communities. Quakers can be very affectionate pets, especially if hand-raised. They possess an engaging, entertaining personality. Their talking ability ranges from moderate to good, may not be especially clear and are quite vociferous. They develop a close bond with the pet owner, especially with one family member in particular. Unfortunately, when they become sexually mature this tendency can be a problem as their desire to breed could lead to sexual aggression or bad habits such as feather picking. Quakers can live into their twenties; one quaker in the author's practice lived 30 years. All things considered, quakers make adorable, affectionate pets, however, be prepared for some seasonal sexual behavior.

Conures

Through the years the reputation of conures as pets has been questionable. Some varieties are notorious screamers such as the Nanday and Sun conures. Patagonian conures were feared by knowledgeable aviculturists as they had been implicated as carriers of the deadly avian virus which caused Pacheco's disease. Recently the status of conures has improved markedly. Conures are popular as pets, and rightfully so, as they are very interactive and playful. Young, hand raised birds are preferable as they are more easily handled. Conures are generally poor talkers, but some do talk, although it may sound garbled and not very clear. They are very noisy and if they become screamers it can be very annoying. Conures may also develop an aggressive nature, especially during periods of sexual activity. Conures are relatively long-lived and can live into their twenties. Conures can be wonderful pet birds, especially because of the success of domestic hand-raising, producing a tamer, more loving pet. If conures are to be considered as a pet, research the different species, evaluating the pluses as well as the minuses.

Senegal/Meyers/Red-Bellied Parrots

This group of small parrots (poicephalus) have become very popular in recent years as they make excellent pets. They are very affectionate and develop a close bond with the pet owner. These birds become 'possessive' and tend to bond to one person in particular so it is a good idea to keep the bird interacting with all the family members. They are very playful and have entertaining personalities. Their talking ability is limited and when they do speak it may be difficult to understand. They tend to become somewhat territorial and may become aggressive towards other birds in the collection. This is especially true in Senegals; Meyers and Red-Bellieds are not as aggressive and have a somewhat mellower disposition. This group of birds is an excellent choice for a first parrot.

Lories/Lorikeets

The popularity of these birds was somewhat limited due to their particular nutritional requirements because they are nectar eaters. It was a messy production to feed them and clean their cages with nectar and the resultant sloppy droppings all over everything. Maintaining them has become somewhat easier with the advent of powdered nectar diets, which meet their specific nutritional needs. Perhaps buoyed by this they have become quite popular. Lories are among the most playful and entertaining of the parrots. They are natural clowns and will roll over on their backs to play with a ball or other toy while holding it in their feet. Associated with this energetic personality is a tendency to be somewhat 'hyper' or high-strung. Talking abilities are varied with some lories being relatively decent mimics. Lories make excellent, entertaining pets, however, due to their animated behavior, they might do better with more experienced bird owners. They will definitely keep the owners amused with their antics as well as busy cleaning up their sloppy droppings.

Pionus Parrots

Pionus parrots have developed a reputation for being a loving and affectionate bird. Probably one of their most endearing qualities is that they are relatively quiet and well suited for condo or apartment living where noisy birds could lead to complaints from other residents. They do vocalize but their speaking ability is generally poor. Pionus parrots are a good starter parrot or ideal for someone who wants a quiet, loving companion bird.

Large Parrots

African Grey Parrots

African Greys are probably the best talkers of all the parrots. Their ability to imitate sounds and the human voice is unmatched. However, some owners become disappointed because despite having the capability to be excellent talkers they may not live up to expectations. African Greys are extremely intelligent, and with intelligence may come associated neuroses. Some can be extremely nervous, upset if there are changes in their routine and distrustful of newcomers. Frustration, either emotional or sexual can lead to vices such as aggression or feather-picking. There are two common sub-species of African Greys; Congos and Timnehs. Congos are larger with a black beak and bright red tail. Timnehs are smaller, have a lighter colored beak with more of a brownish coloration and a dusky reddish brown tail. Some people feel that Timnehs are less nervous than Congos, seem to socialize better, learn somewhat faster yet still possess excellent speaking abilities. Hand-raised African Greys of either sub-species make sweet, affectionate companions but may have a propensity to bond to one particular person. They are long lived with life spans greater than 40 years not uncommon. African Greys are outstanding pet birds with a phenomenal ability to mimic. Owners must understand their intelligent nature and make the commitment to interact with them, be willing to stimulate them mentally and meet their emotional needs, so that a long and satisfying relationship can develop.

Eclectus Parrots

These are beautifully colored birds which are very intelligent and possess an excellent ability to speak. They are one of the few sexually dimorphic parrots; the male has predominantly green feathering while the female is red. There are several sub-species of Eclectus. They are generally high-strung birds who bond quite strongly to their owners and can display annoying behavior during their breeding season. Problems that can develop include aggressiveness or feather picking, which seems to occur more commonly in the female. Quite often people own a pair of Eclectus parrots and usually the female tends to be the more aggressive bird and will quite often attack or pick on the male. The male tends to be calmer and some feel that they make the better pet. To minimize problems, the purchase of a hand-raised baby is preferred. During mating season either sex can be a problem. Eclectus parrots are long-lived birds. Eclectus parrots are very enjoyable pet birds but they are not a good first choice for the inexperienced. Their behavioral quirks can be troublesome so an owner more familiar with bird behavior and management of problems would do much better.

Amazon Parrots

Amazon parrots are the most popular of the large parrots. There are many different species of parrots with variations in colorations, personalities and mimicry abilities. In fact, speaking ability is probably one of the most important factors determining the cost of an Amazon parrot. All Amazon parrots possess the capability to speak, however, some are considered excellent talkers, such as, the yellow-naped Amazon and the double yellow-headed Amazon. These are usually the types that will be seen singing and talking on television or performing at animal shows. Unfortunately, because of their rambunctious nature, these birds can become very aggressive as they become sexually mature, leading to biting or screaming behavior. Quite often, yellow-napes and double yellow-heads are put up for sale at five or six years of age by owners who can no longer handle the aggression and biting of a dominant bird. The other species of Amazon parrots

can be excellent talkers as well and their personalities may not be as aggressive. Blue-fronted Amazons are noted for a good talking ability and a somewhat calmer demeanor.

Other types of Amazons commonly seen include spectacled, Mexican red-headed, lilac crown, orange-winged, blue-crowned and mealy. The spectacled are the smallest of the Amazons and their speaking ability is somewhat limited, however, they possess a nice disposition. They are one of the few Amazon parrots that are sexually dimorphic. Blue-crowned and mealys are among the largest of the Amazons and are generally the most mellow. They are relatively good talkers, however they have a loud call. It is strongly recommended to purchase domestic hand-raised babies. Even the more aggressive species can be affectionate pets with a good start and an experienced bird owner. Older Amazons that are up for sale need to be regarded with caution as their sale might be due to undesirable behavior traits or aggression. Amazon parrots are very long-lived with life spans exceeding those of their owners. It is not unusual to see birds that are more than 60 years of age. In the author's practice, there was a yellow-naped Amazon that lived one hundred and twenty eight years. Amazons make entertaining, interactive pets with great speaking abilities, and can be quite loving. However, experience with birds is preferred as they can develop a dominant type personality when reaching sexual maturity and a novice bird owner would be ill-prepared to deal with the behavior. It is important to counsel clients to research the various species and their attributes so that a proper selection can be made.

Cockatoos

Cockatoos are considered the 'cuddlers' of the bird world, enjoying handling and having close physical contact. They are highly intelligent and very sensitive. These attributes that make them so appealing can be detrimental as they can become so demanding for attention that they will exhibit vices like screaming or feather-picking. Cockatoos can speak quite clearly but usually do not possess a large vocabulary. They talk with a high pitched, sweet sounding voice. There are many different types of cockatoos varying in appearance and personality.

Goffin's cockatoos are the smallest of the cockatoos. They are very active, playful, amusing, and high-strung. Due to this nature, they do not tend to be 'cuddly.' Bare-eyed cockatoos are not that commonly seen, but make good pets. They are similar in appearance to the Goffin's, however, they possess a large bare patch of skin around both eyes, hence the name. They are considered to be the best talkers among the cockatoos. Citron, sulfur-crested and umbrella cockatoos are the more common species of pet cockatoos due to their attractive appearance and lower cost than other types. They are intelligent, gentle, and enjoy being handled. There are different sub-species of sulfur-crested cockatoos including the lesser, medium, greater, and Triton. Rose-breasted cockatoos are attractive pinkish-red and gray birds. They are high-strung birds and possess limited speaking ability. Rose-breasted cockatoos have a tendency to become overweight and develop fat deposits, so nutritional management is very important. Moluccan cockatoos are impressive in size and coloration. They are among the most demanding of all birds for their owner's attention. They would be happy to be cuddled with their owners 24 hours a day. Due to the impracticality of that arrangement, they quite often develop the vices of feather-picking, self-mutilation, or screaming, which can be quite deafening due to their size. Cockatoos are long-lived birds, and may live beyond 50 years. Hand-raised babies are preferred as pets. Due to their powdery feathers they might not be a good choice for a person with allergies. Cockatoos are the

ideal pet for someone who would enjoy a sweet, cuddly, affectionate bird and who has the time to provide it with a large amount of attention.

Macaws

Macaws range in size from the small miniature macaws to the hyacinth macaws, the largest of the parrots. Macaws, in general, are very intelligent, active, mischievous and good talkers. The species of miniature macaws commonly seen as pets include the noble, yellow-collared and severe macaws. These birds all possess the basic macaw attributes, intelligence, playfulness and ability to talk. They can be somewhat 'feisty' on occasion and can have behavioral changes during periods of sex hormone activity. Overall they are a good choice for people who like macaw features but do not want to deal with the size and behavioral challenges of the larger macaws.

There are several species of large macaws varying with size, coloration and temperament. Blue and gold macaws are the most common pet macaw, largely due to their nature and the success of domestic breeding. They are intelligent, somewhat temperamental and possess fairly good speaking abilities. They will constantly 'test' the pet owner and they have a mischievous nature. Scarlet macaws are the most colorful of all the macaws and are the best talkers. The main drawback is that they have a 'feisty' disposition and have a tendency to give unprovoked bites. If the bird owner can deal with the challenge, their beauty and talking ability are wonderful attributes. Scarlet macaws are not a good choice for the first time bird owner. Green-winged macaws, despite their large size and imposing looking beak are the gentlest of the large macaws. They are affectionate, generally easy to handle and possess decent speaking ability. They are a good choice for a first large bird. Military macaws are less commonly seen than the three previously mentioned. They tend to be high-strung and have the tendency to nip. Their speaking ability is not as good as the others. They may be too much of a challenge for an inexperienced bird owner, but can make a wonderful pet in the proper situation. Hyacinth macaws are the 'dream bird' of many bird fanciers that want the 'big one.' They are the largest of all the parrots, beautifully colored and have gentle dispositions. Their cost can be prohibitive for many people. They are not noted for great speaking ability. They seem to mature slower than other birds and when they reach sexual maturity can show some aggressive behavior which can be problematic due to their size and strength. Hybrid macaws are controversial. Some bird organizations do not recognize them. They feel that they are not a natural species and should not be bred. There are several hybrids seen as pets including, catalinas, harlequins, rubies and shamrocks to name a few. All large macaws can be a challenge. Macaws do tend to favor one person and this can be a problem when they are go through their sexual hormone cycles. They can be aggressive towards other members of the family while protecting the 'object of their desire.' Sexual frustration can lead to annoying behavior such as aggression or feather picking. Macaws are long-lived with life spans rivaling those of humans. Macaws are wonderful, entertaining, affectionate pet birds but they can also be very frustrating. Before someone selects a macaw as a pet they must be certain that it is right bird for the circumstances and their abilities. The owner must be financially prepared to invest in extra large, extra strong cages and flight areas.

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