

## **Feeding**

The proper feeding of pet birds has been one of the most challenging aspects of their care, primarily because of limited nutritional research in all species. However, based on studies of other animals, generalizations can be made on adequate feeding practices for birds.

## **Formulated Diets**

Complete, formulated products are available in the pet food industry to offer convenience to the owner and to balance the animal's diet. The current trend is toward appropriate formulations for different life-styles, addressing special age, activity, therapeutic- and stress-related needs.

Although foods prepared for other animals (e.g., dogs, primates) have been fed to birds, formulated diets specifically developed as the primary ration for pet birds are now available. These diets may be purchased as pellets, nuggets, crumbles or hand-feeding premixes.

Most commercial feed companies have at least two formulas: one for the normal adult bird, and one for birds with special needs, such as molting, laying eggs or raising young. Your veterinarian can recommend a reliable commercial producer of formulated diets for birds. Converting a seed eating bird to a formulated food must be done with care because new items in the cage may not be immediately recognized as food.

## **Alternative Feeding Plan**

Unfortunately, many first time bird owners believe that seeds, seed treats and other items that are sold on the market as "bird food" provide complete nutrition. No seed diet is a complete diet. Therefore, other foods, such as those comprising a lean, modern, vegetarian type human diet, must be added to balance the nutrients missing in seeds. Pet birds are most often fed diets that are deficient in vitamin A.

Grains - Approximately 6% of the daily food consumption may be selected from whole grains and grain products. Common food items include various bird seeds, cooked brown rice, oats and oatmeal, dry corn, barley, wheat and whole grain bread.

Fresh Vegetables - Vegetables could comprise approximately 10% of the diet; they provide some essential vitamins and minerals needed by birds. Light-colored vegetables with very high water content (e.g., iceberg lettuce, celery) are the least beneficial. The most valuable vegetables to feed are dark green and leafy or dark yellow - those with high vitamin A content: beets, broccoli, endive, escarole, carrots, parsley, pumpkin, winter squash and sweet potato.

Fresh Fruits - Fruits should be offered in limited quantities in order to prevent overconsumption by the bird. The diet should include less than 5% fruits. Most birds do not need outside sources of vitamin C except during periods of illness or high stress, but high vitamin A-containing fruits are desirable. These include papaya, cantaloupe and apricots.

Sources of Protein - Mature legumes (e.g., cooked beans such as soy, navy, kidney, mung, lentils or mature peas) may be offered in amounts up to 25% of the diet and provide a valuable source of protein. High fat-containing legumes such as peanuts should be limited. Small amounts of tuna or other fish, beef, chicken or eggs may also be offered.

Sources of Calcium - Excessive consumption of milk products by birds is not advised, so the calcium needs must be provided through other means (although birds do enjoy small amounts of yogurt, cottage cheese and hard cheeses). It is generally believed that the greater the consumption of seeds in the diet, the higher the need for supplementary calcium. This is most easily met by mineral supplements in the form of COOKED eggshells (hard boiled or crushed with an egg and scrambled), oyster shell and mineral block. If a bird refuses to eat those items, crushed calcium tablets, liquid or powder may be mixed with other foods.

Owner Compliance - The time and effort involved in preparing foods, and the difficulty in balancing the nutrients make owner compliance the most difficult aspect of an alternate feeding plan. Birds will not choose a balanced diet if given free choice.

Fresh Water - Fresh water must be provided at all times. Some aviculturists and pet owners have had success using laboratory animal water bottles for birds.

## **Feeding Tips**

- Carefully monitor TOTAL food consumption during a diet change.
- Introduce very small pieces of a single new food at a time.
- Gradually reduce the total volume of seed offered as consumption of other foods increases.
- All food and water cups should be cleaned daily and spilled food removed from the cage.
- Supplemental vitamins may be recommended by your avian veterinarian.
- Some food forms can occasionally help provide sources of activity for the bird: berries, buds and leaves, corn on the cob, pinecones and limited amounts of coconuts and whole nuts.

## **GRIT**

The necessity of providing hard, undigestible grit (different from mineral supplements described earlier) is controversial. Grit may not be necessary for the pet psittacine bird, but a few occasional pieces should not cause any harm.

## **Special Requirements**

Lories, lorikeets and related species require specialized diets in captivity, one of which simulates nectar. Alternately, a formula mix that contains known essential nutrients can be offered dry or moist, and can be supplemented daily or several times a week with fresh fruits and vegetables, pollen, seeds, mealworms and branches with fresh leaves and blossoms.

Special diets are available for soft-billed birds. Because toucans and mynah birds have a tendency to develop iron storage disease, one should offer a formulated diet with low iron content. These birds need diced fruits and vegetables daily.

*Adapted from a brochure by the Association of Avian Veterenarians*