



Budgerigar (aka Budgies, Parakeets)

Scientific Name: *Melopsittacus Undulatus*

Written by Dr. Scott Medlin

Background: Budgerigars (hereafter referred to as “Budgies”) are one of the most beloved and common species in the pet industry and as a consequence have been in the pet trade for a very long time. They are native to Australia, living in a variety of habitats, but preferring the scrublands, grasslands, and open woodlands. They were first introduced to the rest of Western Civilization when they were brought back to England in the mid-1800’s and successfully bred there. There are now a multitude of genetic mutations present in the current gene pool of pet Budgies, with most affecting their coloration. There is also a variety of Budgie referred to as the “English Budgie”. This variety is about 30% larger than a regular budgie and has a more pronounced “forehead” but is otherwise similar in behavior and husbandry needs.

As a species generalization, Budgies are very affectionate, friendly, inquisitive, and on occasion have been known to be prolific talkers. In fact, the 1995 Guinness Book of World Records lists a Budgie by the name of Puck as the avian with the most extensive vocabulary ever recorded (1,728 words). Budgies have an average lifespan of 5 to 7 years, but occasionally a bird with excellent genetics can be found to survive up to 10, 12 or even 15 years age. Documentation of budgies living to be older than 15 years of age is exceedingly rare.

Budgies are seed-eaters in the wild, foraging on over 36 varieties of seed in their native habitat. However, it is important to note that seed mixes sold in U.S. pet stores are not like the native seeds and typically contain only 4-6 varieties of seed. The seed species used in the mixes tend to be higher in fat and lower in nutritional content than the native seeds.

Enclosure: The best caging for Budgies is very similar to other parrot species, but size appropriate. The more space you can provide the bird, the better.

Cages that are resistant to corrosion, rust, and difficult for the bird to destroy are optimal. Powder coated cages and stainless steel cages are two good options. However, even these cages can break down over time or with heavy use and should be replaced if they are rusting, cracking, or showing significant signs of corrosion.

The size of the cage should allow for the bird to fully extend both wings simultaneously without touching the sides of the cage, and allow for the bird to have multiple perches/stations spread out within the space. The minimum cage size that you should consider for your budgie should be 18” x 18” x 24”. Spacing between the cage bars for a Budgie should be approximately ½”.

Perches: Parrots will need to have multiple perches in their cage. These perches should be located in different areas of the cage, be of varying diameters, and made from different materials. Sandpaper can cause sores on the feet of parrots and therefore should be avoided. Using wood (Manzanita or grape vine are good choices), rope, and wooden dowels, or even plastic are preferred as long as you have a variety.



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These perches should also vary slightly in diameter. The optimal perch size should allow the bird to wrap its foot approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way around the perch. This is especially important for the upper most perch in the cage. This is the perch that is likely to be the most heavily used perch in the cage. This upper perch should be of optimal diameter and not abrasive on the foot of your bird.

You may find that you can avoid most fecal contamination of the food and water dishes by not positioning the perches directly over them.

Toys: The topic of toys in bird cages can be a long one, but we will keep it simple for this article. Any questions you have that are not answered in this sheet can be directed to your veterinarian.

There are two frequent issues that can come up when discussing bird toys: hormone-stimulating toys, and toxic toys.

Hormone-stimulating toys may include mirrors, bird tents, Birdy Buddies, boxes, or any structure that may resemble a nesting cavity. Hormonal behaviors may include (but not be limited to) egg laying, cage/nest box territoriality, regurgitation, or "tail wagging". Aside from complicating the owner-pet relationship, increased hormonal activity can have many negative effects on the health of your birds, especially for females.

Toxic toys often involve heavy metal toxicity, so avoid toys that contain zinc or lead. The presence of these metals may not be clearly stated on the package, so you should either buy your bird toys from a trustworthy vendor (ask your avian veterinarian for recommendations) or avoid toys containing metal parts altogether. It is also a good idea to avoid toys with small non-digestible pieces that may be swallowed.

Substrate: The best substrates to place at the bottom of the cage are easy to clean up, non-toxic, and not made of small particulate materials. Newspapers or butcher paper are optimal substrates. Other, less optimal, but acceptable substrates could include Carefresh or aspen bedding. Poor choices for substrate include corncob, walnut, cedar or pine shavings, or clay-based kitty litters. These types of litter can cause impaction, infection, and respiratory disease.

Even with a quality substrate, it is important to remember that the key to good health is sanitation. Frequent cleaning of the substrate and the cage will go a long way in keeping your bird free from disease.

Grates can collect a lot of fecal material in a short period of time. Keeping the grate free from food and fecal waste is imperative to the health of your bird. In fact, grating on the bottom may not be needed for all birds. If your bird does not require the protective grate, then simply remove the grate from the cage and you have helped improve the cleanliness of your bird's environment. However, it may be



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necessary to keep the grate in place for birds who are constantly shredding their newspaper (often a hormonal/nest building behavior) or birds who do not avoid their own feces when on the bottom of the cage.

Diet: Getting your bird on an appropriate diet is one of the most important aspects of having a healthy bird, and yet it is one of the areas that is most commonly overlooked. As mentioned previously, Budgies survive in an environment where seeds are an important resource for survival. Yet, the variety of seeds that they forage for in the wild is not the same varieties that they are exposed to while in captivity. Because the seed blends provided in commercial bird seed fail to form a complete nutritional diet, it is necessary for us to provide additional nutrition to prevent disease.

Pellets are the optimal source of additional nutrition for Budgies (and cockatiels). Approximately 50-65% of your Budgie's diet should be a quality pelleted diet (ZuPreem, Harrisons, Roudybush, Pretty Bird, etc). It is important to note that this is 50-65% of what they EAT, not 50-65% of what you offer them. The remaining portion of the diet can be comprised of a mixture of seeds, fresh fruits and vegetables. Good choices for fruits include melons, mango, papaya, kiwi, blueberries, raspberries, and cherries (without the pit). Good vegetables include broccoli, kale, beans, and sweet potatoes. Some owners will also feed small amounts of egg products and whole grain pastas as well. These are fine in small amounts. Avoid avocado as it has been shown to be toxic to budgies, although the toxic dose is not well established.

Water: Aside from having access to fresh, clean drinking water at all times, Budgies need water for bathing as well. Some birds will use their own water dish, sitting in it as if it were a bathtub. However, many will need a little encouragement. While your bathroom shower is suitable option for larger parrot species, it may have too much force for a little budgie.

Gently misting them with a spray bottle is one method of bathing for Budgies. The spray adapter on a kitchen sink can also be used on low power to provide a good shower for your little friend. Some owners have had good luck simply by placing a small pan or dish filled with approximately ½" of water in the bottom of the cage. Aside from promoting cleanliness, and healthy interaction with their feathers, the showering and bathing can help clean out the nostrils and decrease the chance for upper respiratory infections. Showering and bathing should become part of your bird's regular routine, and be offered once to twice weekly.