

An A to Z Guide for Bird-Proofing Your Home and Providing Quality Bird Care **By Pamela Clark, CVT**

Although people have enjoyed parrots as companions since the time of the pharaohs in ancient Egypt, their popularity as pets has grown dramatically in the past 20 years. Since birds are not mammals, we have much less in common with them genetically than we do with our cats and dogs. Perhaps this is why we must continually try to identify the potential dangers to their lives in captivity.

A... Air quality This is the broadest area of concern for the bird owner. Parrots are extremely sensitive to chemical fumes, smoke and indoor air pollution.

Many types of aerosol products can be toxic to parrots. Leather preservative spray tops the list, and should only be used outdoors. Waterproofing products have been found to contain toxic chemicals. Any aerosols should be used well away from companion parrots, and care should be taken to provide ventilation in the area used.

Gas and kerosene heaters can emit both carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxide. All heaters should be maintained in good working condition. It's worth the money to install a carbon monoxide detector near the location of your gas furnace. These are readily available at home improvement and hardware stores.

Cigarette smoke is harmful to birds and has been implicated in many cases of feather picking. It is also a common cause of respiratory disease in birds.

Never leave an automobile running in an attached garage. Carbon monoxide can seep from a garage through cracks in home construction into the house.

When moving into a new home, check to see if you can detect the smell of formaldehyde. Formaldehyde is a toxic chemical often present in new carpeting, curtains or woodwork. If you detect its odor, allow the new home to air out for 10 to 14 days before you move your parrots in. New carpeting can be aired before installation in an existing home.

Parrot owners in northern climates, where houses tend to stay sealed up tightly during winter months, should open a window or two for a few minutes each day. This will help to eliminate any built up fumes and pollutants. Just take care that any open window is not near enough to the cage to cause icy air to flow directly on your bird.

B... Bacteria Birds can contract bacterial infections from spoiled foods or from bacteria that grows in water dishes or water bottles. Fresh foods, especially those that have been cooked, should never be left in the cage for more than a few hours. Water dishes should be scrubbed thoroughly on a daily basis to discourage growth of bacteria, which forms a slippery film on the surface of dishes, even if water is changed daily. Water bottles pose a special threat because *Pseudomonas*, a bacterium, can quickly contaminate the fittings and tube of the bottle. Disinfect water bottles thoroughly on a weekly basis.

C... Cage environment Parrots seem to have a special talent for finding things that can harm them, and even supposedly safe toys, cages and hardware should be scrutinized with a critical eye. Evaluate cage bar spacing carefully in relation to the size of the bird. No parrot should be able to put its head between the bars of the cage. Once caught in this way, a parrot may panic, often unable to retract its head even if there is room, and can injure or kill itself in the resulting

struggle. There is a well-advised trend toward providing ever-larger cages for parrots, but since larger cages often have wider bar spacing, they must be chosen carefully. Many manufacturers will make a larger cage with somewhat smaller bar spacing if asked to.

Both inside and outside feeders and dish holders often present the opportunity for a parrot to get a wing or head caught in them as well. Food dishes should be kept in place, even if not filled, to eliminate this possibility.

Always close quick links that hold toys to the cage bars completely, so that the parrot cannot get caught on them. Only fasteners sold for use with birds should be used in the cage, and under no circumstances should metal shower curtain hooks be used (a bird's feet or beak can get caught).

Toys can pose a hazard for some parrots. If strings on toys or rope perches are more than an inch long, a parrot that is playing vigorously can easily get its toenails caught in the strings. These also pose another hazard for parrots that chew on them. It is unusual for a parrot to ingest non-food items, but it does happen. Cockatoos especially have been known to ingest fabric and string. Watch your bird carefully to make sure that it is not swallowing these materials if it chews on them.

Choose bedding materials carefully. I recommend simple newsprint or paper towels. Do not allow parrots to get to bedding, such as corncob or walnut shell. Parrots have ingested these materials, causing crop impaction, so make sure a grate is between the bird and the type of bedding. When damp, bedding can harbor dangerous fungal organisms, so clean it frequently.

D... Dogs, cats, and other pets While most companion parrots get along well with the other household pets, accidents do occur. In most cases, they occur in a home in which the dogs and cats have previously lived alongside the parrot without problems, even enjoying their company. While most owners fear their cats' innate inclination to attack birds, dogs have proven themselves to be an equal threat to parrots. While there are exceptions, cats are generally attracted only to the "fluttery" quality of movement exhibited by the smaller parrots and will often leave larger birds alone. Dogs may be less intimidated by a large beak. Never leave your parrot unattended out of its cage with a dog or a cat on the loose.

E... Electrical cords Parrots will chew on almost anything that looks interesting, and electrical cords are one of them. Full-spectrum lighting may benefit your companion parrot, but it must be provided in such a way that the parrot cannot get to the cord. Place the cage far enough away from any other electrical appliance, such as the television, so that a wandering parrot can not come into contact with the cord.

F... Foreign substances on feathers Of the many substances that can get on feathers, nicotine is particularly toxic. Owners who smoke must wash their hands carefully before handling their birds. Many non-toxic substances that wind up on the feathers can contribute to feather abuse. These include grease from the hands of an owner who enjoys snacking and petting his bird at the same time, residue left on feathers from showering with softened water, and the residue from soaps and shampoos in the shower.

G... Grit Bird owners often express confusion as to the appropriateness of feeding grit to parrots. Grit consists of small pieces of sand, sometimes mixed with oyster shell. Very small

amounts of grit assist with digestion in birds that eat seed whole, such as pigeons and doves. However, parrots (hookbills) crack their seeds before eating them and do not need grit for digestion. In fact, giving grit to larger birds sometimes leads to excessive consumption, which has caused crop impaction.

H... Humidifiers The use of humidifiers is increasing in homes with companion parrots. Birds' skin and feather health benefit from higher levels of humidity. However, humidifiers can harbor dangerous bacteria, which then circulate through the air and cause infection. Carefully follow the manufacturer's instructions for disinfecting a humidifier regularly, or obtain one that has a built-in UV light for killing bacteria and fungi.

I... Insect control products The most common cases of bird poisoning from this source occur when products sold for use by the homeowner are used to "fog" the premises to eliminate flea and other insect problems. Birds must be removed from the home before the use of any indoor insect control product, and the house must be thoroughly aired before they are returned. An avian vet should be consulted about the safest pesticides to use if such a produce becomes necessary.

J... "Junk" foods While not particularly healthy for humans, junk foods can pose a real health risk to parrots. Chocolate is toxic to most birds, and should not be fed, even in small amounts. Most "snack food" sold for human consumption is too high in sugar, salt and fat, as well as preservatives and other artificial ingredients, to be fed to parrots. Not only can regular ingestion of these cause obesity and illnesses such as fatty liver disease, but eating such foods makes a parrot less hungry for healthier fare.

K... Kitchen The kitchen is the most dangerous room in the house for a bird. Dangers include open pots of boiling water or oil on the stove, hot ovens, and cooking fumes. Keep your bird out of the kitchen when you're cooking.

Nonstick cookware is coated with a substance called polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE). When nonstick cookware is overheated, birds in areas where these fumes circulate can die very quickly after breathing the fumes. Any nonstick cookware in the home should be replaced with other materials to avoid this tragedy. Be aware that nonstick coatings are used in other produces as well, including waffle irons, bread ovens, drip pans for the stove, irons and ironing board covers, blow dryers, curling irons and space heaters.

L... Lead poisoning Lead continues to be a common source of toxicosis in birds. It is also one of the known causes for feather picking in parrots. Sources of lead include old costume jewelry, lead caulking in stained glass, fishing or curtain weights, some types of screen and wire, hardware cloth, antiques, old bells with lead clappers, ceramics, batteries, air rifle ammunition, mirror backing, sheet rock, zippers, bases of light bulbs, foil from wine and champagne bottle seals, and seed beads (used for making jewelry).

M... Medications Medications prescribed for humans can be deadly for parrots. Never leave them where a curious parrot could ingest them. When your veterinarian has prescribed

medications for your bird, the dosage is based upon precise body weight. Overdosing can be dangerous, and underdosing can result in bacterial resistance to the medication or a continuation of the infection.

Avoid over-the-counter medications from pet stores, unless you have consulted with your avian vet. Effective treatment for any illness depends upon accurately diagnosing the organism causing the infection and discovering which antibiotic will be effective against it.

N... Night frights While unrelated to household dangers, this is a behavior of which bird owners should be aware, because parrots can endanger themselves while in the grip of the panic that accompanies this syndrome. It is most commonly observed with cockatiels and African Greys.

Owners may awaken to the sound of their parrot thrashing wildly around the cage. While this can be associated with an earthquake, even miles away, it often occurs for no explainable reason. Owners should turn on the lights, go to the parrot's cage and remove the cover, speaking in a reassuring manner until the bird calms down. In some cases, a soft night-light kept on in the room will prevent a recurrence or at least allow the parrot to reorient himself more quickly.

O... Open windows and doors Windows and doors pose a threat more often than might be realized. Parrots escape through open windows or doors. Many times a flighted parrot is simply trying to land on its owner's shoulder as the owner exits the home, but is then suddenly and frighteningly lost outdoors. Parrots also like to perch on top of interior doors and have been injured when the door was shut. To newly flighted birds, both closed windows and mirrors pose a danger if they fly into them.

P... Plant poisoning Many people do not realize that their favorite plants can cause a threat to their pets if eaten. While there are some non-toxic houseplants that will not cause harm if nibbled, play it safe and keep all plants out of reach of curious parrots. An avian vet can provide helpful advice as to which household plants are safe.

Q... Quality information There is almost as much bad information about birds as good information, especially on the Internet. Using bad advice can be just as dangerous to your bird as any environmental toxin. Scrutinize advice on bird care or behavior carefully. Does the information make sense? Is it based upon a generalization? Does the person giving the advice have hands-on experience in that area? Can they tell you why it will work?

R... Remodeling projects Remodeling projects can affect birds in several ways. Dust and fumes are often associated with these projects. Leave home improvements for a time of year when windows can be opened to provide adequate ventilation. Such projects can also cause extreme stress for our birds, to whom new things are often viewed as dangerous.

Increased stress can result in behavioral problems and a suppressed immune system. Protect parrots from the upheaval of extensive projects by either boarding them elsewhere or placing them in a room away from the work in progress.

S... Scented products Many of the scented products we use to make life in our homes more pleasant can actually make life less pleasant for our birds. Fabric softeners used in cage coverings or other fabrics with which the bird comes into contact can cause respiratory distress, so avoid their use. Perfumes can assault our parrot's respiratory systems in an unwelcome way.

Air fresheners and products used for freshening carpeting and fabrics are also reported to be problematic for companion birds. If you must scent the atmosphere, use natural products, such as pine boughs or cloves simmered in water.

T... Toilets and other water sources Water is a common and serious hazard around the home, especially for the smaller birds, and preventing accidents requires vigilance. Drowning can happen in a second when our attention is diverted. Parrots enjoy spending time in the bathroom with their owners, but the toilet lid should always be down to prevent an accidental drowning.

When cleaning and using a bucket of water, care must be taken to prevent an unexpected fall into the bucket. Any pots of water should have lids on them at all times.

U... Uncommon playthings Many owners are in the habit of giving their birds household objects to play with. These include plastic baby toys, pencils and pens, keys and other objects. One woman with whom I spoke reported regularly giving her parrot old purses to chew up. These objects can contain toxic metals and other substances that endanger parrot health.

V... Vitamin supplements Vitamin supplements can be beneficial, especially if you have not yet been successful in converting your bird from seeds to a healthier diet. However, overdosing of certain vitamins can occur. If your bird is eating 30% or more of his diet in pellets, vitamin supplements should not be given. If using such supplements, follow the manufacturer's directions on dosage. More is not better and might be dangerous. Check with your veterinarian as to his recommendations for supplementation and which products he or she recommends. And remember - vitamin supplements are no substitute for a good diet.

W... Windows Not only do flighted birds injure themselves by flying into windows, but placing the cage in front of a window can cause other problems as well. Windows allow direct sunlight to fall for hours a day on a bird. This causes overheating in the summer months when temperatures rise.

Some parrots also feel too great a sense of vulnerability when living directly in front of a window or sliding glass door. Sliding the cage to the left or right so that a part is against the wall can provide a more sheltered and protected spot, both from temperatures and goings-on outdoors.

X... X-treme temperatures While our parrots come from equatorial regions that often experience mild to very warm weather, birds are fairly adaptable in terms of the range of temperatures in which they will be comfortable. Generally, most parrots will be quite happy in an environment of 60 degrees Fahrenheit and may often enjoy brief periods of even colder temperatures when taken outdoors for some air in winter. However, icy blasts of cold air blowing on the cage will cause problems, and the direct blast from an air conditioner can be quite uncomfortable for a parrot.

Overheating occurs quite easily. Never leave a parrot in the car in warm weather, and if you place it outdoors, watch for signs of overheating. These include panting and holding the wings out from the body. Parrots do not perspire, so these are the only methods they have available to them with which to cool themselves. Birds should always have water available to them.

Y... Young children Parrots may adore quiet, confident children. They may also be quite frightened by many of the things that young children do. Parrots should feel safe and protected at all times, and very young children should be taught to move slowly around a parrot.

Z... Zinc toxicity Zinc is another metal sometimes ingested by parrots that causes feather picking and other health problems. Sources of zinc include quick-links and other metal fittings on toys. The powder coating on some cages contains zinc, which is added so that the coating will dry more quickly. Watch what your bird chews on and could possibly ingest. Take your bird to an avian vet if it begins to show any unusual behavior or health problems.

One client of mine reported high zinc levels in a cockatoo that enjoyed drinking from the bathroom faucet. As he did so, he scraped the inside of the faucet with his beak, breaking loose the zinc deposits from inside.

Parrots are uncanny in their ability to find trouble. As caring bird owners, let's remain vigilant and well informed regarding any other dangers that may be present in our homes.

References:

Adamcak DVM, Alexandra, Hess DVM, Laurie R., Quesenberry DVM, Katherine E. "Intestinal String Foreign Body in an Adult Umbrella Cockatoo." *Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery*, Vol. 14, No. 4, December 2000.

Chamberlain, Susan. "Covering the Cage: Cold Weather Bird Care." *Bird Talk*, November 1997.

Doane, Bonnie Munro 1991. *The Parrot in Health and Illness*. Macmillan Publishing.

Gallerstein DVM, Gary A. 1994. *The Complete Bird Owner's Handbook*. Macmillan Publishing.

Radford, Elaine. "Safety Tips." *Bird Talk*, January 1997.

Ritchie DVM, Branson W., Harrison DVM, Greg J., Harrison, Linda 1997. *Avian Medicine: Principles and Application*. Wingers Publishing, Inc.

Snyder, Peter J 1998. *The Pet Parrot Book*. Barron's Educational Series.

Wissman DVM, Margaret A. "Twenty Do's and Don'ts." *Bird Talk*, August 1997

Harmful Plants

The following is a list of some potentially harmful plants. The list is not inclusive and, since plant names tend to vary among regions, contact your local nursery center and avian veterinarian for accurate information about a specific plant in question.

Common Name	Latin Name
Amaryllis	<i>Amaryllis</i>
Azalea	<i>Rhododendron canadensis</i>
Black locust	<i>Robinia pseudoacacia</i>
Boxwood	<i>Buxus spp.</i>
Calla Lily	<i>Zantedeschia aethiopica</i>
Caladium	<i>Caladium spp.</i>
Castor Bean	<i>Ricinus communis</i>
Cherry tree (bark, leaves, twigs)	<i>Prunus spp.</i>
Daffodil	<i>Narcissus tazetta</i>
Delphinium	<i>Delphinium spp.</i>
Dieffenbachia	<i>Dieffenbachia picta</i>
Holly	<i>Ilex spp.</i>
Hydrangea	<i>Hydrangea</i>
Iris	<i>Iris</i>
Ivy, English	<i>Hedera</i>
Lantana	<i>Lantana spp.</i>
Lily-of-the-valley	<i>Convallaria majalis</i>
Lobelia	<i>Lobelia spp.</i>
Morning glory	<i>Ipomoea spp.</i>
Oleander	<i>Nerium oleander</i>
Poinsettia	<i>Euphorbia pulcherrima</i>
Privet	<i>Ligustrum</i>
Rhododendron	<i>Rhododendron</i>
Rhubarb	<i>Rheum rhaponticum</i>
Sweet Pea	<i>Lathyrus odoratus</i>
Wisteria	<i>Wisteria spp.</i>
Yew, all types	<i>Taxus</i>

Non-toxic Plants

Common Name	Latin Name
--------------------	-------------------

African violet	<i>Saintpaulina spp.</i>
Ash	<i>Fraxinus spp.</i>
Aspen (Poplar)	<i>Populus spp.</i>
Bamboo	<i>Various</i>
Baby's breath	<i>Gypsophila paniculata</i>
Bachelor buttons	<i>Centaurea cyanus</i>
Beech, American and European	<i>Fagus, Nothofagus</i>
Begonia	<i>Begonia spp.</i>
Birch	<i>Betula spp.</i>
Calendula	<i>Calendula officinalis</i>
Christmas cactus	<i>Rhipsalidopsis spp.</i>
Dogwood	<i>Cornus spp.</i>
Elm	<i>Ulmus spp.</i>
Eucalyptus	<i>Eucalyptus spp.</i>
Ferns, asparagus, maidenhair, etc.	<i>Various</i>
Fir	<i>Abies spp.</i>
Grape Ivy	<i>Cissus rhombifolia</i>
Hibiscus	<i>Hibiscus rosa-sinensis</i>
Jade Plant	<i>Crassula ovata</i>
Magnolia	<i>Magnolia spp.</i>
Manzanita	<i>Arctostaphylos manzanita</i>
Nasturtium	<i>Tropaeolum majus</i>
Palms	<i>Various</i>
Pine	<i>Pinus spp.</i>
Pyracantha	<i>Pyracantha spp.</i>
Raspberry	<i>Rubus strigosus</i>
Rose	<i>Rosa spp.</i>
Spider Plant	<i>Chlorophytum comosum</i>
Spruce	<i>Picea spp.</i>
Willow	<i>Salix spp.</i>

(This article originally appeared in the 2002/2003 issue of Birds USA Magazine.)