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Caged Companion Bird Containment

Our topics for this week are:

- Cage
  - shape
  - location
  - size
  - construction
  - bars
  - perches
  - substrate
  - cleaning
  - enrichments
- Aviaries
  - Indoors
  - Outdoors

Companion birds are contained in cages or aviaries, or both. Cages are the most practical for pet birds. Since most birds need the social support of a flock, it is generally inadvisable to cage a bird alone, particularly budgerigars, canaries, and lovebirds.

CAGES

Birds need cages for safety from predators or playful injuries when unattended and for psychologic security to relieve stress. Cages with angular corners are more conducive to capturing birds than circular constructed cages. Plus, square or rectangular cages are easier to line with paper for cleaning.

Location

The respiratory system of birds does not protect from inhaled hazards, as well as the mammalian respiratory system. Cages should never be placed near open windows or doors, or other areas with drafts or near fumes, such as paint, smoke, hair sprays, insecticides, scented candles, plug-in fresheners, ammonia-based glass cleaners, or stain-guard chemicals. They should not be located in or near kitchens with fumes from burned foods or from nonstick cooking pans coated with the fluoropolymer, polytetrafluoroethylene (Teflon®). Silverstone® and Tefzel® are also coated with fluoropolymers. Vaporization of dangerous fluoropolymers begins at the temperature of 464F.

The cage should be located in a bright area, but not in direct sunlight. The location should be without drafts and away from kitchens and placed at chest level. If the cage is placed

near the floor, birds will be stressed with concern about vulnerability to predators. Placing cages above human eye level will decrease stress to timid birds. Locating a cage near an open window risks drafts, direct sunlight, stress from being on constant alert for predators, and transmission of disease from wild birds.

Birds that are well socialized to humans should be caged in family traffic areas during the day. The cage should be located against a wall or the cage should contain a hiding area to reduce stress for rest periods. A separate cage for rest may be needed in a quiet, dark area for larger birds that are used to handling. Frequent interaction with people should be supplemented with toys and multiple perches for entertainment. Placing the cage near a closed window and out of direct sunlight can allow birds to watch outside activities and provide valuable mental stimulation. Boredom is a common cause for many behavioral problems in birds. Providing opportunities to simulate foraging for food, guarding against predators, and create nests avert stereotypic behaviors. Most companion birds are from the tropics where 10 to 12 hours of daylight occurs year round. Exposure to direct sunlight or a UVB light source 18 inches above the cage should be provided for these companion pets at a near consistent 10 to 12 hours per day. For sleeping, some birds prefer for the cage to be covered. Others do not. Cage covering is optional.

Size

Minimum cage size in width, depth, and height for large birds should be 1½ times the wing span for each bird. Smaller birds need additional room to fly in the cage. All cages should be wider than tall. When perched, the tail should not contact the floor, walls, or any other object in the cage. Mynah birds require the largest cages (6 X 3 X 3 feet minimum for one bird).

Construction Materials

Birds can get metal poisoning from cages constructed of inexpensive materials. Bird cages should be constructed of non-rusting metal (stainless steel, anodized aluminum, or chrome plating) and inspected for sharp or pointed projections that might cut or stab an inquisitive bird's tongue. Cages should not be painted with lead-based paint or galvanized. Zinc used for galvanizing is toxic to birds and the most common metal poisoning in caged birds. Better cages are made from stainless steel or wrought iron. Powder-coating can keep the metal from rusting.

Bars

The space between cage bars should be narrow enough to prevent entrapping a bird's head. Small birds (parakeets, finches, canaries) should have bars spacing no greater than ½ inch. Medium birds (cockatiels, conures, lories) should have bar spacing of no more than 3/4 inch. Large birds (African grey, macaws, cockatoo) may have bar spacing of up to 1 1/4 inches. Vertical bars cause less damage to tail feathers than horizontal bars. Wire grids above a sliding solid bottom prevents paper shredding and the bird from eating wasted, spoiled food. Wire cages can be too stressful for nervous birds. Box-type cages are preferable for timid birds. Other birds enjoy viewing activity and receiving attention. Door latches should be substantial. Simple door latches on barred cages can be opened by many birds.

Perches

A cage should have at least two perches: one narrow perch for birds to grasp with their feet, and one that they can stand flat-footed on. Most perches should be wooden, preferably manzanita wood which is dense without any harmful chemicals in it. Willow or fruit tree branches can also be used. Yew, oak, or rhododendron branches should not be used. All branches should be washed carefully to remove possible diseases from wild bird fecal contamination. Additional perches should vary in size to exercise the full range of the grasp of the feet and prevent tendon contracture, but all perches should be appropriate for the size of the contained birds' feet. Recommended perch diameters for small, medium, and large birds are 3/8 to 3/4 inches, 5/8 to 1 1/4 inches, and 1 to 2 inches, respectively. Sandpaper should not be used on perches in an attempt to wear down toenails. Perches should not be positioned over food or water bowls. A sleeping perch should be located in the back of the cage. The location of differ style and diameter perches should be changed occasionally.

Concrete perches can be beneficial in maintaining needed abrasion to the toenails and beak for larger birds (200 to 1,000 gm. in bodyweight), eliminating the need for toenail and beak trimming. Concrete perches should be placed where the bird spends less time, as in front of a feeding container. They should not be used where the bird spends more time at play, rest, or preening due to the possibility of excessive foot abrasion.

Substrate and Cleaning

Paper should be used as substrate. Organic bedding, such as ground corncobs, can promote bacterial or fungal growth. Wood shavings and sawdust can cause respiratory problems and digestive tract impactions. Food and water containers and floor paper should be cleaned daily. Perches should be cleaned whenever soiled. The entire cage should be cleaned once per week.

Enrichments

Inanimate toys are important to provide mental stimulation and prevent stereotypic behaviors caused by boredom, such as aggressive behaviors, pacing along a perch, swinging its head from side to side or bobbing it up and down, feather picking, and screaming. Ropes, paper towel rolls, and plain cardboard boxes are simple toys that birds enjoy. Many bird toys are commercially available, including ladders, chains with bells, and blocks of wood on string. Another diversion is cuttlebones, the exoskeleton of salt water cuttlefish. Cuttlebones are a source of calcium and iodine for small birds and an abrasive that can help keep the beak from overgrowing. Birds also enjoy tearing up paperback books and searching for treats hidden in toys that create a puzzle to solve.

Large psittacines, such as African grey parrots and macaws, are highly intelligent birds that are often kept alone in realtively small cages. Extra effort is needed to provide these birds with room to exercise, interact with their owners, and provide inanimate forms of environmental enrichment for mental stimulation. Otherwise, stereotypic behaviors, particularly feather picking, often occur.

Small passerines, canaries and finches, should be provided with nest or hiding boxes attached to the top of the cage. Nest boxes should be easy to remove and clean.

AVIARIES

Food and water containers and soiled perches in aviaries should be cleaned daily. Substrate should be raked clean once per week and all perches washed. All substrates should be replaced at least twice per year. Substrates for aviaries with concrete floors are usually a gravel or stone chip.

Indoor

Aviaries should have an enclosure within, or connected to, the flight area. In addition to being large enough to accommodate the species size and number of birds, an aviary should be large enough to facilitate cleaning. The shape is commonly rectangular or square.

When more than one indoor aviary chamber is present, there should be enough space between adjoining aviaries to prevent birds in different chambers from pecking their neighbors. At least two perches should be provided. Perches should be placed at different heights and made of branches with bark, cotton ropes, and dowels with different diameters. A portion of the aviary floor should be sandpaper to allow scratching and wear of toenails.

Tree limbs are useful and easily replaced when soiled. However, care must be taken in the selection. Some trees are poisonous. Willow or fruit tree branches are safest. Limbs should be thoroughly washed to prevent exposure to wild bird feces. Perches should be attached securely and positioned away from food and water containers. Bathing bowls or regular sprays of mist should be provided to encourage proper preening. Bathing water should be checked to monitor for bird mites.

Outdoor

Most outdoor aviaries have an indoor compartment and an external cage. In addition to having the same needs of indoor aviaries, an outdoor aviary should be sheltered from wind, noise, and stressful nearby activities by constructing the outdoor cage so that it is sheltered from the prevailing winds. Other visual barriers should be created between the cage and the public and other possible stresses to the birds. An aviary should not be located beneath overhanging trees due to risk of exposure to feces from wild birds. Wire and wood frame is acceptable for most species, but parrots may chew wood and should be contained in heavy (10-14 ga) mesh and metal framed aviaries. At least 1/3 of the top of the aviary should be clear plastic for shelter from the weather and wild birds. The floor should be concrete to prevent entry of burrowing rodents and predators.

To prevent escapes, the ideal entry to an aviary is an chamber with an outside door and a door into the aviary. The second best entry is a door that opens inward. Water is best provided with tube drinkers to prevent contamination. Cuttlebones, mineral blocks, and bathing dishes with about one inch of water should be provided. Supplementary heating and lighting may be necessary for some species.

Now, let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- When selecting a bird cage, its shape, size, and construction materials should be

considered.
- Appropriate bars, perches, substrate, and enrichments vary with types of birds.
- Aviaries can be useful for indoor or outdoor containment and exercise.

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at www.betteranimalhandling.com

Don't forget serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.