

Proper Construction of Bird Cages

Our topics for this week are:

- **Recommendations for bird cage size**
- **Hazardous materials to avoid for cage construction**
- **Better shape for bird cages**

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.

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.

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

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. Birds can get metal poisoning from cages constructed of inexpensive materials. 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, lorries) should have bar spacing of no more than ¾ inch. Large birds (African grey, macaws, cockatoo) may have bar spacing of up to 1 ¼ 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.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

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

- 1. Bird cages should be made of stainless steel, anodized aluminum, chrome plating, or wrought iron, not galvanized metal.**
- 2. Perches should not be oak, yew, rhododendron, or unwashed limbs of any type of wood.**
- 3. Perches should not be positioned over food or water sources.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 325 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

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.