

Keeping birds as pets—Budgerigars



This fact sheet details the requirements for keeping a Budgerigar as a pet, covering areas such as buying a Budgerigar, cage sizes, equipment, general management, cleaning and training.

BUYING A BUDGERIGAR

Before going out to buy a budgerigar, you should make up your mind where your interest lies. Do you want a friendly pet, which will learn to talk ? Or do you want to breed these beautiful little parakeets?

If it is a pet you want, you must buy a young cock bird which is still in its baby feathering. Hens will learn to talk, but cocks are much easier to teach. If you buy from an experienced pet shop owner or an established breeder of budgerigars he or she will be almost certain which chicks are cocks and which are hens. If a mistake is made, many breeders will be willing to exchange your chick for another. They usually prefer to keep more hens than cocks.

What to look for when buying a pet budgerigar

When you think you have found the budgerigar you would like as a pet, take a good look at it and check out several things.

1. Is the bird a young cock ?

Young budgerigars do not have a white ring around the eye. This makes them look wide-eyed and cuddly. On many varieties the black or brown lines, seen on the back of an adult's head, come right to the front of the head. For this reason, young budgerigars are known as Bar Heads. Some young birds have black, or dark brown, beaks. The fleshy part, just above the beak, is known as the Cere. It is the colour of the cere which shows whether a budgerigar is a cock or a hen. The cere of a young cock shows a purplish-pink-tinge. A young hen's cere is more white, with either a biscuit or pale blue tinge. Because an adult cock bird's cere is blue, many people make the mistake of thinking that a blue tinge on a very young budgerigar's cere means that it is a cock.

2. Is it healthy ?

A bird which looks happy and bright, moving about busily, is a fit bird. A wide-open bright eye is another good sign. Any bird which sits quietly, with its eyes partly closed and feathers fluffed up should not be bought.

3. Is the beak properly formed?

If the lower part of the beak overlaps the upper (undershot) or the upper part looks too long (overshot) choose another bird. These conditions can cause difficulty in eating and – if you decide to use the bird for breeding at a later date – they can be passed on to chicks.

4. Does the beak look shiny?

Any bird with a crusty look to its beak could be suffering from Scaly Face and is best avoided. The bird you buy should have a clean, shiny beak.

5. Are the feathers under the vent clean?

If a bird has dirty vent feathers it may have a stomach upset. It is best left and another one chosen.

CAGE SIZES

Whether you are going to buy a pet budgerigar, or more than one for breeding, it is best to have a cage ready for when you arrive home. This will mean that the bird will be put straight into its own home and not be disturbed by being kept in some temporary housing.

If you are going to keep a pet budgerigar in the house there are lots of designs of cage available in pet shops. Nearly all of them will house your budgerigar safely and comfortably. It is best to buy the largest cage you can afford, remembering that it has to fit in one of your rooms at home. Cages with plastic bottoms, which can be removed, are easily disinfected. Cages with metal bottoms can become rusty after a time. Some pet cages have perches which are too small in diameter. Perches should be no smaller than 12mm diameter. Perches of different sizes, say one 12mm and the other 15mm are ideal. But perches are easily changed, so if you find a cage which suits you, do not be put off by the perches. Change them.

Further details on choosing a cage for your pet can be found in Fact Sheet 1.

EQUIPMENT

The equipment you need for your cage consists mainly of feeding utensils. You can use dishes and bowls, not made specially for budgerigars, but it is better to use drinkers and feeders which have been specially designed.

If you give water in an open dish it will soon become full of seed husks and droppings, and will not be clean enough for your budgerigar to drink. Your pet will also play in the water at a time when you do not want him to get wet. You also have to open the door to put the water dish into the cage. The best utensil for giving water is a plastic water fountain. This clips on to the outside of the cage, will not fill up with seed husks or droppings and can be changed without opening the cage door.

The fountain inside the cage is too small for your budgerigar to be able to bathe when you do not want him to. The open dish, already in the pet cage when you buy it, can be used for grit.

An open dish is better for seed than for water but still has the problems that droppings can get in with the seed and the cage door has to be opened for refilling. A larger version of the water fountain can be bought, with the same advantages. When using with seed you should read the instructions carefully. There is a gap in the plastic tube which needs to be lined up with the feeding outlet so that the seed can flow freely. It is best to buy a clip to hold a piece of cuttle fish bone which budgerigars like to eat. This stops the bone getting dirty by lying around on the cage floor.

Budgerigars love to take a bath. Specially designed baths can be bought from pet shops which fit over the cage door opening. The advantage of these is that you can decide the best time for your pet to bathe and the rest of the cage does not get wet.

Although not essential, toys can keep budgerigars happy when you are not at home. Pet shops stock a wide range of toys which includes ladders, mirrors and bells. You will be able to choose the toys you think your pet will like best – but do not put too many in the cage at one time or the cage will become overcrowded.

GENERAL MANAGEMENT

The management of a budgerigar is very simple. It need take only a few minutes each day, with an extra effort once a week when cleaning out. This means that, when you buy a budgerigar, you will be able to look after it properly and still have plenty of time to enjoy its company.

You need to find a good position for your budgerigar's cage. A cool, airy place is best, so avoid draughts and direct sunshine. This means that placing a cage in a window is *not* a good idea. Being placed in a draught can cause your budgerigar to become ill.

The position of seed and water feeders is also important. Seed and water must never be placed in a position where your bird's droppings can get into them. Under a perch is the *worst* possible place. The same is true of any other item you put into the cage such as cuttlefish bone, millet sprays, greens, fruit and even toys. Find a position where they will stay clean.

Both seed and water need your attention every day. The water container should be washed and then rinsed thoroughly, before being refilled with fresh water. When a fountain type feeder is used for seed it should be checked every day to see that there is plenty of seed inside and that the outlet for the seed is not blocked. Seed husks are not usually a problem with this type of feeder. If it looks as though the level of seed has not gone down, check at once. This can

mean that there is a blockage and that your budgerigar cannot get at its seed.

When seed is fed in an open dish the empty seed husks tend to lie on top. These need to be blown off every day, taking care not to get a seed husk in your eye. When the seed husks are gone you will be able to see how much seed is left in the dish. Even then, check once more as sometimes you will find a layer of dust in the bottom of the dish. Fill up the seed dish every day. And remember finally, your pet budgerigar will sleep better if you place a piece of light cloth over its cage late in the evening.

CLEANING

Any pet needs to be cleaned out regularly. It depends on you to keep the housing and equipment clean. Budgerigars need to be cleaned out at least once a week. You can buy sandpaper sheets from a pet shop which make cleaning out very simple, as far as the floor of the cage is concerned. It is just a matter of removing the old sheet and putting a new sheet in its place. Budgerigars often chew these sandsheets. This does them no harm. It is a little cheaper to use bird sand on the floor of a cage, but it will take a little more time to remove the sand and to replace it.

In breeding cages, wood shavings are often used to cover the cage floor. These are not so good in pet cages as they tend to come out of the cage when the budgerigar flutters its wings. If you do decide to use wood shavings, buy them from a pet shop. Shavings bought from a wood yard could make your bird ill. The cheapest of all cage floor coverings is a piece of newspaper. This works well but does not look so attractive as the others.

About once a month you should disinfect the cage and equipment. Use a mild disinfectant and rinse feeders and water containers well in clean water before refilling them. Disinfectant should be used more often if a budgerigar has a stomach upset and its droppings are green instead of the normal black and white. Perches need special attention when cleaning out. They can become very dirty with the birds own droppings which, if left, get hard and could damage a budgerigar's feet. Perches should be scrubbed with disinfectant, rinsed and dried before being put back in the cage.

TRAINING

Budgerigars kept in breeding cages and flights do not need training. But a lot of the pleasure of keeping a pet budgerigar is seeing how easy it is to train.

First you need to gain your pet's confidence and, although you may find it difficult, you must leave the bird alone for the first day after you have put it into the cage. This will give it time to settle down after all the upset of being moved. It may sit quietly at first but as it becomes more sure of itself it will

investigate the cage and start to chirp. When you go to the cage say the same two words, quietly, over and over again. If you are good at training these will be the first two words your pet will say. “Hello”, followed by its name or “Pretty Boy” are good starter words.

When you are sure that your pet is not afraid of you, gently open the cage door and slowly put your hand into the cage. If the bird panics, slowly remove your hand, close the door and wait until it settles down before trying again. When the bird accepts your hand in its cage, extend your first finger and place it gently against its chest. You may find that your budgerigar will step on to your finger at this point. If it does not, then press your finger gently against the bird’s chest. This almost always causes it to step onto your finger. Still moving very slowly, gently transfer your pet to another perch. It will soon get used to this and know what to expect when next you do it.

When your budgerigar has learned this lesson well, you can try bringing it out of the cage. But before doing so there are several things to check to make sure it will be safe. Make sure that all doors and windows are closed. If you have an open fireplace, make sure that it is guarded. Pull the curtain across any clear glass windows, or your pet, not knowing that there is any glass there, will fly into it and may damage itself. If you have a cat or dog make sure that they are not in the room. When your bird flies around the room watch what it is doing as budgerigars will chew papers and house plants if left to do it.

If your budgerigar has learned its lesson well, you should have no difficulty getting it back into its cage. Just follow the method used when training to get it on to your finger and put your hand back into the cage. If it forgets its training and refuses to come to your hand you have more of a problem. First darken the room, which will permit you to get close, without your pet flying off. Then throw a soft cloth over it to capture it. When handling a budgerigar, always hold its wings firmly to its body, in their natural position. You must be firm enough to prevent the bird hurting itself, but not so firm as to hurt it yourself. By placing your thumb on one side of the budgerigar’s face, your fore-finger on the back of its head and your second finger on the other side of its face, with the wings and body in the palm of your hand, you will be holding the bird safely. Then return it to the cage. Carry on training your pet to stand on your finger until you can return it to the cage without capturing it.

When your budgerigar is standing on your finger see if it will let you gently stroke its head and beak. If it does, your training is going well. Always move slowly and gently as if you frighten your pet it will take much longer for it to become tame. Repeating the same two word phrase over and over again, to reassure your budgerigar, will have made a start to teaching it to talk. Do not change the words until it has learned to say the first two. The more often you

repeat the words the quicker your pet will learn them. Once it has learned the first words you can start teaching another two. If you are a good teacher it will not be long before your budgerigar knows lots of words. Some birds can repeat complete nursery rhymes – although they do get mixed up sometimes – which makes everyone laugh.

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