

African Grey Parrots as pets



This fact sheet gives some guidelines for beginners on keeping African Grey Parrots as pets.

ARE YOU THE RIGHT PERSON FOR AN AFRICAN GREY ?

So you have decided that you want an African Grey Parrot as a pet. A Grey can make the most life enhancing addition to your family but are you sure that the African Grey is the right bird for you ? If you've read this far you probably are. Bear in mind a few generalisations - birds are social; in the wild they live in a flock; a bird is not like a cat, which can be happy alone at home all day. A Grey Parrot will be happy on its own for periods of time provided that it feels that it is a member of the human flock. It needs the interaction of others (birds or humans). And of course, once the bird is living in your home, have you thought about its future ? If all goes well it has a life expectancy between 30 and 80 years - the lower end of the scale being more usual. Have you got someone to care for your bird when you can no longer through old age, ill health or death ?

PURCHASING A BIRD

It is no longer necessary to buy a wild caught bird, enough reputable breeders exist in the UK and you are better advised to buy the young bird from one of them than from a pet shop. And of course in choosing a reputable breeder you will get a baby who has been weaned, fledged and socialised. The best breeders will often allow you to visit the baby before you bring it home and will provide a proper follow-up service of advice on feeding, socialising and health.

SOCIALISING

A problem with Greys is that they can bond to one person and then be shy, nervous or outright aggressive to others. If you encourage other family members or visiting friends to interact with the bird while it is young, as it grows up it will learn not to be afraid of strangers and it is the fearful parrot that bites.

Once you realise that those pecks are less to frighten you than because the bird itself is frightened you can gradually lessen their frequency and prevent nervous nips escalating into a vice. And also you have to remember that the young parrot uses its beak to steady itself before stepping onto your hand. A gentle 'NO' to beaking has greater effect than shouting.

Abrupt, jerky movements, harsh loud voices can give parrots the wrong signal and the result may be a lunge or a nip.

Growling in the Grey Parrot is a sign of terror. You can do nothing but try to find the cause and eliminate it – sometimes this is possible and sometimes not.

How you introduce the new parrot to other pets depends on your life-style. Some people would never dream of having mixed species at liberty together, other people find it adds an extra dimension to pet keeping (please never leave birds unsupervised).

FULL WINGS

This brings us to an important, still controversial issue of bird keeping. Can your parrot fly away from any danger he perceives - whether it be Great Aunt Maud's pheasant feather hat or your neighbour's nasty cat ?

Many books written by Americans insist on wing clips both for safety and to keep the bird well behaved. Wing clipping is still the norm in the USA, although less popular in Europe. Bear in mind that clipped birds can and do escape and that the dangers are not negligible of a

bird being trodden on or squashed as Great Aunt or even little Johnny plonks themselves on a sofa and sits down without looking behind them. Wing clips suit the convenience of the owner more than the happiness of the bird. The dangers of falling into toilet seats or landing on top of hot stoves are greatly exaggerated.

ESCAPES

An excuse given for clipping parrots' wings is that the clipped bird is prevented from escapes. This is only partially true because a clipped bird can still fly and if lifted by the wind can be blown out of sight and will be far more terrified than a full winged bird in such a situation. An escape through the owner's carelessness, open door or window or any other mischance is a very real danger.

TRAINING FOR INDOOR FLIGHT

Having decided that your bird will be a bird as nature made it, you will have to teach a few simple commands for indoor flying. The most important of these are: "Step up", "Fly to me", "Off there", and not essential but oh, so useful, some sort of potty training.

A well socialised baby should already "Step up" when he comes home to you. It takes only a few attempts of a gentle pressure against the bird's breast and the command "Step up" followed by a reward. The reward is a treat and praise. The treat can be some part of your bird's daily food allowance that it particularly likes.

"Off there" is taught by repetition. When the bird lands on a forbidden spot, you give the command and remove the bird and place him in an approved spot. How willing your bird turns out to be depends as much on its temperament and yours. With the bird perched on your hand you can approach another perch and gradually teach him to step up away from you. Use "down" or any other word you like. As soon as the bird does what you asked reward him with a treat or praise.

"Fly to me" is also taught in small stages. At first the bird may simply hop to you but as you gradually widen the distance the bird will fly to you. Should the bird get outside accidentally, if he knows "Fly to me" well, he is more likely to fly down to your hand.

There are various methods of potty training. It requires an expenditure of time like most things that are worthwhile. Take a weekend or a couple of days free. Sit comfortably with your bird in a favourite spot. Have the place you want it to relieve itself nearby. It will be its perch, its cage or perhaps an opened newspaper. Watch the bird carefully. As soon as it raises its tail and wriggles a bit rush it to the designated place and give your command. This can be anything you like, "Go potty", "Be clean" or whatever phrase you want to use.

Reward the bird if it performs in the right spot. If it misses, please do not scold. Nothing is gained with Greys (or any other bird) by scolding. Just let the accident pass. What you are trying to do is to make an association between relieving itself and the word. Eventually (a few hours or a few days later) the bird WILL "Go potty" in the place you chose. Then you can transfer the word to other places whenever you think the bird is ready. Don't forget that parrots have a fast metabolism and ten to thirty minutes is the interval between performances.

GOING OUT WITH BIRDS

You can take birds out with you either in carry cages, bird knapsacks or harnesses. It is not easy to accustom an adult bird to a harness. Owners have done it but it requires a lot of time and patience and the bird may become too stressed. If you decide you want to harness your bird, it is advisable to ask the breeder to put a harness on a few times when the bird is being spoon fed.

TALKING

The African Grey, both the Congo and the Timneh subspecies, share the deserved reputation as the best talkers in the parrot world. The most famous Grey parrot in the world is Alex, wild caught and sold as a year-old from a pet shop to Doctor Irene Pepperberg. Alex has been trained by her and her assistants since 1977. Not only does Alex have an extensive vocabulary but he also can use words and concepts correctly. He can say which is the larger of two objects or what material it is composed of. Alex has proved conclusively under laboratory conditions that parrots have cognitive abilities equal to dolphins, chimpanzees and human toddlers - something sensitive parrot owners have always known.

HOUSING THE PET PARROT INDOORS AND OUTSIDE

The bird needs a cage wide enough to stretch and flap its wings. This is now also a legal requirement. But I would ask you to go further and buy or make a cage as large as you can afford or have space for. The cage should be fitted with natural perches to give the foot different surfaces for the parrot to grip. The bird perforce must spend long hours in the cage and the more room for him to manoeuvre, play with his toys or nap on one of his perches, the more contented he will be.

Cages that are too small can be one of the causes of nervous or self-mutilating birds. Once a bird has started to pluck it is a difficult condition to cure for the reasons can be multiple, both physical and psychological. Give your bird the best start by providing as spacious a home as possible.

An outdoor cage is a boon for the birds in warm weather.

Greys do not have beaks with the amazing pressure of the macaws so an outdoor aviary is a feasible proposition if you yearn to sit and watch the birds interact.

OUT OF CAGE TIME

There is no single expert who will agree on how much time your caged Grey should be out. Experience will show you how much rest your bird requires; how much interaction with you and how much quiet time in their cage.

TOYS

How much you spend on your birds' toys is variable. Unlike cages, you need not spend money on many toys should you not wish it. Like the toddler who is far more interested in the model railway's wrapping paper than the expensive toy, your parrot will not notice whether you give him an expensive bought confection or construct homemade toys with cotton reels, toilet paper rolls, empty plastic boxes and ingenuity. A variety of swings are inexpensive and easy to make and give the parrot hours of pleasurable activity. Birds have

their own preferences. What they like are objects hidden within objects. Wrap everything up, once, twice, three times and your Grey will enjoy opening it. If you have a competitive streak you can use it to find out whether you can defeat a Grey's ability to open something. If you let your Grey spend free time loose in your living quarters, your level of tidiness will increase—drawers can no longer be left open, every box must be closed, no pens or pencils in sight.

FEEDING

If you are bringing a young bird home from the breeders, the breeder will have given you a food chart or verbal instructions. If you want to change to a different feeding regime you can do so gradually. Parrots like people vary a lot in how picky they are over new foods.

These are, broadly speaking, three options:

- * you can buy a complete diet in pellets of some sort
- * you can buy a mix of seeds and dried fruits and vegetables
- * you can make up your own mix.

Whichever one of these options you choose, the parrot also needs fresh fruit and vegetables daily and fresh water.

Fortunately, or is it unfortunately, for the amateur parrot owner, the experts do not agree on what constitutes the perfect diet for your parrot ? Nor will the parrot be able to choose wisely. Like the toddlers they so often resemble, most Greys adore junk food. Foods with sugar, salt, spicy, chocolate, fried are all advised against. In practice there are not many pet parrots who do not partake of the occasional unhealthy food.

A Greys favourite fruit is pomegranates. Although the pomegranate has a short season, it's worthwhile to indulge your bird simply to watch its pleasure as it takes the luscious ruby pips out of the skin.

Should your bird have to remain in his cage for longer periods than perhaps he wants, you can keep him occupied by making part of his diet harder to find. Foraging is a natural behaviour for parrots. Hide nuts in containers, thread fruit on skewers. As with toys, your imagination is the limit.

If you have a garden or live in the country, your parrot will enjoy nature's bounty. Although there are poisonous plants in fields and gardens like laburnum, datura, rhododendron, the majority are harmless and will be enjoyed. Your parrot can get most of his mineral requirements from gnawing branches - just be sure the trees were not sprayed with pesticides.

THE CALCIUM QUESTION

Grey parrots do easily develop a lack of calcium. Some owners like to add supplement to the feeds; others rely of a variety of natural foods e.g. a daily teaspoon of yoghurt or low fat cheese, plenty of carrot sticks, occasional scrambled egg, dried figs, apricots and calcium rich vegetables in season like endive, watercress.

ADDING ANOTHER BIRD

You may want to consider the pros and cons of adding another bird. Some of the pros could be:

- * Birds are flock creatures and have to adjust to a solitary life
- * Company for the first bird when he is alone
- * Pleasure for you watching the birds interact with each other
- * Pleasure for you in getting to know another bird personality
- * A second bird of same species, opposite sex may one day breed

But some of the cons are:

- * Original bird if over bonded (too attached) to one person may not accept a newcomer easily
- * Expense of additional cages, toys, food, etc.
- * Time factor – training, socialising, etc.
- * Original bird should he bond too well to newcomer may be less affectionate to you or talk less
- * A second bird of same species, opposite sex may one day breed

HEALTH CARE FOR YOUR PARROT

Firstly you must start with a healthy bird mentally and physically. As mentioned before a breeder is usually better than a pet shop although breeders do vary. A good breeder should be open, supportive, and is usually more interested in making sure you will provide a good home than getting their money. Some breeders will have had blood samples done to check the health of their young birds.

Wherever you obtain your bird it should be bright, active and inquisitive. The plumage should be full and not moth-eaten (don't accept the excuse of 'it's just moulting'). The beak should not be flaky and there should be no discharge from the nostrils. Especially important in young birds the back should not be hunched and the legs should be straight with both feet gripping well - not rolled on their side.

Once you have your bird, find a vet with an interest in birds and take the bird along for a visit. This first visit allows you to make contact with your vet so that you can feel happy if an emergency does occur, you know where you are going. The vet will perform a clinical examination and give further advice on feeding and care. There are different opinions on what more needs to be done at this stage. Some vets advise blood sampling for viruses and basic screening with follow-up samples taken yearly. Other vets are happy to see parrots only if the owner is worried. This is a very personal choice and should be something you come to an agreement about with your vet and your individual experience and needs.

Once you have a healthy bird there are certain things you can do to maintain its health. Stress predisposes to many diseases, the rest of this booklet explains how correct housing and stimulation can reduce this. Diet is another major factor in causing disease.

Cigarette smoke and even cigarette residues on your fingers can cause health problems, as can overheated non-stick cooking utensils (birds are very sensitive to inhaled poisons hence the use of canaries down the mines). Some treats are allowed, although chocolate and avocado are poisonous and please remember that one potato chip for a Grey is the equivalent to an adult eating 240 chips!

In spite of loving, sensible care, if you are unlucky enough to have a sick parrot, they may be acutely unwell or more chronically unwell. An acutely ill bird will not be eating, may not be drinking and will be quiet, its feathers fluffed up and possibly crouching in the bottom of the cage. This is an emergency! Take your bird to the vet as soon as possible. If there is any delay and while transporting the bird, keep it warm; an airing cupboard is good or cover the cage and use a heater. Try to encourage the bird to drink. A chronically ill bird will usually show more subtle changes. Often owners will notice that the bird is just not right. Monitoring weight can be a good way of seeing if there is an underlying problem or the bird just going through a sulk.

It is worth considering avian insurance. Most sick birds do not show symptoms specific to an illness and normally blood samples and x-rays must be done to find the cause and birds are often hospitalised, all of which can be costly.

When birds are examined at a vet or when they have minor procedures done, like nail clipping, they will often have to be wrapped in a towel. Accustoming your bird to this before the trip to the vets will greatly reduce the stress when it needs to be done.

SECURITY ADVICE

African Grey Parrots are very experienced escape artists. The worst time of year is the summer months, when there are increasing numbers of reports of lost birds which have flown through open windows, patio doors or simply placed in the garden for fresh air and fly off. The biggest problem is always the general lack of identification both in the circulations and future identification should the bird be traced.

All bird owners are advised to consider the use of microchips or closed or split rings, which can be supplied at a reasonable cost with owners or breeders unique details there on to assist in the tracing of both lost and stolen birds. Always ensure that you have a good picture of your Grey so that you can use it on Lost Posters should you lose your bird. It is essential that you distribute posters locally as soon as you can after your bird has escaped whilst it is in your general area.

This fact sheet has been produced for:
The NCA —Spring Gardens, Northampton NN1 1DR
www.nca.uk.net