

## HOUSING - SMALL BIRDS

(Finches, Canaries, Budgies, Cockatiels and Lovebirds)

### ***General Information***

A bird is entirely reliant on you for everything in its life. You, the caring pet bird owner, provide its happiness and good health. It is important to continually strive to better your bird's life and help ensure the maintenance of a long lasting, healthy relationship between you and your pet.



### ***How big should my bird's cage be?***

As a general rule, bigger is better. In the wild, a bird would spend much of the day flying from tree to tree in search of food and at play. In captivity, we must allow for some sort of exercise, self-expression and entertainment. The cage must be large enough for the bird to move easily from perch to perch and be able to flap its wings without striking anything. There are numerous designs to suit all tastes. Generally a rectangular metal cage, preferably longer than it is tall, is the best. Tall, narrow cages prove to be rather impractical, as most birds do NOT fly straight up and down. Round cages create a situation in which every perch across its width is in some way directly over the perch below it. This leads to constant soiling with feces of all lower perches.

Wood, wicker or bamboo cages may be attractive or decorative but are impossible to clean and disinfect effectively due to their porous nature. Some birds may easily chew these cages apart.

An all metal cage is the most practical to maintain. The bars on the cage must be close enough together to prevent the bird from getting its head through the bars.

### ***What sort of perches should I have?***

A bird spends all of its time standing on a perch so careful consideration must be given to this aspect of your pet's environment. Tree branches or wood naturally make the best perches (heating branches in an oven at 300 F for 30 minutes will kill any organisms and bugs, please be mindful of the fire hazard). Providing non-toxic, washed, fresh branches such as apple, elm, ash, maple or willow will be both functional and attractive in the cage. Natural branches should be selected so that a variety of diameters are available to perch on. This affords various textures, choice of grip and good exercise for the feet. REMEMBER, a bird should be able to wrap its foot around a perch to grasp it, NOT just stand on it. Some birds on perches too big will fall or slip if they cannot grasp the perch. Wood perches seem to help wear the nails down better than other materials. Branches provide an entertainment value for those birds that like to chew. Wood is more difficult to disinfect due to its porous nature but can be washed and replaced often.

Sandpaper perch covers do little to wear the nails down and can lead to serious foot irritation, sores or deep infections. No tree in the wild has sandpaper covered branches.

Plastic perches are easy to clean and disinfect but may prove slippery for gripping and seem to only be available in one size.

Natural hemp or cotton rope seems to provide a variety of textures but must be monitored carefully so the fine fibers do not become entangled around the bird's toes. This is a much more serious problem with synthetic fiber rope and nesting materials, which should never be used.

Concrete perches provide an excellent texture for wearing the beak and the nails. Care must be taken that this is not the only perch in the cage. Do not place these perches in places the bird stands most of the day. Excessive beak wearing has been observed. Instead, place these perches at the food dishes. This is an area the bird will go to eat, wipe the beak and leave thus providing some beak and nail wear.



### ***What sort of food and water dishes should I provide?***

Dishes are best made from sturdy non-toxic materials that are easy to clean and disinfect every day. They should not be on the bottom of the cage since this is the bird's "toilet". Position the dishes so that they are easily accessible and will not accidentally be soiled with feces from overhead perching sites. The dishes should not be too deep or food will be wasted.

### ***What about toys for my bird?***

Being cooped up in a cage all day can be a very boring, frustrating experience. Whether you are home with the bird or not, a pet must have some form of entertainment. They love to play and explore. Toys may include ladders, rope, swings, mirrors, bells, hanging toys, pieces of wood to chew on or rawhide chew toys. Birds are inquisitive by nature. There are numerous "puzzle toys", foraging and enrichment toys on the market that will entertain some of these birds for hours. These particular toys challenge a bird to figure something out such as getting a favorite food out or opening a container. The smaller birds like the finches and canaries are less likely to interact with toys but please do not ignore the possibility they may play.

Although most companies strive to provide safe toys, there are no quality controls or regulations. Great care must be taken to ensure the toys you purchase are free of potential dangers. Be mindful of snaps, clasps, bell clappers, open chain links, removable parts, easily broken parts, glass or extraneous loose fibers that may be chewed, swallowed or that the bird could become entangled in. Rubber toys that are easily chewed apart can be very dangerous and must be avoided.

Mirrors for small birds must have a covered back or frame so that the bird will not be exposed to the potentially toxic reflective backing. Polished stainless steel mirrors may be more appropriate especially for larger birds.

Some birds like to hide in boxes or paper bags. Experiment with toys and find out what your bird enjoys the most. You may wish to have an assortment of toys that can be rotated on a daily or weekly basis to keep the bird from getting bored. Some birds may appear frightened of new items in their environment. These toys should be introduced slowly to allow the bird to become accustomed to their presence over time.

***Should I clean my bird's toys?***

Occasionally toys get dusty or soiled. Some birds develop such affection towards a toy that they may even regurgitate or masturbate on the toy in a display of courtship or sexual offering. All toys should be periodically washed and disinfected. Remember to rinse them well with fresh water.

***Do you have any recommendations for cage sizes?***

The following is a general guideline for *minimum* suggested cage sizes. Sizes will vary depending on the size of the bird. Remember, bigger is better!

Finch, Canary, Budgie

1 ft x 1 ft x 2 ft           (30 cm x 30 cm x 60 cm)

Cockatiel, Lovebird

2 ft x 2 ft x 3 ft           (60 cm x 60 cm x 90 cm)

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*This client information sheet is based on material written by Rick Axelson, DVM & Shawn Messonnier, DVM  
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