Many times pet sitters are more attuned to cats and dogs than birds and might be a little leary about caring for a bird. Knowing about bird care can serve to enhance your business and the quality of service you can provide to your clients.

This article seeks to help the pet sitter feel more comfortable and confident in caring for pet birds. Birds have their own special needs and it is important that you work hard to be as well-versed in understanding bird care and behavior as you can and that you talk to the client about all aspects of their pet bird's routine. This is especially true if you are not familiar with the type of bird your client has in their family.

The following are some tips that may serve you well as you prepare to care for a pet bird. This info is by no means all-inclusive so I encourage you to do further reading.

**General Bird things you should know:**

- They are smarter than you think – some are as smart as toddlers!
- Most birds like to chew and inspect things.
- Most need stimulation and socializing, and lots of love. Many birds, once you know them, will bend their heads down so you can scratch the top of their heads.
- Even if a bird has his/her wings clipped they can still fly short distances.
- They can develop behavior problems if their needs are not met. Problems such as screeching, destruction of material things, feather picking, and illness can arise in a stressed bird.
- Most birds usually bond with one, or just a few people, within a family and so a pet sitter, who sees them once in a while, may not always be a welcomed face. As a result the feisty side of a bird can arise and they may do their best to act like little toughies and try and nip you when you put your hand into the cage. This can be intimidating to some people, even pet sitters. So if you are not a “bird person” by nature and are asked to care for a bird do your homework and ask the owner lots of questions so you can feel comfortable caring for their little friend. The bites of smaller birds may sting, but they are in no way harmful. Larger birds however, can really do some damage, so move with care around your new feathered friends so they can learn to trust that your hand is a nice, friendly hand, and not one of a predator. If you react to a bird bite by pulling away or by saying “ouch”, this only encourages them to think this is sport and they will try and get a reaction out of you every time. They will think they have won and will try it again and again. If you ignore the bite and deal with it for the second or two it happens, the bird will usually quickly distinguish the behavior.
- They can be quite sensitive to room temperatures.
- They like routine so check with their humans about what time they like to eat, rise, and go to bed at night.
- Some birds have been known to become depressed when their humans leave as exhibited by a lessened activity level or they will not eat. This can happen when they are super – bonded with their owners. Sometimes you can encourage a bird to eat if you stand near their cage and eat your own snack. Hence, “the flock” is eating, so they will eat.
• They need yearly well-visits to an Avian vet.
• Birds have tiny ears and in the wild can hear from quite a distance away so there is no need to speak loudly around them. Speak softly and reassuringly to them.
• Some birds can be trained to talk, sing, do tricks, and mimic sounds like the smoke alarm or phone.
• A female bird without a mate can lay unfertile eggs and that can be an interesting experience. If you are caring for a female that lays eggs it is important that you ask the owner questions about the birds typical behavior just prior to and after egg laying so you can best take care of her needs and also so that you can identify if there is a problem with the bird becoming egg bound or ill.
• If you have a bird with a mate that tends to lay eggs and HATCH them, it is vitally important that you get the scoop from the humans about all aspects of care relating to that.
• It is also important to ask the human if the bird’s wings are clipped or not should he/she get out of the cage. If the owner gives specific instructions to let the bird out of the cage while you are visiting, think twice. It is actually better if the bird remains in its cage while you are pet sitting. This way you will avoid a lost or injured bird, or a bird that will simply refuse to get back in the cage and then you'll be there a lot longer than planned trying to outwit your feathery charge back into the cage. And never, ever, let the bird out if other pets are in the home, regardless of what the human instructs you to do. We all know that sometimes pets act differently when their owners are gone and take no chances in this regard. Even a bird with clipped wings can still fly short distances – and often quickly, or hide under things like sofas or in the back of closets, and then you'll be at the house a lot longer than planned and may will not have to deal with a lost or injured bird.
• Some people think birds just need one pet visit a day. In my experience and estimation, birds need at least two pet visits a day. Their cages need to be covered/uncovered, they need their water and food supply checked, and as well as to make sure the house temp is appropriate for them. Because most birds are social they can easily get stressed out when their humans are gone and stress can create all sorts of health and behavior issues if they get lonely, bored, or anxious. It is my recommendation that you insist that pet birds receive two visits a day, in the morning and at supper time, and if the owner is not willing to be educated a bit more on proper bird care, you might want to decline accepting them as clients. Those are strong words, but if someone really has their pet's best interest at heart, they will heed your advice.
• Some birds, especially cockatiels, can have “night terrors”. These occur for many reasons but the result is the bird falling off the perch and thrashing around in the middle of the night. As the pet sitter, you will probably not be there to witness this, but may see the aftermath in the morning of things messed up in the cage. Birds can injure themselves during night terrors as well and results can be broken wings and chipped beaks. It is a good idea to take a good observational look at the bird each time you visit to make sure all looks well on his/her little feathery bodies.
• Birds molt a few times a year. Molting is when they drop, or shed, feathers and grow new ones. You will see new feathers coming in with a waxy base and they will typically groom themselves more frequently while new ones are growing in. Birds typically preen each feather every single day, and more so while molting. Sometimes during molting a bird might nap a little more and be more wanting of head scratches from you. But molting is a normal process and is nothing to be concerned about, unless it is excessive. Occasionally a bird may have a blood feather, a newer feather that has blood at its base, close to the skin. If a blood feather breaks it is important to stop the bleeding right away. Again, birds are feisty, but fragile. If you feel you can't handle a broken blood feather properly and efficiently, call the vet right away.

Birds need the following:

• As big of a cage as possible – a cage that is horizontal, not vertical. Birds fly side to side more than up and down. Birds need room to open their wings fully and move comfortably. Remember: They are birds and birds by nature like to be free and fly far. So give them the biggest cage possible so they can get all the exercise they need.
• Keep them out of drafts from windows, fans, air conditioners, etc…. Watch them carefully to see if they are shivering. Do not place them directly in front of an open window as temps can change a lot. Keep their cage out of direct sun so they do not get over heated. In the warm weather they should always have access to a shady spot in their cage.
• If the heat goes off in the winter you will need to keep the bird warm until the situation is rectified. Put blankets under and over the cage – leaving enough opening for air and light to get in. Check on the bird to make sure he/she is dealing with this okay. A bird can generally make it in anything down to about 60 degrees if needed, but remember most birds are originally from tropical atmospheres, and
genetically made for warmer temps. You may have to move the bird to a warmer place if the heat will be off for an extended period of time. Remember to warm up your car, cover the cage / carrier and get him/her to a warmer place as smoothly as possible to reduce the bird's stress. Don't forget to seat buckle the carrier into your car seat so that it doesn't slide or topple when the car is moving.

- Birds need 12 hours of darkness and quiet per night to sleep. Cages should be covered at this time. Without proper sleep birds can get sick and develop behavior problems. However, since cockatiels tend to have occasional night terrors, it is recommended that a nightlight be left on so these birds can see his/her surroundings in the middle of the night.
- Loud noises and fast movements scare birds. Move slowly in and around their cages and speak reassuringly to them. They are “flock oriented” by nature so the louder the house is the louder birds get – to keep up with the rest of the flock. They may miss their flock (humans) so it is a good idea to put a TV/radio on softly during the day to give them a sense of not being alone. Plus some birds really get into TV and it can be entertaining for them.
- If there is more than one bird in the cage, the chances are pretty good that they will bond with each other, more than with people, but they can still be trained to be friendly to humans if enough time and love are given to them.

Cages should be equipped with:

- A few different types of perches for birds to have the healthiest foot care. (Rope, Manzanita branches, wood, etc....)
- Appropriate food choices and water feeding cups that are comfortable to eat out of.
- Bird toys! – interchanged occasionally for variety. There are tons of bird toys out there in the marketplace.
- Cages should be cleaned once a day. Any dirt, feces, etc...left inside can cause illness. This is one area where a client may say that it is okay to clean the cage every “couple of days” and this is a good opportunity for you to educate the person about the need for a cage to be cleaned daily.
- Treats appropriate to the type of bird.
- A clip to attach fresh fruits and veggies to the side of the cage.

NUTRTITION:

- Fresh water needs to be provided on a daily basis. Sometimes twice a day if it has gotten dirty with droppings, or if the bird decides to take a bath in the drinking water. Water should be room temperature. As a treat, birds can be occasionally given a little apple or orange juice.
- Some birds have the best nutrition if given special pellets. There are many kinds of pet birds and different nutritional needs so it is important to follow the human’s instructions faithfully when feeding the bird. If however, you notice the bird is being given something that they shouldn't eat, you should again discuss this with the client. Fresh fruits/veggies should be washed and dabbed dry with paper towels before serving. Fresh foods should be taken out of cage after at the next pet visit so they don’t spoil or gather little flies.
- Things that are not good (and could be dangerous) are.
  - Salty foods
  - Sweet foods
  - Chocolate and avocado can be deadly
  - Dairy products. (A tiny bit of cheese occasionally is okay for calcium content)
  - Anything really cold or really hot or anything overly processed (which isn't great for humans either!)
  - Do not use cleaning chemicals around birds. Their respiratory systems are small and delicate. An alternative is a solution of white vinegar and water.
  - Do not cook using anything with Teflon on it in the bird's presence. The gases released from it can instantly kill a bird. Teflon can also be found in other products as well.
  - Do not expose them to cigarette smoke, fragrant candles, air fresheners, hairspray, perfumes, bug sprays, etc...
  - If the bird is in a spot where he/she might be able to inhale anything from outside the home be aware of any construction work, painting, or anything in close proximity to the house that may be of danger if inhaled by the bird.
SOME SIGNS OF A SICK BIRD

- When a bird is sick it is important to contact an Avian vet right away. Birds can go downhill fast after illness sets in.
- A bird may be sick if he/she stays puffed up on the perch, head tucked into the back feathers, and doesn't respond to you. Birds sleep and nap this way, but if they do it at times when they should be awake and eating, or do not respond to you when you walk in the room, be worried.
- A bird sitting puffed up on the cage bottom is a cause for concern.
- A bird showing no interest in eating or drinking water is cause for concern.
- Be aware of what the bird's droppings look like. Different droppings – larger, smaller, not at all, watery, a different color, can signify possible illness.
- A bird hanging on the side of the cage from its beak can signify breathing difficulties as the bird is trying to get more air.
- Bald spots anywhere on the bird is called feather picking, unless the bird has been injured. Birds can pull their feathers out as a stress response to their owners being gone. If not dealt with the bird can make herself bleed and get an infection.
- Obviously, bleeding is a big concern.

I hope this information will give you more confidence in your care of pet birds. They are truly wonderfully sweet creatures and once they catch your heart you will have to keep a good look at your watch because you will want to stay with them all day!

About the author: Linda is a NAPPS certified professional pet sitter in southern New England. Her business is Precious Pets. Linda is currently on the NAPPS board of directors and is a featured monthly guest on WBLQ's "Heidi's Pet Show" out of Westerly RI. This article is written in memory of one of her own feathery babies, Puffy the Cockatiel.