

Healthy Birds Need More Than Just Seeds

If it's true you are what you eat, then many pet birds would look like turtles, on account of all the shells they have to crack to get at the kernels of the seeds we insist on giving them.

And that's too bad, because seeds alone are not enough to keep a bird healthy. If your pet bird's diet consists solely of seeds, chances are good that if he isn't sick now, he will be in time.

The idea that birds should be fed all-seed diets likely has its basis in two facts. First, birds are uniquely adapted to eat seeds and nuts. They are able to effortlessly crack even the hardest shells and extract the tender insides. Second, birds love seeds.

If birds love seeds and are engineered to eat them, doesn't it follow that they should be eating seeds? You might think so, but that's just not the case. You have to remember that the nutritional needs of birds in the wild may well be quite different from those of our own pet birds, living in luxury in our homes. One thing the experts can say for certain about all-seed diets is that they will make most birds sick over time, denying them the nutrients they need for long-term survival and weakening them to the point where other diseases find it easy to take hold. The fact that they can survive at all on such diets is testament to the toughness of birds.

You'd think birds would know what's good for them, wouldn't you? After all, most pet birds are very intelligent. So are you, but I bet that hasn't stopped you from eating things you know aren't good for you just because they taste good. In the case of birds, seeds are the equivalent of a greasy burger. Junk food. And too many pet birds (and people) are junk-food junkies.

The trend in recent years has been toward pelleted diets, and pet birds are healthier than ever before as a result. Pelleted diets are readily available from many reputable manufacturers and can be purchased from any good pet store or from many veterinarians who work with birds.

Pelleted food is a blend of grains, seeds, vegetables, fruits and various protein sources. Manufacturers mix the ingredients and then either bake and crumble them or extrude them, ending up with pellets of a proper size for any given species (large pellets for large birds, small pellets for small birds).

This process produces a food that has a definite and huge overall advantage to the "smorgasbord" way of feeding -- the bird cannot pick out his favorite foods and ignore the rest. Pellets also are convenient for bird owners. These commercially prepared diets are easy to buy, relatively inexpensive (definitely so when you consider the veterinary trips they prevent), and store nicely in a cool, dry place.

Pelleted foods should be the foundation of your bird's diet, but they're not enough. Your bird also needs a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, along with other "people foods" such as pasta, eggs, breads, rice and unsalted nuts in their shells. Skip the guacamole, though, because avocados can be a deadly treat for birds. Excessively fatty foods should be avoided, too. Most pet birds are perch potatoes, prone to obesity.

In addition to rounding out a commercial diet, fruits, nuts and other people food gives your bird something to keep him occupied and entertained. To that end, leave fresh food as "au naturel" as possible. Clean it, of course, but make your bird work some to eat it. Just be sure pellets and fresh water are available at all times.

Do you really need to deny your bird a treat as appreciated as seeds? The phrase "all things in moderation" definitely applies when it comes to seeds. Given in small amounts, seeds are a wonderful way to help teach your bird tricks or reward him for good behavior. But they should be a treat, not a staple, to ensure proper nutrition for your bird.