**What Should I Feed My Bird?**

As a general rule, any nutritious food items (plant-based - fruits, vegetables, nuts, grains) that you and your family eat, can and should be provided to your bird. (There are some exceptions - please visit this webpage to find out what foods are toxic to birds.)

**Base Diet:** Start with a QUALITY dry mix. The dry mixes that are typically available at pet stores contain cheap fillers and harmful additives. It is important to provide a quality, organic and natural dry mix (in addition to foods listed on this page)

"Organic" or at least "all-natural" dry bird mixes are preferred. "Fortified diets" often contain inferior, artificial additives which may be harmful. If organic / all-natural mixes aren't available, it is best to buy unfortified mixes and add a good quality bird supplement instead.

- **Dr. Harvey's Bird Food Mixes** or **Lafeber** are convenient options that lack many of the harmful additives that are commonly found in commercial mixes and have a great variety of quality ingredients (including dried fruits, veggies, herbs / greens and even superfoods, such as bee pollen!) - in short: myriad nourishing ingredients that are not found in other commercially available bird mixes. **However, our biggest grievance with their products is that they use sulphurated dried produce (a process which also requires chemicals),** but it is very difficult to find mixes with unsulphurated fruits and veggies. You could just buy the seeds, nuts and grain mix and buy human-grade unsulphurated dried produce / greens as well as bee pollen and mix them in. Even organic trail mixes (WITHOUT CHOCOLATE!) work great. With a little creativity you can put a mix together that offers superior nutrition without the chemicals typically found in commercial brands.

- **Harrisons** is another dry mix that vets commonly recommend; however, it is a pelleted food and not all birds will easily accept it. It usually can only be purchased at vet offices.

Fruits, vegetables (including leafy greens), **sprouted seeds** should account for approximately 20 - 25% of your bird's diet. Please note that pale vegetables, including celery or iceberg salad, offer very little nutritional value.
Organically grown fruit and vegetables can be given to your pets with its skin on; otherwise remove the skin or wash very thoroughly to remove pesticides, insecticides and other toxins, and cut into manageable pieces depending on the size of your bird.

- **Fresh is always best**, but fresh vegetables and fruits are not always readily accepted or feasible.

- **Mashed fruits and veggies**: Organic baby food that consists of mashed fruits and vegetables (i.e. Gerbers) is a convenient food item when there is no time for preparing produce for your pets.

- **Dry Fruits / Veggies**: When fresh fruits and vegetables are not available, dehydrated fruits and vegetables work wonderfully. Many birds love their crunchiness, or they toss them into their water dish (creating a "soup" of some sorts) and then eat them once they are rehydrated. Be prepared to change the water more often throughout the day. Dried fruits and vegetables have the advantage that they don't go off. You could literally leave them in their cages for days (unless they get wet, of course). This surely comes in handy when traveling. Dried fruits and veggies also help convert "seed junkies" to a healthier diet. When you are at home, you can moisten the dried fruits and veggies with warm water to rehydrate them. Birds tend to LOVE warm fruits and veggies, maybe because it gives them flashbacks to the times when they were chicks and were fed warm regurgitated food by their bird parents.
  - It is important to keep in mind that some companies add artificial coloring to their dried fruits and veggies to make them visually appealing, but may be detrimental to your pet's health. Only purchase naturally dried fruits without any sulfur dioxide, as this preservative is known to increase hyperactivity, aggressiveness, feather shredding or picking due to allergies.

- There aren't many fruits and vegetables that will hurt our birds; but one of the most well-known is the **avocado, which is highly toxic to birds** in any shape and form (including guacamole).

- **Birds - even "seed addicts" that don't like produce - usually readily accept sprouted or germinated seeds.**
  - The sprouting process changes and enhances the nutritional quality and value of seeds and grains. Sprouted seeds are lower in fat, as the process of sprouting utilizes the fat in the seed to start the growing process - thus reducing the fat stored in the seeds. **They help balance your bird's diet** by adding a nutritious supply of high in vegetable proteins, vitamins, minerals, enzymes, and chlorophyll. Soaked and germinated "oil" seeds (such as niger and rape seeds) are rich in protein and carbohydrates. "Starch" seeds (i.e., canary seed and millets) are rich in carbohydrates, but are ower in protein. **Sprouted or Germinated Seeds are invaluable food items at all times; however, they are particularly important for breeding or molting birds.** They also serve as great rearing and weaning feed, as the softened shells are easier to break open chicks, and feeding on them gets them accustomed to the texture of seeds.
• **Vitamin A deficiency** is common in birds whose main diet consists of seeds. Vitamin A promotes appetite, digestion, and also increases resistance to infection and to some parasites.

The most obvious sign of a vitamin A deficiency is a feather stain above the cere. The staining of the feathers above the nostrils reflects a discharge from the nostrils. Subtle differences may be seen as far as the color intensity of the cere and feathers is concerned - and the overall condition of the plumage. A bird deficient in this vitamin may have pale, rough-looking feathers that lack luster. The cere may look rough instead of smooth, and you may see an accumulation of a yellow dry scale on the sides of the beak.

Vitamin A occurs naturally in dark leafy greens and orange-colored produce, such as apricots, cantaloupes, carrots, red peppers, pumpkins and sweet potatoes. To resolve Vitamin A deficiency, try adding foods like sweet potatoes (either cooked or steamed until soft), mashed up with other fruits will be both loved by your pet bird, as much as it is good for her or him. Many birds also enjoy fresh carrot juice - or try offering shredded carrots. Natural sources are preferable over synthetically produced nutrients, which may not be absorbable and could easily be overdosed).

• **Medicinal Herbs offer a convenient and ever so nutritious addition to a bird's diet.**

Many of us don't grow herbs in our garden; but nowadays **dried herbs** present a viable option. I offer my bird's dried herbs and dried fruits/veggies mixed in with their seeds, and also in a separate dish. Heavy Metal Poisoning poses a real risk to pet birds, specifically because of their strong urge to chew. But even we are exposed to heavy metals on a daily basis. There are some tests kits available if you suspecting heavy metal poisoning. But even for prevention purposes, I regularly make (and eat) something that has been termed as the "**Poor Man's Chelation Therapy**" -- which is basically a very tasty pesto sauce - the .most important ingredient of which is the medicinal herb cilantro

• **Healthy foods that are often tossed away** ... Bird owners don't realize that their birds would enjoy the fresh seeds in our fruits and vegetables, such as:
  - **Fruit Seeds:**
    - Pomegranates (a HUGE favorite of many parrots that is very healthy too boot -- but it's VERY messy! - best be eaten in an outside enclosure or in an area that is easy to clean)
    - Figs
    - Grapes
    - Guavas
    - Melons, such as cantaloupe, watermelon, Papaya
  - **Vegetable Seeds**:
    - Bell peppers (green, red, yellow, orange)
    - Cucumbers
    - English peas (in the shell)
    - Hot peppers (green, red)
    - Okra (long pods of fat, round, slippery white seeds)
    - Pole beans
    - Pumpkins (fresh seeds or dried Pepitas)
    - Squash (the larger yellow Crookneck squash contain large, moist seeds)

**Avoid:**

**Milk Products:** Most birds lack the enzyme lactase to break down lactose. It is
recommended, in most cases, not to feed milk products to birds. This being said some birds do not suffer from lactose tolerance. I have fed small pieces of cheese to my parrots without problems. If milk products are fed, please look out for symptoms of indigestion and diarrhea.

**Grain Products**, such as cereal, bread and, in fact, most other grain products, are often fortified with iron. Birds can't tolerate iron supplementation and they are susceptible to iron overload disease - an untreatable and deadly condition.

**Fortified Bird Food**: Some researchers voiced their concern that "fortified bird seeds / pellets" are also to blame for the increased occurrence of Iron Storage / Overload Disease.

**Carbohydrates**: The best sources of carbohydrate content in the diet of seed-eating birds are cereal grains such as: canary seeds, millets, wheat and oats. Softbills, lories and similar feeders require fruit. It is not recommended to feed other carbohydrate foods to your parrots.

**Calcium**: Incorporate plenty of calcium-rich foods into your bird's diet.

- Even though most dark leafy greens are rich in calcium, broccoli, rapini, turnip greens, collard greens and mustard greens are better sources than spinach, chard and beet greens because of the high oxalic acid content that blocks absorption of the calcium in spinach, chard, and beet greens.

- **Calcium-rich vegetable / fruits and greens are**: bok choy, kale, parsley, mustard greens, cabbage, broccoli, carrots, dandelion greens, apricots, figs, endive, okra, garbanzo beans (chickpeas), pinto beans and kidney beans. Please note that large raw beans - such as Anasazi, Black, Fava, Kidney, Lima, Navy, Pinto, and Soy - can cause toxicities when fed raw, causing digestive upsets for people and potentially for birds. Some experts recommend that large beans should be cooked to make them safe and digestible. Others counter that soaking beans for 24 hours starts the germinating process and that soaking makes the beans safe and digestible. For those who do not want to take any risks, it's best to cook large beans thoroughly before feeding to your birds. These beans are not recommended for general sprouting purposes. Certain uncooked dried beans contain enzyme inhibitors, are indigestible, and may cause visceral gout in birds. These enzyme inhibitors may prevent or decrease the utilization in the body of substances, such as trypsin and chymotrypsin, to produce nutritional deficiencies. Beans that can interfere with proteolytic enzymes are lima, kidney and soybeans. Cooking these beans for at least 2 hours destroys these enzyme inhibitors. Other dried beans do not appear to contain these enzyme inhibitors or, if present, are in low concentrations. To be on the safe side, it's best to cook ALL varieties of beans.

- **Other food sources of calcium**: Baked eggshells, crushed and sprinkled over the food; oatmeal, almonds, walnuts, hazelnuts, sesame seeds, and tahini - "nut butter" made of sesame seeds.

- **Supplements**: If you incorporate foods high in calcium (as listed above), your pet probably won't need any supplements, except if it is an egg-laying female. However, if
your pet refuses to eat calcium-rich foods, supplementation may be necessary.

- Cuttlebone is often provided to birds as a calcium supplement and some birds will eagerly eat it, while others ignore it. If your bird is not eating from the cuttlebone, there are a couple of ways to handle it.

- **NOTE:** Care must be taken with vitamin supplements not to provide too much calcium. It has been shown that calcium levels in the diet of over 1% decrease the utilization of proteins, fats, vitamins, phosphorus, magnesium, iron, iodine, zinc and manganese. At a level of 2.5% in the diet nephrosis, hypercalcemia, hypophosphotemia, visceral and renal gout, and decreased food intake have been observed.

- You can scrape off shavings every day with a knife and mix those shavings in with your bird's soft food. Another method is to smash cuttlebone up. One easy way is to place the cuttlebone into a Ziploc bag, close it up and wrap it in a dish towel (or other strong cloth). Take a sledge hammer and start smashing it until it is in pieces. Then you can pulverize it with your mortar and pestle. Put it through a sieve to get out any sharp pieces and put it into a salt shaker for convenient daily use.

- Relevant Article: [Natural Calcium for Birds - Sources and Absorbability](#)

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### Picky Companion Bird?

If your parrot doesn't show much interest in his vegetables / fruits, you can try taking his or her dry food away first thing in the morning and offer nothing but fruits / veggies in the morning. Secondly, parrots are "social eaters." My parrots, for example, show special interest in food when they see us eating. If they can, they will come right up to our plates and pick at our food, which I allow them to do provided the food is good for them. Mostly it is, as we generally eat a healthy diet ourselves.

- One little trick that works well is to place a shallow dish (saucer maybe) that fights snugly on top of a bird dish (preferably inside) right over the existing seeds. Your bird is used to eating from this food dish and is more likely to give new food items a try. If you don't have a dish, replace the current dish with one filled with healthy foods for a few hours in the morning or in the evening. Whenever your parrot is most likely to be hungry and eat

### Special Dietary Needs for Molting Birds:

Since molting can be stressful and uncomfortable, some birds experience a decrease in appetite. However, an increase in metabolism to accommodate the production of several thousand new feathers can cause an increase in appetite. Whether they lose their appetite or eat more during the molt probably depends on their comfort level. Molting birds benefit from more quality protein in the diet which can be provided in the form of well done eggs, well cooked meats and seafood, as well as cooked beans and rice, which together form a complete protein. Nuts provide additional protein and the good fats needed to create strong and lustrous feathers. This is a good time to grind and sprinkle flax seeds over the birds'
food. Hemp seeds also provide beneficial oils and the essential fatty acids (EFAs) necessary to produce quality feathers. (*Hemp Seeds are often referred to as "super-seeds" as they offer a complete amino acid profile, have an ideal balance of omega 3 and 6 fatty acids, and provide an impressive amount of trace minerals - they also have the highest concentration of protein in the plant kingdom.)

Probiotics:

- **Very important for molting, stressed or sickly birds, chicks or elderly pets, as well as those who have undergone antibiotic treatments.** Antibiotics destroy "friendly" bacteria in the gut, allowing harmful pathogens to grow unchecked. Probiotics suppress the growth of potentially harmful organisms and boost the immune system. Acidophilus also helps to restore the microbial balance within the digestive tract. The probiotic strains acidophilus and bifidum release anti-fungal enzymes and alkalinize the body, so pathogens, such as candida (a big problem with chicks and stressed birds), can't flourish.
  - **Yogurt not a good alternative:** The live cultures found in yogurt are beneficial to the humans; however, these strains are different from those found in the gut and intestines of birds and, therefore, cannot provide the clinical therapeutic gut recolonizing strength needed. Opinions differ, but some experts recommend against feeding yogurt to birds as the colonies may indeed be harmful to them.

Avoid pellets as much as possible: (Other than, at best, Harrison’s which vets commonly recommend and sell - and even then pellets should only be part of a healthy diet, not an exclusive diet).

Most pellets contain chemicals such as artificial coloring / flavoring / preservatives, etc. Parrots may be able to tolerate these for a year or two, but once these chemicals build up in the "system" to a certain degree, symptoms such as feather plucking, aggression and, in some species, toe tapping and wing flipping, aggression may appear.

Pellets may cause kidney problems, particularly in birds that don't drink much. Also, there is enough anecdotal and circumstantial evidence that pellets may cause major health problems for mutations, the reason of which is not quite known.

*Please note:* If your bird's diet does include pellets, please be aware of the fact that overly feeding citrus fruits (including oranges) to your birds can lead to "Iron Overload Disease."

The Dangers Associated with Grit in a Parrot's Diet: Grit is an important aid in helping certain birds, such as finches, canaries and other passerines, digest food - but this does NOT apply to parrots. Parrots have a smaller exit opening from the stomach into the intestines, so grit remains trapped in the stomach causing internal blockage. The birds may show neurological symptoms, weight loss, and eventually death.
Foraging enhances your birds’ environment

Species-specific Diets:

Sprouting For Health: Sprouts - A Healthy and Simple Way to Provide Fresh Green Food

- Species-specific Nutrition: African Greys (African Parrots) Diets ... Amazon Food ... Budgies / Parakeets ... Cockatiels / Lovebirds ... Cockatoos ... Conure Diet ... Eclectuses ... Finches / Canaries ... Macaw and Large Parrot Diets ... Softbill / Lory Food.
  - Species Nutritional Requirements ... Dietary Requirements of Commonly Kept Psittacines and Converting Seed Junkies
- Dietary Sensitivities: Please also refer to food items that may cause allergies in birds (such as dry and itching skin).
- Relevant Web Resources: Toxic Foods (includes fruits, veggies and other items) ... Nutritional Diseases

Converting Seed Junkies

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Nutritional Disorders and Holistic Treatment:

Most digestive problems can be traced to the quality of food we serve. In the wild, animals eat raw food that is abundant with the digestive enzymes. Not only is the most commercial pet food heavily processed, which eliminates most of the natural enzymes, but many brands also contain artificial colors, preservatives and other chemicals. These ingredients have a negative effect on the bacteria in our animals’ digestive tracts. Like us, our pets’ intestines contain “friendly” and “unfriendly” bacteria. Ideally, the friendly bacteria should outnumber the unfriendly by a healthy margin, but typically, “bad” bacteria have taken over. This overabundance of bad bacteria leads to digestive disorders or organ failure. Consider switching your brand of pet food to one that is all-natural, with no added sugar or preservatives. Raw vegetables are a wise choice. Carrots and other veggies are chock full of natural enzymes and can really aid digestion.

Nutrition is an important factor as deficiencies will lead to serious health problems, including impaired immune system, weak bones, cardiovascular problems, even feather picking.

If your birds have health problems of ANY kind - look at the nutrition! Research done by Laurie Hess, a vet at The Animal Medical Centre in New York, came up with the following figure for major nutrient deficiencies in USA pet birds: Calcium 98% ... Vit D 97% ... Vit A 67% ... Vit E 27%
Following are 1-800 numbers of bird food companies.

Some will send samples.

1-800-841-6800 - Ziegler Brothers Inc.
1-800-345-4767 - ZuPreen
1-800-346-0269 - Harrisons (good quality food)
1-800-353-2473 - Diamond Avian Dist. 1-800-942-3438 - Dr. Dee's
1-800-225-2700 - Hagen
1-800-529-8331 - Kaytee
1-800-842-6445 - Lafeber
1-800-332-5623 - L/M Animal Farm
1-800-356-5020 - Pretty Bird Int'l
1-800-326-1726 - Roudybush Feed
1-800-543-3308 - FeedL'Avian
1-800-327-7974 - Scenic

Species Research by Sibylle Johnson

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