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AVIAN NUTRITION

by J. BeauSoleil

Ask a non-bird person to describe a parrot's diet and they will invariably say 'seeds,' as this is what is commonly seen lining pet store shelves and offered in bird dishes. Feeding seed and nuts to pet store birds is done mainly for an aesthetic and tidy appearance to the viewing public, and is easily fed, which reduces amount of work by staff. The "uninformed" buyer mistakenly believes this is the standard diet of pet parrots, and is often sent on their way with new bird, cage, toys, bottle of vitamins, and a variety of seeds, with very few (if any) other instructions. Although a parrot can be sustained for a time on this marginal seed diet, eventually deficiencies will occur along with health problems and shortened lifespan.

Early studies found parrots which fared best in health and longevity were those that ate a variety of foods, often dining with their owners at mealtimes. Their plumage was much better, activity level higher, with fewer health problems than their seed-eating cousins.

VITAMIN DEFICIENCIES

Vitamin A is the most common deficiency seen in pet parrots, particularly those on seed-based, marginal diets. Vitamin A is necessary to boost the immune system and protect against bacterial infections. Birds deficient in Vitamin A do not have the protective mucous lining their complex sinus, respiratory, reproductive and digestive system, which allows harmful bacteria to penetrate the tissues causing secondary infections. An immune-suppressed, deficient bird does not have the ability to fight off these invasive pathogens.

Since the upper respiratory system and sinus cavity are most frequently affected, white plaques can often be seen on roof of mouth or base of tongue. These plaques can form abscesses, which affect the bird's ability to breathe and swallow and may advance to other organs of the body if left untreated, and ultimately cause death.

Symptoms of bacterial infections include sneezing, labored breathing with wheezing sound, nasal discharge and crustiness, swelling around cere and eyes, slimy mouth, lethargy, poor appetite, diarrhea, weight drop, usually accompanied with foul smelling breath, sometimes described as a pungent garlic smell. There are many gram negative (occasional positive) bacterial infections, so the only reliable way to determine which kind of bacterium are present and what antibiotics will effectively treat the infection, is to have a culture and sensitivity (Cand S) test done. The choanae (throat) and cloaca (vent) are swabbed with Q-tips, which are sent to the lab where a culture is grown in medium to determine which bacterium are present. Once it is determined what type of pathogens are present, sensitivity tests are run to find out which antibiotics will effectively kill the organisms. Cultures and sensitivity tests are usually run in conjunction with a CBC (complete blood count) to get a baseline for overall infection.

VITAMIN ADDITIVES

Vitamins come in powder and liquid form. Powdered vitamins are sometimes added to seed but are of little value since the powder falls to the bottom of the bowl, uneaten. Also the few vitamins which may adhere to the seeds are not ingested since parrots shell (husk) their seeds, eating only the inner portions.

Water-soluble vitamins create a medium for bacterial growth if drinking water is not frequently changed throughout the day. Also a bird will often refuse to drink water containing additives, so even though available, the vitamins aren't doing any good if not consumed. Vitamins cannot be accurately administered unless mixed in with moist foods, with careful attention to exact amounts so as to not over- or under-supplement in conjunction with other foods available in the diet. Vitamins are not needed and should not be given if majority of diet consists of highly fortified bird pellets.

FOODS HIGH IN VITAMIN A

Fresh veggies need to be included as portion of overall daily diet, so choose those which are high in Vitamin A such as dark leafy greens such as broccoli, spinach (limited amounts), kale, dandelion greens (untreated); as well as the orange carotene veggies such as carrots and yams. Other food sources high in Vitamin A are fresh or dried chili peppers and egg yolk.

Fruits are highly favored by birds and may be eaten to the exclusion of all other foods and can dilute nutrients they need. They should be limited to occasional treats of papaya, mango and cantaloupe (all of which are high in Vitamin A). As far as I know, there is no nutritional requirement for other types of fruits, including citrus. Sometimes cod liver oil is mixed to seed for added Vitamin A but can quickly turn rancid and kill the bird, so is not recommended.

FOODS THAT ARE NO-NOS

Pet birds can eat most foods that we ourselves enjoy. However there are some, because of toxic properties or enzymes that cannot be fed to birds. First on the list and known killers are chocolate and avocado. Chocolate contains active ingredients of theophylline and caffeine and can cause hyperactivity, vomiting, diarrhea, seizures, and cardiac arrest (death) even if given in small amounts.

Avocado is said to contain enzymes which are not tolerated by birds' digestive systems. Some claim the outer portion of the avocado meat is okay, but the portion closest to the seed is deadly to birds. Not knowing where this fine line is drawn, it's best to NOT take any risks.

Also because of intolerance of enzymes and acids, raw pineapple and raw tomatoes are not recommended. Although not known to be deadly, they may in fact upset the bird's inability to properly digest these foods. Dried pineapple is available in many parrot mixes and considered safe, as is cooked tomato used in pasta sauces.

Other foods that should be limited or eliminated from the parrot's diet are foods that contain sugar, salt, oils, or caffeine. Birds also have the inability to properly digest lactose in dairy products with exception of yogurt and hard cheese, which are good food choices in limited amounts.

Nuts, highly favored by birds, contain a lot of fat and should be limited to occasional treats. Almonds are said to contain less fat and provide added calcium to the diet and are the recommended choice.

PELLETS

With avian nutrition in its infancy during the mid-to-late 1980s, some manufacturers started combining dry food ingredients, along with vitamins and minerals, pressed into pellet form. This revolutionized food form would provide most or all of the parrot's daily dietary requirements, make it easy for owner to feed, and keep the area tidy.

However, unlike other animals which select foods by smell, parrots select foods visually. These unfamiliar-looking pellets were quickly rejected by birds that were accustomed to eating seed and nuts. Gradual conversion is time-consuming but necessary to provide the best optimum diet for the pet bird. The most effective conversion method is to remove seed first thing in morning, replace with pellets for several hours, then return seed later in the afternoon.

Nowadays there are many types of pellets available; some which contain no preservatives, are quite expensive and must be refrigerated; others are more reasonably priced and come in fruit flavor and shapes which visually appeal to the parrot. Sometimes it takes experimenting with several different types to find the one (or more) that the parrot will actually eat. All parrot pellets are scientifically formulated to meet the birds' daily requirements, so the object is to find which ones the bird will actually eat.

Many breeders nowadays start their weaning babies out on pellets so conversion is not necessary. Quite by accident several years ago I found grinding pellets in the blender into a powder form was quickly devoured by weaning cockatiel babies. When these babies were turned loose into the flights with resting breeders, the breeders too ate the ground pellets with the same enthusiasm as their chicks.

The amazons had been converted to pellets many years ago, but they would pick their favorite color (or shape) to eat and discard the rest. Or they would bite down on a pellet and most would go flying out of the cage onto the floor. Desiring to cut down on the waste, I started feeding the ground pellets to the amazons, and surprisingly they eat them much more readily than when in whole form. The ground pellets can also be added to birdie bread (cornbread), scrambled eggs, cooked dried beans or brown rice for variety and optimum nutrition.

Typically for my Amazons, I feed approximately:

25 percent pellets

25 percent orange and leafy green veggies

25 percent cooked dried beans, brown rice, scrambled egg

15 percent quality seed bread

10 percent nuts (almonds), spray millet, pinenuts or safflower

Information supplied in this article is the expressed opinion of the author, who believes it to be true after extensive research.