

BUDGERIGAR CARE

The budgerigar (*Melopsittacus undulatus*) or “budgie” is a small member of the parrot family, and one of the most popular pet birds in the world. Originally from Australia, in its native territory large flocks can commonly be seen, constantly roving over the semi-arid plains. They migrate over the continent as the weather changes, spending the summer in southern regions, and the winter in the warmer north.

The budgie is a friendly bird with great powers of mimicry, and some individuals can use more than 500 words if given plenty of encouragement whilst still young. In fact, the best time to start training a budgie is from the age of 6 weeks when they are still very receptive to learning new words and sounds. In contrast, training an adult bird over 6 months of age is often unsuccessful. Males and females can be easily distinguished by the colour of their cere (the area above the beak encircling the nostrils). In adult males this is blue, whereas in adult females it is a pink-brown colour, but this may be variable in certain colour morphs and in juvenile birds. They can live 10 -15 years in captivity.

HOUSING

- Budgies naturally live in large flocks so will be happiest in a spacious aviary set up. This should be an outdoor enclosure made of strong wire mesh (which should be zinc free), with an easily cleanable floor and plenty of room for the birds to fly around. In addition to the flying area, a sheltered sleeping area should be provided to protect from the worst of the British weather. There should also be the facility to provide supplementary heating in the winter. The enclosure should also provide shade on sunny days. Perches can be placed at varying heights around the enclosure with branches of different diameters providing the most natural set up. It is also particularly important to ensure that the enclosure is secure, both to stop the birds getting out (double security doors are the best way to prevent an escape) and to stop predators getting in.
- Alternatively, if an aviary is not an option or if you wish to tame the birds, then they may be housed indoors in a cage set up. Ideally the cage should only be used for housing the bird at night or when unsupervised. A cage set up should also be as large as possible, and must, at the very least, allow the bird to stretch its wings in all directions. Space for flight should be provided within the cage if possible. The cage should be made of non-toxic material and be zinc free. It should be placed out of direct sunlight and draughts and situated away from any item that may give off toxic fumes. Certain household products such as tobacco smoke, Teflon from non-stick frying pans, air freshener plug-ins and deodorants can lead to irritation of the bird’s respiratory tract and in some cases can be fatal.
- We recommend changing the perches that are supplied with most cages (usually wooden dowel or plastic) to natural tree branches. Fruit trees are preferred, and these should be washed thoroughly with an appropriate disinfectant before use. Natural tree branches prevent the common foot injuries that we see and prevent nail overgrowth. Sandpaper perch covers should not be used as they simply abrade the feet and do not keep the nails short. In most budgies the problem is sharp nails as opposed to long nails and at the bird’s health check-up we can burr the nails to blunt them.
- Ultraviolet lighting is important for birds, being required both for natural behaviour and calcium metabolism. Specific bird lamps are available and have recognised health benefits. A good review of bird lighting can be

found on the Arcadia website www.arcadia-bird.com/uv-lighting/. A bird lamp should be fitted above the cage to reflect light downwards as a bright light hitting the side of the bird can cause eye irritation.

- Different toys should be added and changed regularly to entertain birds. A variety of enrichment ideas can be found at www.northernparrots.com. It is, however, important to bear in mind that many pet shop toys can be easily demolished, so only sturdy toys should be used. When purchasing toys or cages always make sure that they are “zinc-free” as zinc toxicosis is increasingly seen in captive birds. Be careful as some fixings can contain zinc, yet the toy is sold as zinc free. Household items such as keys, old paintwork, and lead weights can contain heavy metals and be potential sources of toxicity. If planning to be out of the house for a long time, it is also a good idea to leave a radio program on at a low volume to give the birds some stimulation.
- Free flight is an essential requirement and birds should be given the opportunity for exercise daily. It is important to ensure that the room they are allowed to fly around is totally secure with all windows, doors and chimneys blocked off, heaters and fans turned off and any potentially poisonous house plants removed. If started young, birds can be easily trained to perch on a finger and returned to the cage.
- The cage or aviary should be cleaned out at least once a week to help prevent disease and a suitable disinfectant used, such as F10 disinfectant.

COMPANIONS

- In general, most birds are social animals and ideally should be paired up with at least one bird of the same species for lifetime companionship.

WHAT TO FEED

- In the wild, budgies will predominantly feed at ground level eating grass seeds and the occasional other “weeds”. In captivity seed mixes have traditionally been provided, but often provide an inadequate balance of nutrients. A good quality complete pellet diet is recommended, which will provide a better balance of nutrients (please see separate diet hand out for more detailed advice on this).
- For budgies we would recommend Harrison’s lifetime fine or super-fine. This should comprise 80% of the diet, with the remainder made up of vegetables (broccoli, kale, spinach, carrot, sweet potato), a small amount of sprouted seeds (see separate handout). Grass with seed heads can also be offered for enrichment. High quality seeds may be offered as treats/training rewards.
- Water should always be available both for drinking, and in a shallow dish for bathing. This should be changed daily.

ANNUAL HEALTH CHECKS

We recommend annual health checks for pet birds as medical problems are more easily treated if detected at an early stage – **you can register for automatic reminders.**

INSURANCE

We highly recommend that you take out a pet insurance policy. There are a lot of different companies and policies available and we suggest you contact a number of them for information.