

CAGES, PRISON OR SANCTUARY?

Many bird owners do not keep their bird in a cage because they believe that it is cruel to do so. Somehow they equate the bird's cage to a prison. Cages should be set up as a sanctuary for the bird, a roomy safe haven and place for rest and independent entertainment. The type and set-up, general environment around the cage, and their own attitude determines whether or not this is true.

I believe that our companion birds need a cage for their safety and well-being. Birds who have a secure and stimulating cage environment are far more contented than those who do not. Like children, birds feel safe and secure when all their basic needs are satisfied and they know their boundaries, both physically and behaviorally. Your bird should not feel threatened to be placed back into its cage, even if it is for a time-out to chill-out, if it is comfortable and secure in its cage.

Birds who do not receive rules, structure, and guidance virtually rule the roost and do whatever they want, whenever they want to. Often these birds turn into biting, screaming, furniture chewing problems for their owners. It would be better for the bird to gradually get used to a spacious cage and the rules, structure, and guidance that goes along with it, than to be sent to a new home.

In order to create a safe, secure, and stimulating environment for your bird try to anticipate your bird's basic needs. Then try to think of the things that will make your bird happy to be in its cage. There are times that you cannot be there to supervise your bird and it should be content to play, eat, or sleep in its cage while you are away or otherwise occupied. Here are some things to think about:

First of all, your bird's cage should be as large as possible. (Make sure that the bar spacing is the correct size for your bird; its head should not fit through the bars). Larger is better.

The location should be where the people in the house spend most of their time, whether it is in the living room, bedroom, office, den, etc.; birds like being "where the action is.". (This does not mean that the bird is in an area that has such high traffic that it is constantly being threatened by strangers or unsupervised circumstances). Many birds also enjoy being near a window for the stimulation it provides.

The perches should be various sizes, shapes, and materials so that the bird can exercise its feet. Having several perches is ideal because it encourages the bird to exercise its body by climbing to different locations in the cage.

There are many types of perches available. Never use a dowel. Natural wood branches are my favorite, especially Ribbon wood because it is very hard wood. Manzanita is also hard wood, but is slippery. (It can be made less slippery if you sandpaper it). Fruit tree branches are fine, but make sure that they have not been chemically sprayed. Cement perches are okay as long as your bird does not spend the majority of its time on it. Some birds are okay with rope or sisal perches, but watch them for fraying and the length of your bird's toenails.

TOYS, TOYS, TOYS! A large cage allows for many toys to be included within the cage. (I've already written about the importance of toys in a previous newsletter). Many birds also enjoy swings.

Three bowls inside the cage will hold dry foods (seed, pellets, etc.), water, and moist foods (cooked foods, veggies, etc.). You can include a fourth bowl for hand-held toys, if you wish. Never put moist foods on seed or pellets/extruded foods.

Cage top playpens are okay for birds who receive behavioral guidance from their owners and who view their owners as "flock leader." Some birds will display "cage top dominance" behavior while at a height above household human's heads. This behavior is usually displayed by birds who have inconsistent guidance and are in control of their own lives. Avoid this behavior by having a separate play gym below shoulder height.

The upper tray below the cage top play gym blocks out too much light, so I remove it.

A quality powder-coated metal cage that is square or rectangular shaped and has horizontal and vertical bars is what I prefer for my companion and breeder parrots. More cage width versus cage height is desirable. Often vertical space is wasted space.

Decorative scroll work on cages looks pretty, but it can trap a bird's head or other body part. Watch for cages that have bar spacing that is wide at the top and narrow at the bottom (e.g. round cages); the bird can get its head or other body part caught. It may be tempting to purchase a used cage, but be careful to inspect and test it first because some older cages may be coated with leaded paint.

Acrylic cages are not recommended because they generally promote bacteria growth from lack of adequate ventilation and usually lack climbing bars.

Some ground birds, like cockatoos and African grays, prefer to be able to forage on the bottom of their cages and do well without a bottom grate. In fact, they seem to prefer it.

Full-spectrum lighting placed near the cage is a plus. Even if the bird's room is light, the window glass blocks out parts of the light spectrum that are needed by the bird for its general health.

Covering the cage at night is recommended not only to keep your bird warm at night, but also as a night time ritual that it can count on.

The cage habitat is one of the most important things in our companion parrot's life. Providing a safe and stimulating environment will help prevent many potential behavioral problems. Because our parrots are so active and we cannot always be there to supervise them, they need a cage environment where they can be quite active and where they can create their own safe entertainment. The cage should also provide all of the bird's basic needs, such as food and water. The cage habitat should be a happy home within a home as long as you address your bird's emotional and physical needs.