

Diets for Healthy Birds



Bob Doneley, BVS, Fellow (FANZCVS) Avian Medicine

Date Published: 04/14/2022

Seeds are not an appropriate or natural diet for birds. For years, people gave their birds a mostly seed-based diet simply because there wasn't enough guidance on what a good pet bird diet is, and birds lived much shorter lifespans than they should have because of their terrible nutrition. A diet consisting of mostly seeds is the avian equivalent of a person living on fast food and cookies. Seeds are a teeny, tiny part of their diet in the wild. Captive parrots love to eat seeds because of the high fat level that makes them taste good; like children and dogs, birds often prefer junk food to healthy food.

Sadly, a seed diet will not give your pet bird a full lifespan with good health, and will instead give them viral, bacterial, and fungal infections, and unnecessary veterinary bills for you.

Consider:

- Sunflower seeds are 49% fat; that's three times as much fat as the average chocolate bar. Many other seeds contain similar levels of fat.
- Birds love fatty foods.
- Birds on seed diets suffer the same health problems as people who eat high-fat diets, such as obesity, heart disease, fatty liver, diabetes, bad skin, and so on.



An all-fresh diet for birds, often defined as one without pellets or seeds, is also not recommended. It generally consists of a variety of cooked foods, such as beans, grains, pasta, with a variety of fresh vegetables and a bit of fresh fruit. It tends to lack the correct variety of vitamins, minerals and trace elements. Fresh doesn't necessarily mean balanced, and this diet usually lacks sufficient calcium. Balanced means that the right nutrients are given in adequate amounts that won't interfere with other nutrients or be toxic. A bird's body cannot absorb enough calcium if there is more phosphorus in the diet than calcium. In general, avian veterinarians see more clinical problems, such as obesity and metabolic bone disease, in birds using fresh-food diets than with an appropriate diet.

So What Should they Eat?

A good diet boosts the immune system and helps the bird ward off illness. Not only that, but also a good diet keeps a bird in good spirits, keeps their feathers in great condition, and improves life overall.

Wild birds eat a vast variety of foods such as nuts, grasses, flowers, fruits, insects, seeds, and the list goes on. New seasons bring new types of foods, and they eat what is available. Captive birds also eat what's available, whether it's good for them or not.

While not enough research has been done about the healthiest diet for birds for anyone to know absolute specifics, we can safely say that pellets are formulated to meet the best guesses for nutritional requirements based on the information available. The first formulated diets for birds were created in the 1970s and have kept improving.

While birds can have some seeds without problems – given as a treat – their diet should be 60% formulated pellets and 40% vegetables, with seeds and fruit used only as treats. Birds on a pelleted diet live longer, have fewer health problems and look better than birds on a seed diet.

A diet of 100% pellets is rarely healthy either, as there is no 'one diet' recommended for parrots that have evolved in a wide range of geographical and climatic conditions, e.g., arid zone birds (budgies and cockatiels) vs rainforest birds (macaws and Eclectus).

Many people say that their bird will not eat pellets. The likely reason is not because of the taste, but because the bird doesn't recognise pellets as food. Birds are like cats in that they get used to what they first ate as youngsters, and many dislike trying new foods. It's easier to start with a baby bird than an adult, but as with cats, it can be done. We have to teach many birds, just as their parents would have done, what is safe to eat, even if it may take longer than we realize.

To switch a bird from an all-seed diet, the first step is to work out how much seed they eat. Measure how many teaspoons of seed your bird eats in a 24-hour period. Measure the amount fed in the morning and then 24 hours later blow off the husks and measure how much is left. The difference is the amount eaten. Repeat this exercise for 3-4 days to get an idea of the average daily consumption.

The next step is to then only feed that amount of seed that you know your bird actually eats, but now mixed with an equal amount of the formulated pellets and thawed mixed frozen vegetables. Mix it all together to make a uniformly distributed mash.

The last step is to then take away a pinch of seed each day. This makes your bird slightly hungrier each day, and as they forage through the mash they start eating the pellets and the vegetables. At the end of 2-3 weeks, most birds are eating the formulated diet and vegetables, and aren't getting any seed at all. It may take longer with some individuals.

Other tricks that work with some birds:

1. Pretend to eat the formulated diet yourself and then offer it to the bird.
2. Sprinkle some of the diet on a tabletop or the floor, and let the bird explore and nibble at it.
3. Convert two birds in the same cage at once – the competition for food often makes the conversion faster and simpler. As soon as one bird sees the other eating the new diet, they will likely try it too.

If at any time during this conversion period your bird looks unwell or develops small black droppings, feed it some seed immediately. You may have pushed too hard and your bird is starving.

Vegetables and Fruits

Remember, 40% of your bird's diet should be vegetables. There are three main vegetable types that can be fed to birds, easily grouped by color:

- Yellow vegetables: corn, carrot, sweet potato, pumpkin
- Green vegetables: beans, peas, Swiss chard (silver beet), broccoli, milk thistle, dandelion
- Red vegetables: beetroot, red or green peppers, chillies

All fruit is high in sugar and should be given only as a treat. Low glycemic index (GI) fruits should be given. Fruits high on the GI, such as watermelon, are rapidly digested and absorbed and result in marked fluctuations in blood sugar levels. Low-GI fruits (apple, apricots, banana, grapes, kiwis, peaches, pears, plums, strawberries) are more slowly digested and absorbed, producing gradual rises in blood sugar. Remember that the fruits that many of the captive parrots eat in the wild are not often available in the human market.

A Special Note about Lorikeets

Lorikeets are unique among parrots in that their anatomy and metabolism have evolved around a high-energy lifestyle. Wild lorikeets eat high sugar, easily digested foods (pollen, nectar, and fruit) but burn it off quickly. In captivity, lorikeets fed a similar diet are likely to gain weight and suffer the associated health problems. They should be fed small amounts of commercial lorikeet diets (i.e., 1 dessert spoon per day) and low GI fruits and vegetables.

Lifespan and Diet

While there are approximately 279 species of parrots, one reliable rule of thumb is that the bigger the bird is, the longer they will live, to around 70 years or so – and even 90 is not unheard of for the largest parrots. Captive cockatiels can live for 15-25 years, lovebirds 10-25 years, parakeets 7-14 years, pigeons 5-10 years, and the tiny finch 2-5 years. However, those lifespans depend on appropriate nutrition and lifestyle. Birds do best with a formulated pellet diet and vegetables, enrichment activities, exercise, space, attention, and veterinary care. Birds fed a less than appropriate diet will not be so lucky.

URL: <https://veterinarypartner.vin.com/doc/?id=10891591&pid=192391dc1f469-7d0e-4499-8093-c3ee2e11bef9.1680214224>

The content of this site is owned by Veterinary Information Network (VIN®), and its reproduction and distribution may only be done with VIN®'s express permission.

The information contained here is for general purposes only and is not a substitute for advice from your veterinarian. Any reliance you place on such information is strictly at your own risk.

Links to non-VIN websites do not imply a recommendation or endorsement by VIN® of the views or content contained within those sites.