

Choosing the Right Companion Bird



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Dr. Michael Krinsley, D.V.M., ASPCA's Animal Watch Fall 1997

These tips will help you make the call on the bird who's right for you.

How do you know if a bird is the right pet for you? And how do you decide what type of bird will best suit your household? The following scenarios should help potential owners make a decision that's right for them and a new avian friend. If after reading these suggestions you want to get a bird, be ready - as with any companion animal - to invest money for regular veterinary care, a varied diet and toys. Also, prepare to spend time playing with and talking to your bird. Today, most pet birds are hand-raised and therefore dependent on human contact for their happiness and well being.

- **"I don't like a lot of mess."** Choose small birds, such as budgies (parakeets, to Americans), canaries, finches or lovebirds.
- **"I don't like loud screaming birds."** Although there are individual exceptions, avoid conures, parrots and cockatoos.
- **"I don't have much space."** Choose any bird, as long as you allow for a large enough cage and time out of it almost every day.
- **"I am afraid of being bitten by my bird."** If this is a concern, find out how large your bird will be when fully grown. As babies, medium- and large-sized birds are very sweet and have little beak strength. But when they mature, they can become somewhat aggressive, their beaks more powerful and their behavior somewhat erratic. Instead, choose a smaller bird, such as a cockatiel, who is less able to cause harm when he bites.
- **"I want my bird to talk."** African Gray parrots and Amazon parrots are considered the best talkers, but there is no guarantee that your bird will talk.
Birds who speak the most are those who are spoken to most often.
- **"I am concerned about how my new bird will get along with other pets and young children."** Adequate space and close adult supervision will promote harmony among birds, children and other pets. You will need a room in which you can close off your bird for his or her protection when you are not present, even if you are just in another room. If you have a

very large bird, such as a macaw, you may need to protect your children and other pets from the bird if he has been provoked inadvertently.

- **"I am thinking of buying a captured wild bird because they are much less expensive than domestic birds."** DON'T! The Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992 bans the import of certain species of wild-caught birds, and many populations have been decimated by this trade. These birds also make inferior and often dangerous pets. They are not easily tamed and are known to carry more diseases than domestically raised birds. Buy from a reputable dealer, preferably one with a closed aviary, which prevents baby birds from coming in contact with any outside birds.
- **"I have an illness or a disease and want a bird as a companion."** First discuss your decision with your physician. Then speak to an avian veterinarian about your situation. Both should be able to help you make the right choice. Most likely, a bird will be a fine pet for you.
- **"I want my bird to bond with me, so maybe I'll buy an unweaned bird."** Newborn, unweaned birds, like human infants, need to be fed by hand, which requires a great deal of care. Also, they are more likely to develop problems that weaned birds (birds able to eat by themselves) don't experience. So if you have no prior experience hand-feeding birds, make sure the bird you select is weaned. As for the bonding issue, birds who are young but already weaned bond very well with caring and affectionate owners.
- **"I'll take my neighbor's bird, since he is looking for a home for her."** Pet birds are often given away or sold at a loss because of behavioral or medical problems. If you are thinking about buying a pre-owned bird, it is best if you know the previous owner and are aware of any preexisting problems. Ask to see the bird's veterinary records or take the bird for a veterinary exam before you finalize the purchase. (Editors note: There are many birds available through reputable bird rescue groups that will evaluate your situation and recommend a suitable companion from their rescues.)
- **"I'll get a small bird now and if that goes well a bigger one later."** All birds, regardless of size, require care and attention. Don't buy a small bird as an experiment for your children or yourself, thinking that you will buy a larger bird later.

When you buy a pet bird, get a written contract that includes the bird's age, breed, place of birth and medical history. Make sure that you have enough time for a veterinary exam (and to process test results), and that the bird can be returned if he or she is found to be unhealthy.

Dr. Michael Krinsley is the avian specialist at The ASPCA's Bergh Memorial Animal Hospital. His family also cares for several birds. In a future issue, Dr. Krinsley will tell potential bird owners how to get the most out of their pet's visits to the veterinarian.

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ASPCA Animal Watch - Fall 1997

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