

BUDGERIGARS/BUDGIES/PARAKEETS

By Catherine Love, DVM

Updated 2021

NATURAL HISTORY

Budgerigars (*Melopsittacus undulatus*), also known as budgies or parakeets, are small parrots native to Australia. Wild budgies have a distinctive green and yellow coloration and naturally live in large flocks that can exceed thousands of birds, but typically range from 10-100. These birds are largely nomadic, spending most of their time foraging for seeds and weeds in scrublands, open woodlands, and grasslands, but drought can drive them into more coastal or wooded areas. Budgies are plentiful in the wild, with population estimates over 5 million. They are considered least concern by the IUCN and have established invasive populations around the world including in North America.

ZOONOSIS

Parrots can carry a disease called psittacosis, which can cause serious respiratory symptoms in humans. This disease is spread in respiratory secretions. Birds may be asymptomatic shedders.

SEXING

Male budgies typically have blue ceres (the fleshy part above the beak), whereas females and immature budgies have pink ceres. However, this is not 100% accurate. Different morphs may have different colored ceres. A blood DNA sexing test is required to definitively sex a bird.

LIFESPAN

7-15 years with proper care

CHARACTERISTICS & BEHAVIOR

Due to their small size and comparatively manageable care requirements, budgies are popular pets in captivity. They come in a wide variety of color morphs and have the capability to mimic words and sounds, though not as extensively as some other parrot species. However, they should not be mistaken for low maintenance pets. All parrots have extensive care and space requirements and budgies are no exception. Budgies are very social and need extensive attention and enrichment. Despite being readily available at pet stores, they are not beginner pets. Budgies can become hand tame with time and effort, but they are very fragile and should not be handled roughly. They are not pets that do well in isolation and if not kept with other budgies they will need significant interaction time with their owner every day. When kept with other budgies these birds tend to take more effort to remain hand tame. Like all parrots, budgies are very vocal and potentially destructive.

HEALTH

Birds are very adept at hiding illness so it can be difficult to know if a bird is sick until they are very sick. Budgies are prone to vitamin A deficiency, liver disease, obesity, and reproductive issues. Only pet your bird on the head, as this is considered friendly behavior, whereas petting them elsewhere on their body can cause inappropriate reproductive behavior. Covering birds at night for a total of 12 hours of darkness can also help prevent egg binding and inappropriate reproductive behaviors.



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HOUSING

Caging for a budgie should be as large as possible. At a minimum, birds should be able to fully extend their wings and not damage their feathers on the ceiling or sides. They should be able to fly in a horizontal plane from perch to perch, and have at least 3x the length of their head to tail in height. A recommended minimum cage size is 18" long and wide, with length more important than height. The smaller the cage, the more out of cage time a bird will need. Bars should be no more than ½" apart and horizontal to allow climbing. Cages that are constructed or painted with lead, zinc, galvanized metal, or other heavy metals can be very toxic for birds and should be avoided.

Numerous perches of varying size should be provided throughout the enclosure at different heights. Different types of toys and enrichment items should be provided and rotated. Toys can be store bought or homemade but need to be bird-safe. Cardboard, wood, and shreddable materials are popular with birds. No bedding is needed for birds but if it is used, avoid cedar and pine as these can cause respiratory irritation. Mirrors are not recommended as they can encourage inappropriate reproductive behavior and egg laying. Food and water dishes should be ceramic and kept clean.



HANDLING

Budgies should be handled gently and consistently from a young age to acclimate them to humans. These birds are extremely fragile, to the point that stressful handling can be deadly. Birds move their keel (breastbone) in and out to breathe, so it is important to never squeeze a bird as this can disrupt airflow. Practice asking birds to voluntarily step up onto fingers and hands to make handling easier. Handling sessions should be positive and low stress. Many birds can be desensitized to handling by offering their favorite treat.

GROOMING

Birds need their nails trimmed once or twice per month. Start with early desensitization to the nail trimmers as this is a common source of stress for birds and their owners. Birds with beak deformities may need corrective trimming from a veterinarian. It is recommended to not trim a bird's wings, as this is a very good source of exercise and enrichment. If a bird needs its wings trimmed for safety reasons, this should also be done by your veterinarian to ensure the trim is done safely. Never have a young bird's wings trimmed as this can cause significant behavioral issues.

ADULT SIZE

25-35 grams. English budgies are larger.

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ENRICHMENT

Parrots, including budgies, need extensive enrichment to remain mentally and physically sound. In the wild, parrots spend the majority of their time foraging. This should be replicated in captivity by providing food in puzzle feeders or in hidden areas so the bird has to work for their food. These puzzles can be homemade or purchased. Birds that have never had to work for their food may need simple puzzles to start, such as a box full of crumpled paper.

Another excellent source of enrichment for birds is training. Parrots are very intelligent and can learn different kinds of tricks. Training is not only important for teaching a bird husbandry behaviors (such as stepping up, accepting grooming, etc) but it is also fun! Budgies can be taught to fly to their owner, pick up objects, and even use tiny skateboards. Get creative, and always use positive reinforcement to ensure the bird is having fun. Birds should also have numerous toys always available in their cage. These toys should be rotated to prevent them from becoming boring. Birds enjoy shredding things, including cardboard, finger traps, and paper.

WATER

Fresh water should always be available.



FEEDING

The most appropriate diet for captive parrots is pellet based. Seeds are fatty and lack important vitamins that can lead to deficiencies. Birds on seed diets commonly have beak overgrowth, liver issues, and may be overweight. Budgies are considered granivores (seed eaters) in the wild, but captive seed diets lack the same variety that is found in the wild (often more than 60+ types of seeds) and are not nutritionally balanced. When birds are offered both seeds and pellets they have been shown to select the tastier, fattier seeds over the healthier seed diet. Therefore, seeds should only be offered in very limited quantities, no more than 5-10% of the diet. A balanced pelleted diet should comprise the majority (at least 60%) of a budgie's diet. 20-25% of their diet should be fresh vegetables, and 5-10% fresh fruits. A maximum of 5% of the bird's diet can include treats for training such as commercial treats, dried fruit, macadamia nuts, pasta, eggs, walnuts, cashews, seed-based treats, or brown rice. It is recommended to encourage foraging behavior rather than have captive parrots eat from bowls. Recommended brands for bird food include Lafeber, Harrison's, Zupreem, and Roudybush.

Appropriate vegetables: Peppers, squash, cooked beans, broccoli, zucchini, pumpkin, peas, leafy greens, sprouts, cauliflower, and celery.

Appropriate fruits: Apple, banana, strawberries, grapes, melon, pineapple, berries, oranges, peaches, pears.