

QUAKER PARROT

By Catherine Love, DVM

Updated 2021

NATURAL HISTORY

Quaker parrots (*Myiopsitta monachus*), also known as monk parakeets, are small-medium parrots native to subtropical South America. Invasive populations have been established in numerous European countries, as well as parts of Mexico, Brazil, and the United States. There is even a thriving feral population in the Chicago area. The biggest concern with invasive quaker parrots is that they tend to nest on electric utility structures. Unlike most parrots, quakers build nests out of twigs rather than nesting in tree hollows or other pre-existing structures. These nests can be massive, housing entire flocks with numerous “apartments” for mated pairs.

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

There are no obvious physical characteristics to tell males and females apart. DNA sexing is required to determine if a Quaker parrot is a male or female.

ADULT SIZE

Around 100 grams is average.

WATER

Fresh water should always be available.

CHARACTERISTICS & BEHAVIOR

Due to their status as an invasive species, quaker parrots are banned in some states so always check local laws before obtaining one as a pet. Quaker parrots are popular as pets due to their mimicking abilities and friendly disposition. Quakers are generally blue or green with a grey underside, but other colors including yellow have been developed in captivity. While any parrot may be wary of strangers, quakers tend to be fairly reasonable to tame. They are generally very vocal birds and are capable of learning many words and phrases, which may make them unsuitable for apartment dwellers. Like all parrots, they are very intelligent and social, and can become neurotic and destructive if not given sufficient mental stimulation and social interaction. Even though quakers are fairly small, they are very high maintenance pets.

HANDLING

Most quaker parrots will become accustomed to humans with gentle, consistent handling. 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. Parrots often enjoy sitting on their owner’s shoulder. Birds are fragile and can be very sensitive to rough handling. Handling a bird roughly can cause bruising, bone fractures, and even death.

LIFESPAN

Up to 30 years

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HOUSING

Caging for a quaker 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. A recommended minimum for birds is 3x their wingspan in length and width, and 4-5x their wingspan in height. The smaller the cage, the more out of cage time a bird will need. Bars should be no more than $\frac{5}{8}$ " apart to 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.

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. Parrots are prone to vitamin A deficiency, liver disease, obesity, and reproductive issues, particularly when kept on seed diets. 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. Heavy metal toxicity is also being found more frequently in pet parrots. Previously, it was thought that it was normal to have bits of metal in a parrot's GI tract. However, newer research suggests that these metal pieces are actually causing chronic, low level heavy metal poisoning. It is not completely clear what the sources of these metals are, but may include household items or even bird cages, toys, and some low quality foods. These heavy metals are not present in quantities high enough to be a common problem for humans, but birds are very small and very sensitive to lead, zinc, and other heavy metals.

Signs of illness in parrots include drooping wings, ruffled feathers, tail bobbing, sitting at the bottom of the cage, feather loss, loss of appetite, abnormal droppings, and eye/nose discharge. Yearly wellness exams and blood work are recommended for parrots to ensure they are healthy.



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ENRICHMENT

All parrots need extensive enrichment to remain mentally and physically healthy. 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! 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. Parrots are social and need social interaction from other birds and/or their human companions on a daily basis.

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.

FEEDING

Wild quaker parrots have been known to eat a variety of foods including fruit, seeds, plant matter, insects, and human crops. In captivity, a balanced pelleted diet is recommended. Seed diets 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. A balanced pelleted diet should comprise the majority (at least 60%) of a parrot'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. Pelleted diets with seeds or dried fruits mixed in are not recommended as parrots will pick out the tastier, less healthy pieces. 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.

