Parrots: a tailor-made diet

Dr. Gianluca Deli, MRCVS, GpCert(ExAP), PgCert(ExAP)

Introduction

The food for parrots that can be found most frequently in pet shops are represented by mixtures of seeds (millet, sunflower and pumpkin seeds). In recent decades it has been noted that pet parrots which were given a more "natural" diet (vegetables, cereals, fruit), appeared in better conditions, apparently healthier and with a longer life expectancy compared to those fed with seeds only.

Feeding a parrot in captivity presents some problems mainly related to the reduced variety of foods offered. While seed-only mixtures can be nutrient-deficient, the opposite mistake is to administer do-it-yourself diets, mixing food specifically formulated with food for people and seeds, thus risking overfeeding your parrot. Each diet and strategy adopted can have their advantages and disadvantages.

Seed-only diets

Seed-only diets are quite palatable. Ingestion of seeds also promotes natural behaviors like manipulating and cracking food items. But the biggest drawback of these diets is that they are deficient in some nutrients, like essential amino acids, minerals, and vitamins (particularly vitamin A, D3, E, and K). **This mean that these diets are not balanced for companion birds.**

Because the amino acids (the protein bricks) are not present in the correct ratio, birds will continue to eat this unbalanced seed diet trying to meet their amino acid and protein needs. But because these diets are high in fats, problems of **overweight** or **obesity** can develop in the meantime. Another mineral that is scarce in these diets is **calcium**, essential for eggs shell and muscle contraction. The consequences of its deficiency can be convulsions, incorrect production and / or eggs retention.

Pelleted diets

The pellets are balanced foods obtained from the grinding of cereals (corn, soy and oats) and integrated with vitamins and minerals. This mixture is then subjected to controlled temperatures and pressures, thus obtaining the desired pellet shape.

If on the one hand the pellets represent an advantage in the feeding of parrots, as they are not able to select only the tastiest seeds, on the other hand they do not guarantee sufficient environmental enrichment, given the uniformity of shape and color. This can sometimes be an obstacle in the administration of this specific food, especially in parakeets and cockatiels, which normally prefer seeds.

Foraging diets

Nutri-Berries®, Avi-Cakes®, Nutri-An Cake® and Nutri-Meals® all contain a mix of pellets (enriched with amino acids, vitamins and minerals) mixed with hulled grains and seeds.

The main advantage will be to offer a balanced meal with variable shapes and textures, thus also guaranteeing good enrichment and normal foraging behavior.

This feature can be exploited in the case in which it is necessary to modify the feeding of a parrot, accustomed to eating only seeds.

At the same time, the gastrointestinal function is promoted by the coarse food particles.

The shape of these foods stimulates proper and appropriate foraging behavior, such as using the foot to hold and manipulate food Nutritious berries are often retained in the foot by larger parrot species, allowing them to mimic their behavior natural food to work on an object to extract components.

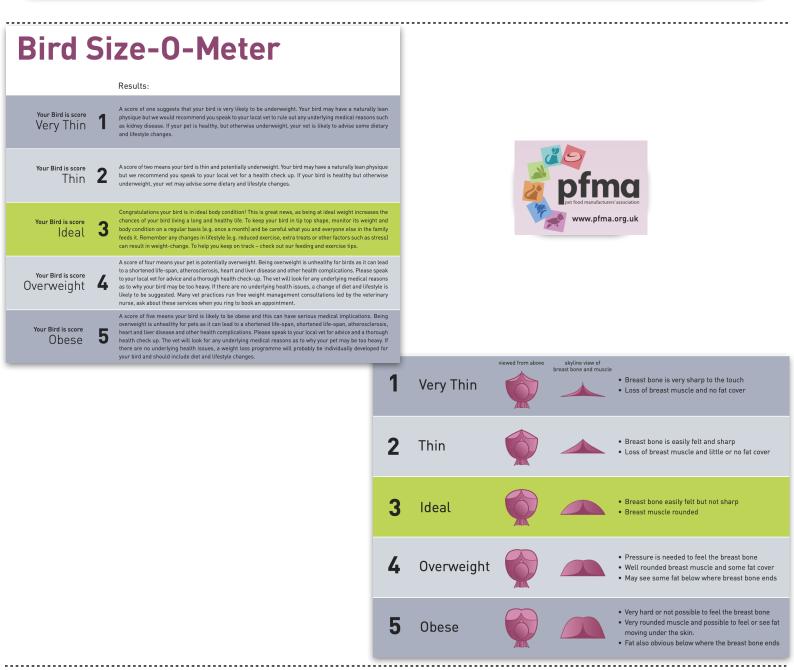
Extruded diets

Extruded foods always consist of ground grains supplemented with vitamins and minerals, but temperature and pressure will be higher to create a variety of shapes and colors.

This assumes that the mixture is chopped more finely: this can have a negative effect with a reduced stimulation of the gastrointestinal tract. The exception is Harrison's © Bird Foods, where the mixture particles are larger in size. Also in this case, a diet based on extrusions only significantly reduces brain stimulation and could, especially in the more strictly granivorous parrots, not be easily accepted.

Conclusions

- Exclusive seed-only diets are deficient in nutrients.
- Seed-based diets promote brain stimulation and foraging behaviors.
- In captivity, parrots are unable to independently balance their diet, even when offered fruit and vegetables along with seeds.
- Seed-only diets (high in fat) will provide excess energy, predisposing to **obesity** and **malnutrition**.
- A reasonable compromise is to add to only-seeds diet specifically formulated pellets and extrusions. Even an exclusive diet with only pellets / extrusions can present some contraindications, such as for example a reduced physical or mental stimulation.
- The advice is to consult an avian veterinarian who can help the owner find a tailor-made diet, which reflects the needs of the parrot and also meets the needs of the owner.
- The major brands for optimal nutrition: Lafeber® Company, Harrison's© Bird Food, Kaytee®, ZuPreem®. Fresh vegetables and fruits (eg. blueberries, walnuts) may be added in small amounts.



Reference:

- https://lafeber.com/vet/nutritional-strategies-for-the-companion-parrot/
- <u>https://www.pfma.org.uk/bird-size-o-meter</u>