

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.

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.

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.

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.

Bird Size-0-Meter

Results:

Your Bird is score **1**
Very Thin

A score of one suggests that your bird is very likely to be underweight. Your bird may have a naturally lean physique but we would recommend you speak to your local vet to rule out any underlying medical reasons such as kidney disease. If your pet is healthy, but otherwise underweight, your vet is likely to advise some dietary and lifestyle changes.

Your Bird is score **2**
Thin

A score of two means your bird is thin and potentially underweight. Your bird may have a naturally lean physique but we recommend you speak to your local vet for a health check up. If your bird is healthy but otherwise underweight, your vet may advise some dietary and lifestyle changes.

Your Bird is score **3**
Ideal

Congratulations your bird is in ideal body condition! This is great news, as being at ideal weight increases the chances of your bird living a long and healthy life. To keep your bird in tip top shape, monitor its weight and body condition on a regular basis (e.g. once a month) and be careful what you and everyone else in the family feeds it. Remember any changes in lifestyle (e.g. reduced exercise, extra treats or other factors such as stress) can result in weight-change. To help you keep on track – check out our feeding and exercise tips.

Your Bird is score **4**
Overweight

A score of four means your pet is potentially overweight. Being overweight is unhealthy for birds as it can lead to a shortened life-span, atherosclerosis, heart and liver disease and other health complications. Please speak to your local vet for advice and a thorough health check-up. The vet will look for any underlying medical reasons as to why your bird may be too heavy. If there are no underlying health issues, a change of diet and lifestyle is likely to be suggested. Many vet practices run free weight management consultations led by the veterinary nurse, ask about these services when you ring to book an appointment.

Your Bird is score **5**
Obese

A score of five means your bird is likely to be obese and this can have serious medical implications. Being overweight is unhealthy for pets as it can lead to a shortened life-span, atherosclerosis, heart and liver disease and other health complications. Please speak to your local vet for advice and a thorough health check up. The vet will look for any underlying medical reasons as to why your pet may be too heavy. If there are no underlying health issues, a weight loss programme will probably be individually developed for your bird and should include diet and lifestyle changes.



	viewed from above	skyline view of breast bone and muscle	
1 Very Thin			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breast bone is very sharp to the touch • Loss of breast muscle and no fat cover
2 Thin			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breast bone is easily felt and sharp • Loss of breast muscle and little or no fat cover
3 Ideal			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breast bone easily felt but not sharp • Breast muscle rounded
4 Overweight			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pressure is needed to feel the breast bone • Well rounded breast muscle and some fat cover • May see some fat below where breast bone ends
5 Obese			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very hard or not possible to feel the breast bone • Very rounded muscle and possible to feel or see fat moving under the skin. • Fat also obvious below where the breast bone ends

Reference:

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