

# **CAGED BIRD'S BILL OF RIGHTS**

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For the Birds

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Although we have many decades of tradition in keeping companion birds in aviaries and as pets, we, as stewards, have often failed to meet the basic needs of these animals. The intrinsic nature of most birds leads them to be adaptable to almost any circumstance, even those that fall far short of thoughtful, humane care. Although these tenants of humane and compassionate care might be self evident, the following list should serve as a reminder to all of us acting as stewards. Although our caged birds may appear tolerant of conditions and traditions that defy logic and common sense, we have a responsibility to define and deliver a standard of care befitting these wonderful creatures.

## **THE RIGHT TO A CLEAN, SAFE ENCLOSURE**

A clean safe enclosure is defined as one that can safely house a particular species. Pet birdcages used inside should be constructed of materials that can not be damaged or eaten by the species housed. As birds will often chew their enclosures, materials used in construction should be nontoxic. Galvanized materials pose unacceptable risks to cage chewing birds. Bar spacing should be appropriate for the species and should not allow for the bird's head to fit through the bars. Cages should have a grate on the bottom to allow fecal material to pass to the cage floor. The cage floor should be far enough below the grate to prevent access to waste. Absorbent materials should be dust and pathogen free. The cage floor should be cleaned daily. Minimum cage size should allow for each bird to fully extend its wings. Outside aviaries should be partially sheltered to furnish protection from wind and rain. Wire size should be appropriate for the species and should offer protection from pests and predators. Galvanized wire should not be used for species that are at risk to ingest it. A two-door system should be used for flighted species.

## **THE RIGHT TO EAT FOOD THAT WILL PROMOTE HEALTH**

Years of experience and clinical research have shown that there is a huge difference in meeting a bird's caloric need and feeding a healthful diet. Many different species with unique nutritional needs are kept as companion and aviary birds. Formulated diets are preferable to the tradition of seed. The practice of feeding a seed diet, though rooted in tradition, continues to result in numerous syndromes of gross malnutrition. Organic formulated diets are recommended. Fresh vegetable and fruits, preferably organic, should be prepared and offered daily. The practice of feeding cooked food should only be employed if uneaten food can be removed within one hour. The risk of food borne illness increases with cooked food. All dishes should be hygienically maintained. Lories, lorikeets and other nectar eating birds require fresh unspoiled nectar replaced often.

## **THE RIGHT TO CLEAN WATER**

All animals require access to clean water. Water dishes should be washed daily and replaced when worn or pitted. The dishes should be made of an inert, nontoxic material. A water source left unattended will grow potentially harmful microorganisms.

## **THE RIGHT TO FRESH AIR**

Birds have, as their unique adaptation to flight, a very effective method of respiration. This adaptation renders them very susceptible to dust and pollutants in the air. Dust, debris, household chemicals, smoke and volatile toxins pose a special risk to birds. The canary was used in the mineshaft because it would succumb to fumes before humans noticed a problem. Indoor air-pollution from many sources will cause sinus problems and respiratory disease. Often these problems will slowly develop into serious medical conditions. Birds that are covered at night should only be covered in a clean cage, with a clean cover. Confining a bird to a small, poorly

ventilated airspace can predispose to serious disease. Many birds like cockatoos and African grey parrots produce a lot of feather dust and debris. If allowed to accumulate, this dust and debris can cause respiratory problems not only for the bird that produced it, but other birds and animals in the immediate vicinity.

### **THE RIGHT TO EXERCISE**

Birds are some of nature's greatest athletes. They are designed for flight. The physiologic requirements for flight make the bird unique in many regards. Although it is often not wise or safe to allow flight, the need for exercise remains. Most healthy birds will instinctively find ways to play vigorously. To maintain cardiovascular and respiratory health birds need to exercise. The only way to develop healthy bones and muscles is to use them.

### **THE RIGHT TO INTERACT**

Most of the species kept as companion and aviary birds are intelligent and social. Although the bird's brain is very different from other intelligent mammals, research has proven that the capacity to learn and be creative is astounding. The free-living bird must learn to recognize hundreds of different plants, socialize with an organized flock, build and use nests, raise and train their young and recognize and avoid danger. It is essential that our companion birds learn to interact successfully with their environment. Just as young birds in the wild learn survival skills from their parents, so too must our companion birds learn to relate to different people and learn to interact with their surroundings through toys, playing and vocalizing.

### **THE RIGHT TO BATHE**

Despite the long-standing traditions of protecting our companion birds from the elements of nature, our birds need to bathe. Many birds have little or no experience with water for bathing and may seem fearful. Regardless of that, we owe it to our birds to introduce them to showers, water misters, spray bottles, hoses and birdbaths. Just as it is with other species, a bird must bathe to maintain its health and vigor. Ignorance is not bliss in this case, as a bird's plumage requires a huge time commitment in the form of preening and bathing.

### **THE RIGHT TO EXPERIENCE SUNLIGHT, WIND, RAIN AND THE ELEMENTS OF NATURE**

Despite many "old wives tales" to the contrary, birds have evolved to live outside. The notion that moving air, in the form of drafts and wind, can kill birds is ludicrous. Fresh air and good ventilation are essential for birds. Birds in the wild rely on the breeze for cooling. Experienced birds in the wild may rely on the wind for information about weather changes and seasonal events. Birds with healthy plumage are very water-resistant. In fact, the exposure to wind and rain promotes healthy plumage. Many of the dustiest companion birds rely on their "dust" for waterproofing. Many of our caged birds rely on a regular recurring cycle of day and night (photo-period) to trigger seasonal physiologic events like molting and breeding. Most caged birds are diurnal species. They get up at dawn and settle in to sleep at dusk. Exposing companion birds to artificially long days with household lights and TVs can not only sleep deprive them, but may alter essential physiologic processes.