

# Balancing Your Parrot's Lifestyle

By Scott L Ford, DVM, Dip. ABVP-Avian

Avian Specialty Veterinary Services of Alaska

13861 Hillcrest St NW, Poulsbo, WA 98370, USA / Phone: 360-271-7000  
[www.alaskabirddoc.com](http://www.alaskabirddoc.com) / [vet@alaskabirddoc.com](mailto:vet@alaskabirddoc.com)



We can all relate to the importance of balance. A balanced diet, a balanced checkbook, and a balanced lifestyle are important to our well-being. Birds also need balance in their life. Balanced nutrition is an important cornerstone of care. Equally important is balanced activity and behavioral enrichment to allow them to engage with others and with their environment.

## What are the Elements of a Balanced Lifestyle?

There are three primary elements to a parrot's daily life: **Nutrition, Social Interaction, and Maintenance Behaviors** (see Figure 1). Nutrition and foraging refers to the make-up of the diet and the time and energy involved in finding, extracting, eating, and processing food. Social interaction includes time spent in a flock setting vocalizing, preening, flying, and displaying. Maintenance activities include all the things that a bird has to do to maintain its physical health, outside of eating, such as sleeping, preening, and bathing. Once these areas have been satisfied, there are additional behaviors and activities that take place on an annual cycle, such as reproduction, molt, or, in some cases, migration. However, if the three basic categories occupy most of a bird's time and energy, the annual activities, particularly reproduction, may not take place at all. It comes down to budgeting of time, nutrients, availability of mates or nests, etc. Realizing this is the first step to recognizing how we can change a pet bird's behavior through manipulation of the environment, diet, and our social interaction with them.

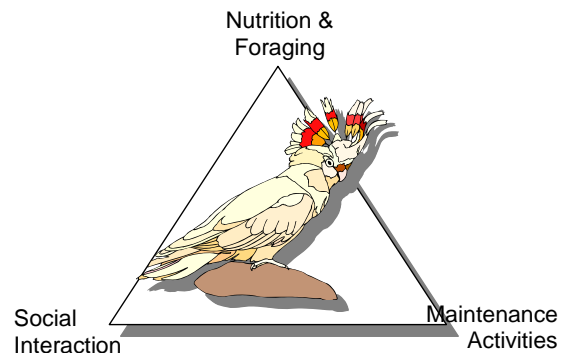


Figure 1: The three cornerstones of daily activity in birds

## Getting Off Balance

In a wild setting, birds work hard, most of the time, to find food, watch for danger, and take care of themselves. A natural equilibrium establishes which may or may not allow for extra activities. In captivity, basic needs are met easily and so there is an enormous surplus of time and energy intake and a minimal amount of physical activity required. This extra time and dietary energy can be utilized for breeding even if the other required elements, such as a mate or nest site, are minimally available. For many captive parrots, this is enough to be reproductively active on a continuous basis, often without being able to ever complete the cycle and enter a phase of rest and repair. Because physiological changes for breeding are so intensive, it is believed that birds that are constantly in this condition are very prone to a variety

of medical and psychological illnesses. Resulting medical conditions include osteodystrophy (loss of bone calcium), hepatic lipidosis (fatty liver), egg coelomitis (inflammation of the abdomen from internally ovulating), oviductal or ovarian cancer and cysts, egg binding, cloacitis (inflammation or infection of the cloaca), cloacal prolapse, and stroke. Undesired behaviors that can result include feather or skin destructive behaviors (feather picking/plucking), obsessive compulsive behaviors, territorially defensive behaviors, and screaming or other attention-getting behaviors (e.g., separation anxiety). Birds that do not enter breeding condition, but still cannot satisfy their needs for activity, mental exercise, or social interaction, can also exhibit some of these problem behaviors. At the very minimum, birds that are not allowed to achieve lifestyle balance probably experience more stress and do not behave and interact with their human flock to their full potential.

## Social Interaction

Most wild parrots are social creatures except, perhaps, when they pair up and concentrate on raising young. Commonly the birds will spend brief periods of time allopreening (preening the feathers on each others' heads) or otherwise interacting and vocalizing with a flock. These flocks can be very noisy and active. As our birds' surrogate flock, we need to fulfill this role without inadvertently taking on the role of mate. Talking, dancing, training, and playing games with your bird are excellent ways to fulfill your bird's need for social interaction. Even just having your bird nearby on a perch, stand, or travel cage, wherever you are at the time, is good quality time. To avoid the impression that you are a willing mate, avoid prolonged cuddling, allopreening, or perching on your shoulder. To a parrot, these can suggest a more intimate interest.

## Nutrition and Foraging

This cornerstone of daily activity includes the search for food and the act of extracting, eating, and processing it. This can occupy as much as 6-18 hours of a wild parrot's day. The activity of foraging also engages the bird's mind as it flies, takes in all of the sensory information, watches for predators, learns from its flock members, and concentrates on discovering, manipulating, and extracting food items. In contrast, a pet parrot may only spend 20-30 minutes a day simply eating out of a bowl in isolation from others. During periods when social interaction is limited, as is often the case when we, the surrogate flockmates, are away earning a living, other maintenance behaviors such as foraging and feather care should be increased to fill the time. This in turn may be very beneficial as a part of behavioral modification treatments for abnormal behaviors such as feather picking, screaming, or pair-bonding behaviors.

There are three keys to successfully teaching your bird to forage: Diet, starting simple, and consistency. Foraging rewards should be tiny pieces of extra special food that is not present in the regular diet. For most parrots, the basic diet should be limited to pellets and vegetables, thus freeing items like small seeds, nut fragments, fruit, pasta, Cheerios, or other non-fatty people foods for use in training and foraging. Listed below are some basic foraging ideas. Remember to start easy if your bird has never foraged. On a daily basis, assemble, play with, and disassemble foraging items in front of your bird at first as they may not even understand that food can be concealed. Once they understand that rewards are involved, they will begin

exploring and learning on their own. You are the surrogate flock so your bird will be naturally interested in whatever you show interest in on a regular basis. As your bird masters a particular technique, you can begin to randomize rewards, increase difficulty, and combine techniques. For example, every foraging device may have a tasty nut piece as first but later you can hide pellets or beads or toys instead. For combination, you could place wrapped items in a bowl that is itself wrapped with cardboard. Interestingly, the increased difficulty and less consistent reward can actually increase your bird's drive to forage as they search harder for that desired reward. Give these techniques a try:

- ❑ **Foraging perch:** A piece of non-treated wood (e.g., pine lumber) drilled with holes into which nuts, seeds, or other rewards fit tightly. The reward should be visible but not accessible without chewing down through the wood. This perch material can be used with your training perch, when the bird is outside of the cage with you. The wood can also be used as a perch in the cage, or even hung in the cage to increase the challenge.
- ❑ **Wrapping food bowls:** Wrap the food bowls with paper or cardboard so that your bird has to spend time chewing in to get at the food. You may have to teach your bird the first time by punching a starter hole, or simulating the foraging activity yourself, acquiring your bird's favorite food item, and not sharing it with the bird after you find it.
- ❑ **Treat wads:** You can individually wrap nuts, seeds, or other rewards in small pieces of paper, corn husks, snowcone cups or Dixie cups, or other materials. Not all wrappings need to contain a reward, either.
- ❑ **Buried treasures:** Pellets or seeds can be mixed in with wood buttons, dry beans, or other items so that the bird has to dig through to find its food. Some parrot species, such as grey parrots, can be particularly stimulated into new foraging behaviors by having a "sandbox" and buried treasures provided.
- ❑ **Commercially-available toys:** There are a variety of toys available that require birds to unscrew parts or manipulate components to get at their reward. See the Resources list at the end of this packet for ideas on where you can find commercially available foraging toys. Remember that you can gradually increase the difficulty by stuffing the toy with wrapped food items, sticks, or other clean debris.
- ❑ **Foraging tree:** A "tree" complete with challenging foraging stations can be made of lumber, sticks, plastic pipe, or rope. See the Resource section at the end of this handout to learn where you can acquire the DVD "Captive Foraging" which demonstrates how to build and train your bird to use a foraging tree.
- ❑ **Trick training:** By asking your bird to perform a desired behavior for a reward, you are, in essence, providing a modified foraging activity for your bird. In addition, you are also having a lot of fun, and are satisfying your bird's need for social interaction. See the Training section later in this handout and check out the training opportunities in the Resources list at the end of this handout.

## Maintenance Activities

Maintenance activities include sleeping, preening, and bathing—the basic physical needs of a bird in addition to eating. While we do not generally need to encourage maintenance activities, we do need to provide for them. A regular allowance for quiet, dark conditions for proper sleep is important as is provision of bathing opportunities. Although covering your bird can provide some privacy, if there is still activity and noise in the room, it is unlikely that the bird will

completely rest. If possible, we recommend that you provide a small accessory cage (such as a travel cage) in a separate, darkened room, such as a bathroom or spare bedroom. The “sleeping cage” need only contain the basic essentials: a perch and water and possibly food if you may be delayed in removing the bird the next morning. As a general rule, your bird should have the opportunity for 10-12 hours of rest daily. If this schedule is consistent, you may be able to diminish “hormonal” or sexual behaviors since photoperiod, or day length, has some influence on the secretion of reproductive hormones. Some experts also believe that breaking up the bird’s daily environment by activity (e.g., sleeping, socializing, and feeding) could help decrease a perception of their cage as a breeding territory.

Providing for your bird’s bathing needs is usually relatively simple. Some birds will prefer to bathe in a bowl while others will enjoy showering with you. Most will accept gentle misting with water. Some like to splash in the sink under a gentle stream of water. We encourage you to experiment to find your bird’s favorite method. Frequent bathing is a good thing and the only requirement is that your house is at least 55-60°F. If they really enjoy bathing, it can be a daily activity but we recommend an opportunity at least 1-2 times a week.

## Getting Back Into Balance

As mentioned earlier, an imbalanced lifestyle can lead to abnormal behaviors. For example, if a bird is picking its feathers, this could occur because of a lack of social and foraging activity. If social interaction and challenging foraging activities are introduced, there may be less time available for overpreening. Of course, there are other reasons for feather picking including health problems which should be checked out by your avian veterinarian before starting treatment yourself.

Balancing daily activities should, as closely as possible, fit the natural biology and behavior of your bird’s species as well as the lifestyle constraints of your home. Maintaining a balance of healthy social interaction, foraging and nutrition, and maintenance behaviors requires conscious effort by the owner. In the wild, a multitude of external pressures and natural processes shape and mold the bird’s lifestyle. In the absence of that, you become the master of the bird’s environment. It’s a tall order to try to provide the stimulation and boundaries that nature provides, but it’s up to you to do your best. I recommend that you become as much an expert as you can on your bird’s natural lifestyle. There are some resources at the end of this packet that can help get you started. Here are some encouraging tips to help you keep it in perspective.

- **Check out** the resources at the end of this handout. You can never have too much information (or encouraging stories) to help you be the master of your bird’s domain.
- **Be the flock:** Since many pet birds are hand-reared, they often have learned to recognize people as other members of their species. This recognition and the interaction that comes with it is what helps to make parrots such enjoyable companion birds in our homes. Normally, other flock members would teach a juvenile bird what social behaviors are appropriate through a system of observational learning and trial and error. To set your bird up for lifelong success (which can be up to 100 years in some species), it is important for you to fill this role as mentor. Recognizing this role is key to understanding how your parrot views you and learns from you. Consider

opportunities to take your bird with you to work, on trips, or even on errands occasionally. On these adventures, provide your bird with opportunities to meet other human “flock” members and expand their social experience. Remember, most parrots are highly social and live in flocks.

- **Get involved** with a local bird group. They can provide encouragement, support, and advice. As with any information, carefully consider the practicality and substantiation (e.g., scientific basis). In other words, take all advice with a “grain of salt.”
- **Homework** is important for your bird. Consider the intellectual and social strengthening you experienced during your upbringing. A structured environment is equally important to shaping your parrot's behavior.
- **Patience and consistency** is a must for any behavior modification program. Everyone in the home must be on-board with the program. Results will usually come in small baby-steps. Don't give up!
- **Well-trained and adjusted** pet birds are less stressed, better nourished, and less likely to develop illness. We also gain enjoyment from our pet birds if they are well adjusted, trained and behave well in our homes. This is your ultimate goal, and it is attainable.
- **Call us** to discuss your birds behavior and health any time that there is a question. Every bird and household is different so we will do our best to help you find the solutions that fit your unique situation.

## Homework

---

### Training & Behavior Modification Concepts

**Define your goal:** It is essential to know what you are trying to train your bird to do, otherwise how will the bird ever learn what you want? Be sure to choose small, achievable goals at first.

**Use small steps or approximations to reach the goal:** “Rome wasn't built in a day,” right? Nothing complicated is learned in one great chunk—not even by humans. However, breaking it down into small, short steps and practicing these steps over and over can provide the building blocks for a variety of complicated new behaviors.

**Use of bridges and cues:** A bridge is a sound, such as a clicker, a spoken word, or a whistle, which is used in conjunction with the bird performing a desired action. The association eventually builds so that the bridge becomes a cue—a sound used to signal to the bird it is time to perform that behavior.

**Positive Reinforcement:** This is the presentation of a stimulus following a behavior that serves to maintain or increase the frequency of the behavior. Positive reinforcers are desirable items or interactions such as food rewards or moments of verbal interaction or a pet on head. The reward should be consumed or completed in within about 10 seconds so that the training can continue smoothly.

**Negative Reinforcement:** The removal of a stimulus following a behavior that serves to maintain or increase the frequency of the behavior. These tend to be unpleasant stimuli that



the bird avoids. Negative reinforcement can be effective but the learner generally does not continue learning beyond the minimal amount necessary to avoid the negative stimulus. For this reason it is NOT generally recommended.

**Positive Punishment:** The presentation of an aversive stimulus following a behavior that decreases or suppresses the frequency of the behavior. NOT RECOMMENDED as it will tend to produce counter-aggression, escape behaviors, and, finally apathy.

**Negative Punishment:** The removal of a stimulus following a behavior that serves to decrease or suppress the frequency of the behavior. This can be used carefully to replace inadvertent positive reinforcement of undesired behaviors and is particularly helpful if acceptable replacement behaviors are positively reinforced. Example: A bird is screaming in your presence and you leave the room until it stops for a couple of minutes. Then you return and offer a treat or positive interaction for being quiet.

**Targets:** A target is something used to focus a bird's attention and direct their next step. The bird is always rewarded when the target is touched or followed. If this rule is not violated, there is no end to the types of tasks and tricks that can be trained. A target can be as obvious as a colored stick or as basic as a raised finger.

**Station:** This is where all the neuron-building takes place. The station can be a portable perch or anything that the bird is comfortable sitting on but which is not distracted by other birds, people, food, toys, etc. The bird will learn that this is where the best rewards are to be achieved and should look forward to the time spent at this special spot.

**Don't change the rules:** Once you hold out a reward, or a hand for stepping up, or a target, and the bird follows through, you must let them have their reward. If you've decided it's too easy for them, reset the scenario after the reward and make them try again with a slightly harder goal. On the flip side, if it looks like too big a step, withdraw the reward, step back for a second, then step in with a new, easier goal to achieve.

**Patience:** Animal training takes time and patience! This is especially true if the bird has significant social issues to overcome. Take your time and celebrate and repeat the small achievements along way.

**Ending on a good note:** Try to end training sessions on a good note. If you see a hard-won breakthrough, give the bird a good reward and call it a day—unless it's clear his favorite reward is continuing the training!

## Foundation Behaviors to Teach Your Bird

- ❑ **“Step-Up”:** Stepping up is a foundational maneuver upon which most training and behavioral guidance relies. If your bird is already fairly tame or even used to know how to step-up, then simply press your hand gently up against the front of your bird's legs and say “step-up” (or use whatever bridge or cue you prefer). Once the bird places its foot onto the edge of your hand, hold still and provide a firm and solid perch with your hand. A shaking, hesitant, or unsure hand will not be a desirable perch for most birds to transfer their weight to. If your bird is not tame, you may have to start by “bribing” your bird to your hand by offering a small piece of a nut or seed. If the bird does not respond immediately then eat the reward in front of them (with obvious relish) and try again later. When they do step onto your hand to get to the bribe, avoid the temptation to lift the bird away the first few times. Repeat the exercise a few times before finally beginning to lift

the bird away. If they seem uncertain, offer them a reward or set them down and start again. Remember, the priority is to build trust before building new behaviors.

- ❑ **“Step-Down”:** Stepping down is important simply to allow for you to guide your bird's movement. To step your bird down, with your hand positioned lower than the perch you desire it to go to, gently roll your hand towards the perch, shifting the bird's weight forward so that they step down. In most cases, the bird should be encouraged to grasp the perch with it's beak, and then climb up to the perch from there. In this sense, the bird is actually climbing up when being stepped down most of the time. A target or food reward can be used to encourage a bird to step onto a perch for the first several times—particularly if the bird seems unsure about a new or odd-looking perch.
- ❑ **“Stay”:** Staying on a perch, where placed, is important for your bird to experience “normal” flock social interaction while outside of its cage with you. This simple behavioral requirement will allow your bird to share time with you, but not on you, and will preclude your bird from having free-roam throughout the home. The free-roaming pet parrot is at increased risk of traumatic injuries and household poisonings. Behaviorally, the free-roaming pet parrot will be at risk of developing pair-bonded interactions with one person, and may be less able to be guided into general flock interactions with others in the home. Portable tabletop perches are great for this training since they can be put anywhere and are not usually higher than people. Set your bird on the perch and occasionally offer a stroke or reward—as long as they stay put. If they climb down and walk around, put them back without any verbal cue or other reward. Come back a few minutes later and offer a reward if they stay put, or work to devise other positive reinforcement methods that will help your bird decide that staying on the training perch is a desired thing – from their point of view.

## Foundational Diet Recommendations

An overabundance of food, foods high in fat and calories, and too many food choices can all “turn on” your bird's reproductive drive. In addition, obesity and other nutritional complications may occur. For most captive parrots, the most appropriate diet is a combination of formulated pellets and vegetables. Fruit, seeds, nuts, pasta, and other people foods are not present in the regular diet. The brand or type of pellet is generally not as important as what the bird will accept. In other words, the best pellet is the one that the bird will eat! My recommendation for your bird's diet is:

% Pellets	% Fresh Vegetables	Other
-----------	--------------------	-------

Please follow these instructions for converting your bird's diet to a formulated (“pellet”) diet:

- ❑ **Conversion for medium to large parrots:** with the bird sharing time with you from its training perch, eat (or act like you are eating) the food in front of your bird. Make sure that you really enjoy the food item, and show your enjoyment to your bird. Offer some to your bird, but do not necessarily try to force the issue. Give them a limited time to accept the offer (a few seconds). If they don't take it, keep “eating” the food and make it

obvious that you are enjoying it. **Do this daily** as it must be seen as a regular flock behavior. During the introduction period, offer pellets in a separate bowl from the old diet. Once your bird is eating the pellets during these “foraging session,” you can remove the dish used for the old diet. This will open up many opportunities for “treats” to be used as positive reinforcement and training tools in the future. Once the birds are regularly consuming a pellet diet you will notice changes in their droppings. The droppings may be larger and lighter in color than when on seed. Additionally, food colorings, if present, may be seen (orange coloration for example).

- ❑ **Conversion of cockatiels or budgies:** It may be important to have your bird's wings clipped unless they are very tame, in order to maintain the bird's focus on you. Spread a variety of choices of pellets out on a table surface covered by a towel and set your bird amongst them. Use your hand to simulate a scratching and pecking flock member. Pick at the pellets, crunch them in your fingernails, and flick them about. **Do this daily** as it must be seen as a regular flock behavior. During the introduction period, offer pellets in a separate bowl from the old diet. Once your bird begins to eat the pellets consistently, you can replace its old diet. You may also find that using smaller pieces or varieties of pellets will be more readily accepted and you can later increase the size you feed. You may want to simulate foraging, using your fingers, in the food bowl in the cage as a final conversion training method as well. Since these species are ground-feeders, it may help to offer the pellets on the floor of the cage or in a flat dish instead of in a bowl. Even then, be sure to monitor your bird's droppings to ensure that they are eating well. Once the birds are regularly consuming a pellet diet you will notice changes in their droppings. The droppings will generally be larger and lighter in color than when on seed. If you only see scanty, dark green feces or black feces, your bird may not be eating and will need to be offered its old diet again.
- ❑ **Conversion of lovebirds, parrotlets, and conures:** It may be important to have your bird's wings clipped unless they are very tame, in order to maintain the bird's focus on you. Place a small assortment of pellets in one hand. Holding it slightly cupped, perch your bird on this same hand and use your opposite hand to simulate a scratching and pecking flock member. Pick at the pellets, crunch them in your fingernails, and flick them about. **Do this daily** as it must be seen as a regular flock behavior. During the introduction period, offer pellets in a separate bowl from the old diet. Once your bird begins to eat the pellets consistently, you can remove its old diet. You may also find that using smaller pieces or varieties of pellets will be more readily accepted and you can later increase the size you feed. You may want to simulate foraging, using your fingers, in the food bowl in the cage as a final conversion training method as well. Even then, be sure to monitor your bird's droppings to ensure that they are eating well. Once the birds are regularly consuming a pellet diet you will notice changes in their droppings. The droppings will generally be larger and lighter in color than when on seed. If you only see scanty, dark green feces or black feces, your bird may not be eating and will need to be offered its old diet again.
- ❑ **Conversion of finches and canaries:** For the most part, these species will self-convert if offered a dish of very small pellets or mash. Most brands of pellets offer a finely ground mash for these birds. Offer the old diet in a separate dish until you notice a change in dropping color or you see the birds investigating the new diet. Once your bird begins to eat the pellets consistently, you can remove its old diet. Monitor your bird's droppings to ensure that they are eating well. Once the birds are regularly consuming a pellet diet you will notice changes in their droppings. The droppings will generally be



larger and lighter in color than when on seed. If you only see scanty, dark green feces or black feces, your bird may not be eating and will need to be offered its old diet again.

- ❑ **Offer vegetables:** These should be restricted to just 2 or 3 types of vegetables at a time to avoid the perception of abundance. For smaller species, I suggest trying grated or thinly sliced fresh vegetables or offering clean sprouts or broccoli. A frozen vegetable mix (e.g., corn, diced carrots, and peas or beans) can be convenient. Just thaw out a small amount each day.
- ❑ **Restricted foods:** These include fruit, seed, nuts, pasta, rice, and other people foods. These items pack lots of calories which can stimulate reproductive behavior. Also, regularly offering softened or warm foods can simulate regurgitative feeding that might be offered by a mate. Very limited amounts of these items should be offered only through foraging and training. Making your bird work for what they want will help balance their lifestyle, prolong your healthy interaction, and limit the amount of those items that they actually eat.

## Inappropriate Pair Bonding

Should your pet bird view you more as a mate than a member of its flock, there is a greater risk of reproductive and behavioral problems. There are four main control points that we can use to encourage or discourage our bird's sex drive.

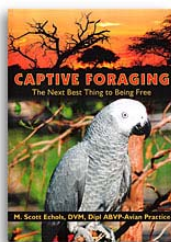
- ❑ **Diet:** If the diet contains excess fat or simple carbohydrates or if there is a rich variety presented on a regular basis, this can support reproductive drive. See "Foundation Diet Recommendations."
- ❑ **Social Interaction:** Normally, most birds do not give each other extensive physical pleasure unless they are pairing up. Long petting sessions or touching your birds in sexually-stimulating ways will reinforce the perception of you as a willing mate. Regular amounts of shoulder time may also convey a perception of sexual intimacy with you.
- ❑ **Nesting sites:** Reproductive readiness starts with certain external influences but is strengthened when a bird is able to carry out nuptial actions such as nest exploration or nest building. If your bird tends to explore cabinets, closets, clothes piles, or under furniture or bed covers, this activity should be curtailed and replaced with other activities such as foraging.
- ❑ **Photoperiod and sleep cycle:** Variations in day length may affect reproductive drive. I recommend maintaining a consistent day length of 10-12 hours. You can place your bird in a small sleep cage at night if their cage is in a room where sleep may be interrupted. A sleep cage can be a small travel cage and needs only to have a perch and some water. Going to the sleep cage should be positively reinforced, particularly during the first uses.

## Behavioral Followup

I recommend that we meet for a follow-up behavioral appointment in	weeks.
--	--------

# Suggested Resources

---



“Captive Foraging” DVD by Dr. Scott Echols. This DVD demonstrates the concept of foraging in a captive situation using homemade foraging toys and a foraging tree. The video can be purchased from us or online at [www.thebirdbrain.com](http://www.thebirdbrain.com)



The Gabriel Foundation's Bird Brain store is an excellent place to shop for training perches, foraging toys, and books and videos. Proceeds go to help the Gabriel Foundation's rescue and education efforts. Their website is at [www.thebirdbrain.com](http://www.thebirdbrain.com)



Good Bird is an excellent web resource and magazine dedicated to enriching the lives of captive birds. They can be accessed at [www.goodbirdinc.com](http://www.goodbirdinc.com).



Susan Friedman's is a human and animal behaviorist from the Department of Psychology at Utah State University. She has taught veterinarians and bird owners alike on the subject of bird behavior. She offers online courses in bird behavior and behavior modification techniques. Check her website at <http://www.behaviorworks.org>.