

Cage Birds In The Home

A 4-H Project

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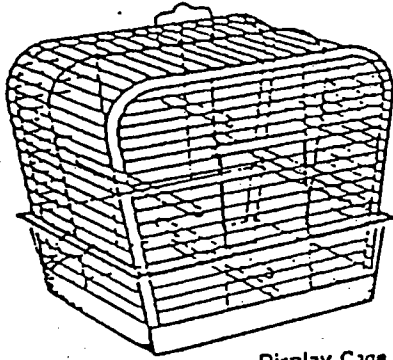
For certain people, birds are kept as members of the household. They serve as company, provide song and color, and may be taught simple tricks. Some can also mimic the sounds of humans and household noises.

The most common cage birds are canaries and parakeets; however, many others are also kept. Among these are finches, mynahs, doves, parrots, crows, magpies, and cockatiels.

For a bird to be a good pet it must be happy and content while in close contact with people. It also must be able to live on foods that you can easily obtain.

The smaller birds are the most popular, but some larger birds also make good pets if you have a larger cage.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE BEGINNER



Display Cage

1. Before you begin a 4-H cage bird project, do the following things:
 - a. Talk over the idea with your parents and other family members.
 - b. Visit pet stores; see the various kinds of birds that are available and note their costs. Notice also the price of cages and feed so you know what your total expenses will be.
 - c. Talk to people who presently have or who have had a bird in their home.
 - d. Consider where in your home the bird would be kept.
2. Decide on the kind of bird you would like to have.
3. Obtain a cage suited to your choice of bird and a supply of feed it is familiar with. (The breeder or pet shop manager will help you with this.)
4. Obtain a strong, healthy bird that has been living in a cage. (See the next section for desirable characteristics.)
5. Try to learn everything you can about your bird and about birds in general.

BUYING A PET BIRD

Before buying any bird it is important to observe it closely. Things to look for are these:

1. Your bird should be active. Its feathers should appear smooth and be held close to the bird's body. The scales on its legs should appear waxy and fit close to the skin. The bird's eyes should be bright and alert.
2. The bird's droppings should be fairly firm and not yellow or greenish in color. The feathers in the vent area should not appear soiled.
3. The floor of the cage should not contain many loose feathers.
4. The overall condition of the cage, feeder, and water cups should be clean.
5. Also observe birds in nearby cages. Birds caged close to sick ones may have become infected by them even though they do not yet show it.

Remember that a pet store or a breeder can guarantee a bird to sing but cannot be sure it will live. Spend enough time selecting your bird to be sure it is normal and appears healthy. Then be careful when taking it home so it does not become chilled or overheated in the carrier.

A BIRD IN ITS NEW HOME

Any bird may be scared and nervous. Give it time to become adjusted to its new home without too much attention from people. Little brothers and sisters or the family cat and dog should not be allowed to come near the bird's cage until it has had time to adjust to its new home. Your bird will be much happier (and healthier) if its cage is located where there is not too much traffic or noise.

The bird should have the same amount of light each day. In some places sunlight shining through window glass may prove to be too warm if it shines directly into the bird's cage.

PROJECT SUGGESTIONS

- First Year**
 Obtain one or more individually caged birds.
 Become acquainted with the bird.

Learn its needs, its history, and its habits.
 Provide daily care.
 Keep a record of your experiences.
 Do three or more activities listed below.

Second Year

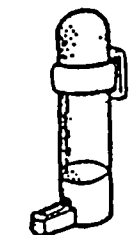
Attempt to raise some young birds (mate a pair, provide a nest, etc.)
 Raise a mealworm colony if you have soft-billed birds (robins, mynahs, toucans, nightingales).
 Build two or more items of equipment (nest box, feeders, waterers, perches).
 Grow a tray of green feed such as oats or other cereal grains. (Grow to 2 to 3 inches in height.)
 Complete two or more of the activities listed below.

Third Year

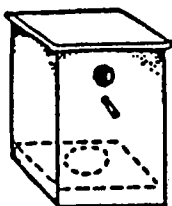
Prepare a public demonstration of your project (for the schoolroom, 4-H fair, pet show).
 Explain the results of mating in terms of the number of youngsters, their sex, the way they look.
 Photograph your project.
 Complete two more of the activities listed below.

Activities

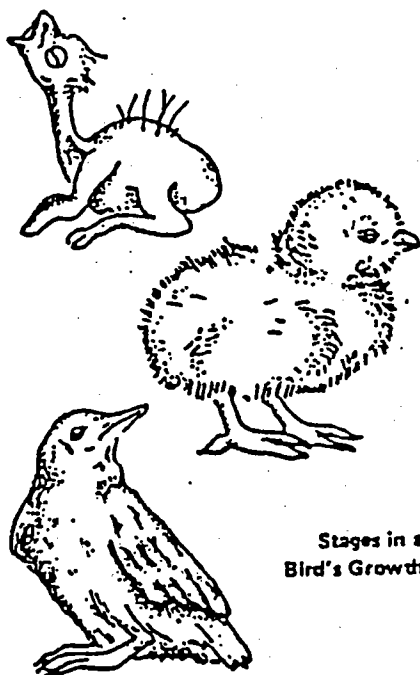
1. Visit a zoo to see various kinds of birds.
2. Visit pet stores to learn what is available in birds, equipment, supplies, etc. (Pay attention to costs, space needed, and source of birds—imported or domestic birds.)
3. Read a book that tells about your kind of bird (the library may have these).
4. Learn the names of the parts of your bird.
5. Make drawings of three types or shapes of bird cages.
6. Learn the scientific name of your bird and its history.
7. Visit a breeder of cage birds.
8. Teach your bird to know its name. (If it is a parakeet, parrot, mynah, etc., teach it to talk.)
9. Visit your local Humane Society animal shelter.
10. Visit an animal diagnostic laboratory (state or private).
11. List all the things your bird eats and tell where they come from.
12. Sketch your bird's digestive tract, label the parts, and list the job each part does.



Self-waterer



Nest Box



Stages in a Bird's Growth

TYPES OF CAGE BIRDS

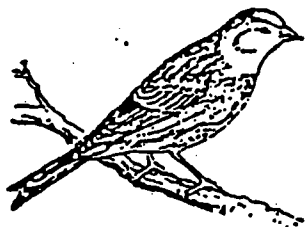
When thinking of cage birds, parakeets and canaries probably first come to mind. There are many other small birds that are currently kept in homes, but these are the two most popular groups of cage birds. So let's look at some of the characteristics of the birds in these two categories that you could use for your 4-H project.

Canaries

Canaries have been bred by people since the first century, when Pliny, a Roman historian, caught some and named them after the Canary Islands where he found them. These islands are off the west coast of Africa and were named Canaria in 40 B.C. by King Juba of Mauretania because of the large dogs that also lived on the isles. (*Canis* means "dog" in Latin, and so one of our favorite cage birds is named "dog.")

Male canaries usually are good singers, which is why so many of them are kept as pets. Some females sing a little, but their song is usually shorter than the male's. When buying canaries, you should realize that there are no good physical clues as to the sex of the bird. Since only the males sing well, they are more valuable than the females, and for this reason it is important to *buy your canary only from a reliable store or breeder*. Getting it without having it shipped a long distance is a good idea, too.

Dealers will be able to assure you that the male you buy will sing within a given length of time, and this protects you from paying male canary prices for a female



Yellow Bunting



Harz Mountain Canary

that does not sing. To protect themselves, dealers will usually stamp the wings of your bird with a permanent ink, so that if you bring a bird back, they can be sure it is a bird you purchased from them. Any ink that may show on the feathers is only temporary and will disappear with the bird's next molt.

In addition to their beautiful voice, canaries are noted for their range of lovely colors, including yellow, orange, white, and gray. Some birds may have two or more of these colors on their feathers.

Just as the price differs for singers and for those that do not sing, there is a price scale based on the color of the bird. As a rule, the more red there is in a canary's coloring, the higher its price.

Here are a few of the many kinds of canaries:

The Roller—Bred first in the Harz Mountains of Germany, this bird is noted for its song. It sings with a closed beak, whereas most canaries are "choppers" and sing with an open beak.

The Yorkshire—A large canary, over 8 inches in length, this bird was developed in England. It is a slender bird with long legs and slim thighs. It needs a larger cage than most canaries.

The Lizard Canary—This bird is noted for its color pattern. Its back looks like the scales of a reptile; hence its name. In addition to its body coloring, this bird has a cap of solid color covering the top of the head.

Crested—The crested canary has a flat rosette of feathers that grow outward from a center point on the top of the skull.

Frilled—The frilled canary has long, leaflike feathers on the back of the head, shoulders, sides, and breast.

Parakeets (Budgies)

The most popular cage bird in America is the shell parakeet, or budgerigar. It is native to Australia and today exists in more than 50 different colors.

It is a colorful little bird with clownish behavior and a real liking for people. It can be taught to say a few words and short phrases, as well as to do simple tricks.

The normal parakeet is very active. Its busy life uses up considerable energy, so it should be given a good basic diet. Normally, this will be a packaged parakeet mix consisting of canary seed, millet, and hulled oats. The parakeet will also need grit or gravel of "parakeet size." In addition, the parakeet will relish a small amount of green feed, such as clover, vegetable trimmings, dandelions, or fresh fruit.

The parakeet will usually take a bath if given some water in a shallow dish in the bottom of his cage. Do not bathe your bird or allow it to bathe if the house is cool or drafty or if its cage is located near an open window or door.

Parakeets breed easily in cages. Adults normally mate when about one year old. Allow the male and female to see each other by placing their cages close together for a few days before putting the birds in the same breeding cage. This cage should be at least 18 x 18 x 24 inches and must be equipped with a parakeet nest box. If you want to breed parakeets you should read as much as you can on the subject. Books on parakeets can be found at the local library.

Parakeets often prefer to breed in communities. This means that several pairs are housed in a large pen, each pair having its own nest box.

Sometimes a parakeet will bring up food that it has already swallowed. Often this is an attempt to feed an imaginary mate or a mirror image and is nothing to worry about.

The "Budgie" is a very rugged little bird despite its delicate appearance. If you start with a healthy bird, give it a good diet, and keep it out of drafts and extremes of temperature, it should live for several years.

GENERAL HEALTH The key to keeping a pet healthy is cleanliness. Clean food, water, cages, and equipment are most important.

The appearance and actions of your pet will often be the first warning that your bird is sick. A few things to look for are ruffled feathers, eating less, drinking more water, discolored and/or watery droppings, and decreased activity.

In treating your sick bird, first check its feed and water supply. Has it been getting clean feed and water? Has there been a recent change in diet? These are two of the first questions you should answer. Also, since most cage birds are from the tropics, it is generally wise to make sure that your bird is warm enough. A hospital cage, enclosed on three sides, with a small light bulb for heat, is often the only treatment needed. This cage should be kept at about 85° F., away from other birds and away from drafts.

Bird diseases are very hard for the normal hobbyist to identify correctly. Therefore, consult a veterinarian in cases of serious illness or when your bird does not improve within 2 or 3 days after receiving general treatment. The following are some of the most common diseases and/or problems and their treatments:

1. Diarrhea—This usually is noticed because of watery droppings and dirty feathers around the vent. The bird may not be very active. (Note: Soft-billed birds may have watery droppings because of their diet.) Treatment usually consists of placing the bird in a hospital cage and withholding green feed. (A little Terramycin or other antibiotic may help.)
2. Egg-bound—This is a condition in female birds in which the bird is unable to lay an egg. The bird will make straining movements, attempting to lay the egg, often on or near the nest. This bird should be placed in a small box on a warm hot-water bottle (100° F.). A small amount of mineral or olive oil placed inside of the vent with a cotton-tipped swab may also help. If this fails, it may be necessary to break the egg carefully and let the contents run out. Crush the shell by squeezing the vent; then pick out the pieces of shell with tweezers.
3. Sore eyes—Often this problem is noticed first because of the bird's red or swollen eyelids, with the bird rubbing the side of its head against perch or cage. This problem can usually be relieved with a warm and weak boric-acid eyewash.
4. Sore feet—This condition is usually caused by unclean or rough perches. Clean the perches. Wash the bird's feet daily with mild boric-acid solution and apply zinc oxide salve.
5. Overgrown toenails and beaks—These should be carefully trimmed once a month if normal wear does not keep them in shape.
6. Lice, mites—Examine the bird for these parasites monthly and treat if necessary with approved powders or sprays.
7. Feather pulling—This may be caused by a lack of some requirement in the feed or by low humidity.
8. Unexpected molt—Normally birds lose their feathers during late summer and early fall. Molting at other times is usually due to poor management in feeding, keeping the cage too warm, or varying the length of daylight.
9. Ornithosis (psittacosis)—"Bird fever" is the name of a virus disease that can affect all species of birds. It was originally called psittacosis, or "parrot fever," because it was thought to occur only in this species. This disease is important to us because it can affect people. (This has led to a restriction on importations

cage birds raised by individuals. Symptoms vary but are similar to those of a very bad cold. It will be difficult for you to diagnose this disease, since it is not common, so rely on your veterinarian to identify it.

10. Newcastle disease—This is a serious disease that can affect any bird. In the early stages, it looks like a bad cold. Later it may cause the bird to be unable to stand or walk properly. Death may result. No medication works very well against this disease. It spreads easily and exists in many foreign countries. Because it can easily spread to chicken and turkey flocks, the government has set up strict rules for importing pet birds in order to reduce the chances of spreading Newcastle disease.

NUTRITION OF CAGE BIRDS

Basic Needs:

Protein

Vitamins

Minerals

Energy

+

fresh air and clean water

Soft-bills—Robins, Mynahs, Toucans, Nightingales

The basic diet of soft-billed birds is insects and fruit. Because of this soft diet, their droppings are a bit messier than those of seed eaters, or hard-bills.

A mixture of dried insects, ant eggs, kemp meal, and suet is a good ration for soft-bills. The size of the birds you are caring for will suggest the size of mix or pellets to feed. The smaller breeds of soft-bills can be fed a mockingbird mix, while the larger soft-bills can be fed a mynah mix. These mixtures are usually fairly dry and are best fed with a grated carrot or apple added for moisture. This moisture is in addition to the drinking water. Soft-bills do not need grit or gravel.

In addition to the commercial mixes your birds will enjoy a few treats. Hard-boiled egg, bits of hamburger, insects, worms, and fresh fruit are all tidbits your bird will enjoy. These treats, and especially mealworms, can also be used if you are taming your bird.

It is necessary to keep both feed and water before the birds at all times. Feed and water dishes should be emptied and cleaned daily.

Young soft-bills need generous amounts of live insects each day to be healthy, and this tends to discourage many people from breeding these interesting birds. A good project for older members interested in this area would be to grow a mealworm colony to feed the young soft-bills. (Instructions for growing mealworms and starter cultures can be obtained from your local pet shops.)

Hard-Bills

The "finch mixture" is the stock food for hard-billed birds. It is usually made of about one part red millet, two to three parts common yellow millet, three or four parts small white millet, and two to three parts canary seed.

You can feed green food such as watercress, lettuce, cabbage, and alfalfa in limited amounts. Watch for loose droppings, and if they are present, quit feeding greens for 4 days. Also, clover, dandelions, spinach, and fruits such as apples, pears, and oranges can be fed in small amounts. Feed only what the bird will eat in about 12 hours. Remove uneaten green feed each day. Seaweed is often added to egg and other mixtures to provide iodine and minerals. This is usually dried and finely ground, and is sold in small packages in pet and department stores. Cheddar and cottage cheese can be given in small pieces. These are good sources of protein, especially for molting and nesting birds. For variety in the diet you can hard boil an egg for 20 minutes, then mash the whole egg very fine and add 2 tablespoons of dried and crumbled whole-wheat bread, crackers, or toast. Mix completely and feed as a crumbly mass.

Cuttlebone is a fish bone that birds will pick at and get some minerals from. This will give them exercise and wear their beaks at the same time, both of which are good for the bird.

Some colored foods will make the feathers brighter. Feed them to birds during normal molt, or to young birds at the age of 10 weeks. These foods are very effective in certain kinds of canaries in bringing out color. One colored food may be made by mixing one tablespoon of egg food and 1/2 teaspoon of fresh paprika with 2 to 3 drops of olive oil. Give birds 1/2 teaspoonful per day until the feathers show color. This amount can be reduced slowly until the end of the molt. During this time, also offer the birds flax seed in addition to their regular bird seed which you buy at the pet shop. To help keep this color, it is necessary to keep birds out of direct strong light.

Hard-bills need grit to digest their food. It stays in the gizzard and takes the place of teeth. Commercial grit usually contains quartz sand, shell, bone, and salt. Grit on the floor of the cage also helps to keep birds' feet clean.

Following are specifics for diets of various kinds of hard-bills:-

Parakeets

Use parakeet mixes; these contain mainly millet and oat groats.

Canaries

Canary mixes contain rape and canary seed in addition to millet. Purchased mixtures are all right, but if you use one, make sure it is fresh. Crack a few seeds to make sure you are feeding more than just hulls.

Cockatiels

Use parakeet mixtures plus hemp and sunflower seeds. These birds also relish whole-wheat bread, which may be soaked in milk to form a crumbly mass. Chicken starter mash can be used for young and old cockatiels and should be used in the crumbled form.

Lovebirds

Lovebirds can be fed cockatiel diets and given small amounts of apple or other green foods.

Finches

The diet should contain all of the bird's needs in the proper amounts and be thoroughly mixed so each day's food satisfies the bird. Special finch mixes should be used because these birds are small and eat only small amounts. Home mixing is not recommended. Finches also enjoy small amounts of green foods.

Doves

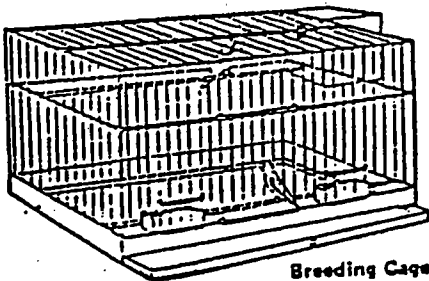
Mixtures of milo, wheat, millet, small field peas, and small-kernel corn are used. Doves will need quite a bit of feed when feeding young in the nest.

REPRODUCTION

Mating a pair of cage birds and attempting to raise a nest of young is a very interesting project for the second- and third-year 4-H member. It may be good for the first-year member to learn the care and the habits of the bird the first year and try mating a pair and raising young the following season.

When birds are being mated, they need small particles of oyster shells, finely ground eggshell, or calcium grit in order to be able to make the shell for their own eggs.

Each kind of bird has special nesting habits and its own incubation period for the eggs. The various kinds of birds also do their jobs differently. That is, in some cases, the duties of nest care, incubation, and feeding the young are shared by both parents, while with other kinds of birds one parent does most or all of the work.



Breeding Cage

Before trying to raise any kind of cage birds, 4-H members should know most of the habits and needs of their particular kind of bird.

MORE INFORMATION You can find out more about cage birds by reading and talking to knowledgeable persons at the following places:

1. Local library.
2. Pet shops (these usually have inexpensive books on each of the common kinds.)
3. Zoos.
4. Local breeders (if there are some in your area).
5. Your County Extension Agent with assistance from the state university and U.S.D.A.
6. Specialized magazines.
7. Clubs and organizations of bird breeders.
8. 4-H'ers who carried the project last year can often guide you to sources of information in your area.

Suggested Books and Periodicals

This is a list of informative books and magazines, which you may be able to find at the library:

1. *Bird Diseases*, L. Arnall and I. F. Keyner, T.F.H. Publications.
2. *Cage Bird Magazine*, 3449-51 N. Western Avenue, Chicago, IL 60618
3. *Introduction to Finches and Soft-bills*, T.F.H. Publications.
4. *Parrots and Parrot-like Birds*, Allan, T.F.H. Publications.
5. *Diseases of Canaries*, Robert Stroud, T.F.H. Publications.
6. *Budgerigar Handbook*, Hart, T.F.H. Publications.
7. *Cage Bird Identifier*, Bechtel, Sterling Press.
8. *Cage and Aviary Birds*, Risdon, Transatlantic Arts Press.
9. *Seed-Eating Birds as Pets*, Rogers, Scribners.
10. *Aviary Birds*, Low, Barnes & Co.

The illustrations of the yellow bunting and Hartz Mountain canary on page 3 are from J. N. Albright's *Canaries and Other Cage Birds*, (Des Moines, Iowa: Campbell Publishing Co.). The breeding cage illustration on page 7 is from *Parakeets, Their Care and Breeding* (Reseda, Calif.: Bird Haven Publishing Co.) 1954.



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