

## Budgerigar or Parakeet

Budgies are without a doubt the world's most popular pet parrot, and one of the most common pets worldwide. Budgies are ideal pets for people of all ages. They are hardy and easy to care for. The budgie is also known as the common parakeet, shell parakeet or Budgerigar. Their scientific name is *Melopsittacus undulatus* and they are the only species in this genus. (a monotypic genus). Natives of Australia, the word Budgerigar, means "good to eat" in the language of the Australian aborigines. They come in a small, or standard size, often referred to as the American Budgie or extra large sized English Budgies. Budgies are admired for their engaging personalities, small size, and wide range of color varieties and ease of maintenance.

Budgies are small bundles of energy, personality and vitality. They are always active, playing with toys, chattering, and interacting with each other or their owners. Budgies are highly domesticated and have been bred for over 200 years. They are readily available worldwide and usually modestly priced although some English budgie show birds may be worth several hundred dollars each in value.

When buying a budgie make sure you buy a young bird. Young budgies can be recognized by dark spots or stripes on the beak and dark, almost black eyes. Young budgies also have more stripes on the top of the head than adult birds and these stripes can be used to estimate their age. Very young birds have stripes, which start just behind the cere (bare skin around the nostrils). In adult birds these stripes recede until they extend from the eyes straight up and across the top of the head and the eye color is white. The cere of a young bird is also pinkish flesh color while the cere of an adult male budgie is blue and that of an adult female is brownish.

The voice of a budgie is a constant pleasant warbling chatter with occasional sharp chattering. Budgies can easily be taught to talk but have a squeaky speaking voice, which is difficult to understand. They are especially fond of words like itty, bitty, pretty bird.

## Appearance

Wild type or normal colored budgies are a beautiful bright green with a yellow face and forehead. The covert feathers (body contour feathers) have black scalloping on the edges, which form lines across the top of the head and down the neck and back. There is a small bright blue cheek spot. Their long tapered tail has a prominent band on ends of the lateral tail feathers. Their beak is yellow tipped in brown. Budgies typically maintain their plumage in good condition and have very sleek feathering.

Through the years many color mutations have been established in captivity and budgies are now available in a rainbow of colors. Initial color mutations were blues and yellows with further crosses and mutations producing whites, grays, pided (irregular blotches of lighter colors). All of these colors are now available in a variety of shades. Budgies are

truly birds of many colors. Keep in mind however that color mutations are typically not as strong and healthy as the normal green color.

Wild type budgies and the typical American budgie are 7-8 inches. English budgies are slightly longer (8-9 inches). American budgies usually weigh approximately 30 grams (1 ounce) while English budgies may weigh twice as much.

Wild, budgies are the normal color, green and yellow. They are often encountered in large noisy flocks, which twist and turn in unison in flight. Widely distributed throughout most of Australia, budgies are extremely abundant and nomadic. Flocks may show seasonal shifts or migrations towards the south in the summer and north in winter. Wild budgies inhabit arid regions. Some authors claim that wild budgie flocks do not exist outside of Australia. Others report that budgies have been introduced successfully into a number of areas and are established exotics in South Africa, UK, Japan, Hong Kong, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Switzerland, Colombia, New Zealand and Florida. The world population is estimated at 5,000,000.

Despite claims that they can live without water, they are frequently found near watering holes and come in huge flocks (15,000) to drink. They are ground feeders eating primarily grass seeds. They nest in small tree hollows, a hole in a stump or log and lay 4-8 eggs. Incubation lasts 18 days. Chicks take 5 weeks to fledge.

Taming and training. Young budgies are easily tamed and hand rearing is not necessary to obtain an excellent pet. Select a young bird and clip the wings (Juvenile clip – 6-8 primary feathers) so that he can be handled and tamed but will not be injured if he jumps from your hand. Adult birds will need more extensive clip. Start by teaching the bird to “step-up” on your finger. Carry the bird, cupped in your hands, into a small room, such as a bathroom and sit on the floor. Allow him to climb onto your fore finger as you say “step-up”. If he jumps down pick him up again and repeat this process numerous times. Then practice step up the to the forefinger of the other hand. This practice session should take place daily and will allow you to interact with him in an expected way daily.

### Diet and Feeding

Historically budgies have been fed only seed mixes consisting primarily of white millet. While they can survive for an extended period of time on such a diet, eventually they fall into poor health. The rate of cancer is very high in budgies, which may be a reflection of chronic poor diet. Budgies shell their seeds so vitamins added to the outside will be discarded. It is a common practice to give a budgie a large bowl of seed (relative to it's size, and leave it for a few days. The bird will then leave the shells in the feed cup as he eats and the cup full of seeds may appear to be a cup full of seed. This may lead to starvation. Preferably the bird should be given a smaller bowl and just a little bit more seed than he will eat daily. The cup should be emptied every day and replaced with fresh food.

Pelleted diets, made in a small size are available for budgies and provide balanced nutrition in every bite. Kaytee Exact Parakeet diet can be substituted for seeds and seeds can be given as treats, or feed Kaytee fortified seed mixes. A very nice diet is Kaytee Fusion, which is a mixture of half Exact pellets and half fortified seed mix. Budgies should also be offered small amounts of fresh dark green leafy vegetables, tiny slices of apple, grapes, melons, sprouts, or other fresh foods are relished by budgies, which have been introduced to them especially at a young age. Boiled eggs or commercial egg food are excellent for young and breeding budgies but care must be taken in avoiding contamination, leaving moist foods in the cage too long. Budgies are susceptible to goiter and need a source of iodine if feed only seeds. Vitamins should also be given and can be provided in the water but the bowl or water bottle must be washed daily to prevent bacterial over-growth. Vitamin supplementation is not necessary if the bird eats a polluted diet.

Contrary to popular belief budgies do not need grit. They will consume it and if they are in good health it will not harm them but if they don't feel well they may eat too much resulting in an impaction.

## Housing

Budgies are small but they are very active and should be given plenty of room to move around their cage. They should have at least 2 perches far enough apart to jump or fly between. Cage size should be at least 18 inches square. If bars are horizontal they can more readily climb around the cage.

The floor of the cage should ideally be lined with paper, newspaper or craft paper. Sheets of paper cut to the size of the cage floor make daily paper changing easy. Make it a habit to look at the stools of your bird every day when changing the paper. This is an excellent way to monitor its health. If your budgie is eating seeds the feces should look like a small dark round dot (the feces) with a smaller white spot (the urates or solid urine) on top. If he is eating pellets the feces will be slightly more bulky and may contain colors from the pellets, which pass harmlessly through the digestive tract. Some colors may also show up in the urates. If you feed greens or vegetables they can also make the stools more bulky and liquid. Stop feeding these foods and the feces should return to the more typical appearance.

The cage should be placed so it is not directly below an air conditioning vent, or in a direct sunlight from a window, but should be in an area of the home where there is much activity. Budgies are very social and like to be the center of attention. If you keep your budgie in the kitchen, always be aware of the dangers of Teflon poisoning, cleaning chemicals, oven cleaners. (Teflon poisoning occurs when a Teflon pot or pan is overheated, not during normal cooking temperatures).

The cage should have at least 2 perches. Don't use sandpaper perch covers as they are very abrasive on the feet. Place one perch near the food and water to allow easy access. Budgies adore a swing and will spend hours playing on it. A small rope perch is also fun.

Toys should be supplied to keep the budgie busy and he should be introduced to a variety of toys at a young age so he is not frightened of them. Budgies, especially single birds, also love mirrors and will even court their image. Illness may occur if the budgie continually regurgitates as if to feed its image (mate) in the mirror. In such cases you may need to remove the mirror. Budgies love bells, toys with moving parts, and little plastic fake budgie companions. They also like toys that they can enter like little snuggle companions, paper bags, boxes, etc.

## Grooming

Budgies love baths and small birds baths can be purchased that will fit into the door of a standard budgie cage. This can be filled with luke warm water and all the bird to enter as he chooses. Budgies can also be bathed by misting with a fine mist spray bottle. They should be bathed twice weekly to maintain excellent plumage.

Wing clipping is essential for initial training of the budgie and will need periodic renewal as the flight feathers are regrown. Many people keep their bird full flighted and a flying budgie in the home can be delightful. If you do choose to keep your bird flighted however there are safety concerns. Accidents are often associated with ceiling fans, birds falling into open toilets, swimming pools, pots on the stove, etc. Escapes can also happen very quickly when a door is suddenly opened and the bird becomes startled and flies out.

Nails should be kept an appropriate length, as overgrown nails can be a hazard as well. They can be clipped with fingernail clippers watching for the quick (vein) inside the nail. Since a budgie's nails are white the vein can be seen easily and the nail should be clipped a little bit past the vein. In case a nail bleeds after it is cut, you can stop the bleeding by application of quick stop. If no such product is available you can stick the nail into a bar of soap, apply flour or cornstarch or you can light a match, blow it out and cauterize the nail on the hot head of the match. Because of their small size control of bleeding is important.

Budgies are often identified by a leg band by the breeder. These bands often show the hatch year and code of the breeder. They may also indicate the family of the budgie. If well fitted they represent negligible risk but may help you to retrieve your bird if it is lost.

## Breeding

Budgies are very easily bred and a pair will breed and raise their babies in the home, right in front of the family. Budgies are dimorphic (The male has a blue cere and the female has a pinkish brown cere). Budgies can breed when they are 1 year old. They can be bred in pair cages or in colony flight cages.

The breeding cage should be larger than a single pet cage. A good size is approximately 24 inches long, 20 inches tall and 18 inches wide. A small wooden box can be mounted at a top corner. The box should be approximately 4" x 4" x 6" or 6" x 6" x 6". Nest boxes are usually available at the local pet store. Pine shaving can be used however

budgies often don't use nesting material in the box but lay their eggs on the floor. Breeders typically supply a box with a concave depression in the center of the floor, which keeps the eggs together in the center. The hen lays 4-8 eggs, 1-2 days apart and she usually starts to incubate with the second or third eggs. This can result in quite a size difference between the oldest and youngest chicks in the clutch. For that reason some chicks may be lost if they are too small to compete with their siblings.

Incubation is the shortest of all parrots (except for the odd vasa parrot) and the eggs hatch after 18 days of incubation. Provide plenty of food for the pair to feed their young, especially eggs food and some fresh greens. Both parents share in caring for the young and they are ready to fledge (emerge from the box) when they are 5 weeks old. Babies are clumsy and should not be allowed to fly free initially as they can be easily injured in their clumsy flight attempts.

Breeding pairs are often in a hurry to start another clutch of eggs and may abuse the chicks to force them from the nest. Chicks may be plucked or bitten. Such chicks may need to be removed for hand feeding. Hand feeding budgies, especially if very small is very challenging due to their small size. A standard hand-rearing formula such as Pretty Bird 19/8 is a good formula. It can be fed with an eyedropper or 1 cc syringe. Always follow label instruction for preparation. If you have a gram scale, you can feed 10% of the body weight at each feeding, or fill the crop to the point where it looks and feels full but not overfilled.

Budgies will breed year-round if allowed to which will exhaust the hen. After 3 clutches in a year the nest box should be removed and the birds forced to rest. Reducing the photoperiod (reduce to around 10 hours of light daily) will also help to shut them down.

Professional budgie breeding developed as a huge "cottage industry" in the mid-west United States in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many breeders produced budgies in incredible numbers in large colony breeding cages, or in banks of hundreds of pair breeding cages. This allowed widespread availability of budgies throughout the country. Additionally most cities will have many hobby budgie breeders. Many people just enjoy keeping a few pairs of the delightful little birds in their home and sell their offspring to local pet shops.

## Diseases

Tumors – Common tumors include fatty tumors, testicular tumors, kidneys, adrenal tumors and many other types.

Goiter – Iodine deficiency will cause enlargement of the thyroid gland that can cause changes in the bird's voice.

Psittacosis or Parrot Fever – Caused by the bacteria *Chlamydia psittaci*, this disease can be transmitted to people. Birds should be tested, especially if going into the home of elderly people.

Cnemidocoptes mites – Scaly face and scaly leg mite causes build-up of scales with tiny holes on the surface of the feet and beak. Can cause beak deformities.

Liver disease – Probably associated most often with poor nutrition, however can also be associated with many disease processes.

Polyoma virus – First described as “budgie fledgling disease” this virus causes death of chicks as they emerge from the nest.

Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease – causes poor formation of flight and tail feathers (often in combination with polyoma. Affected birds are often referred to as creepers because they have not flight feathers and cannot fly).

Brown hypertrophy of the cere – a hormonal imbalance of older female budgies.

Megabacteria – Historically called “going light” the bacteria is probably actually a yeast infection and is treated with antifungal drugs. It causes chronic weight loss.

Protozoal infections – trichomonas and giardia are common protozoal infection, especially in breeding colonies of budgies.

Traumatic accidents and accidental poisonings are common causes of death in budgies.

Don’t allow them un-supervised freedom in the home. Pet budgies are often killed by other family pets (cats & dogs).

Ideally you pet budgie should have a yearly examination by a veterinarian to help it live to it’s potential. Budgies can live up to 15 to 18 years with good nutrition and care.