

Converting "Seed Junkies" Into Table Food Connoisseurs

A "seed junkie" is a caged bird that eats only seeds and nuts, steadfastly refusing all other foods offered. Unfortunately, such an exclusive diet guarantees ill health and a greatly shortened life expectancy for these pet birds. Why do caged birds become so easily "hooked" on seeds (primarily sunflower and safflower) and nuts (peanuts most notably) when these foods are rarely part of their diet in the wild? The answer has 2 parts.

The first part concerns the wide availability, popularity and relative feeding convenience (including lack of perishability) of seed/nut mixtures, most often called "parrot mixes." The second part concerns the relatively high fat content of these food items. For years, there has been speculation that sunflower seeds contain some addictive property. Recent research at the University of California at Davis has revealed that the relatively high fat (oil) content of these foods produces an "energy rush" or "high" similar to the "sugar rushes" from consuming "junk foods" containing lots of sugar.

Parrots, given the opportunity, preferentially eat these high-fat foods. When deprived of them, they exhibit profound depression and a craving for the seeds. This almost addictive quality of seeds certainly contributes to the huge number of "seed junkies" currently being kept as pet birds.

Variety is Important

Caged birds should be fed a wide variety of high-quality foodstuffs. Seeds and nuts in the diet must be restricted to maximize optimal health and prevent disease. Unfortunately, just because we offer a veritable smorgasbord every day to our pet birds, this is no guarantee that they will consume the foods. Further, there is certainly no guarantee that our birds will consume food items in the proper dietary proportions.

Caged birds tend to select their foods according to habit (what they are accustomed to eating), and the appearance of the foods offered. If the food item is unfamiliar, or, worse yet, perceived as threatening by the bird, it will not attempt to eat it. Birds must become familiar with a food before any experimentation is likely. Visual and tactile (touch and feel) familiarity seem to be important.

Diet changes should never be attempted with sick birds or those suffering from multiple stresses (change of environment, introduction of a new cage mate, exposure to temperature extremes, etc) because forcing a bird to experiment with unfamiliar foods produces a fair amount of stress by itself.

Many larger caged birds developed very poor eating habits (dependence on seeds) during holding and quarantine before purchase. Seeds may have been the only or predominant food offered during these periods. Birds, like people, can become easily habituated in their feeding behavior and diet.

Birds must gain substantial familiarity with a given food item before they will attempt to eat it. However, it is usually *not* sufficient to offer what the bird prefers (seeds) along with new food items. It is unlikely that the bird will completely ignore its particular preferences in favor of the new foods.

Introducing New Foods

Vary the Form

How the new food items are presented can make a big difference to your bird. Carrots are a particularly good dietary source of vitamin A and are, therefore, high on the list of recommended foods for caged birds. We will use this food item to illustrate a point. Your bird may be frightened, or at least suspicious, of a whole carrot or carrot stick because of that food's size and shape, but the bird might be more willing to sample grated carrot or carrot peelings. Further, your bird may actually prefer eating cooked to raw carrots because of the change in texture produced by the cooking. Sometimes, presenting a given food item in an entirely different form hastens its consumption. For example, your bird might willingly accept carrot cake even though it has steadfastly refused carrot in all of the other variations you have offered. Be prepared to take many weeks, months or even a year or more for your bird to totally accept food items other than seeds and nuts.

Restrict Seeds

Another method of encouraging experimentation with other foods involves restricting the amount of seeds offered every day. Estimate the quantity of seeds that your bird will consume without any restriction in a 24-hour period as accurately as possible, and then offer only half of this estimated amount each day. This ensures that your bird will not starve but should still be hungry enough to begin to experiment with the table food items you have offered.

Mix with Seeds

Sometimes, mixing unfamiliar food items directly with the seeds fosters gradual acceptance and sampling of them. In other cases, caged birds totally ignore even the seeds and refuse to eat anything for days (a dangerous situation).

Sprouting Seeds

The seeds preferred by your pet bird can be sprouted and offered in this form. The advantage of this strategy is that sprouted seeds have a lower oil content, and feeding them assists the "seed junkie" in making the transition from seeds to more fleshy foods, such as vegetables and fruit.

Seeds can be sprouted within a plastic wrap-covered cake pan. First, the seeds to be sprouted should be soaked in water overnight. Next, the bottom of the cake pan is covered with wet paper towels, after which a single layer of soaked seeds is placed on top of them. Plastic wrap is then tightly fitted over the top of the pan and a few holes are created in the covering. The pan is then placed in a warm environment and the paper towels are checked and re-moistened daily. If the seed is of good quality, sprouts should be forthcoming within 2-5 days. They should be rinsed several times in cold water and stored in the refrigerator to prevent bacterial and fungal contamination.

Monkey See, Monkey Do

Some birds may be more agreeable to trying new foods if they see their owners eating the food. Therefore, bringing your bird to the dinner table may be a rewarding ploy. Hand feeding new food items may also help your bird to accept new and unfamiliar foods. Don't feed your bird from your mouth because the normal bacteria flora in your mouth may be harmful to caged birds.

Try Soft Foods

Another usually successful strategy involves getting a reluctant bird to first unconditionally accept and consume a particular soft food, such as baby cereal, oatmeal, cream of wheat, or strained baby food (fruit, vegetables). A powdered vitamin/mineral/amino acid supplement, such as Nekton-S (Nekton Products, West Germany) can then be mixed into this food to immediately improve the bird's nutritional status. Once the bird is readily eating this food, begin to mix unfamiliar or untried foods into the soft food. Continue this until the bird begins to accept a wide variety of food items, whether or not they are presented within the soft food itself.

New Area

It may be helpful to introduce new foods by placing them below a mirror or adjacent to a favorite toy within the bird's cage. Some birds are more willing to accept new foods if fed outside of their cage in a favorite area.

Remove Seeds

Another method for encouraging "seed junkies" to accept and eat other foods is to remove most, but not all, of the 1-2 types of seeds your bird most prefers. An alternative involves removing preferred seeds at night and not replacing them in the morning. They are then added into the food cup later in the day only if your bird refuses to eat any of the other foods available. This process is repeated day after day.

Interval Feeding

"Interval feeding" is another way to encourage acceptance of new foods by your bird. Instead of leaving food in the cage 24 hours each day, offer a greatly restricted amount of seeds along with a large variety of table food items for just 20-30 minutes, 3 times a day. After this period, all of the uneaten food is removed. The water dish remains in the cage at all times and should be replenished as needed.

Interval feeding may well become the "way of the future" for the great majority of pet birds. Given the opportunity, birds will overeat just like many people do. The larger caged birds (parrots, cockatoos, macaws) live many years (potentially as long as 60-70 years plus). Unfortunately, their lives are considerably more sedentary than those of their counterparts in the wild. This relative inactivity, combined with boredom and the opportunity to eat any time of the day, inevitably results in overeating and obesity. This is yet another reason to greatly restrict the intake of seeds and nuts in the diets of caged birds. These food items are especially rich in fats and oils.

Hospitalization May Be Necessary

When all else fails with attempts to "persuade" your bird to accept and consume new food items, hospitalization may achieve results. At this time, your bird is first allowed to acclimate to its new environment. Then the staff gradually weans the bird off of seeds and onto table food. The key to success is thought to be having the bird away from its owner.

Patience is Rewarded

All strategies mentioned above should be considered and attempted to encourage your pet bird to accept and consume a wide variety of table food items. It cannot be overemphasized that *you must be very persistent and patient* with your bird. Improving your bird's diet requires a total commitment on your part. It may take many many months to achieve the desired result, but the effort made and frustration endured will pay dividends in improved health and a long life for your companion.

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