

Problems and Solutions : What to Feed?: A Solution

By Peter Feldman

It used to be so simple. You found a good seed mix and might let the bird munch on a piece of fruit as a treat, but for the most part it lived on seeds.

Perhaps the hottest debate in aviculture today is being waged over the question of what to feed our pet birds. There are the old timers who feel that a seed diet, supplemented with some fruits and vegetables is fine, and they have the long-lived pets to prove it. There are the nutritional specialists who, after several years of work, proclaim that pet birds should be fed nothing but the newly formulated pellets or crumbles. A third group is made up of those who take an intermediate position - pellets, seeds and some human food. What's a bird owner to do?

Certain facts are clear by now. First, seeds do not provide a sufficiently balanced array of nutrients for our pets. Field studies, the few that have been done, clearly show that wild birds eat a variety of foods including seeds, grasses, fruits, and the occasional live insect. There are species of parrots that specialize in one type of food. The fig parrots are an example, but they are the exception, not the rule. Second, most pet birds seem to enjoy some variety in their food. Many is the time I have had a seven or eight week old cockatiel that is just being weaned go after a piece of pasta, or fruit, or fruit juice. And we all have seen parrots eating anything from pizza to chicken. One of my cockatiels even likes fish, including pickled herring. Thirdly, different species have different likes and dislikes and, probably, different nutritional needs. There are pet birds who will not eat fruit, others who will not eat vegetables, and so on. While the variety of foods that a particular bird eats may be selected by taste, that sense of taste is connected in ways we do not understand to the nutritional needs of the bird in question. In other words, birds, as well as all wild animals, eat what they need to eat.

The research that led to our modern pelleted and extruded foods came from years of work with poultry, particularly chickens. Over the years, farmers and scientists worked hard to find combinations of food that would increase the yield from egg layers or would add weight in the form of protein rather than fat to pullets and fryers. Researchers added to this body of knowledge information gleaned from the work of zoo keepers, who discovered that many animals require special nutrient fortification because of the stresses of

being kept in captivity. The result is pelleted food that is touted to be absolutely complete.

A few years ago I made the attempt to shift my birds over to pelleted food. After a few weeks, most of them ate the new food but I discovered a problem. They were eating at every moment of the day, to the exclusion of almost any other activity. They did not seem to ever be satisfied with the amounts of pellets they had eaten. Something was wrong. The problem was cured when I added mixed seeds to the pellets. Thanks to that experience, and the facts mentioned above, my birds now get a commercial mix that combines several types of seeds with several shapes and flavours of pellets. This is their base food. To this is added a daily portion of fruits and/ or vegetables, small amounts of pasta, and some hard boiled egg a couple of times a week. They are also allowed to eat from my plate from time to time. Why? It is my belief that the pellets provide almost all of the nutrition needed. But, it should be kept in mind that pellets are sold by size, not by species of bird. There has not been enough research to prove that conures and cockatiels, amazons and greys, macaws and cockatoos require exactly the same nutrition. The seeds in the diet I feed provide small amounts of added nutrients. Just as important, the seeds also provide different textures for the birds to deal with, as well as the activity of hulling the seeds as they eat. Just as we sometimes crave a hard food, or a soft and creamy food, I think that birds also require such variety. The same is true of fruit and vegetables. I stick with yellow and orange veggies, such as corn and squash and bell peppers. Fruits include apples, oranges, raisins and dates, peaches, papaya, and grapes. The hard boiled egg is fed for its nutrient value and because all of my birds love it.

It is true that many pet parrots have lived long lives on seeds alone. And time will show that some parrots will live long and healthy lives on pellets alone. Sooner or later, scientists will begin to make pellets that are species specific, each different pellet providing just the mix of nutrients for a particular type of bird. Until that day arrives, and possibly even after that day arrives, my birds will benefit from the idea that variety is not only the spice of life, but one of its chief necessities.

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