

Poicephalus Parrot

Genus *Poicephalus*



LIFE SPAN: 20-50 years, depending on species.

AVERAGE SIZE: from 8 - 14 inches, 100-300 grams, depending on the species

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written by an expert in the pet care industry and approved by an avian veterinarian

the information on this care sheet is a basic overview and not a substitute for veterinary care. For more information and to find a qualified avian veterinarian, go to www.AAV.org.

WILD HISTORY: The genus *Poicephalus* includes 9 species native to the tropic and sub-Saharan regions of Africa ranging from Ethiopia, Senegal to South Africa. Some *Poicephalus* species are sexually dimorphic (males and females are visually different), and some are not. A proper DNA test by a qualified avian veterinarian can tell you whether your pet is male or female.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: The name *Poicephalus* literally translates from the Greek to "made of head." *Poicephalus* parrots are small to medium sized, stocky birds with short, square tails and large heads and beaks. Common species in captivity include the smaller Senegal, red-bellied, Meyer's and brown-headed and the larger red-fronted (Jardines). Less commonly kept is the largest, the Cape parrot.

NORMAL PARROT BEHAVIOR AND INTERACTION: *Poicephalus* are shy, easy going, calm parrots. They can be very playful and outgoing when they are comfortable with their surroundings. *Poicephalus* react more strongly to change than other parrots do, so any changes should be made slowly. *Poicephalus* can learn to talk, although they generally do not have a clear voice and do not learn many words. They are known for mimicking sounds extremely well, and many a *Poicephalus* keeper has gone to the microwave to respond to a beep when nothing is cooking.

Parrots are flock-oriented animals, and they do well with other birds in the home to communicate with. However, you and your family become part of your bird's flock as well. Some parrots often get labeled as "one person birds." Although this may sometimes seem to be the case, many members of the household can have a good relationship with the family bird. Because most parrots mate for life in the wild, it is natural to choose one person to have that closest relationship with.

Every parrot, even within the same species, has his or her

own personality. Some parrots are very bold and interactive, and some are subdued and shy. The more you work with your parrot, the more comfortable it will become and the more his or her own personality will emerge.

DIET: Contrary to popular belief, parrots do not live by seed (or nuts) alone! A seed/nut-only diet can result in nutrient deficiency and diseases such as liver, kidney and heart disease, as well as obesity, all of which can severely shorten the life expectancy of your pet.

Pelleted diets have been carefully formulated to meet the specific needs of the pet parrot. If your bird is not used to pellets, they can be mixed with seed. As time goes on, you can slowly convert your bird to a majority of pellet and fresh food diet.

Your parrot should also be offered fresh vegetables, fruit and grains daily. *Poicephalus* also eat insects in the wild, so provide small portions of cooked egg, chicken, beans or other healthy protein. Be sure to remove any fresh foods that have not been eaten within a 24-hour period.

Never feed your parrot chocolate, sugary/fried foods, avocado, or junk food. Good treats include Lafebers® Nutri-berries® or Avi-Cakes.® See our **Avian Nutrition** Handout for more information!

SUPPLEMENTS: If your bird is eating a balanced diet, the only supplement that you will need is calcium. Calcium can usually be offered in the form of a cuttlebone or mineral block. Do not use gravel or grit as it can cause impactions. For optimal calcium metabolism, your bird will need some UVB exposure for at least 3-4 hours a day. Careful outdoor sun exposure or indoor UV lighting is recommended (see our **UV Lighting** handout).

WATER: Clean, fresh water must always be available and should be changed daily. All water should ideally be free of fluorine, chlorine and heavy metals. We recommend that you use unflavored bottled drinking water or bottled natural spring water. If tap water is used, you should treat it with a water conditioner. If you do not want to chemically de-chlorinate the water, you can leave an open container of tap water out for at least 24 hours with exposure to ultraviolet light. Do not use distilled water, which can cause severe medical problems, since it lacks minerals that are essential to important body functions.

Because your bird will often even bathe or dunk food in its water, it must be checked/changed several times a day. It is recommended that the bowl be wiped clean with a paper towel at every change to prevent a slimy film (bacteria) from collecting on the inside of the bowl. Thoroughly wash the bowl with a mild dishwashing detergent and water at least once a day.

HOUSING & ENVIRONMENT: *Poicephalus* need a clean, warm, mentally stimulating environment. The cage should be at least 24" x 24" x 22." The spacing between the bars of the cage should be no wider than ¾ of an inch. Select a powder-coated or stainless steel parrot cage, free of rust and chips. The cage should be placed in a family-centered room where the bird will feel like a part of the "flock"; however, the back of the cage should be positioned against a wall to provide security. Avoid drafty areas and any placement that will get too much direct sun for any portion of the day. If your bird spends time out of its cage, make sure that any ceiling fans are off. Do not place your bird's cage in the kitchen, as

cooking fumes and even a small amount of smoke can be fatal. Average room temperature will be fine for your bird, not to exceed 80 degrees. Be careful of drafts from air conditioning, especially when bathing and misting.

Perches of varying materials and types should be included in the cage, such as wood dowel, natural branch type, cotton rope or a cement perch. Having different sizes will exercise the feet and prevent sores and foot-related health issues. We do not recommend sandpaper covered perches as they are too abrasive for bird feet.

At least three clean bowls should be ready for use: one for fresh water, one for dry pellets/seed and one for fresh foods.

Use newspapers to line the bottom of the cage. It is easy to change and you can monitor your bird's feces daily. We do not recommend sandpaper floor paper or corn cob bedding. Corn cob can be ingested and cause obstructions and can grow molds on moist foods and feces.

We recommend against using mite protectors due to the potential for respiratory irritation (fortunately mites are not common in parrots). In addition, a smoke-free household is best for bird and owner!

Your bird may appreciate a cage cover for nighttime. The cover can block out any extraneous light and create a more secure sleeping place. Be careful not to use any fabrics for your cover that your bird might catch its claws or beak in, or that it might pull strings from and ingest.

ENRICHMENT: In the wild, parrots spend most of their day from morning until night flying and foraging for food. They also use their beaks constantly to chew open fruit and nuts. For the domestic parrot, their food is right at their beaks and this provides limited physical and mental enrichment.

At least three different types of toys should be available to your bird. Purchase *Poicephalus* size-appropriate toys, and remember that parrot toys are meant to be destroyed! Parrots enjoy shiny, wooden, cotton rope, and plastic toys. It is very important to purchase toys made specifically for parrots as they are much more likely to be safer in construction and material. Be sure to include foraging toys. These types of toys mimic the work that a bird might do to find food in the wild. Hide treats in cardboard tubes and balled up paper or purchase plastic puzzle toys, which force your pet to work for its treats!

Several types of "play places" should be available for safe supervised, out-of-cage playtime. A play gym and portable T-stand can allow your bird to spend time with you in different rooms. Supervised flying and walking/climbing is an excellent daily physical requirement.

RECOMMENDED SUPPLIES:

- Cage
- Perches
- Dishes
- Toys
- Play gym or T-stand
- Misting bottle and/or large crock for birdbath
- Nail clipper & styptic powder
- Pellet diet
- Treats
- Calcium supplement
- Fluorescent UVB Bulb and housing
- Cage cover

CAGE MAINTENANCE: Your parrot's cage should be checked daily. Feces and spoiled food should be wiped clean of perches, cups and cage bars consistently to prevent health problems. Cage paper can be changed every to every-other day. Check the metal parts & bars of your bird's cage periodically for chipped paint and rust, which can cause serious health issues if your bird chews or swallows any flaked pieces.

The entire cage should be cleaned thoroughly at least once every month with:

- A mild dishwashing liquid in warm water
- Vinegar & water (1:8) or bleach and warm water (1:32)
- Cage "furniture" should also be scrubbed clean with the same dilution.
- Rinse off all soap and bleach thoroughly with plain water before re-introducing your pet to its enclosure.
- NEVER MIX VINEGAR AND BLEACH - IT CREATES A TOXIC SOLUTION

GROOMING & HYGIENE: All birds should be gently misted with a water bottle dedicated to this use only. Some birds enjoy going in the shower with their owners. In addition to misting, a crock/bowl for bird bath should be offered to your bird at least twice weekly.

Be sure to take your bird to your avian veterinarian for regular nail and wing trims. Because *Poicephalus* are heavy-bodied birds, their wings must be trimmed conservatively to avoid injury from falling. *Never* use styptic powder on your bird's skin-nails only!

SIGNS OF A HEALTHY BIRD: A healthy bird should be perky, active and alert with bright, clear eyes, and nostrils. You should observe your bird eating and drinking throughout the day. Your bird should appear well groomed with neat, bright feathers. The feathers should be mostly smoothed to the body at rest - not continually fluffed. The feet and legs should be smooth and free of lumps, scabs and rough scales. Parrots vocalize regularly with chirps, clicks, whistles and learned words. Your bird should be interested in communicating, but may be shy or intimidated around new people or in new environments. A healthy bird is confident and inquisitive, although cautious and aware as well. We recommend your bird be seen by an avian vet for yearly health exams.

SOME COMMON HEALTH PROBLEMS THAT REQUIRE VETERINARY EVALUATION INCLUDE:

- Fluffed feathers, missing patches of feathers, feathers being purposely plucked.
- Evidence that your bird has stopped grooming.
- Bird sitting still and low on perch with a puffed-up appearance, drooping wings; may also stay at bottom of cage.
- Beak swelling or unusual marks on cere.
- Nasal discharge, eye discharge, wheezing or coughing.
- Any change in stools including color or consistency.
- Loss of appetite.
- Favoring of one foot, holding a wing differently, presence of any blood.