



Budgerigars

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The budgerigar (*Melopsittacus undulatas*) or “budgie” is actually a small member of the parrot family, and one of the most popular pet birds in the world. Originally from Australia, in its native territory large flocks can commonly be seen, constantly roving over the semi-arid plains. They migrate over the continent as the weather changes, spending the summer in southern regions, and the winter in the warmer north.

The budgie is a friendly bird with great powers of mimicry, and some individuals have the ability to use more than 500 words if given plenty of encouragement whilst still young. In fact, the best time to start training a budgie is from the age of 6 weeks when they are still very receptive to learning new words and sounds. In contrast, training an adult bird over 6 months of age is often unsuccessful.

Males and females can be easily distinguished by the colour of their cere (the area above the beak encircling the nostrils). In adult males this is blue, whereas in adult females it is a pink-brown colour, but colours may be unclear in juvenile birds.

Scientific Classification

Budgies belong to the Order Psittaciformes, Family Psittacidae, Genus *Melopsittacus*.

General care

Budgies naturally live in large flocks so if possible will be happiest in a spacious aviary set up. This should be an outdoor enclosure made of strong wire mesh (which should be zinc free), with an easily cleanable floor and plenty of room for the birds to fly around. In addition to the flying area, a sheltered sleeping area should be provided to protect from the worst of the British weather. The shelter should also provide shade on any sunny days. Perches can be placed at varying heights around the enclosure, with branches of different diameters providing the most natural setup. Appropriate branches can include those from the ash, hazel, birch, willow, eucalyptus, chestnut, sycamore, elder and untreated fruit trees. It is also particularly important to ensure that the enclosure is secure, both to stop the birds getting out (double security doors are the best way to prevent an escape) and to stop predators getting in.

Alternatively, if an aviary is not an option, budgies may be housed indoors in a cage setup. Indoor birds will require more individual attention and stimulation but will often form a close bond with their owners. Ideally a pair of birds will be kept – either two males or two females if breeding is not planned. Both birds should be introduced to the cage at the same time to prevent fights over territory. Budgies do **not** naturally live on their own.

A cage setup should also be as spacious as possible and placed out of direct sunlight and draughts. It should also be situated away from any item that may give off toxic fumes, such as non-stick cooking utensils, which can release lethal fumes when heated. It is similarly important to ensure that the cage is made out of zinc-free materials as zinc is also very toxic to these birds. A variety of branches can be placed as perches as in an aviary setup, and different toys should be added and changed regularly to entertain birds. These can include the usual pet shop bells and mirrors as well as natural alternatives such as pine cones which are easily replaced when destroyed. If planning to be out of the house for a long time, a radio programme may be left on at a low volume to give the birds some stimulation.

Free flight is an essential requirement and birds should be given the opportunity for exercise daily. It is however, important to ensure that the room they are allowed to fly around is totally secure with all windows, doors and chimneys blocked off, heaters and fans turned off and any potentially poisonous house plants removed or covered. If started young birds can be easily trained to perch on a finger and returned to the cage.

Hygiene

Cages should be “spot-cleaned” daily to remove any droppings, feathers, uneaten greens and husks. Once a week, ideally while the birds are exercising, the whole cage and furniture can be disinfected (further details of suitable disinfectants can be obtained from your vet) and branches replaced as necessary.

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Diet

In the wild, budgies will predominantly feed at ground level eating grass seeds and the occasional other “weed”. In captivity seed mixes can be provided, most of the common mixtures containing millet seed. Larger fatty seeds such as sunflower seeds should be avoided. Alternatively, good quality complete pellet diets are now available, which can provide a better balance of nutrients.

Some fresh green food can also be fed, such as seeding grasses, dandelions, chickweeds and groundsel. It is important however, to ensure that these are from non-polluted sites and washed thoroughly before feeding.

A cuttlebone should be provided for additional calcium and to allow the bird to wear down its beak. Grit will provide additional minerals and aid with digestion of food. An iodine block will prevent thyroid problems which are very common in budgies on seed diets. Treats can include small pieces of oranges, apples or grated carrot. Water should be available both for drinking, and in a shallow saucer for bathing.

Fresh food and water should be provided daily and food containers cleaned out.

Lifespan

Budgies generally live about 10-20 years

Signs of health

A healthy budgie will be bright and alert with clear eyes and nostrils, shiny feathers and a clean vent. It is important to become familiar with your budgie’s normal behaviour and droppings, in order that signs of illness can be noticed at an early stage. Beak and nails should also be checked regularly in case trimming is required. It is advisable to take your bird to a vet who routinely deals with birds for a general health check at least once a year.

Signs of illness

Birds will often not show obvious signs of illness until they are very sick, but you should look out for your budgie appearing “fluffed up”, breathing fast or noisily with its mouth open, any discharges from the eyes or nostrils or any changes in droppings. Changes in beak, nail or feather condition including excessive feather plucking may also indicate a more chronic illness. If you have any concerns, do not hesitate to contact a vet as soon as possible.

This caresheet is only intended as a general guideline, so please ask for further information.

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