



Macaws

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Introduction

Macaws are large colourful parrots found in forests and swamps throughout the Amazon basin and the Caribbean. They can be very noisy, destructive and sometimes aggressive so are not ideal for the novice bird owner.

Scientific Classification

Macaws belong to the Order Psittaciformes, Family Psittacidae, Genus Ara and Anodorhynchus

Most commonly kept are

- Red and Gold (Scarlet) Macaw (*Ara macao*)
- Blue and Gold Macaw (*Ara ararauna*)

General care

Macaws, like any pet parrot, are a big commitment, as they require a lot of attention. Ideally, all birds should be paired up with a SAME SPECIES, OPPOSITE SEX bird for lifetime companionship.

Any bird will be happiest in a spacious aviary setup. 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, parrots may be housed indoors in a cage setup, although ideally the cage should only be used for housing the bird at night or when unsupervised. Indoor birds will require more individual attention and stimulation but will often form a close bond with their owners. 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. It is however, important to bear in mind that these birds do have powerful beaks and will easily demolish many pet shop toys, so natural alternatives such as pine cones which are easily replaced may be a useful addition. If planning to be out of the house for a long time, it is also a good idea to leave a radio program 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. While numbers vary with each source, most agree that three hours out of cage daily and 45 minutes of physical interaction is the minimum attention required for good mental health. 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,



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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 an arm and returned to the cage.

It is also important to supply full spectrum **UV lighting** for the indoor macaw. Unlike humans, birds can see the UV light that is a part of natural sunlight. The bird uses this UV light for behaviours such as reproduction and feeding - life without UV would be the equivalent of humans seeing everything in black and white, only worse. Without UV we are able to recognise the sex of another. In some breeds, birds require UV to differentiate the sexes. Where a bird is not kept outside, UV light should be provided. Normal domestic lighting does not do this. Most domestic lights distort the natural colour of the bird. Without a balanced source of light, the oculo-endocrine cycle (light to the pituitary and pineal gland) is affected. This affects every aspect of a bird's life. Failure to provide adequate lighting can result in agitation, picking behaviours, and calcium problems leading to weakness, breeding problems, and metabolic disorders. Bulbs should be positioned no more than 30cm from the bird and replaced every 6 months.

Hygiene

Cages should be "spot-cleaned" daily to remove any droppings, feathers, uneaten greens or 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.

Diet

In the wild, macaws feed primarily on nuts, seeds and fruits. It is however, difficult to replicate this diet in captivity as these parrots can be notoriously fussy when fed a traditional parrot seed mix, picking out the parts they like best (which are usually not the most nutritious!). Feeding a good quality complete pellet diet is the best way to ensure your macaw has the best balance of nutrients. Treats can be given to provide interest, including small pieces of oranges, apples, corn on the cob, or grated carrot, but these should form no more than 10% of the total diet. 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.

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

Macaws can live for more than 50 years

Signs of health

A healthy parrot will be bright and alert with clear eyes and nostrils, shiny feathers and a clean vent. It is important to become familiar with your parrot'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 parrot 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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