Guidelines for the welfare of pet birds

National Consultative Committee on Animal Welfare (NCCAW) Position Statement - May 2006

Introduction

Birds provide enjoyment and companionship to many people. People, therefore, have a duty of care so birds live a fulfilled life that is free from stress and disease.

Pet birds are defined as all seed and nectar feeding birds that can be kept legally in a state of captivity, and spend all or part of their time housed in cages. Other types of birds, including insectivorous and birds of prey, waterfowl, ratites, pigeons used for racing, poultry, pheasants or quail used for the commercial production of meat or eggs, have specific needs and are not covered by these guidelines.

These guidelines do not deal with common or statute law requirements which impact on the keeping of birds, such as council regulations or nature conservation. This information should be sought from the appropriate authority.

These Guidelines do not apply to the keeping of birds in cages used for exhibition, quarantine or hospitalisation. Cages used for exhibition should be bound by regulation sizes controlled by the organisation conducting the exhibition, and should be designed to protect the welfare of the birds.

These guidelines set out the basic care requirements for birds in captivity and aim to:

- promote the humane and considerate treatment of birds the use of good husbandry practices
- inform people of their obligations for the care and management of caged birds , and
- provide the community with a set of guidelines for the care of caged birds.

The guidelines recognise that a basic welfare requirement of birds in aviaries, is a husbandry system appropriate to their physiological and behavioural needs. A caged bird's basic needs include:

- ready access to food and water to maintain health and vigour
- accommodation that provides protection from the weather and does not harm or cause stress
- prevention and treatment of disease, injury or unwanted behaviour
- space and opportunity to exhibit their natural behaviours, and

- careful and proper handling.

The guidelines also address the 'five freedoms' of animal welfare (from the United Kingdom Farm Animal Welfare Council):

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst through ready access to fresh water and an appropriate diet to maintain full health and vigour.

2. Freedom from discomfort by providing a suitable environment, including shelter and a comfortable resting area.

3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease through prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.

4. Freedom to express normal behaviour by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind.

5. Freedom from fear and distress by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

Good care and treatment of birds is important and cannot be over-emphasised. Owners should develop appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding to care for their birds, and be able to recognise a bird's normal appearance and behaviour. This can be achieved by joining a bird club or by reading books and other materials on the subject.

Children can benefit from interaction with birds but they can also be a risk to a bird's wellbeing. Responsible supervision of children and the promotion of a caring attitude are essential to safeguard the welfare of birds and create a lifelong appreciation of their role in our lives.

- **Water**

Clean water must be available at all times at a temperature and quality that meets the birds physiological needs, and that the bird will drink.

Every effort should be made to ensure that water containers remain clean and free of faeces and other contaminants. They should also be checked daily to ensure that there is an adequate supply of water.

Water containers should not be transferred to other enclosures without being thoroughly cleaned using a low toxicity disinfectant.

- **Food**

Adequate food suitable for the particular species of bird should be available at all times. Advice should be sought from an experienced aviculturist or veterinarian if you are uncertain of the bird's requirements.

Food should be fresh and clean, and stored in a way that prevents deterioration or spoilage, otherwise it can be prepared daily - depending on the ingredients.

A varied diet should be supplied and is possible given the limitations of seasonal availability - alternate regularly between fresh fruit, vegetables and seeding grasses appropriate to the bird species. Suitable pelleted food can also be used.

Mixed grit and a source of calcium should be available for those species requiring it.

Food containers should be checked at least daily to ensure there is an adequate supply. Feed should be changed regularly, rather than topped up.

Food containers should be constructed and used in a way that does not cause injury to the birds.

Food should be not be placed below perches or where the food is least likely to be spoiled or contaminated.

Except where it is a specie's requirement, direct feeding on the ground should be avoided - instead, suitable containers should be used.

To avoid the spread of disease through cross contamination, food containers should be cleaned regularly using a low toxicity disinfectant. Containers should always be cleaned before use in different cages.

- **Housing**

Birds must be kept in housing that is suitable for their needs, and at an appropriate stocking density. Young birds that are not self-sufficient may be excluded from the count in determining the stocking density for a cage or aviary. Once the progeny are self-sufficient the numbers should be reduced to comply with the recommended standards.

Birds can benefit from environmental enrichment - an experienced aviculturist or veterinarian can provide advice on this.

Cage environment

Accommodation should provide:

- a clean and healthy environment for the birds
- protection from extreme weather - in relation to the normal environment for the species
- draught-free shelter with suitable wind breaks
- protection from predators
- a means of escape from, or avoidance of other cage birds
- a variety of different diameter perches with enough space for all birds
- an adequate number of feed and water stations to meet the requirements of all birds, and
- sufficient nesting sites with suitable nesting material - if birds are used for breeding.

Cages should be simple structures at maximum length, width and height. This allows for easy cleaning, and depending on the species of birds contained, should allow the birds to fly freely with clear lines of flight.

Suitable floor drainage should be provided and where possible, the cage floor should be kept dry. Any area that is persistently wet may present a health hazard. Solid floors are recommended for hygiene reasons.

If there are a number of aviaries, they should not share surface drains.

Contamination on floors should not be allowed to build up to a level where it puts the birds at risk of disease. If floors are covered with absorbent litter (sand, etc), all the material should be replaced at least twice a year.

Removeable trays are advantageous for small cages.

Roosting sites and perches should be in a position that is appropriate for the species, and should be cleaned regularly, or preferably replaced.

To prevent escape, the aviary door should not open directly to the outside, but rather open into an enclosed area with a second door.

Bathing water should be available by sprinkler or in a container that is appropriate for the species.

Only compatible species or individuals should be housed together.

Cage design

Cages should be built with strong materials that allow for thorough washing and cleaning.

Cages should not be placed close together as this will impair ventilation.

Where possible, vermin and predators should not be able to access cages. If bait stations or traps are used inside cages they should be designed so it is impossible for the birds to reach the bait or trap.

Cages should have rough uneven-diameter perches of natural, non-toxic wood to help prevent overgrown toe nails.

Perches and cage floors should not be coated with sandpaper as this may lead to footpad abrasions.

The interior of the cage should be free from any sharp points or edges and any dangerous obstruction.

Indoor housing

Indoor cages are those normally kept inside a building. They can house one or more birds either permanently, or for short periods - for example, during breeding.

A cage must be located where it will avoid noxious fumes and extreme temperatures. Despite being indoors, cages must not be left in the full sun. Adequate shade must be provided.

To provide adequate ventilation, at least half of the largest side of the cage should consist of a metal grill, netting or mesh.

Floors should be have a material on them that can't be easily displaced.

Suspended wire cages should be hung over a floor that can be kept in a clean and sanitary condition.

Recommended minimum indoor cage dimensions are set out in Table 1.

Outdoor housing

Any aviary or cage which is exposed to the weather should be constructed in a way so every bird in it is able to perch or roost in a place that is sheltered from the wind, rain and direct sunlight.

To provide shelter against prevailing winds, a solid material or cladding on the roof and walls should be used, and should cover at least one-third of the total area, running continuously around three walls. It is recommended that at least three-quarters of the area of one wall should be constructed from open weave mesh.

Predators should not be able to gain entry to the aviary, and this can be achieved by installing concrete barriers or galvanised steel or mesh (or a similar resistant material), buried to a depth of 300mm.

Recommended minimum dimensions for outside housing are set out in Table 1.

Wire

Due to the presence of zinc and lead, **galvanised wire may be toxic**, especially to parrots. The risk of poisoning can be reduced by thoroughly brushing the wire, removing loose metal flakes and 'dags' of galvanised iron that could be swallowed.

New wire should be washed with a mild acidic solution such as vinegar followed by a rinse with water. Weathering the new cage for twelve months also helps reduce the risk. Ideally, leave new wire mesh to weather naturally before using it to construct the cage. Regardless of these precautions, wire chewing birds need to be regularly monitored for signs of poisoning.

The selection of wire gauge size should be based on the birds' potential ability to chew through the wire, and the wire's suitability in detering predators and vermin.

The potential to chew through wire depends on species as much as size. 16 gauge (1.6mm) wire is

parrots and finches. Mesh size depends on the size of the smallest birds. Common sizes are 12mm x 12mm for small birds, and 12mm x 25 mm.

- **Health**

The health of aviary birds is a specialised area and resolving health their problems is not often simple. Veterinary advice should always be sought if birds are seriously ill or if there is an ongoing health problem.

Birds must be inspected regularly and any with health problems dealt with promptly and appropriately.

Disease

Evaluating a bird's health regularly is a key step in ensuring good welfare and preventing disease. Indicators of health include:

- appearance of droppings (quality and quantity)
- amount of food or water consumed
- behaviour (eg. ability to fly)
- appearance or posture (eg. sleepy or fluffed-up)
- bodyweight
- rate and depth of respiration.

Changes in the above indicators could indicate a problem.

Particular signs that indicate a health problem are:

- discharge from nostrils, eyes or beak
- excess loss of, or soiled or misshapen feathers
- inappetence and weight loss
- soiled vents
- enlargements or swelling
- vomiting or regurgitation
- injury or bleeding
- dull or closed eyes
- lameness, wounded or swollen feet
- lumps or wounds on the body
- overgrown beak or nails
- stains or scabs around eyes or nostrils.

Sick or injured birds should be isolated for observation and treatment or euthanasia. This will prevent further injury and restrict the spread of infections.

Parasite control

Cage birds can be affected by internal parasites which cause health problems, and may also result in death. Treatment can be put in food or water but dosing of individual birds is the most efficient and effective treatment method. Individual dosing should be performed by experienced handlers.

External parasites should be eradicated by applying an appropriate insecticide to birds, cages and nest boxes, and may include dusting, spraying, oral medication, or contact insecticides on perches. It is important to have a year-round parasite control program rather than treating birds after they are affected or losses are incurred.

Euthanasia

Where treatment to restore health or to repair injury is impossible or unsuccessful, euthanasia may be necessary. Euthanasia (a humane death) should be performed by a veterinarian or by a person skilled and experienced in the euthanasia of birds. Euthanasia must never be undertaken by an inexperienced person. Acceptable methods of euthanasia are: stunning and bleeding, decapitation, cervical dislocation (for small birds only), carbon dioxide gassing and overdosing with barbiturates. Using car exhaust gases is not acceptable.

Quarantine

Newly acquired birds should be quarantined for a minimum period of 30 days for treatment and observation before being released into permanent housing. After quarantine, a bird should only be released into its new surroundings early in the day, giving it time to adjust to the new environment before nightfall.

- **Trading**

Any person trading in birds should ensure that inexperienced recipients understand the feeding and general husbandry requirements of the species. This should include the provision of written material. If a licence is required to hold a bird, the trader must ensure that the purchaser is in possession of the licence.

A juvenile bird that is not fully feathered or self-sufficient should not be traded except to a person who has skills and experience in raising such birds.

A bird trader should provide carry cages appropriate to the species of birds offered for sale (see Transport).

Sick, injured or infirm birds should not be traded without the full knowledge of the purchaser and a certificate documenting the nature of the health problem.

Before deciding to buy a bird, and where possible, the customer is advised to look carefully at the breeder's or trader's facilities and the health of all of their birds.

- **Handling**

Capture

The capture of aviary birds is usually stressful to the bird. Birds should be caught using the least stressful method and be subject to minimal handling.

Children should not handle birds unless being supervised by an experienced adult. The pulling or holding a bird by its wings or legs is not acceptable.

Restraint

Birds should be restrained for only a minimum amount of time. All of the bird's body should be gently supported during restraint.

Tethering

closely when it is restrained by a body harness.

- **Husbandry Procedures**

Identification

Identification rings may be used on the legs of aviary birds. These should fit closely, yet move freely on the leg of an adult bird. Over-large rings may get caught in obstacles such as vegetation or wire, and rings that are too tight may restrict blood flow to the leg.

Special care needs to be taken if a ring needs to be removed (for example a leg injury) as there is potential to injure the bird.

Microchips are a useful means of identification and should be considered.

Wing clipping

Cage birds should have the ability to fly and wing clipping is not acceptable unless undertaken under the guidance of a veterinarian or an experienced bird-keeper.

If some flight restriction is necessary to tame a young pet bird, wing taping is an option but advice must be sought from an experienced person. Wing tapes should not be in place for prolonged periods as they can damage feather follicles.

Pinioning of the wings is not acceptable, except under exceptional circumstances.

Nail and beak trimming

Overgrown beaks and toenails should be trimmed carefully by an experienced person. Unskilled trimming can cause haemorrhage and death.

Overgrown toenails can be prevented by using perches of uneven-diameter made from rough, natural and non-toxic wood, and by eliminating foot disease and obesity.

- **Transport**

General standards for all transportation

Transport causes stress and therefore should be kept to a minimum, especially for birds that are not used to it.

Only healthy birds should be transported, except those being transported to a veterinarian or other health professional for treatment.

Containers should be strong enough for the species they contain and should close securely to ensure no injury or escape is possible.

Transport cages should not be too large but should be spacious enough for the birds to move around and containers should be darkened. All wire metal cages should be covered with a dark cloth during transport, taking care not to obstruct ventilation. In addition, transport cages should not be packed together in a way that obstructs the circulation of air.

Food should always be available during transport, especially for small or young birds. Water should be provided at least every eight hours, and in hot weather at least every six hours. Only non-spill water containers or fixed containers using cotton wool soaked in water should be used in cages during transport.

Birds should not be exposed to temperature extremes. They must not be left in vehicles in hot weather or parked in the sun.

A bird should not be transported in a container with a bird of an incompatible species. As far as is practical,

may occur even with bonded pairs). Birds that fight should be shipped in separate containers.

The floor of the carry cage should provide a secure footing for the birds. It should also be sealed and covered with a non-toxic absorbent material to stop the escape of urine or faeces.

Sizes for transportation cages

For the purpose of determining a suitable cage, a bird's dimension is measured from the tip of its beak to the tip of its entire tail when held in the hand.

Containers used to transport live birds should conform to the following measurements, except where very young birds are being transported and need a close environment to share body heat.

Length: no less than 20 per cent (one fifth) longer than the longest bird to be carried in it, and no more than twice the length of the longest bird to be carried in it.

Width: 50 per cent of the minimum length providing that if more than one bird is to be transported, the container should be wide enough for all birds to stand shoulder to shoulder.

Height: should be high enough for the birds to stand normally and no higher than 50mm above the bird's head when standing in a normal posture. The height should be such that the birds standing on the floor cannot obstruct ventilation holes.

An organisation that is running an exhibition may allow its governing body to determine suitable cage sizes for individual species, for transport to and from their exhibition.

Short period carry cages for individual birds (up to 2 hours)

A strong, clean cardboard box may be suitable for some birds. Larger parrots and cockatoos may chew through cardboard or softwood so a substantial hardwood box or metal cage is necessary.

Containers should be made of non-toxic material.

Adequate ventilation is necessary. Containers such as milk cartons, jars, plastic ice-cream boxes, paper and plastic bags etc, do **not** provide this.

Ventilation holes must not be blocked when the cover or lid is in place. As a guide, a line of holes along both sides and ends of the box need to be placed at intervals not exceeding 4cm, and need to be a minimum of 0.8-1 cm in diameter. The holes should be near the top of the container and should be clipped or drilled out - perforated holes that are made using a spike can easily become blocked.

Long period carry cages for groups of birds (up to 36 hours)

These cages should be made of wood, plastic or metal and be sturdy enough to prevent escape or injury. Floors should be solid.

Cages should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected between consignments.

During transport, all carry cages should be in a position that provides adequate ventilation. Where carry cages are stacked, square spacer blocks of at least 5cm should be placed between consecutive tiers (both vertically and horizontally) to ensure adequate airflow between cages.

Bulk consignment cages also require adequate ventilation. As a guide, drill 1cm diameter holes at 10cm intervals in two staggered rows along the back and each side of the carry cage. The holes should be in the upper one-third of each side.

As far as is practicable, birds should not be delivered to the dispatch point more than two hours before their scheduled departure time.

Wild, trapped birds must be held for two weeks after capture and be in good health before they are transported long distances.

the:

- consignees name, address, and telephone number
- consignor's name, address, and telephone number
- number of birds, and their species, and
- the time and date the birds were placed in the container.

The words "live birds" should be displayed on similar sized labels on at least two sides of the container.

- **Commercial and Retail Establishments**

This section applies to the housing of birds in commercial and retail outlets, such as pet shops.

When buying birds, batches should not be mixed and quarantine should be considered, especially when there is any doubt about the bird's health.

As soon as practicable on arrival, the birds should be transferred to their appropriate display, indoor or outdoor cage, and in a way that minimises stress on the birds. The cage should not be located near any major thoroughfares.

All display cages should be strong, and made of an impervious material that can be thoroughly washed and cleaned. At least 75 per cent of the front of the cage should be made of open weave mesh. Floors should be solid.

Cages should be in a position free from draughts, direct sunlight, and other factors that may stress or cause discomfort to the bird. They should conform with the requirements for indoor or outdoor cages as appropriate (see Housing).

Diseases can be transferred to humans when dust is disturbed during cage cleaning. Staff must be trained in appropriate procedures to reduce this health risk.

When a bird is sold, the dealer should provide the purchaser with a written document that outlines the basic care that the captive bird requires, including:

- food
- water
- cleanliness, and
- permanent cage sizes required under regulation.

The document should also provide information on the bird's special habits and characteristics.

If any birds are still in the possession of the retailer or trader after 60 days they should be released into a cage complying with the specifications for indoor or outdoor housing - whichever applies. The birds should remain in this cage for at least 14 days before being returned to a display cage.

- **Cage Dimensions**

A cage in this document is a receptacle or enclosure with an openwork of wires, bars, etc for keeping birds. An aviary is a large cage.

The tables below provide the recommended minimum dimensions for cages and aviaries, for breeding pairs. The dimensions of holding cages for juveniles or single sex adult birds, and for highly domesticated birds may differ from these. Advice should be sought from a veterinarian or experienced birdkeeper.

Table 1 - minimum indoor or suspended cage dimensions

Size of bird (approx. length in cm)	Minimum Floor Area (Square. cm.)	Number of Birds	Minimum Height (cm)	Increased floor area for each additional bird. (square cm)
10	1,000	2	34	500
20	1,600	2	34	800
30	5,000	2	70	2,500
40	8,000	2	70	5,000
50	22,500	2	100	7,500
90	36,000	2	120	12,000

Table 2 - Minimum outdoor aviary dimensions

Size of bird (approx. length in cm)	Minimum Floor Area (square cm)	Number of Birds	Minimum Height (cm)	Increased floor area for each additional bird. (square cm)
10	3,700	2	180	1,800
20	7,200	2	180	3,600
30	10,000	2	180	5,000
40	15,000	2	180	7,500
50	25,000	2	180	12,500
90	50,000	2	180	25,000
