

## Birds as pets

**Life expectancy:** Parakeets / budgerigars and canaries up to 15 years, agapornids / rosellas up to 20 years, parrots up to 80 years

### Costs

Animal	60-250 CHF	Depends on the species, parrots are much more expensive
Initial costs	1000-5000 CHF	Aviary, branches for sitting and climbing, water and feeding dishes, bird sand dish, various other facilities and installations
Yearly costs	ca. 500 CHF	Food, veterinary expenses, sojourns in an animal shelter or pension during holidays, or "pet-sitter" care at home
Varia	Unforeseen veterinary costs can greatly exceed the purchase-price of the animals.	

### Birds need to fly

Even before deciding for birds as pets, future bird owners need to inform themselves thoroughly by asking experienced bird owners or bird specialists as well as by reading the relevant technical literature. Conventional bird cages are much too small and do not cover the needs of the animals, since the birds cannot fly in a cage and only hop around. Muscles as well as natural behaviour atrophy under these conditions. Cages with floor spaces smaller than 2400 cm<sup>2</sup> (f.ex. 40 x 60 cm) are forbidden in Switzerland for any bird housing. The legal minimum of floor space is as follows. Parakeets / budgerigars and canaries: 2400 cm<sup>2</sup> floor area and 50cm height, cockatiels and rosellas: ½ m<sup>2</sup> and 60 cm height, bigger parrots (African greys, amazons): 7000 cm<sup>2</sup> and 1.2 m height, macaws and cockatoos: 10 m<sup>2</sup> and 3 m height. Keeping the birds on these minimum floor spaces cannot be equalled with good housing according to their needs since they cannot fly under these conditions! Also, granting caged birds only a daily hour of free flight does not cover the species-specific needs of these animals for unobstructed flight opportunities – they still spend 23 hours in the cage. An optimal solution is housing birds in an aviary sized several square metres or in a separate bird room with free access to an outdoor aviary. Even housing small birds is therefore quite expensive. Minimal space requirements for an aviary are 2 m x 80cm x 1.8 m for 6 canaries, 6 budgerigars or 2 cockatiels. Small parrots need at least a bird room with access to a garden aviary, bigger parrots need spacious aviaries of over 100 square metres, just to be able to stretch their wings and fly for some metres. A permit by the Cantonal Veterinary Office is needed for some parrot species (macaws, cockatoos). Birds are neither toys nor a living room decoration!

### Birds are social animals

Birds must never be housed alone, the Swiss Animal Protection law forbids single housing! Such a dreary, boring and lonely life cannot be made up by mirrors, plastic bird companions or humans as a replacement for a real conspecific. In the wild, most birds live in pairs and often aggregate in huge flocks. Pairs bond for life in many species and share a close relationship. Group composition must therefore allow for unconstrained social contacts with



conspecifics. Canary males should never be housed in isolation, either. They sing similarly impressively if living together with a female. In the wild, the function of the song is both used to present to the female and reinforce the pair-bond as well as to defend the shared territory against competitors. The talking behaviour of singly housed budgerigars is none but a behavioural abnormality!

### **Provenance of the birds**

Choose only captive-bred animals with Swiss provenance. Species that have been kept and bred in captivity for a long period should be preferred, such as canary, budgerigar, zebra finch, agapornids, cockatiels or rosellas. Since these species have been studied for decades, there is a broad choice of literature available on their behaviour and their specific needs. For many bigger parrot species you will need permit for keeping them as pets, issued by the Cantonal Veterinary Office. Native birds must not, under any circumstance, be captured or housed.

### **Where to buy? What to pay attention to?**

Birds can be adopted from animal shelters run by a local animal protection organisation, bought from pet shops featuring excellent housing conditions and bearing the quality label VZFS Codex. They can also be bought from breeders, whose breeding and housing facilities should be inspected critically before deciding to buy animals there. Generally, no birds with extreme traits should be chosen. Hooded budgerigars are unable to see because of feathers covering their field of vision. Canary breeds like “Gibber italicus” are cripples through breeding. Such strains should be avoided and birds of a normal body shape, size and plumage should be chosen.

Refrain from buying animals via the internet! You either support animal mass production under unspeakable conditions, or you might even be cheated.

### **What do birds need?**

The aviary should be placed in a bright corner of a room facing south or south-east. Part of the aviary should be sunny during at least part of the day, but the birds also need to be able to retreat to a shady place anytime. It should not be accessible from all sides, since a certain degree of cover is beneficial. The birds also need opportunities to retreat above eye-level of a person observing them, i.e. the aviary needs to be at least 2m high. Shadows from above give the birds the impression of a raptor bird and elicit a stress response. Draft, unnecessary disturbances (other pets, children) and irregular lighting should be avoided. In the bird room, both smoking and a TV set should be forbidden. Agapornids and zebra finches that naturally sleep in dens or nests should be provided with nest boxes or baskets. With other bird species, such as budgerigars or canaries, the provision nest boxes or baskets triggers nesting and breeding behaviour. Further a bird-bath, food and water dishes with fresh water are needed. The aviary is fitted with natural branches for sitting and climbing (no plastic or standard wood bars), which are replaced every few days. Fresh branches and twigs occupy the birds. Fir, spruce, hazelnut, willow, birch, beech, linden/lime and fruit tree branches can be used without danger. Bird sand needs always to be present, either as a substrate on the floor of the aviary or in smaller dishes. Lime can be added by offering a cuttlebone or special lime stones. Every species has its own food requirements. Special food mixtures are sold in pet shops, but variability and environmental enrichment is also important (ears of wheat, millet or oat, seeds in the pods, seedlings or germ buds).

### **Population control**

Refrain from breeding birds, since finding an adequate living place for the young in an aviary is very difficult or even impossible. Further, many of these long-lived animals wait for new owners in rescue shelters. Usually it is sufficient to deprive the animals of adequate nesting opportunities to prevent reproduction (nest box for budgerigars, nest pit for canaries). However, if the female should begin to nest despite precautions, just remove the freshly-laid eggs and replace them by artificial eggs.

Hand-rearing birds produces mal-imprinted, behaviourally disturbed and unhealthy animals and should be avoided. Do also refrain from buying hand-reared animals.

### **What to do with the birds during holidays?**

The stress-susceptible birds should preferably be left at home in their familiar aviary and be cared for by a competent, reliable “bird-sitter”. As an alternative, birds can also be brought to an animal shelter or pension, which costs 15-30 CHF per day. Use tight, dark containers with airholes for transport, not the cage/aviary since birds stressed by the transport could hurt themselves when thrashing around in panic. Abandon of animals is forbidden in Switzerland and can be fined with up to 20'000 CHF.

### **Birds and Kids**

If housed according to the behavioural needs of the species, birds offer interesting opportunities to observe bird behaviour. Taming these stress-susceptible animals as pets is questionable, but with a lot of patience it is possible. All on their own, children cannot take care for the birds. An adult needs to guide and supervise them.

### **Information and contacts**

- Brochure: „Birds as pets“ (German, French, Italian), guide booklet by Swiss Animal Protection SAP, can be ordered for free by sending a C5 post-paid envelope with your own address: Swiss Animal Protection SAP / Schweizer Tierschutz STS, Dornacherstrasse 101, Postfach, 4008 Basel, phone 061 365 99 99, Fax 061 365 99 90, [www.tierschutz.com](http://www.tierschutz.com), [sts@tierschutz.com](mailto:sts@tierschutz.com), helpdesk, free advice (German, French, English), free brochures, addresses of shelters, children's club [www.krax.ch](http://www.krax.ch)
- Auffangstation für Sittiche und Papageien APS, Frauenfelderstrasse 95, 9548 Matzingen, phone 052 376 45 45, [www.auffangstation.ch](http://www.auffangstation.ch); [info@auffangstation.ch](mailto:info@auffangstation.ch), Specialized parrot rescue shelter, free advice, rehoming of abandoned budgerigars, agapornids, cockatiels, rosellas, etc.
- Information brochure “Budgerigars – species-adequate pet keeping” (German, French, Italian), issued by the Swiss Federal Veterinary Office. Can be ordered for free from the Swiss Federal Veterinary Office (PDF or booklet), [www.bvet.admin.ch](http://www.bvet.admin.ch) and [www.tiererichtighalten.ch](http://www.tiererichtighalten.ch)
- Highly recommended book on budgerigars: “Wellensittiche verstehen und artgerecht halten” (German only), Esther Wullschleger Schättin, CHF 36.-, order via [www.nature-themes.ch](http://www.nature-themes.ch)
- Aviaries: Volierenbau Senn, R. Senn, Wiesenweg 2, 3373 Heimenhausen, Tel/Fax 062 961 65 68, Natel 079 332 95 68, [www.volieren.ch](http://www.volieren.ch), [info@volieren.ch](mailto:info@volieren.ch)

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