

## Guidelines for Food Management

"Food management" refers to a method of feeding that is actually pretty common for most household pets as well as humans, which consists of scheduled meals with only occasional treats in between. It is used for the health of the bird, to maintain a healthy weight and encourage eating a balanced diet, as well as for setting a proper stage for training. When used in a training routine, training sessions are done before meals, and treat foods are reserved for training only.

### Before you Start:

Please read these instructions carefully and contact an experienced trainer with any questions.

- **BUY A SCALE.** Small electronic scales or mechanical balances are available on the internet. You will want one with the capacity to fit your bird's weight (1-2 kg scales are typical) and one that is precise to at least 0.5 grams.

Weigh your bird every day at the same time, after he has had at least 12 hours to digest his last meal. Keep track of the weights in a log book. Most people feed the main meal around dinnertime (around 6 pm) and weigh their birds the following morning (around 8 am).

Frequently birds hide illnesses until they are very advanced (a survival instinct) but weight loss can be an early sign that something is wrong. It also allows you to monitor food management to ensure that your bird is eating properly.

Some weight fluctuation is normal (though you will probably see less variation on scheduled feeding) but the goal is to keep your bird at the same average weight, give or take about 2-3%.

Before starting food management, record your bird's "At-lib Weight" -- his weight when allowed to eat freely all the time. When using food management there may be a slight drop in weight initially, especially if your bird was a big snacker (although sometimes there may actually be a weight increase). While using food management (without weight management) the goal is to keep the weight consistent from day to day.

- **Set up a brief training plan, including**
  1. Starting weight
  2. Feeding plan (what, when)
  3. Training plan - what skills (for recall include distances, heights, or any other recall challenges), when you plan to train, and for approximately how long.
- ***You should be familiar with the basics of clicker training already.*** See information below for clicker training resources. Your bird should already be trained for a few simple behaviors this way (for example stepping up, targeting, waving). This is so that your bird is already familiar with the process (has learned how to learn) and so that you have had some practice with positive reinforcement

methods (capturing behavior, shaping, successive approximations, timing of the click and treat, adding a cue, etc.)

#### **After you Start:**

- **SCHEDULE REGULAR VET CHECKS** (at least annually, and preferably within a few months of starting food management). Your vet should find your bird to have:
  - Healthy plumage: good color and strong intact feathers
  - A healthy weight with good musculature and minimal fat.
  - Normal levels on blood tests for organ function and nutrients

It is common to find that a bird on food management has a better appetite for a greater variety of healthy foods. Often there is a gradual increase in weight, and frequently the weight becomes much more stable from day to day than it was before. With food management the goal is not to decrease weight, but to time feedings so that training is most effective.

#### **FOOD MANAGEMENT: How it works**

**A. Reserve treats for training.** Remove your bird's favorite item(s) from his regular meals and use these only as training treats. For example, if walnuts and almonds are the first thing your bird eats from a mix of food, start using those exclusively as training treats.

Some find that this step is sufficient to get a good training response. However for very reliable recall training, scheduled feeding (step B) is also strongly advised. Most outdoor free-flyers consider this absolutely essential for safe outdoor flying.

**B. Scheduled Feeding.** With scheduled feeding you do not free feed around the clock (i.e., food in dish at all times). Parrots have crops to regulate the supply of food to their system and do not need to eat continuously. Most parrots eat only once or twice per day. That is how the crop is designed to work. (For a great article on how their crop works see the link below.)

Schedule feeding so that your bird's main meal is just after you will be doing your main training session. For example, if you are planning to do late afternoon training, the main meal will be at dinnertime. A light breakfast may also be given; usually this is a small amount of fruit or other fresh food. (For outdoor flying/training it is best to keep the early feeding light in the beginning.)

**Feed only as much at mealtime as your bird will actually eat.** There should be no leftovers that remain in the bowl for more than 30-60 min. This ensures that your bird is getting all the necessary items in his diet without picking out only his favorites.

Treats can be offered during the day for short training breaks, but avoid feeding so much during the day that the bird is not really hungry at the main training session.

(Remember what mom told you about snacking before dinner!) You can also take "treats" out of the main meal allowances.

Anytime food is offered, make sure that you have a training session first. This may consist of only a few minutes, but it will reinforce the idea that there is tasty food when the bird comes to you.

- **How much does your bird actually eat?**

Measure or weigh the food you offer your bird at mealtime each day for several days. Weigh it before feeding, and then subtract any amount that is left over when the bird is done. The average over several days is the amount that should be fed.

NOTE: This only works if you feed the same types of food every day. Remember, a nut weighs less than a grape, but has many more calories. You can weigh or measure the food by type, if there are several items that have similar caloric value per gram. For example:

- Nuts (walnuts, almonds, sunflower seeds, cashews)
- Fruit, low calorie (apples, oranges, papaya)
- Fruit, medium calorie (grapes, mangos)
- Fruit, high calorie (bananas)
- Sprouts
- Vegetables (broccoli, carrots,)
- Starchy vegetables (sweet potatoes, yams, corn)
- Leafy vegetables (collard, kale, dandelion)

A feeding plan for a particular bird might consist of 3 grams of nuts, 10 grams of fruit, 10 grams of sprouts, 10 grams of vegetables, and 5 grams of starchy vegetables. Substitutions can be made according to caloric value (for example, 5 grams of high calorie fruit might substitute for 10 grams of low calorie fruit on some days.)

A good look-up table for caloric value can be found here:

<http://www.calorieking.com/foods/>

You can enter the units in a variety of units of weight or volume (e.g., per 100 g, per cup, etc)

**C. Evaluate your progress.** If your bird is still not responding well (i.e., reluctant or slow to come when called) there are several factors to evaluate, including training methods, the environment, and the bird's weight. At this time it's best to consult with an experienced trainer. It's easy to miss little things, even for those who have been training for some time.

- Are you moving too quickly or asking too much during your training? Are the steps and approximations you are using small enough? When in doubt, move back and make it easier.
- Are your signals unclear?
- Are you giving the click and reward at the appropriate time, and are you very consistent with that?

- Have you introduced something new into the environment, or changed locations? Birds can respond to this as if they are learning a behavior for the first time, if it hasn't been generalized to different locations.
- Will your bird perform other tricks or behaviors it is familiar with without a problem? If so, you may be asking for a level of difficulty with recall that is too high.
- Is your bird in good health? Are there other signs that may indicate illness such as lethargy, being unusually quiet, weight loss?

If none of the above appear to be a problem, your bird may be overweight and weight management may be appropriate. This involves a small reduction in the bird's weight (similar to us being on a diet to lose a few pounds) that can increase his interest in food. Please contact an experienced trainer for more details. Weight reduction should generally not be used on birds under 1 year old.

## Other Resources

### Food Management

A nice, thorough explanation of food management and its use in training is also available on Gay Noeth's site, On African Wings:

<http://www.onafricanwings.com/FoodManagement.htm>

Another good resource is the article from the Natural Encounters web site, which includes a sample weight and training log:

[http://www.naturalencounters.com/images/Publications&Presentations/The\\_Mouse\\_Went\\_Down\\_The\\_Hole-Cassie\\_Malina.pdf](http://www.naturalencounters.com/images/Publications&Presentations/The_Mouse_Went_Down_The_Hole-Cassie_Malina.pdf)

### Clicker Training

- Bird-Click Yahoo Group <http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/Bird-Click>
- Article by Angell Memorial Animal Center avian specialist Leigh Clayton, DVM on the benefits of clicker training for birds:  
<http://www.clickertraining.com/node/285>
- *Getting Started: Clicker Training for Birds*, by Melinda Johnson  
<http://www.clickertraining.com/store/?item=clforbi>
- *Don't Shoot the Dog*, by Karen Pryor (excellent general clicker training book)  
<http://www.clickertraining.com/store/?item=dontshootdog>
- Excellent training articles in the Natural Encounters web site library:  
<http://www.naturalencounters.com/pressRoom.html>

### Feeding & Nutrition

- How the Crop Works  
<http://www.thegabrielfoundation.org/HTML/crop.htm>
- Feeding Feathers Yahoo Group  
<http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/FeedingFeathers>

DISCLAIMER: The food management methods described here are used by professional trainers, as well as pet owners who find their parrots eat a better and healthier diet on scheduled feedings. However any use of these methods is done at the owners own risk. We are not veterinarians who provide professional dietary advice. We also advise education about parrot diets such as that available on the FeedingFeathers yahoo list or through reputable professional breeders.

*NOTE: Please check with your vet before switching to food management if a bird is under veterinary care for illness.*

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