



Lecture title: **Pet bird general care**

Lecturer Affiliation:

Summary:

Pet bird general care

To understand how to keep a parrot healthy and how to recognize if he's ill, you have to know something about your bird's bodily systems. Parrots are complex and have a lot of intricate organs and systems, too many to detail for this discussion. Here are some of the important aspects of a bird's body that you should know.

Eyes

A parrot has one eye on either side of its head, allowing him to see nearly 360 degrees. This helps him notice predators and avoid other dangers. Parrots don't see better than humans, but they do notice things faster.

- A parrot's eyes are very large in proportion to its head. If humans had eyes this large.
- Parrots also have a third eyelid called a *nictitating membrane* that acts as a windshield wiper of squeegee for the eye, keeping it moist and uncontaminated. Interestingly, reptiles and cats also have this membrane.
- Parrots have different eye colors, depending on the species. Some eye colors can indicate gender, as in the Goffin's cockatoo, where the female's eyes are brown and the male's black (though eye color isn't always a reliable method to determine gender).
- Also, in many species, eye color changes as an immature bird becomes an adult. A healthy eye is clean, moist, and free of discharge.
- A parrot with an eye problem may squint, scratch the eye with his foot, or rub his head on the perch or bars of the cage. Look for swollen eyelids, cloudy eyes, excessive blinking, discharge, and excessive tearing. Any eye condition must be treated immediately.





Ears

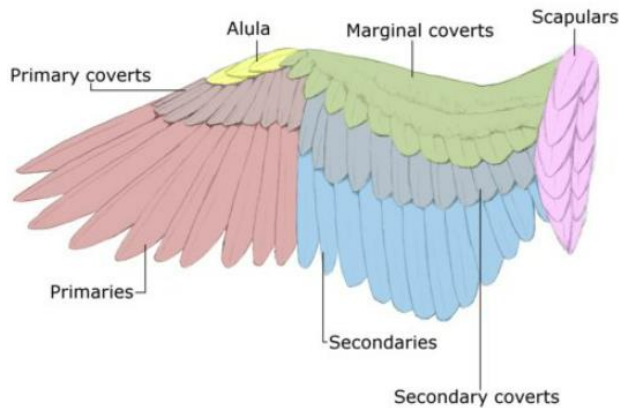
Your parrot's ears are located just behind the eyes; they look like a small opening in the head.

- They're covered by a small flap of skin and generally by feathers, unless the feathers have been lost due to illness. the ears after your parrot bathes, when the feathers around the head are wet.
- In many parrots, the feathers over the ears are a different color, either vastly different or just a slight shade darker or lighter than the other cheek feathers.
- Parrots can't hear in the same range of sound that humans do, but they do hear sound in greater detail.



Feathers

- Feathers are a remarkable evolutionary construct, unique to birds and quite complex.
- Feathers regulate a bird's body temperature, help it remain waterproof, and allow it to fly (in most cases).
- The colors and patterns of feathers also facilitate mating rituals and, in some parrots, distinguish males from females. Parrots have fewer feathers than other orders of birds, but their feathers are stronger.



Preen gland

Parrots have a *preen gland* at the base of the tail (on the rump) called the *uropygial gland*, which secretes an oil that the parrot spreads on its feathers during preening. This oil helps keep the feathers supple and waterproof, though it's not necessary for waterproofing in parrots.



Feet

Parrots' feet are *zygodactyl*, meaning they have two toes pointing forward and two pointing backward. This is a first-rate design for grasping and climbing. Parrots also use their feet to regulate body temperature. When it's cold in the bird's environment, a parrot can decrease the amount of blood circulating to his legs and will often draw one leg up into his body and stand on the other. When a parrot is warm, blood flow to his legs increases to cool off.



FIGURE 10-2:
Parrots' zygodactyl feet make for good grasping and climbing.



Beak

- Parrots are called *hookbills* because the beak is curved. This kind of beak is perfect for eating a wide variety of foods.
- The beak is made of the same material as human fingernails, keratin, which grows over a honeycomblike structure that is basically hollow, a good design for a bird that needs to be light enough to fly
- The beak acts as a crushing and cracking device but is also delicate enough to peel the skin off a pea.



- The beak also functions to help your parrot climb and move around, kind of like an additional foot. The beak may not look sensitive, but it is. Your parrot should be able to keep its beak trim through eating and playing.



FIGURE 10-4:
An overgrown
beak can indicate
malnutrition or
mites.



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Cere

- The *cere* is the fleshy spot just above the beak where the nostrils, or *nares*, are located.
- In some species, like the parakeet, the cere is prominent; in others, the cere is covered by feathers.
- Both the cere and the nares should be clean and free of debris. If you notice a discharge, a crust, or bubbling around the cere or the nares, contact your avian veterinarian immediately.





Tongue

- A parrot's tongue is fleshy and muscular, with a hard plate beneath the tip. It has about 350 taste buds. For contrast, humans have about 10,000 taste buds (interestingly, rabbits have about 17,000, pigeons around 40, chickens roughly 24, and catfish 100,000).
- A parrot can manipulate its tongue during speech to make different sounds, something that previously was thought to be something only humans could do.
- Lorries and other parrots that feed on nectar have brushlike organs on the tip of the tongue, making it easier to eat pollen and nectar from flowers.

Neck

A parrot's neck is relatively much stronger than a human neck. A parrot's windpipe is fully ringed with bones, allowing for the stress of turning the head so far around. That's why the proper way to hold a parrot is basically around the neck — you won't prevent a bird from breathing this way, but you will prevent it from breathing by holding it around the chest area.

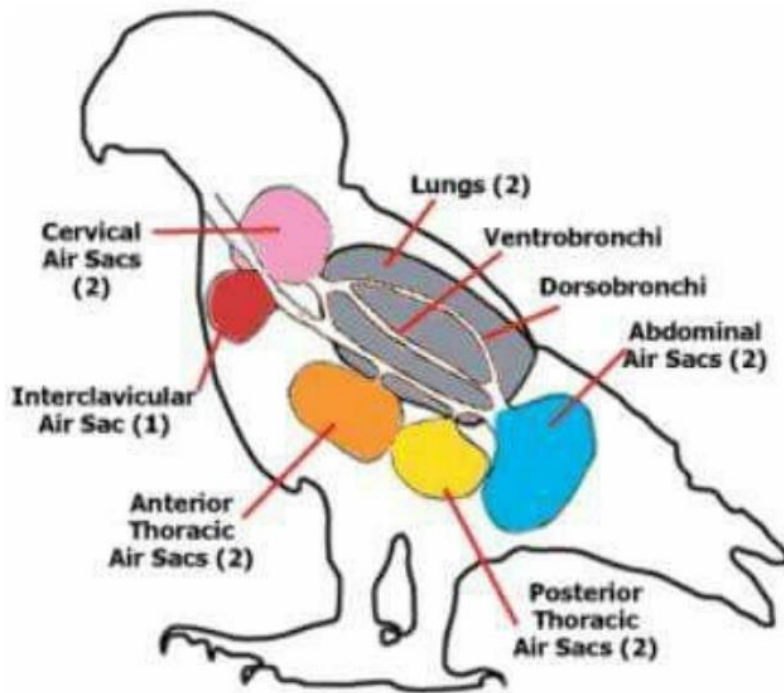
Skin

A parrot's skin is much thinner and more delicate than a human's. All of a healthy parrot's skin is covered in feathers except for the cere (nose), legs, feet, and eye patches.

Respiratory system

Your parrot has a sensitive respiratory system, susceptible to airborne irritants such as aerosol sprays, fumes from heated nonstick cookware, and tobacco smoke. Coal miners used to take birds, primarily canaries, into the coal mines, and when the canary keeled over, it was time for the miners to leave.

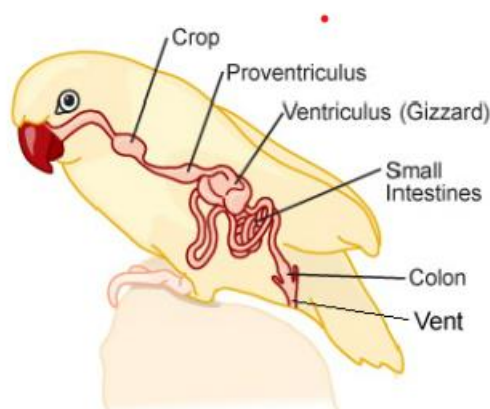
- Parrots are prone to respiratory illness and distress because their system is more complicated than that of humans. They don't have lungs that expand and contract like human lungs.
- Parrots take two breaths to complete the breathing cycle: If you notice your parrot panting or having respiratory distress, call your avian veterinarian right away.
- You may be able to identify a respiratory infection by a change in your parrot's breathing and, in severe cases, bubbling from the mouth or nostrils.
- A parrot laboring to breathe may bob its tail as it pants. If you observe these symptoms, take your parrot to the veterinarian right away.



Digestive system

After food is crushed and chewed by the beak, it's swallowed and goes to the *crop*, a saclike organ near your parrot's breast. Parrots do have saliva, but their saliva doesn't have enzymes like a human's saliva. For humans, digestion begins in the mouth, but for parrots, it begins in the crop. After being softened in the crop, the food goes to the stomach (*proventriculus*); then it goes to the gizzard (*ventriculus*), which grinds the food, and moves on to the *cloaca*, where feces and *urates* (urine) collect before being eliminated through the *vent*.

It takes about three hours for food to make it from the beak to the vent, depending on the type of food and the bird's health (in lories, the digestive process is shorter). Many digestive disorders can occur in parrots. If you notice a change in your bird's eating habits or droppings (color, frequency, or odor), contact your avian veterinarian at once.



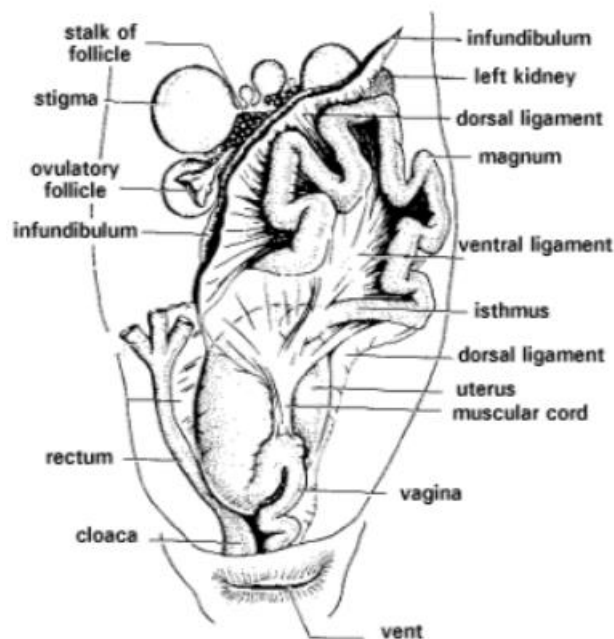


Circulatory system

Birds have a four-chambered heart, like humans, but it's much larger proportionate. It has to be extremely strong to pump oxygen-rich blood at a rate faster than needed by humans.

Reproductive system

Female parrots have two ovaries, though only the left one is functional. Birds don't get pregnant the way female humans do. They get *eggant*. All parrots reproduce by means of eggs. Females can lay infertile eggs and don't need a male around to be inspired to start a little egg family. The male has similar organs to a human male, but they're hidden internally. You can read more about illnesses of the reproductive tract in the section, "Reproductive disorders," later in this chapter.



Recognizing Indications of Illness

A major part of making sure your parrot remains healthy is being an observant guardian. Make an effort to get to know your bird's regular, healthy behavior so that you'll be better able to tell when something's wrong.

Birds can be sneaky when it comes to their illnesses and injuries. They'd rather no one notice, especially a predator. A sick parrot doesn't want to be picked out from the crowd. That's why figuring out whether a bird is sick until he's *very* sick

» **Excessive sleeping:** An ill parrot may sleep too much, especially during the



day. Sleeping on the bottom of the cage is a particularly significant symptom. Look for any odd changes in sleeping patterns.

» **Sleeping on two feet:** A healthy parrot generally sleeps with one foot drawn into his belly.

» **Fluffed-up appearance:** A fluffed-up parrot may be trying to maintain his high body temperature and fight off an illness. Or the room's temperature may be too cool.

» **Loss of appetite:** You should know how much food and what types of food your parrot consumes each day. If you notice that your bird isn't eating or is eating far less than usual, an illness could be present.

» **Change in attitude:** If your parrot seems listless and isn't behaving normally or has become cranky or limp, call your veterinarian.

» **Lameness:** If your parrot can't use his feet or hold up his head, something is very wrong.

» **Panting or labored breathing:** These signs may signify respiratory illness or overheating.

» **Discharge:** If you notice runniness or discharge on the eyes, nares, or vent, the bird may be ill.

» **Change in droppings:** Your parrot's droppings should consist of a solid green

portion, white urates (over the green part), and a clear liquid. If the droppings are discolored (very dark green, black, yellow, or red), and you haven't introduced any change in the diet (such as feeding beets or blueberries), you may have a problem. Also, if the droppings have a pungent odor or they seem far more liquid than usual, call your veterinarian immediately.

» **Debris around the face or on feathers:** This sign indicates poor grooming or vomiting, potential signs of illness.

» **Bobbing tail:** A bird sitting on the perch and panting will have a bobbing tail, which is often a sign of respiratory illness.

» **Messy vent:** If the bird's vent (where waste comes out) is crusty or damp with fecal material, there's a problem.

