

# Captive Exotic Birds: A Brief Introduction

## DID YOU KNOW...

- Parrots and other exotic birds represent the largest population of captive wildlife held in private hands in the U.S.
- Exotic birds are, by definition, any non-indigenous species to the U.S.
- Different types of birds are not different “breeds” like dogs or cats, but are actually different species.
- Birds are not domesticated animals like cats, dogs, or horses that have been selectively bred for the qualities that enable them to live harmoniously among humans.
- Even when bred in captivity, the physical and behavioral needs of birds (to fly and flock for example) remain intact. Deprivation of these natural behaviors causes many birds to suffer from captivity-related stress and other maladaptive behaviors such as excessive screaming, feather destruction, self-mutilation, phobic reactions, stereotypic behaviors, and depression.
- Most parrot species are sexually monomorphic or show very slight or indistinct dimorphic traits.
- Birds are prey animals whose behavior, experience, and perspective in the environment are shaped by the fact they must be vigilant in avoiding predation.
  - Fight or flight response triggered by a variety of incidents.
  - Caution and fearfulness ensure survival in the wild.
  - Instinctively mask signs of illness or injury
- Parrots are highly intelligent; they can be sensitive, emotional, and unpredictable.
- Large parrot species have long life expectancies, often outliving their caretakers:
  - Small parrots 10-25 years
  - Medium to large parrots 25-80 years
- Birds have extremely high metabolic rates and an average body temperature 103-106. Injured or ill birds require supplemental heat in order to maintain their body temperature and, in many cases, is a life-saving measure.
- Vocalization is integral to avian survival: singing, chirping, and loud calling out are the norm.
- Birds have very sensitive respiratory systems, making them susceptible to environmental pathogens and toxins: mold, fungus, and bacteria; fumes from chemicals, cleaning agents, cigarette smoke, car exhaust. Heated Teflon, Scotchgard, and other non-stick surfaces emit toxic fumes that can be fatal to birds.
- Nearly all birds experience some hormonal changes during the year; during breeding cycles, they can become aggressive, irritable, or territorial.
- Routine spay/neuter is not readily available for birds; it is necessary to understand procreative behaviors to avoid unwanted offspring.
- Captive exotic birds commonly sold in the pet trade or used for other entertainment purposes currently do not have specific protections under the Federal Animal Welfare Act, and they are often excluded from animal welfare legislation, pet shop regulations, and existing animal cruelty statutes.
- The most commonly kept species in captivity in the U.S.
  - Passeriformes – Canaries finches, mynahs, and Pekin robins
  - Psittaciformes – Parakeets, cockatiels, parakeets, conures, Quaker or Monk parrots, Amazons, cockatoos, lorries/lorikeets, Eclectus parrots, African greys, macaws, and many others.
  - Columbiformes – Pigeons, doves
  - Piciformes – Toucans

*While almost a third of the world's 330 parrot species are threatened with extinction due to pressures from collecting for the pet trade, combined with habitat loss, many of these same species end up at the doorsteps of animal sheltering facilities throughout the U.S.*

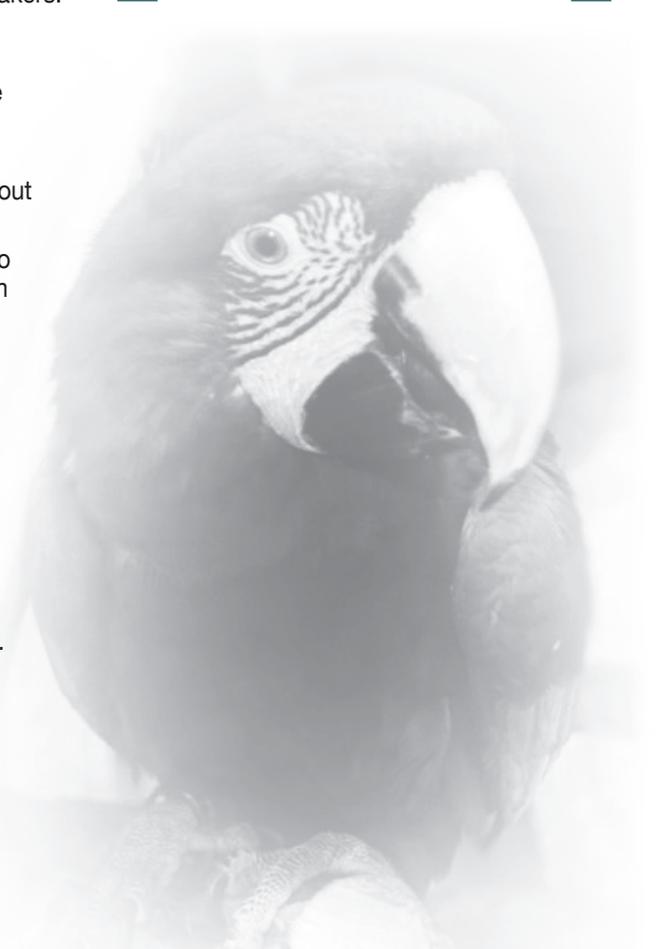


Photo: Foster Parrots

# Common Physical Abnormalities of Captive Birds

Birds often arrive in sheltering facilities with physical or behavioral conditions that require remedy but are not necessarily signs that a bird is diseased or ill or has a life-threatening condition. Most are the result of poor care, inadequate diet, previous injury or trauma, and lack of proper grooming. The most common are dull or matted plumage, bald spots, missing toes or toenails, and overgrown beaks and nails. Birds are prey species, and their instinct is to hide illness. Examination by a qualified avian veterinarian to determine the underlying cause and to ascertain if the signs are an early indication of a more serious illness is always recommended.



## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

In general, the bird should be alert, vocal, active, responsive to stimuli, and interested in the surrounding environment. They should be able to perch steadily, preen themselves, and exhibit a healthy appetite. If there are no other overt signs of illness (i.e. bleeding, lesions, discharge from the eyes or nostrils, respiratory distress, swelling, dragging a wing or leg, lethargy, or fluffed and lying prone on the cage floor), chances are the bird is otherwise in good health.



## FEATHER ABNORMALITIES: PLUCKING VS. MUTILATING

The origins of feather destruction behaviors are complex; they can be medical, psychological, environmental or a combination thereof. Some birds simply over preen or shred their feathers, others pluck out some or all of the feathers within their reach, while others graduate to the most serious self-mutilating of their skin and underlying tissue. For shelters, the most serious concern is a bird with an open wound that is the result of feather plucking or self-mutilating. These birds should receive immediate medical attention.

Feather plucking and shredding, dull or matted plumage, ragged wing or tail feathers, dark stress bars, and generally poor feather quality are often caused by factors such as:

- Nutritional deficiencies: insufficient food, diets lacking in essential nutrients
- Psychological factors: boredom, lack of exercise and mental stimulation, stress, separation anxiety, or lack of socialization with humans and/or other birds
- Excessive confinement in too small a cage
- Allergies; bacterial, viral infection or protozoal infection (Giardia)
- Low humidity or infrequent bathing, airborne toxins
- Developmental factors: chicks deprived of physical contact with parents, too early or forced weaning, juvenile did not fledge, insufficient social interaction with parents, siblings & flock
- Breeding; hormonal imbalance

Some conditions can be mitigated through improved diet or medical intervention. Boredom or lack of physical or mental stimulation is often a cause. Providing the bird with an increased variety of enrichment activities may help to reduce feather plucking. Repeated feather plucking over a long period often results in permanent damage to the feather follicle and prevents feathers from growing back.

### Healthy Plumage

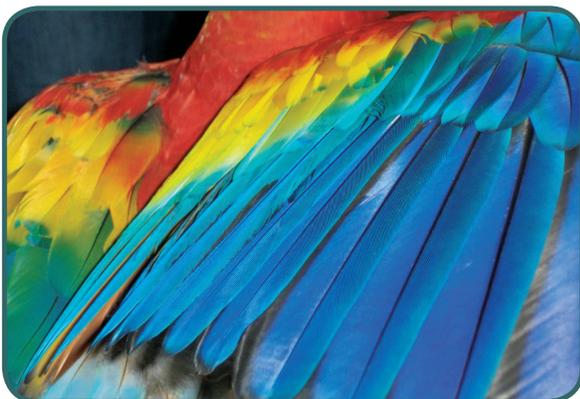


Photo: MAAARS

Feathers are smooth & glossy with an iridescent sheen in some species. Colors are rich and vibrant and feathers free of ragged edges, stress bars, or discolorations. Species such as a Cockatoos, African Greys, and Cockatiels emit a powdery down.

### Unhealthy Plumage

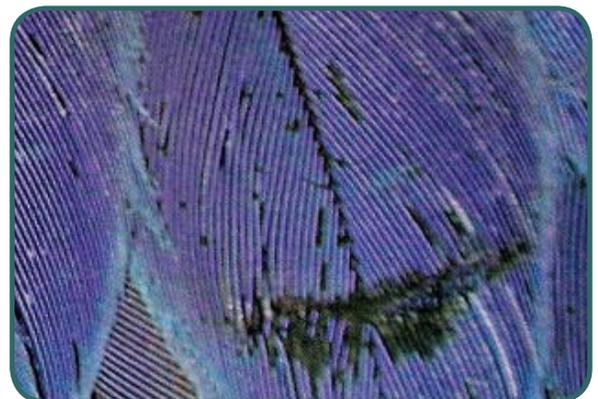


Photo: MAAARS

Generally dull and pale, and/or has ragged edges, black areas and stress marks.



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This information herein is intended solely for use by animal shelter and care facilities to accommodate the short-term care and housing needs of captive birds in a shelter setting; not recommended for long-term care. The above guidelines are specific to birds kept as "pets" and surrendered to shelters. For medical care relating to wild birds, consult with a licensed wildlife rehabilitation organization. These materials are made possible through a generous grant from the ASPCA.®

# Common Physical Abnormalities of Captive Birds cont.

A bird that is feather plucking to the point of self-mutilation is a far more serious condition, and it can be life threatening.

Self-mutilating birds will chew through their own flesh, often in the breast area, and may extend to legs, wings, and toes. A chronically open wound on a bird can result in laceration, nerve and tissue damage, and/or infections.

Though feather plucking and/or mutilation are common among all captive bird species, these behaviors are seen more frequently in Cockatoos and African Grey parrots than in other species. In severe cases, birds will bleed to death from self-mutilation.

**Birds with bleeding or open wounds that are the result of feather mutilation should receive immediate medical care.**

## Self-Mutilating Cockatoo



## Plucked, but healthy



Blue & Gold Macaw



Conures



Congo African Grey



## OVERGROWN OR DEFORMED BEAKS

Beak overgrowth is often caused by a bird not having enough chewing aids to naturally trim their beak. Feeding a couple of almonds a day and offering branches or toys for chewing will help captive birds keep their beaks trimmed. If overgrowth interferes with their ability to eat, the bird's beak should be professionally trimmed.

Deformed beaks or severely overgrown beaks may be signs of other more serious medical conditions such as:

- Nutritional imbalances, malnutrition, lack of vitamin D
- Infections, mites
- Liver disease
- Trauma or injury
- Serious diseases (Psittacine Beak & Feather PBF)

An experienced avian veterinarian should determine the underlying cause of severe beak abnormalities.



Yellow-headed Amazon  
Overgrown beak due to neglect



African Grey  
Untreated sinus infection



# Common Physical Abnormalities of Captive Birds cont.



## OVERGROWN NAILS

Overgrown toenails make it difficult for a bird to properly perch, walk, or grasp their food. Severely curved or curled nails can be uncomfortable and endanger the bird by getting caught onto toys, cage bars, and fibers.

Nails should be short enough so that the bird can stand on a flat surface without the nail raising the toe off the surface. Providing natural branches for birds to rub their feet on can help keep their toenails trim. As a preventative measure, overgrown nails should be professionally trimmed.



Overgrown, curled nails



## MISSING TOES OR TOENAILS

Most birds have four toes; three pointing forward and one pointing backwards. Parrots, however, have four dexterous toes; two facing forward and two facing backward, which enables them to have a better grip on most objects.

Unless a bird's toe or foot is bleeding or they have a fresh wound upon arrival at the shelter, missing toes and toenails are generally the results of prior injury. Some birds experience a little difficulty gripping certain objects, but most of them function quite well despite their missing toes/toenails.

A bird having difficulty perching or walking, appears to be in pain, or shows other signs of discomfort as a result of missing toes/toenails should be seen by a veterinarian.

Providing perches of differing diameters and textures that are appropriately sized for the bird helps to keep a bird's feet healthy.

Braided rope perches provide added comfort, but should be cleaned often to prevent build-up of droppings and debris. A corner triangular perch or platform with a flat surface helps to relieve pressure off a bird's feet, lessen any abrasions, and can aid their mobility.



Missing toes



Missing toenails

*Authored by Denise Kelly, President, The Avian Welfare Coalition  
Photos courtesy of: MAARS, Project Perry, and Foster Parrots*



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# Avian Placement Application Evaluation Guide

Because the adoption application is designed to encourage potential adopters to take seriously the responsibility of caring for a captive bird, some questions listed are purely educational and, as such, there are no “right” or “wrong” answers. This evaluation guide is designed to help you, the evaluator, recognize potential misconceptions, situations, or expectations that may lessen the possibility that the applicant is ready to care for birds. This evaluation process can provide an opportunity to educate the prospective adopter in order to make the adoption a success.

## Living Arrangement

- 1. Type of residence?** House      Condo      Apt      Other
- 2. Do you:** Rent      Own
- 3. If you rent, do you have the landlord’s consent to have a bird?** No      Yes

The living arrangement of the applicant is an important consideration when placing a bird. Disrupting neighbors due to bird vocalizations (squawking, chirping, talking, calling, screaming) should especially be considered by those living in condos or apartments. Housing particularly loud birds such as conures and macaws in apartment/condo situations should be discouraged.

All potential adopters should be warned that birds can cause considerable damage to home interiors. Those who rent will likely be held financially responsible for any damage caused by the bird or risk losing their deposit if the bird destroys any portion of the rented property. It is also important that those who rent have permission from the landlord to keep a bird. If the applicant indicates that they do not have permission to have a bird they should not be allowed to adopt until approval from the landlord is obtained (you may want to ask for proof of approval, such as a copy of the rental agreement or the landlord’s phone number to ask directly). Failure to do so could cause the renter to lose his or her lease or other rental agreement, pay a fee, or lose a deposit, all of which could cause the bird to become homeless again.

## Household Members

### **4. Do all parties in your household know that you are applying to adopt a bird?**

It is important that all family members are aware of and support adding a bird to their household. Household conflicts concerning the bird can result in a stressful situation for the bird. The adopter may feel obligated to sacrifice the needs of the bird in order to satisfy disgruntled household members. Household tensions of this type are very often the reasons birds are surrendered in the first place.

### **5. Are you aware that exotic birds may carry diseases that can infect humans?**

For public health and safety purposes it is important that prospective adopters understand that chlamydiosis (psittacosis) and avian tuberculosis (extremely rare) can be transmitted through the air from birds to humans. These diseases can cause significant illness, especially for people with compromised immune systems.

### **6. Does anyone in the household have allergies or asthma?**

Many who have allergies to dogs and cats mistakenly assume that a bird will be ideal for their household. However, birds continually shed “feather dust” — particles of feathers, which may aggravate asthma in some people. Many homes with captive birds have HEPA-type air filters in rooms with birds to control allergies from bird dander. Some species (Cockatiels, African Greys, and all Cockatoos) produce a powder that coats the feathers; these species are not recommended for persons with allergies.

### **7. Does anyone in the house smoke?**

Poor air quality due to tobacco smoke is a major concern and chronic exposure will cause premature death. Unlike humans, a bird replaces nearly all the air in her lungs with each breath. Because no residual air is left in the lungs during the ventilation cycle of birds, they transfer more oxygen and more pollutants during each breath. If there is a smoker in the house of the prospective adopter they should not be allowed to adopt a bird unless care is taken to ensure that all smoking is done outside and away from the bird.

### **8. Who will be the primary caretaker of the bird?**

It is important that the individual applying for the bird is the primary caretaker of the bird. The application process is designed to educate the individual who will be responsible for the bird’s well-being. Adopting animals as gifts should not be allowed.

### **9. Who will care for the bird when the primary caretaker is away, either for business or vacation?**

Many people mistakenly assume that a bird may be left unattended for several days as long as the bird’s food and water dishes are full. This is not acceptable. Many birds require regular social interaction and can become stressed or depressed when left alone for extended periods. In addition, birds require fresh fruits and vegetables that must be replenished daily with uneaten portions removed daily, cages need routine cleaning, and birds need time outside the cage for physical and psychological health.

Parrots are monogamous by nature and will bond to humans as their “mate,” so the absence of their caretaker for long periods can cause stress and depression from which they may never fully recover. A primary caretaker who travels often and/or for long periods of time should consider adopting two birds to provide constant companionship. Birds also like predictability — knowing who will be taking care of them and when.

# Avian Placement Application Evaluation Guide cont.

## Time

**10. Approximately how much time will the responsible person have available to spend with the bird?**

**11. How many hours a day would the bird be left alone?**

Birds are gregarious flock animals who need lots of socialization to learn how to interact with their human family members and other birds; it is unnatural for them to be alone for hours at a time. Those who work full time or who will not have a lot of time to spend with a bird should consider adopting at least two birds to meet the bird's social needs or they should think about adopting a different animal that is not so socially dependent.

It is a myth that birds do not remain bonded to humans when there is another bird in the household. Even if the birds also bond to each other they will remain human-bonded as long as humans continue to interact with them.

## Expectations

**12. Why are you interested in adopting a bird?**

Beware of applicants who indicate that they are looking for a low-maintenance pet, a unique pet, or want birds because dogs and cats are prohibited where they live. The desire to adopt a bird should not be based on convenience or novelty.

**13. What are the most important characteristics you are looking for in a bird?**

Beware of applicants who indicate that they want a bird who can talk, is entertaining, or affectionate. Not all parrots talk, not all parrots choose to bond with humans, not all parrots are tame, and not all parrots want to amuse and please people on command. The personalities and habits of the bird(s) in your care should be carefully evaluated to determine whether they match the interests of the applicant. Unreasonable expectations for a bird's behavior can lead to a disappointing, unhappy, negative situation for all involved.

## Bird Care

**14. What do you feed your exotic bird?**

All birds need a wide variety of fresh and nutritious foods. Birds cannot survive on seeds alone. Prospective adopters should take time to learn the needs and preferences of the species they wish to adopt.

**15. How will you provide daily exercise and entertainment for your bird?**

Birds are active and inquisitive and must be provided with ample room to move about and play. An indoor or sheltered outdoor aviary or a flight safe room (windows covered, no cats/dogs, no ceiling fans, etc.) that will allow the bird(s) to fly is good for exercise. Birds with clipped wings can get exercise by climbing, swinging, and flapping (if provided with ample space), toys, and climbing structures. At the very least, birds need enough room inside their cages to flap their wings and climb about. They need toys for amusement and wood to chew.

**16. Do you have any experience in keeping birds?**

**17. Would you be willing to attend a class on bird care if available?**

Even if an individual has experience in keeping birds it is very important that bird caretakers stay on top of the latest information, especially since avian care advice changes so frequently. For example, grit, gravel, and oyster shell was widely recommended to feed to birds as little as ten years ago and we now know that it can be very dangerous (and even fatal) to some exotic birds.

Learning how to recognize the subtle signs of illness in a bird is especially important since birds will hide their distress until they are so compromised it may be too late for medical intervention.

Provide information on where to attend a bird education class. (If the shelter does not offer such classes and none exist in your area, recommend that the adopter purchase a current book on bird care specific to the species they are adopting.) Regardless of class availability, a "yes" answer indicates that the adopter is serious about providing good care.

**19. Do you know an avian veterinarian?**

It is important that prospective adopters understand that birds need veterinary care from a veterinarian that specializes in birds. New bird exams and diagnostic tests as well as annual well-bird exams are recommended by avian veterinarians.

**20. Would you like us to recommend an avian veterinarian?**

Recommend any number of local avian vets that the shelter trusts. You can also direct them to visit the Association of Avian Veterinarians search page at [www.aav.org/vet-lookup/](http://www.aav.org/vet-lookup/).

**21. Have you made arrangements for your bird(s) in the event of your illness or death?**

Since many of the larger species of parrots can live to 80 years in captivity, many parrots outlive their caretakers. It is important that prospective adopters realize that many parrots are a lifetime commitment — the equivalent of caring for a special-needs child for the rest of her life. The potential adopter should have a plan for who will take the parrot in the event of their death. The adopter should have specific family members or friends who will take responsibility for caring for their bird — the designated person should be identified in the adopter's will. If the adopter does not know anyone who can provide lifetime care for the bird, they should at least arrange to have the bird placed in the care of a bird rescue organization that will find the bird a responsible home.

# Avian Placement Application Evaluation Guide cont.

## Bird Behavior

**22. Are you aware that exotic birds might have or develop bad habits such as destruction of clothing, furniture, drapery, etc.; biting; screaming; dislike of strangers or certain household members; and leaving droppings everywhere? Are you aware that these habits can be difficult to break?**

Since parrots are commonly surrendered for behavioral “problems,” it is important that the prospective adopter realize that birds are not low-maintenance pets and that many of their so-called problems are a direct result of the environment in which they are kept.

The average captive parrot spends 10–12 waking hours a day confined to a cage and is fed a monotonous diet of manufactured bird foods. Many are denied the opportunity to fly because their wings have been clipped to keep them “under control” and to prevent them from hurting themselves by flying into walls and windows, chewing on household objects, and getting into other hazards. Few are kept in groups with their own species. Eventually, the restriction of a parrot’s natural desire to fly and forage and to have the companionship of other birds can manifest itself in neurotic behavior such as excessive screaming, pulling out her own feathers, and even biting. Most people cannot cope with the long-term challenges and responsibilities of caring for these essentially undomesticated animals that are physically and psychologically adapted to live in the wild.

**23. If your bird develops a bad habit what will you do?**

One should never yell at or hit a bird. Birds have sensitive ears and may never trust the person who has struck him or her again. Birds don’t learn by punishment, they learn through patience and positive reinforcement for good behavior. A prospective adopter should be willing to seek advice from an avian behaviorist or specialist, local bird club or avian rescues which can be helpful in providing educational materials, advice, and referrals on bird care, housing, diet, behavior, and veterinary services. Sometimes a change in environment, diet or behavior modification can make all the difference in creating a happier living situation for a bird and his or her caretaker.

*This Bird Adoption Application Evaluation Guide was prepared by Monica Engebretson, Senior Program Associate, Born Free USA and Eileen McCarthy, Co-Founder, Midwest Avian Adoption & Rescue Services, Inc. – please copy, distribute and utilize this document in its entirety for the benefit of all captive birds in your care.*

# Avian Placement Application\*

Taking care of a bird is a serious responsibility. This adoption application is designed to help you decide if a bird is right for you, and to ensure that you are properly informed about the needs of captive birds. Before completing this application, please read the provided information. You must be at least 18 years of age to adopt a bird from this shelter. This application is confidential.\*\*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Home Phone # \_\_\_\_\_ Cell Phone # \_\_\_\_\_

Email (optional) \_\_\_\_\_

1. Type of residence? House \_\_\_\_\_ Condo \_\_\_\_\_ Apt \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

2. Do you: Rent \_\_\_\_\_ Own \_\_\_\_\_

3. If you rent, do you have the landlord's consent to have a bird? No \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_

4. Do all parties in your household know that you are applying to adopt a bird? No \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_

5. Are you aware that exotic birds may carry diseases that can infect humans? No \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_

6. Does anyone in the household have allergies or asthma? No \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_

7. Does anyone in the house smoke? No \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_

8. Who will be the primary caretaker of the bird? \_\_\_\_\_

9. Who will care for the bird when the primary caretaker is away, either for business or vacation? \_\_\_\_\_

10. Approximately how much time will the responsible person have available to spend with the bird?

Weekdays \_\_\_\_\_ Weekday evenings \_\_\_\_\_ Weekends \_\_\_\_\_

11. How many hours a day would the bird be left alone? \_\_\_\_\_

12. How will you provide daily exercise and entertainment for your bird? \_\_\_\_\_

13. Why are you interested in adopting a bird? \_\_\_\_\_

14. What are the most important characteristics you are looking for in a bird? \_\_\_\_\_

15. What do you feed an exotic bird? \_\_\_\_\_



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# Avian Placement Application\*

16. Do you have any experience in keeping birds? No \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ If so, what? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

17. Would you be willing to attend a class on bird care if available? No \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_

18. Do you know an avian veterinarian? No \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_

19. Would you like us to recommend an avian veterinarian? No \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_

20. Are you aware that exotic birds might have or develop bad habits (destruction of clothing, furniture, drapery, etc; biting; screaming; dislike of strangers or certain household members; leaving droppings everywhere), and that these habits can be difficult to break? No \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_

21. If your bird develops a bad habit what will you do? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

22. Have you made arrangements for your bird(s) in the event of your illness or death? No \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**I have completed the above application and have read the provided information. I understand that a staff member will review my application and that the shelter has a right to refuse adoption to any applicant.**

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*\*\*Note: Answering yes or no to any of the above questions will not necessarily result in your qualification/disqualification as an adopter.*

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