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## WHY PET BIRDS NEED SPECIES-APPROPRIATE FRESH FOOD DIETS

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Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#) DVM World-Renowned Veterinarian

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Decades ago, it was common for avian veterinarians to recommend fortified seed diets as the gold standard for pet birds, followed by the trend of only feeding fortified pellets (similar to dry pet food) to meet minimum nutritional requirements
- Now it's known that seed-based diets and one-size-fits-all pellets are lacking in important aspects of species-specific bird nutrition and may lead to nutritional diseases such as obesity, reproductive disorders, abnormal feathers and organ dysfunction
- The best diets for exotic birds are diets that most closely mimic a bird's native diet and include an abundance of fresh, live, whole foods, which provide natural foraging opportunities and vitamins and minerals from bioavailable sources
- More and more aviculturists, including biologist and educator Dr. Jason Crean of All Species Consulting and Collaborating 4 Avian Wellness (C4AW), are recognizing the important role of species-appropriate nutrition for the birds they keep and are seeing improved health and vitality as a result, making excellent nutrition a priority

If you're new to sharing your life with a pet bird, you may assume that they eat mostly seeds or pellets. This, however, is setting her up for probable nutritional disease and eventual organ degeneration, which can occur over time due to dietary deficiencies or excesses.

Decades ago it was common for veterinarians to recommend fortified seed diets or extruded pellets (aka "bird kibble") as the gold standard for [pet bird nutrition](#). Many pet birds were also fed poor-quality sunflower and peanut mixes, which are too high in fat and deficient in antioxidants, phytonutrients, vitamins and minerals, which contributed to the vast majority of captive birds dying notably early deaths.

Avian veterinarians now know there's no one-size-fits-all diet that's good for all birds, as each species has different nutritional requirements. Macaws, for instance, need a higher fat content in their food while cockatoos do better with lower fat and higher protein. Knowing your pet bird's nutritional requirements, as a species, is crucial in ensuring she stays disease-free and healthy.

### Birds Do Best Eating Their Natural Diet

We've learned, the hard way, that taking a one-size-fits-all approach to exotic bird nutrition is a bad idea. Many seed-addicted parrots don't live to see half of their expected lifespan, and while there are many factors that contribute to a parrot's healthspan, the role of species-appropriate nutrition is a critical piece of the psittacine longevity equation.

In the 90's, avian vets (including myself) assumed “nutritionally complete and balanced” extruded pellets (“bird food”) would dramatically improve the nutritional status of our malnourished avian patients.

This novel approach for birds resulted in the same issues we see with our dog and cat patients eating a lifetime of kibble: animals with weight issues, skin problems, an increase in behaviour problems and a wad of chronic, degenerative diseases not seen in their wild counterparts.

Birds are highly sensitive animals — much more so than dogs and cats. Ninety-nine percent of mass-produced bird foods on the market are made with non-inspected “feed grade” ingredients, so the levels of heavy metals, mycotoxins, pesticide residues and contaminants can be profound.

Add to that synthetic dyes, preservatives, emulsifiers and a slew of synthetic vitamins and minerals (coming from China), not to mention the [byproducts of processing](#) itself, and it's easy to see why many avian vets (including myself) hopped off the pellet band wagon a while ago.

### **What's the Best Food to Feed Your Pet Bird?**

Health-minded aviculturists have been having the ‘what do we feed’ discussion for quite some time, and thankfully we've learned a lot over the last 20 years. One of my colleagues, Dr. Jason Crean, has been at the forefront of the species-appropriate, exotic avian nutrition conversation for the last two decades.

In addition to being a nationally recognized science educator and zoo consultant, Dr. Crean is the current vice president of the American Federation of Aviculture and helps bird lovers educate themselves about whole food nutrition via his website [c4aw.org](#) and his Avian Raw Whole Food Nutrition Facebook group.

It was out of this passion that he started using his background in the biological sciences to move away from processed bird foods to more whole foods for his own [birds](#) and making those recommendations to those for whom he consults. Recently I had a chance to catch up with him to discuss the Avian Fresh Food Movement:

#### **Dr. Becker: How have you seen avian nutrition evolve since your career got started with birds?**

Dr. Crean: I remember as a 12-year-old with my first cockatiel offering seed and being surprised to learn they could eat more than that in the way of vegetables. In high school and college, I worked for pet shops, which was the time that pellets became available.

Now, we are still seeing health issues as well as behavioural issues that can be tied to nutrition, so neither the mostly seed diet nor the mostly pellet diet seem to have improved the lives of our birds.

#### **Dr. Becker: What is the current state of exotic avian nutrition?**

Dr. Crean: From my experience, it is similar to the movement of raw food feeding of cats and dogs as more and more pet owners are educating themselves and seeing the positive results of feeding diverse, unprocessed foods. It is hard to argue that, if processed foods aren't good for us, why would they be good for the animals we keep?

We know that heating many foods like grains can result in increases in carcinogens and inflammatory compounds. So it isn't just about the ingredients but more about the processing itself, not unlike processed dog and cat foods. However, avoiding ingredients like soy, peanuts, corn gluten meal and other items in processed foods is also important.

**Dr. Becker: What obstacles seem to keep bird lovers from making the switch?**

Dr. Crean: As you always say, “Stop Fearing Food!” comes to mind as some veterinarians scare their clients away from feeding fresh foods, citing everything from concerns over food safety to nutritional imbalance. But how do we know what that “balance” is for the many, many different bird species we keep?

There is no “complete” diet that is going to satisfy every species and every individual bird in our homes. Offering a diverse whole food diet is, in my experience, the best way to satisfy the needs of our birds. And not just the nutritional needs, but also their need to forage and engage in other naturalistic behaviours.

**Dr. Becker: The internet has become a primary resource for dog and cat owners and with this comes the spreading of rumours and myths about diet. Do you see this also with information about the feeding of birds?**

Dr. Crean: Sadly, I see this every day! Myths like “All seeds are bad and are devoid of nutrients” or “tree nuts are too fatty and shouldn’t be included in avian diets” are both common misconceptions. Seed-only diets are, of course, not beneficial; especially when sourcing and freshness aren’t considered. But some fresh seeds (organic when available) have their place in a diverse diet.

Soaking and/or sprouting them also dramatically increases their nutritional benefits, similar to the vast nutritional difference between wheat and wheat grass. And tree nuts are extremely nutritious and most that are offered are fantastic sources of proteins, fibre and those all-important omega-3 fatty acids.

There are also myths that I continually try to debunk such as a great many food items are “toxic” or that “whole foods spoil incredibly fast.” There are a select few whole food items that should be avoided like avocado, but there are countless healthy items that can be introduced into a diverse avian diet.

The main take-away here is this: by offering a diverse whole food diet, birds should not be able to consume too much of any one thing, as even the healthiest of food items can lead to imbalances if too much is consumed on a regular basis.

**Dr. Becker: How can we help bird owners make better species-appropriate choices?**

Dr. Crean: Consider what your birds would eat in the wild. Cockatiels, for example, are seed eaters but consume many other things like herbs, grasses, flowers and even small insects.

My colleagues who are involved in wild parrot conservation have directly observed a wide range of parrot species consume insect larvae, tree bark, seeds from the inside of fruits, flowers and buds, and other things we may not consider feeding.

So offering high quality mealworms, papaya or squash seeds, and edible flowers (dried or fresh) can help diversify the diet as well as increase the foraging opportunities that make feeding engaging.

**Transitioning Your Bird to a Healthier Diet**

Not unlike finicky felines, many birds are addicted to their poor quality diets and must be transitioned slowly, with tremendous patience and maybe some trickery, to begin exploring healthier food choices.

Dr. Crean suggests considering how the bird species you keep lives its life in the wild. Offering foods like shredded vegetables and sprouted seeds on the cage floor for foraging is species-appropriate for birds like cockatiels, while hanging foods from stainless steel skewers in larger chunks could be a great method of engaged eating for a macaw.

Offering whole foods diced, shredded, in chunks or whole and considering how and where you present them could be the gateway to better eating.

How you present foods to your birds may be critical to them actually recognizing new items as a food. Dr. Crean says, "Keeping birds is a scientific experiment that has no end," so whether it takes, days, weeks, months, or longer, never stop trying different ways for your birds to eat better foods. More often than not, you cannot offer a food once or twice and claim that your bird doesn't like it; persistence on your part is key!

### **Why Foraging Matters to the Food Experience**

One of the most underestimated aspects of avian wellness that has become very apparent in the last decade is environmental enrichment, including food foraging experiences.

Dr. Crean states, "Birds are not little people and, therefore, you need to treat them as birds. Knowing how birds behave and not expecting human-like behaviours from them helps a great deal when you consider their preferences for foraging." Providing species-appropriate foraging involves allowing them to work for their food, which research shows animals prefer.

Foraging could mean birds need to move things around in order to get to foods, or open something to access some foods. It isn't uncommon for birds to hang upside down just to reach their favourite food item.

Mixing foods together can help them forage, and it's also a great way to introduce new foods. Dr. Crean recommends making a mash that consists of soaked and sprouted seeds and grains, diced and shredded vegetables, fresh or dried edible flowers, and even some fruit. From his direct observations, he has seen birds try new food items they have never encountered before when mixed into a mash such as this.

As more and more people see their birds as integral members of their families, they are recognizing the important roles of species-appropriate avian nutrition and foraging experiences in their birds' overall health. Feeding a diverse whole food diet rich in unprocessed foods can take your bird from just surviving to thriving.

Thankfully, there are a variety of educational groups and websites to help you become a well-informed and knowledgeable avian owner including Dr. Crean's "[Avian Raw Whole Food Nutrition](#)" group on Facebook and the [Collaborating 4 Avian Wellness](#) site.