

Elaine from Modesto has added a new member to her family. His name is Maxwell and he is a five-month-old blue and gold Macaw. She has a large cage for him and plans to allow him plenty of time interacting with her outside of his cage. Her questions revolve mainly around his diet and what would be best to feed him. Maxwell was purchased at a pet store where she was told to feed him a seed mix along with various fruits and vegetables, but she has heard that seeds might not be ideal for his diet.

Elaine's new family member is truly a spectacular creature. Macaws are natives of Central and South America, but thankfully are no longer imported to the United States after being taken from their homes. They are, however, readily available as pets thanks to breeders who are able to raise and breed these birds in captivity.

Choosing a macaw as a companion is comparable to a full time job. These birds are highly intelligent and do require a tremendous amount of interaction with their caretakers. I've often heard of these birds being compared to a five-year-old child in both intelligence and habit.

Owing to their intelligence, they can be very manipulating, if allowed. I know of several households that I would swear to you are run by the macaw in the living room. Obviously, these birds can be a challenge as companions; however, with the right "upbringing" they can make unbelievably wonderful family members.

Diet is the most important factor in good caretaking for any companion and macaws are no exception. Of the disease problems I see in my avian patients, ninety percent can be either directly or indirectly tied to poor quality nutrition. These low quality diets are always seed based. When trying to decide what is best to feed a companion bird, it is important to understand how these birds eat in their natural environment.

Macaws, like many of the parrots, are omnivores. This means they take their nutrition from both plant and animal sources. Humans and dogs are also omnivores. In Elaine's letter, she states she was advised to feed a seed based diet with fruits and vegetables. This combination is not an omnivore diet suited for a macaw and eventually will lead to malnutrition and the diseases that can result.

One common pitfall that bird caretakers commonly drop into is allowing their bird to pick what it wants to eat. I often hear caretakers tell me their bird really loves its seed mix. Birds have an extremely well developed sense of taste and will, when allowed, eat only what tastes best. Seeds do have good taste owing to their extremely high (40-90%) fat content however they can become a disaster for their health. To use the five-year-old child analogy, if you place a bowl of broccoli and a bowl of ice cream in front of a five-year-old and let them make the choice on which to eat...which do you think they'll pick? I think you get the point. Taste is not a nutritional quality!

The best diet for a macaw is one that addresses their omnivorous needs and one of the easiest ways to do this is to base their diet on a pelleted formulation. Those of us with dogs and cats for companions are already using this type of preparation in the dry foods they are feeding their companions. These foods along with water make a complete nutritional package. These pelleted diets accomplish the same thing with avian companions.

In the case of macaws, I recommend a diet eighty percent of which is pellets. From this base, I add vegetables of almost infinite variety, fruits to a much lesser degree, grain-based foods such as pasta and rice and small amounts of meat. I can commonly be heard telling bird caretakers that human foods that are considered to be nutritious are okay for your bird. This is the case as long as pellets make up at least eighty percent of the overall diet. One special dietary note specific to macaws, especially the spectacular hyacinth macaw, is their need for a higher fat diet. Thus, seeds can be used especially whole large seeds with their shells. Brazil nuts work quite well for this purpose, allowing the macaws to work a bit to get at the nut and then providing the extra fat of high quality that they require.

Pelleted bird diets are readily available at most pet stores and are sized according to the type of bird being fed. As to the question of which pellet is best? I prefer Harrisons, but any quality pellet is far and away better than a seed based diet. Does this mean your bird should never have seeds? Absolutely not; seeds can be given as a treat once or twice a week for a couple of hours, Again back to the five year old, it's okay to eat the ice cream once in a while.