

The Great Change-over: Bringing Nutrition Advice into the Kitchen

by Sherry Rind
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"You wouldn't feed your birds motor oil, would you?" The normally affable veterinarian fixed me with such a stern, blue-eyed glare that I began to stammer, "But I—but . . ." I tried to answer his question about what I fed my birds but did not get past the four-letter word "seed" before my recitation was abruptly cut off.

"Oil!" he thundered, "fat! That's all you find in seed. Feed 'em pelleted food. Feed 'em corn, rice, and beans. You can give them just about anything you find in the produce department. Variety but no seeds!"

"Not even sprouted?" I asked.

"What difference does it make if they're soaked in water? No seed!"

Timid I may be when practically pinned to the wall by an accusing stare, but I do disagree about the sprouts. A sunflower seed that has sprouted is now a whole plant, not a seed. The starch in the seed has been used up in the growth process and the tiny plant is packed with vitamins and protein. The manager of a health food store pointed out that a seed that has been sprouting for a couple of days in the kitchen is fresher than anything bought in the grocery store and is a plant grown without pesticides.

Pellets, the vet said, form the basis of a balanced diet, high in protein and carbohydrates and low in fat. I winced at the price when I bought my first box of Lafeber's, which was the only brand of pelleted food the store stocked. "But there's so much less waste," Myra, the veterinary assistant, had told me. "The birds don't pick through and leave half of it to spoil."

The feeding directions that came in the box suggested one way of changing the birds over from seed to pellets was to mix pellets into their regular rations in gradually increasing amounts. The birds would have time to become accustomed to the pellets without being terrorized by the sudden appearance of new and strange objects in their food cups. In human terms, a sudden change in diet might be the equivalent of a morning coffee devotee being deprived of his coffee and

handed chamomile tea instead. Just imagine the uproar in the house.

Mindful of the birds' sensibilities, I did try the gradual change before coming to my senses and realizing the changeover would cost me a fortune in wasted pellets as the birds ate their fruit, vegetables, and seeds and left the pellets sitting. If the birds could not cope with the sight of the little yellow objects after three days' exposure, too bad. Let them climb to the tops of their cages, screaming with terror at the morning feed. Let them cower away from their beloved food dishes. I decided to serve only pellets in the morning with fruit and vegetables not coming until later. Having consumed all those seeds, the birds ought to be fat enough to stand a bit of stress, I reasoned.

I have heard that some birds, like cats, will practically starve themselves if they cannot get their favorite, accustomed food. I prepared my psyche for tough times ahead; I spoke cheerfully to the birds when offering them nothing but pale yellow pellets. Imagine you have a house full of food and your child is gazing at you, obviously hungry. You hand him a bowl of dry oatmeal. That was what it felt like.

The birds dug right in. So much for trauma. High on my success, I decided to introduce a mixture of corn, beans, and rice. Pita, the female Mexican redhead, ate the mixture as if she had been at it all her life. She eats anything I give her. I suspect her eating habits are much like mine: nibble, nibble, nibble all day, given the opportunity. Fortunately for both our figures, we do not always have the opportunity.

Pico and Pedro, the two male redheads, seem offended by beans, as if this is too humble a food for them. They pick out the corn and rice but, even after a month of my consistently offering beans, they have yet to taste them. Pedro is probably the culprit here. He is the leader and Pico does what he does. I look forward to the day when Pico moves in with Pita; perhaps then he will learn to eat beans.

You can probably find as many diets as there are veterinarians, owners, and breeders. Different people recommend such items as: calf manna, dog kibbles, chicken scratch food, meal worms, monkey chow, cheese, chicken, and eggs. With the possible exception of dairy products, all are wholesome additions to a psittacine's diet. Inclusion of fresh fruits and vegetables receives unanimous agreement.

An excellent piece of advice comes from Dr. Robert Shelley in an article summarizing a nutrition panel held for the Aviculture Society of Puget Sound. After discussing the various ingredients in a bird's diet, he writes, "Remember, too, a good diet is one that you are *capable* of feeding. By this I mean that it should be convenient and not too tedious to prepare and maintain or you won't use it." I hope that every owner wants to give the best of all possible care to his bird(s) but sometimes the ideal needs to be tailored down to the practical. That is, if you find it a bother to keep track of sprouts, the birds can do fine on some other vegetable.

I am experimenting a little in my effort to make the birds eat their legumes. On the days when I have the morning at home, I give the guys only the corn-bean-rice mix. No pellets, no sprouts, no fruit or vegetables. Then we wait. They eat the corn and rice. We wait. They glare at me as accusingly as my veterinarian and we wait some more. Then I decide they are about to collapse from malnutrition and I give them some pellets. The beans stay in the cup until I throw them out. In the evening, the birds get their fruit and vegetables. Would they starve for the food they want? I am afraid to find out. Maybe it is only pinto beans that disgust them. When the freezer is empty of this batch, I will try small white beans.

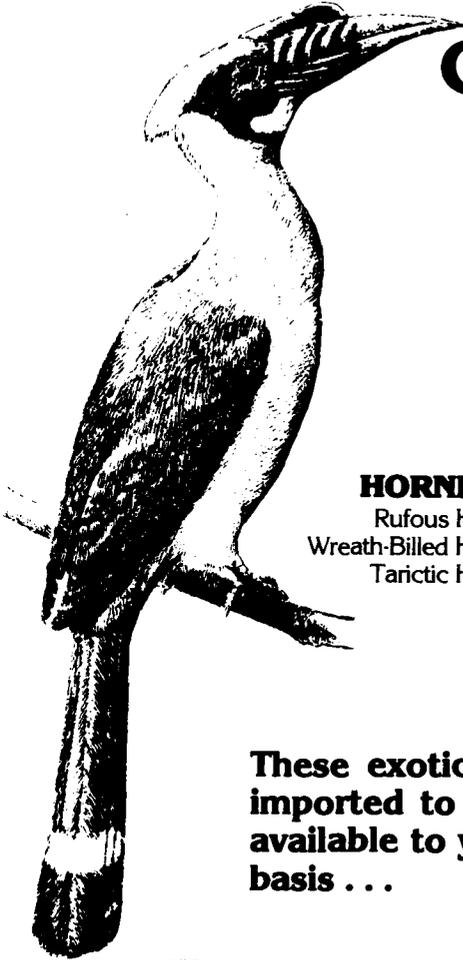
I would not accuse these birds of being so intelligent and so calculating that they know exactly how far to push me to get what they want. They would not understand me if I did.

And—dare I reveal this?—I do include seed in my birds' diet. In the interest of variety. ●

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