As an addicted reader and writer of science fiction, I’m sometimes amused by my colleagues’ mention of scientifically designed pets. You and I know that there’s no reason to wait for the genetic engineers to do their stuff in order to have a galaxy of choices for the perfect companion. The large and varied class of birds already contains enough species to match almost any lifestyle. The real trick is deciding which of the feathered charmers is right for you, your family, or your customers. The following checklist should help you narrow down the search for that special bird.

When choosing a pet bird, the single most important consideration is the amount of time you have to spend with the new acquisition. Birds are highly social creatures who become seriously depressed if deprived of interaction with others; a single tame parrot, for instance, will want to be with you at least an hour each day. If you can’t provide sufficient human companionship, get two birds and let the pair amuse itself. Finches, who rarely learn to accept human friendship in lieu of relationships with their own kind, should almost never be kept alone.

Another central consideration is your expectations for the pet. What do you want from your birds — self-sufficient beauty, melodious song, personality-plus companionship? The person thrilled by the trills of a canary may be exhausted by the tricks of an attention-hogging parrot, while the fan of a
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<td><strong>VIRGINIA</strong></td>
<td>Northern Virginia Bird Club</td>
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For information about contacting any of these member clubs, please call that club's closest state coordinator. There is a state coordinator listing with phone numbers elsewhere in this publication.
A few factors outside your control will also influence your final decision. Allergy or respiratory disease sufferers, for example, may want to avoid members of the cockatoo family, including the cockatiel, because they produce a fine powder down that irritates some people. If you live in an apartment, space and noise are important considerations. While only a crank could be annoyed by a canary, a pair of finches, or a budgie, anyone might be irritated by the sunrise serenade of a conure or macaw! (Some sensitive individuals may even be disturbed by the monotonous peep of a cockatiel, although its cry doesn’t carry that far.) In most cases, however, a single, small hookbill will be quiet enough to slip by the neighbors. Since space is at a premium in most condo and apartment units, you’ll do well to stick to the smaller, more conveniently housed species anyway.

We all know that we should insist on the healthiest birds available, but sometimes our hearts get us in trouble. Do try to resist a bird that’s out of condition. Experienced breeders can sometimes identify a specimen that will thrive if rescued, but a novice may only add the stress of transfer to a sickly bird’s problems. The best thing that most beginners can do to improve the bird today will be around tomorrow, and don’t hesitate to get your under­standing of the seller’s policies in writing. You’ll avoid a lot of heartache and don’t be embarrassed to identify a specimen that will sometimes accommodate a hyacinth macaw; maybe a ringneck parakeet will speak-talk you as nicely as a handfed double yellow headed parrot. Allergy or respiratory diease sufferers, sensitive individuals may even be disturbed by the monotonous peep of a cockatiel, although its cry doesn’t carry that far.)

Cost is the last thing you should consider when looking for your special bird. Don’t be tempted to pay too little. A cheap parrot hawked at a flea market or sold from the back of a truck is probably smuggled (if it’s wild) or stolen (if it’s tame) — and disease, trauma, and legal hassles aren’t bargains at any price. Be sure that the person who sells you the bird today will be around tomorrow, and don’t hesitate to get your understanding of the seller’s policies in writing. You’ll avoid a lot of heartache by paying a little more to sellers willing to stand behind their birds. If the best of a particular species is out of your price range, consider a different species. Perhaps the lovely sun conure can meet your yearning for the spectacular as well as a hyacinth macaw; maybe a ringneck parakeet will sweet-talk you as nicely as a handfed double yellow headed Amazon. Don’t forget that galaxy of avian choices: no matter how small your home or your bank account, you too can enjoy a fine feathered friend.

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