

Birds With Handicaps

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A bird with a physical handicap presents special challenges for those who love them and want to provide them a full and enjoyable life. A handicap can range from mild disabilities like missing toes, an up-curved beak, splayed legs, amputated feet, missing wings, dislocated hips, burn injuries to blindness. Animals have a different attitude about disabilities - if they were born with them, they know no other way to live and seem to adapt in the most amazing ways. Even animals who are injured later in life seem to possess the drive and determination to get on with the task of survival. They even find ways to enjoy life in spite of their disabilities.

When dealing with a bird with physical challenges, it is helpful to "put yourself in their feathers" and visualize how *you* would get around if you were in

their situation. For instance, if your bird is missing some toes, then his ability to grip wood perches and keep his balance are compromised. Providing rough textured perches and rope perches can greatly enhance their ability to perch, as well as increase their comfort because they are not having to grip the perches so tightly with their few remaining toes.

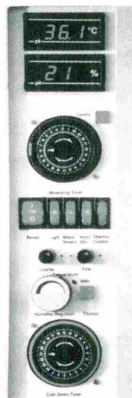
SPLAYED LEGS: Splayed legs is a condition that usually happens in the nest box, where the chick's legs are spread apart at the hip or at the knee joint, making it impossible for the bird to stand upright with both legs parallel. Sometimes the condition can be corrected while the baby bird is still very tiny by taping their legs together in the correct position, but that is not 100% successful. (Once a bird has matured, the splayed legs are pretty much a perma-

nent condition, unless x-rays reveal the problem is due to a hip dislocation or defect that can be corrected with surgery.) One owner has found that by providing V-shaped perches, her little Lovebird can put one foot on each perch of the "V" and perch quite comfortably with his legs in their natural splayed position. He eats, plays, and is generally a happy and sassy little creature.

DEFORMED FEET: Quaker parakeet "Gimpy" was obviously handicapped when purchased nine years ago. Gimpy has always been full of life and like many Quakers just loves to have fun. He has one foot that has been crippled since birth. The only thing that his owner had to do to help this handicap is to make sure that he has very comfortable perches. If you didn't already know he was crippled you would never expect it. It does not stop him from doing what he wants to do. He is very active, energetic and extremely loving parrot.

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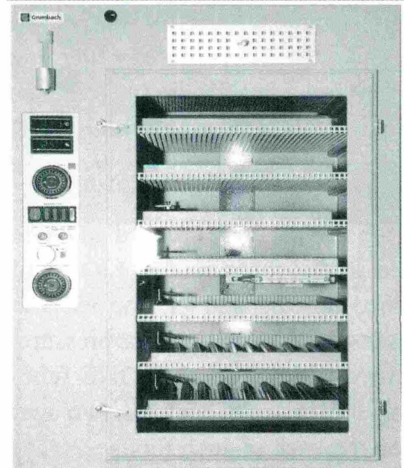
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DEFORMED BEAK: Blue - fronted Amazon "C.B.," named for his crooked beak, is a bird rescued from deplorable conditions five years ago. Unfortunately, one of the consequences of the poor care and unsanitary conditions of his previous home is a permanently deformed beak. C.B. apparently had a sinus infection that went untreated. The infection of the tissue in the sinuses also infected the beak bed (which is similar to a nail bed in humans), and his beak now grows straight out with no curve to it at all. It needs trimming now and then by the owner's vet. He also has one nostril that has grown almost shut. Because of this beak deformity, C.B. is not able to enjoy chewing wood like other parrots, nor is he able to crack nuts or bite into hard foods like almonds, carrots, or big pieces of apple. His owner is able to provide him a good diet by using small sized pellets, and smaller diced fresh foods.

Other than his deformed beak and his inability to shred wood, crack nuts, or bite into firm foods, C.B. is a normal parrot in all other ways. He is full of conversation, whistles and squawks, as well as charm, personality and that typical Amazon attitude. He has even taught one family member to hop up and give him treats at the ring of his bell!

MISSING TOES: In the last year, I have had personal experience with two handicapped birds. Buster is a 13 year old Quaker parakeet who came to live with me last fall. In his previous home, two of his front toes on his left foot were "amputated" by the beak of a larger bird. On his right foot, another front toe was severely crushed and then twisted so that the remnant of a toenail is turned upward and the toe itself is very sensitive to any touch or pressure. This leaves him with only ONE functioning toe in front, and his two rear toes on the back of each foot.

When I first got Buster, he had quite an aggressive attitude and his cage set-up included a hard manzanita and a regular small dowel perch in his cage. His activity level was very little other than when he was climbing around the

bars of the cage. But when on a perch, he gripped on as tightly as he could and didn't move for fear of slipping off the perches. The first thing I did was to get rid of that slippery manzanita perch and dowel perch. Instead, I bought several rope perches (braided rope and sisal rope) for him, as well as a square perch that is easier for him to grip. I also installed a very fat sandblasted manzanita perch (lots of knots and bumps) so he could perch on it flat-footed and not lose his balance. This became his nighttime sleeping perch and made an immediate difference in his attitude when he could get a good night's rest and not fall off his perch in the middle of the night.

It was amazing how quickly Buster started moving around with his new perches. Before long, he was scampering from one perch to another, flipping upside down to go from one place to the other, with only his hind toenails holding onto the perches for stability. He will also stretch to reach a toy, gripping the perch with just his rear toenails, and stretched forward with his foot and beak doing damage to whatever toy he is playing with. Such simple changes in perches made a tremendous improvement in his quality of life ... Buster rarely climbs on the bars of his cage anymore - the rope perches have removed the fear of failing and greatly improved his confidence in himself. Buster is now master of his entire world in his cage and he is a delight to watch scamper and flip and hop around his cage with total abandon. Of course, an improvement in his diet from all-seed to pellets and fresh foods, as well as some serious behavior modification were also needed to bring out Buster's true potential as Mr. Charm, which is how most people think of him now. But I think that improving his activity level by providing safe ways for him to move around, and restoring his confidence to allow him to play aggressively and enthusiastically with his toys, were the most important changes.

BLINDNESS: This is a subject very close to my heart. In May of this year, I was given a wild-caught female

Timneh Grey who was blind. Unfortunately, for the last ten years, this poor bird had been passed from one owner to another as part of a failed breeding pair, with no one realizing she was blind.

The last owner was observant enough to notice something was wrong and took her to the vet where it was discovered she was totally blind - our best guess is her blindness was caused by a blow to the head at the time of capture in the wild (there is no injury or disease to her eyes themselves, so the blindness must be neurological.)

Marge Geraci has a female Parrotlet that has been blind since birth. It became obvious to Marge very early in the handfeeding that the little female had something wrong - her eye sockets remained sunken and her head seemed a little misshapen. But the little Parrotlet has adapted very well, as long as Marge keeps all the perches in her cage in the same place and always warns her verbally that she is coming into the cage.

Dealing with a blind bird is an especially difficult challenge - one of a bird's most dominant senses is sight - they are very color oriented and without sight, it can be challenging to find ways to get them to move around and get exercise, to help them to feel secure, and to give them true pleasure in their lives. Some of the techniques that I have used to help a blind bird not only find her food and water cup, but to give her a level of confidence and control over her cage environment, has made her active, inquisitive, playful, and even demanding. It is a true joy to see this formerly timid and skittish blind bird play with her toys, scamper all over her cage from the very top to the very bottom with as much agility and confidence as any sighted bird. Indeed, unless you watched her very closely, you would not even know she is blind. One technique that helped her was the use of different size bells hung on the outside of the cage by each food dish. When the dishes are filled, I ring that particular bell to let her know which dish had new goodies in it. To teach her what the different "commu-

nication bells" mean, I wait until she is eating from the dishes, and then ring that bell to help her associate the particular bell tone with that specific food dish. A different toned bell on the cage door lets her know when the door is being opened and that she might encounter a human hand or the sound of dishes being moved or the cage being cleaned.

Since one of the senses an unsighted bird uses is touch, I made sure that no two perches in Faith's cage were alike. Two short perches meet in the middle across the lower front of the cage (where the two food dishes and a water bowl are located). One is a pedicure perch and the other is a very knotty sandblasted manzanita perch. As she steps sideways along these two perches, Faith gets her bearings through her feet to cue her which food dish is nearby. She also has strategically placed chains to give her something secure to hang on to with her beak or feet as she maneuvers between the two levels of the cage.

MISSING WINGS AND BALANCE PROBLEMS: "Miss Nubbins" a Goffins Cockatoo with only one wing since the other was damaged and amputated by a parent-inflicted injury before her eyes were even open, has never known flight and apparently has no desire to fly. She is a very active little bird, as well as very vocal and devoted to her family. Once a bird realizes it cannot fly, even if the injury is later in life, the bird usually becomes very adept at using its beak to assist moving around, and its balance soon compensates for the change in its physical center of gravity. Care must be taken, however, that the nails are not trimmed too short, reducing the bird's gripping ability and possibly causing it to suffer a hard fall if it lose its balance.

Also, care should be taken to never put flightless birds in high places where they could fall a long distance. Added padding of a layer of folded towels on the ground would be a good idea, especially for young birds, to make sure that any fall is onto a padded surface.

If your flightless bird has serious

balance problems, either due to missing wings or other physical or neurological injuries (including seizures), it's important to modify their environment to prevent hard falls and also to encourage it to move around without risk of injury. If your bird falls while in its cage, placing a thick layer of toweling on the bottom of the cage can break the fall.

(Note – if your bird has long nails or you are concerned about the bird becoming entangled in the thread loops of the toweling, you can put the toweling in a cotton pillowcase which will eliminate the risk of thread/strangling injuries. Also, when using toweling or sheeting on the bottom of cages for padding, do NOT wash them with scented laundry soaps or fabric softeners. Many birds cannot tolerate the perfumes or chemical residue on the fabrics, especially if they are sliding across them, and this can irritate their skin and sinuses.)

Also, lowering the perches so that no perches are high in the cage will help to prevent hard falls.

Providing a cage that is wide rather than tall will give an unsteady bird plenty of safe horizontal play area and remove the risk of dangerous falls.

As with birds with missing toes, soft and secure gripping perches are critical for an unsteady bird their nails digging into a perch can make the difference between breaking a fall or injury. Make sure to check rope perches regularly and keep all threads trimmed. You can also wrap wood perches with sisal twine to make your own non-slippery perches (wrap the perch tightly with the sisal so no perch shows through.) Another product called Vet Wrap is a great rubberized "tape" (no glue) that provides a cushioned surface over existing wood perches. It's waterproof, soft, and inexpensive. You can also use Vet Wrap Tape on shower perches to provide a non-slip surface in the shower for all birds. Vet Wrap tape is available at veterinarian offices and is inexpensive.

Some birds are so seriously disabled or unbalanced that it is not possible for them to use perches at all. In those

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cases, the bottom of the cage should have a soft area for them to sleep (some people even keep these birds in fish aquariums which helps to protect them from drafts). It is important to use materials that help to make it easy to clean, such as paper towels or cotton toweling wrapped in a pillowcase.

Sometimes, with birds that must scoot on their bellies, if the padding is too thick, it is hard for them to scoot around. Watch your bird and figure out what thickness works best for them. Another option would be a V or 2" thick piece of medium density foam, covered with fabric or toweling. With birds that must scoot around on their bellies, a silk-like fabric or very tightly woven fabric may work better than toweling to remove the friction on the belly and abdominal feathers. Of course, it goes without saying that it's a tremendous amount of work to keep the bottom cage padding materials clean, as well as constantly cleaning up the droppings on the bird itself. It's definitely a labor of love.

When dealing with seriously handicapped birds, make sure water and food dishes are easily accessible to a bird that must live on the floor of its cage - perhaps even using low, flat dishes instead of bowls so the bird can easily reach the food. A water bottle instead of a water bowl might be a good idea for a seriously crippled bird.

Toys: When you have a bird that is easily put off balance, either from blindness, missing wings or feet, or other causes, placement of toys is important. Try to make sure all toys are right by a perch or in front of a perch where the bird does not have to stretch too far to reach the toy. Stretching forward a long way can throw off a bird's balance and cause them to fall. This could destroy their desire to play with toys because of the negative association they have with moving around too much and subsequent falling.

A bird with balance problems is more likely to be insecure and, as such, it's important to provide plenty of preening toys and small wood blocks

for them to chew - keep that beak busy so they are less likely to chew their feathers. Other adaptations you can make to help your bird rediscover the love of playing with toys is to provide toys and wood blocks that are a little smaller than they normally would chew. If a bird is easily put off balance, then holding a huge wood block or large swinging toy is too intimidating for them ... provide smaller toys that won't knock the birds off balance. Also, while many birds love foot toys, an unstable bird may need a little help. Attach a foot toy to a plastic chain, with the other end of the plastic chain wrapped around a perch or attached to the side of the cage - that way, the bird can play with the toy, drop it and it doesn't fall to the bottom. The bird can stay right where he is sitting and pull up the toy to play with it again.

BURN VICTIMS: Unfortunately, many pet birds are seriously injured when they fly onto a hot stove burner, a hot fireplace tool, a lighted cigarette, or burning candles. Many times, the burned tissue will be forever sensitive to friction and infection. Some birds lose one or both of their feet after landing on fiery-hot surfaces. While the guidelines mentioned above for "Balance Problems" would work for a burn-injury bird, some additional steps must be taken.

Consistent cleaning and thorough rinsing of all surfaces is critical to reducing the risk of infection. If the bird is confined to the cage bottom and must scoot around on its belly, then a silk fabric would definitely be a great benefit. I would even consider tying a taught knotted rope that runs horizontal to the cage bottom and is at a height that is just at the bird's beak level. The bird could use this knotted rope as a "guide rope" to pull itself across the cage without having to try to grasp the silk or slippery fabric on the floor of the cage. Knots in the horizontal guide rope, or even small plastic rings knotted every few inches, will make it easier for the handicapped bird to grasp the rope and pull itself forward without straining.

Even scooting around on a padded, silk-covered surface can be too irritating to delicate scar tissue for some burn victim birds. Also, the constant pressure of their body weight on a solid surface can cause "bed sores" to form. Another option is to make "water beds" that cover the entire bottom of the cage floor. Use heavy plastic zip lock filled with water, adjusting the amount of water to the best firmness to fit your particular bird's needs. Cover the plastic "water beds" with toweling and/or a double or triple layer of sheeting or silk. Eliminating the pressure point on the belly or keel bone of a crippled bird can greatly reduce the amount of infection or sores the birds will get, and may also encourage them to move around by removing the physical discomfort of scooting around on their belly.

Daily and even twice-daily inspections of the burned/scarred areas will be necessary to spot any potential sores or irritations that need immediate medication. Make sure when handling a bird with burn scar tissue that you do not have any perfumes or lotions on your hands which could irritate the sensitive scar tissue. A soft snuggle buddy attached to the side of the cage right at the floor level might provide a very warm and soft place to sleep that does not touch the burned scar tissue - of course, this must also be washed regularly to keep bacteria down.

FEATHERED INSPIRATIONS: No matter what the challenges, sharing your home with a handicapped bird is a totally different experience. These wonderful creatures show us how to "stop and smell the roses" even when dealing with tremendous hardships. It also takes a serious commitment on your part to be even more observant and vigilant about their care - but what incredible lessons we can learn from watching them get on with life no matter what the obstacle. I hope that if a handicapped bird comes your way, you will consider giving him a good home. Your efforts will be returned tenfold. ♦

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