

An Introduction to African Greys

by

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African Greys, *Psittacus erithacus*, are parrots that are native to several countries in Africa. The bird commonly called the Congo Grey is the nominate species, *Psittacus erithacus erithacus*, and the Timneh Grey, *Psittacus erithacus timneh* is the subspecies. There are some people who may refer to a “Cameroon” or a “Ghana” Grey; these are not different species. The names refer to the country in which the birds are believed to have come. This is not always accurate, though, since the laws regarding importation caused many sellers of Greys in Africa to lie about the country of origin.

Baby Greys are relatively easy to find. You have a few choices as to where to get an African Grey. You can find a breeder, purchase one from a pet store, from a private breeder, or you can adopt one from a rescue facility. If you have the time, patience, and resources to rehabilitate a bird, I would strongly urge you to adopt a bird from a rescue organization. The problem of unwanted parrots is very real. According to a Symposium held by The Gabriel Foundation, within a few years, Organizations will have to begin large-scale euthanasia of parrots. This is indeed tragic. Please do the research before you decide to take home a parrot of any kind. The Gabriel Foundation estimates that only about one percent of people have the emotional, financial, physical, and monetary means to properly care for a parrot. Are you part of that one percent?

If you’ve done your homework and decided that you will be able to properly care for a Grey, your next step is to choose a source from which to get a bird. Don’t dismiss adopting an older bird. Older birds can make wonderful pets! Greys have the potential to live 50-60 years with a proper diet. Therefore, a 10-year-old bird is still very young. If you think it over and decide you’d like a younger bird, my recommendation would be to find a good breeder. Some pet stores are good and do provide proper care for birds, but many don’t. Greys and other parrots are very specialized animals, and it requires a lot of training to care for them. Pet stores usually don’t have those resources.

Once you’ve chosen a breeder, make sure that the bird you will be taking home is well-socialized and weaned first. A Grey will take anywhere between 12 weeks to 16 weeks to wean. Don’t ever attempt to wean a bird by yourself! Hand feeding can be very dangerous. It is too easy to cause crop burn, sour crop, a bacterial infection, or some other life-threatening problem. Hand feeding should be left to the professionals. Your Grey baby should also be allowed to fledge. In learning to fly, your Grey will develop confidence, muscle tone, and balance. Of course, unless you are going to completely bird-proof your home, the wings should be clipped after fledging. When you take your Grey home, she should be fed whatever food the breeder was feeding her. It is a very stressful time for your new bird, and she should be given what she is comfortable with. Within a few days, get your new bird to a Veterinarian, preferably a certified Avian Vet, for a new bird checkup. Your vet can advise you on diet issues, as well as the quarantine period if you have other birds.

The cage you get for your Grey should be as large as you can afford. Greys need to be in cages at least 24 by 24 inches unless they are going to be out most of the day. Bar spacing should be less than an inch and a half for Congos and one inch or smaller for Timnehs. Be sure the cage is safe. This involves making sure there are no unsafe metals, sharp edges, chipping paint, etc., along with making sure the cage is secure (i.e. safe locks). The cage should be furnished with a few safe toys, which need to be rotated weekly for variety. Your Grey will also need a variety of perches throughout your house. Playgyms and other stands will be needed.

Your Grey will need a very healthy diet in order to develop properly and avoid diseases. The debate on avian nutrition could go on for ages, so your first stop for nutrition information should be your avian vet. Some basic guidelines, though, can be provided here. Your Grey should eat lots of healthy people foods, like vegetables, grains, proteins, etc. You should provide fresh and cooked vegetables high in Vitamin A, since parrots can easily become Vitamin A deficient. Vitamin A is necessary for cell and tissue growth, and therefore necessary for good health. Your Grey should also be provided with leafy greens like Collard greens, kale, broccoli, dandelion greens, mustard greens, etc. These vegetables are high in both Vitamin A and calcium. Greys can have difficulty metabolizing calcium, so you must be very careful with both calcium and phosphorus intake. More information on avian nutrition can be found by reading articles by avian nutritionist Dr. Alicia McWatters.

Hopefully the breeder you chose worked hard to socialize your bird. Parrots are not domesticated, like dogs and cats. Your Grey needs to be taught how to live with people. When you take her home, you should continue working to keep her socialized. Baby birds are very easy to work with; they love everyone! You should introduce the bird to every member of the family, along with trusted friends and extended family. You should have a secure carrier for visits. It’s good for your Grey to go places with you—take her on short car trips, visits to friends and relatives, etc. This is socialization; the process of teaching your Grey that change is ok, and that other people are ok. To find out more information on socialization, refer to articles by Sally Blanchard.

Parrots are flock animals. Greys, especially, depend on the flock for food, safety, comfort, friendship, etc. You have just become your Grey’s flock. Greys are also prey animals. We are predators, so it’s difficult for us to understand the behavior of a wild prey animal. The flock provides safety and security. A bird in the wild who becomes separated from the flock is in grave danger. The bird will call for his flock until they return. This is a contact call, and your bird will call to you in this manner. Please answer the calls in some way, either with a whistle, a word, or something to put your bird at ease that you are all right and the flock is all right. If your bird does not feel secure, contact calls can progress to screaming. According to Grey Breeder Pamela Clark, Greys live and breed within large social groups of between 100 and 200 Greys. This is different from other parrots such as the New World Parrots, who often travel in smaller numbered, mixed species flocks. Your Grey’s instinctual need to be with you all the time can be a problem for those of us who work full time or need to leave home for an extended period of time, like for a vacation. Your Grey will feel abandoned if left for too long of a time. A bird who has been taught to play on her own will usually be all right during the work hours. Due to the need for flock interaction, your bird will want to share in your activities, such as eating. Be sure whatever you will share with your Grey is healthy! According to Sally Blanchard, a critical independence stage usually starts at about 6 to 9 months with the larger parrots. Your Grey will need increased guidance, as she will probably be more insecure than she was as a baby. It is because of this increased insecurity that a vacation or a weekend away from your bird could cause serious behavioral problems.

An article about Greys would not be complete without a mention of the work of Dr. Irene Pepperburg. Her studies with African Greys have shown the world that Greys can use speech cognitively; that is, they can use speech appropriately. This is just one sign of their intelligence. Do not get an African Grey if you are only interested in having a bird that talks. Not all Greys will talk. They are very intelligent birds, but they may use their intelligence for things other than talking. You must be aware of their intelligence in order to provide a stimulating environment for your Grey. You also must be aware of their intelligence so you can be ready when she tries to take control of the flock! Flocks of birds are not like packs of dogs. With dogs, there is a clear leader who remains leader with little interference from the pack. With flocks of birds, whoever wants to be in charge challenges the current leader. A flock needs a leader; if your bird senses you do not have control of the flock, she will attempt to take control. After all, somebody has to do it in order for the flock to survive. Taking control doesn’t mean being dominating. It simply means setting limits and enforcing those limits. It means being consistent. By consistently using “up” and “down” commands, and setting behavioral limits (no shouldering, for example), your bird will feel comfortable with you being in charge. Be aware of seasonal hormonal behavior though! You may feel as if you have a completely different bird in your home during breeding season, but rest assured that it will end.

African Greys are a powder down species. They produce small down feathers that release powder when preened. If you have allergies or asthma, be aware that you will probably have problems due to the powder your bird will release. Your bird may also need relief from her own powder. An air filter near the cage will help. Baths and showers are essential. Your Grey should have at least one drenching shower a week, with water reaching down to the skin, in order to wash away the powder buildup. A humidifier near the cage may also help with feather problems. Be aware that many experts believe that African Greys are prone to feather destructive behaviors. Feather picking can be caused by a variety of problems, such as poor diet, disease, insufficient humidity causing itchy skin, mites and lice, and other behavioral problems. If your bird begins to chew or pull out her feathers, your first stop should be an avian veterinarian. If your bird is deemed healthy, your next stop may need to be an avian behaviorist. Your bird may pluck because she has been upset by something. Be aware of this and try to work with your bird to calm whatever fears she is having before plucking becomes a habit. Parrots, especially Greys, are sensitive to our emotions, and if you are stressed or upset by something like feather picking, your bird will probably pick up on it and react by getting upset herself. This may result in continued feather picking.

Greys are very sensitive creatures and you must always be aware of this. You must never do anything to break the bond of trust between you and your Grey. Do not force her to do something she is obviously scared of. Pay attention to her body language to distinguish between her moods. Don’t allow anyone to handle her in a rough or teasing manner. Nurture her sense of exploration, and encourage her playfulness. Take her on trips and visits with other people. If you can, your Grey will probably benefit from spending time with other Greys. If you choose to expose your bird to other birds, make sure all of the birds are healthy. You should request a health certificate from a veterinarian for any other birds your Grey comes into contact with. You should also be sure to wash thoroughly and change clothes if you have been in a pet shop with birds or if you have handled any other birds besides your own. Most avian diseases are airborne, and many birds can be carriers of diseases without showing any symptoms. There are also some diseases that cannot be tested for yet. Take every precaution to protect your bird. She has the potential to spend 50 or 60 years with you. Do everything you can to make her life happy and healthy. We owe our birds that much. They are magnificent creatures who are indeed wild. We must make every accommodation necessary; we must buy the toys, the expensive, healthy food, we must pay the vet bills, we must tolerate a certain noise level, a certain amount of mess, a loss of free time. Keeping a parrot is not easy. It’s up to you to decide if you are capable of keeping one and ensuring she will be happy and healthy for her whole, long life.

As a bird owner, I could encourage you to become active in organizations that work to improve conditions for birds. Conservation groups also need our help. It is very sad that parrots have become almost as common as dogs and cats, because that means that they are also given up, discarded, abused and neglected as much as dogs and cats. Please support avian rescue organizations and do everything you can to protect parrots in your community. If we don’t do it, who will? For more information, please contact Rebecca Margison at Rmargison75@aol.com.