

So you want a Pet Bird...

by

Kim Bear

"HI!!!"

This is the enthusiastic greeting I receive every morning at my house. It comes from Bijou, my Blue and Gold Macaw. He is one of the many parrots in our home, and life is never dull (or quiet) around here because of their constant activity and chatter. If you're thinking of adding a new companion to the family, you might consider getting a bird. Your life may never be the same.

Birds, particularly parrots, are being called "The Pet of the 90s", but actually have been kept in captivity as companions for centuries. It has been within the last few decades or so that captive breeding has replaced wild capture as the main source for these magnificent animals. Domestically-bred parrots are often hand fed: They are raised by people and therefore imprint on people. This eliminates the need for "taming" because the birds already recognize humans as friends. The relationship you develop with such a parrot may be like no other.

If you are thinking of getting a bird, there are some questions you should ask yourself before you make such a commitment. Too many people think of the smaller parrots, such as canaries, budgies (parakeets) or cockatiels as "throwaway" pets because they are small and relatively inexpensive. These birds are often purchased on impulse, and often don't receive the proper care. I don't think there is such thing as a "throwaway" pet. I believe that if you want to have a bird, you should take some time before purchasing one: do some research so you get the bird that's right for you, and learn as much as you can about the bird's care. First, ask yourself why you want a bird. Is it because they talk or sing? Will you be disappointed and get rid of the bird if he doesn't? Is it because of their pretty colors? People have been known to choose particular species because the colors will complement their home decor, which is a very superficial reason. Are you looking for an exotic, showy pet that will impress your friends? Birds should not be thought of as status symbols. Do you think that the bird will just sit there and look pretty, need only some seed and water, and provide you with amusement whenever you feel like it? Think again. That kind of attitude is very unfair to the bird. In the few years that I have been raising and selling birds, I think I've heard just about every silly reason for wanting a bird, but I've heard good reasons, too. If you want a true companion-- something that will become part of the family, something that will bring joy and love to you every day, then a bird may be a great choice for you.

One of the first things to consider before getting a bird is whether or not you have the time to give him the attention he needs. I once read a quote in a magazine that disturbed me. It said something like "If you don't have time for a dog or cat, get a bird." This couldn't be further from the truth! Birds are very social and need lots of interaction with their flock-- That's you and your family. To confine a bird to his cage most of the time, only getting him out once a week or so, when you feel like it, is neglectful. The exception may be birds like finches and canaries, because they generally stay in their cages, but they still deserve some attention. Parrots want and need to be part of the family. If you're not willing or able to do this, perhaps this kind of pet is not right for you.

Do you have time for bird-keeping chores? Are you willing to put up with some mess? While not all birds are messy, many of them are. Food flinging is a favorite sport among many birds, and feathers can make their way into the strangest places. Cages and the surrounding areas need to be cleaned, sometimes everyday, and fresh food and water must be provided daily. Birds can become ill if they are not kept in clean environments, so a good cleaning routine is important.

Are you willing to put up with some naughtiness now and then? There is no such thing as a perfect bird-- even the nicest birds can have bad days. There may be some screeching, some furniture chewing, and some nipping. These are the "hazards" that bird people put up with. Your bird will have his own personality, his own likes and dislikes, and will generally want to have his own way. Having a parrot is a lot like having a two year old child that won't grow up. If that thought terrifies you, a parrot may not be a good choice.

Once you've decided you have the time and temperament to have a bird in the family, there are practical matters that need some thought. You'll need to examine your budget to find the bird your family can realistically afford. If your dream bird is quite expensive, it may be better to save up a little longer than to settle for something else just because it's cheaper. Keep in mind you'll also need a good cage, toys, food and a vet check, and of course there will be regular upkeep costs. The prices of birds and their necessary accessories vary greatly, but I always tell people there's a bird for every budget and lifestyle.

No pet should be bought on an impulse or a whim, and birds are no exception. By learning as much as you can and making an educated decision, you and your future bird will be better off. If you've thought it over and know you'd like to get a bird, now you get to ask yourself, "But what kind should I get?" Stay tuned!