

SPECIAL NEEDS BIRDS: SETTING UP AN ENCLOSURE FOR A PARROT WITH LEG ABNORMALITIES

INTRODUCTION

Leg abnormalities are common in parrots; these abnormalities can occur in the egg or during development (i.e., congenital or developmental abnormalities such as splay leg), secondary to traumas, infections, and neurologic conditions at any point in a bird's life, or due to cancers and arthritis as birds age. Most parrots can live comfortable and fulfilling lives despite these abnormalities, but it is important that their environment be set up to accommodate their special needs.

There are many different types of problems birds can have with their legs—from missing toes, to lack of feet, to only one leg, to significant weakness in one or both legs. Because each bird has its own set of challenges, it will also need its own set of accommodations. Below are adjustments that can be considered for birds with leg abnormalities, but you will need to determine what might work best for your bird; if you need help figuring this out, discuss your concerns with your avian veterinarian.



Preventing Big Falls



Birds with leg abnormalities are often clumsier than the average bird so it is important to make sure their cages are safe for them. Long, short cages, such as those made for ferrets (cages by Ferret Nation have worked really well for some rescue groups), are often preferred over tall, narrow cages to prevent big falls. Sometimes a tall cage can be adjusted to be shorter by raising the floor grate or creating a new “floor” higher up in the cage with a sheet of acrylic or untreated wood. Padding the bottom of the cage with a towel or blanket can protect against injuries if the bird does fall, but make sure there are no loose strings that could tangle around a toe or leg stump. If desired, the towel or blanket can be covered with newspaper (sometimes this is slippery), paper towels, or chemical free puppy pads (if your bird doesn't eat these!) to keep it clean. Bar spacing is another consideration for birds with leg abnormalities; smaller bar spacing is helpful for birds that have enough leg function to wrap part of the leg around the bar to move around.



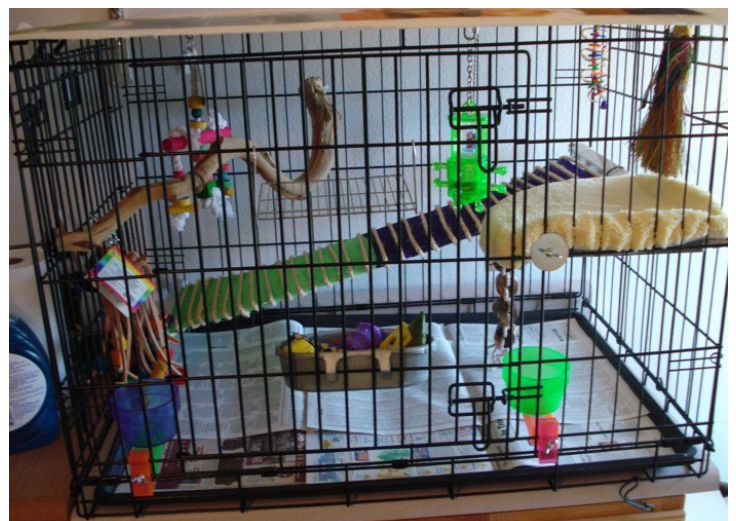
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Alternative Perching Surfaces

Birds with leg abnormalities often have a hard time perching on a smooth wooden dowel or branch so different perching options may be needed. Keep in mind that it is important to provide your bird with choices; having a variety of perch types acts as physical therapy for these special birds.

- Wrapping wooden perches with self-adherent bandaging material (e.g., VetRap or Coban) and offering rope perches can make gripping easier.
- Flat perches can also be very helpful for birds with a variety of leg abnormalities. Corner shelves make a great option so that the bird can rest or sleep and take some weight off their feet or legs. Corner shelves are made of metal or wood. The wood ones are usually a solid flat surface while metal ones look similar to the bars of a cage.
- Sundecks hook onto the side of the cage and can be wrapped in vet wrap or left with the bars exposed.
- Untreated 2x4s can be cut to fit the cage bars to make a flat surface for the bird to walk on. These can also be wrapped in vet wrap so that they are more padded and less slippery.
- Because birds with leg abnormalities often bear weight abnormally, they are more prone to bumblefoot (sores on the weight bearing surfaces of the feet/ankles); thus, padded perching surfaces are often especially important for these individuals. Check your bird's feet regularly for sores and see your avian veterinarian if you are concerned.
- Birds without much leg function may need ramps to help them move between levels of their cage. Ramps can be made easier to use by wrapping them with vet wrap first and then followed by rope to provide something for a beak to grab.
- Birds with leg abnormalities may fall over or roll around and, in fact, birds with severe leg abnormalities often learn to enjoy rolling around as a way to give their legs and hips a rest; a flat, soft surface (to avoid bruised elbows) should be provided to allow for rolling around fun!



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Ease of Access to Food and Water

Birds with leg abnormalities may not be able to perch and eat. They may not be able to move around their cages easily to get to where the food and water bowls are located. Alternatively, they may not be able to hold food in one foot while they are manipulating it with their mouths. Thus, it is essential that these birds have easy access to food and water bowls and be able to get the food and water from the bowls without difficulty. This might mean you need to place the food and water bowls on the floor of the cage, adjacent to a flat perch, in multiple locations throughout the cage, or in shallow bowls. Birds that are unable to hold food in their foot to eat might prefer smaller, bite-sized pieces of food.

Comfortable Sleeping or Resting Areas

Depending on the abnormalities of the individual, it may be difficult for the bird to get comfortable while sleeping. Providing a soft toy to lean against or a soft surface to lay upon may be necessary. For example, consider a small fleece bed placed on a flat perch or a fleece toy or rolled up towel at the end of a perch against the cage wall for cuddling.

Grooming and Cleanliness

Special needs birds may need extra help with self-care so here are some considerations:

- Keeping feet and leg stumps clean is essential to limb health; check weight bearing areas once to twice daily to make sure they are not caked in droppings and clean them gently as needed. Likewise, keeping perching surfaces clean is essential.
- Massaging leg stumps can help maintain blood flow to these areas, assuming your bird enjoys this activity.
- Sometimes birds with leg issues have to use their wings for balance so check wings routinely for any sores; if problems develop, make an appointment with your avian veterinarian for advice.
- Birds with leg abnormalities will usually benefit from being able to fly. This gives them more freedom of movement, better balance, and may significantly reduce risk of trauma from falls. It also helps with exercise which is as important for special needs birds as it is for others.
- Make sure toenails are not getting too long as they won't wear normally if they are not used for gripping a perch. Long nails can get stuck in towels and blankets and can also make balancing and moving around more difficult.
- Parrots depend on their beaks to do many things but those with leg abnormalities really depend on their beaks. Make sure your bird's beak is maintaining its normal shape since its beak is not just used for grooming and eating but also essential for moving around the enclosure. Your avian veterinarian can help with routine beak grooming if needed.
- Birds with leg abnormalities may be more prone to getting droppings (feces, urine, urates) stuck on their vents; check the vent daily to make sure there is no material accumulating. Having fecal build up on feathers can make it difficult to pass droppings and increases the risk of infection.

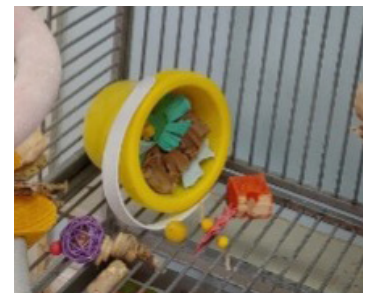
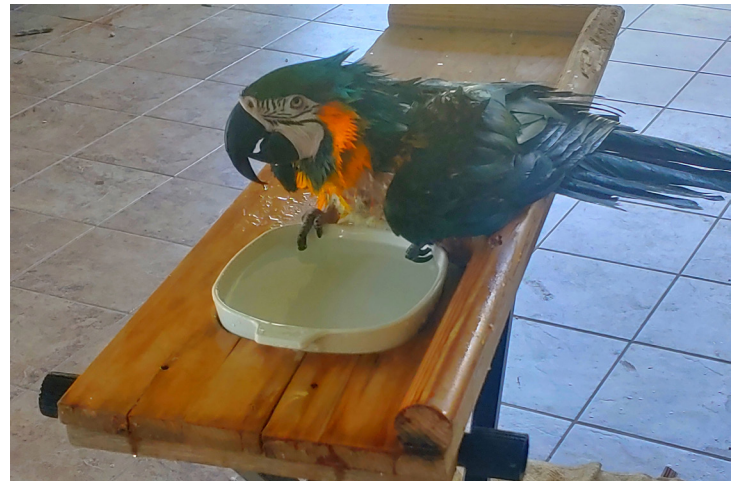


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Enrichment

Just because a bird has special needs does not mean it doesn't want to play and have fun; we can give them the same opportunities of our average birds, but perhaps with some adjustments.

- Toy placement in the cage can actually help the bird to move around; for example, toys can serve as something to grab onto for stability when moving along a perch.
- "Foot" toys can be placed in a bucket on the floor.
- Toys can be placed on the walls of the enclosure next to the floor or next to a flat perch. The same can be done with foraging toys; ask your avian veterinarian for AAV's handout on "Foraging for Parrots" to learn more about this enrichment opportunity. One simple foraging exercise appropriate for birds with leg abnormalities is mixing their pellets with shredded paper so they have to sort through the paper to find the food—of course, make sure your bird understands how to do this and doesn't go hungry!
- Special needs birds require lots of time with their human flock, as long as this is something they enjoy. It may take a bit more time for us humans to build trust with these birds as they adjust to their challenges but it can be done with patience and time. Often, the biggest challenge is helping the bird to become comfortable being scooped up in hands if it cannot step up; using positive reinforcement training (see resources below) is the best way to help the bird learn that hands are good. Parrots are flock animals and having a physical challenge does not change their need for a family. Keep in mind that these birds may need to use their beaks to balance when being handled—so a beak on your hand may not be intended to be aggressive.



General Health

Routine veterinary care is essential for these special needs parrots; as you can see, there are many health considerations to keep in mind for these individuals. One additional consideration is weight management. An obese bird with leg abnormalities will have an even harder time navigating its environment and will be putting even more pressure on abnormal limbs increasing the risk of sores and arthritis developing.



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Summary

Remember that parrots are resilient creatures and can learn to adapt to many challenges. You may have to begin with a small, safe cage but as your bird masters life with leg abnormalities, you can broaden its horizons by offering more opportunities to play and explore. Additionally, don't forget that your avian veterinarian is an excellent resource on every step of this journey!

AAV: Setting a Standard in Avian Care Since 1980

Avian medicine is a distinct and very specialized field that requires extensive training, advanced skills, and facilities specifically designed and equipped to treat and hospitalize birds. The Association of Avian Veterinarians was established to provide veterinarians with this special education, and to keep them up to date with the latest information on bird health. The AAV holds an annual conference on avian medicine and publishes the peer-reviewed *Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery*. AAV also makes annual contributions toward avian conservation and sponsors studies advancing the understanding of avian medicine.



For More Information

For more information on birds, ask your veterinarian for copies of the following AAV Client Education Brochures:

- Avian Chlamydiosis and Psittacosis*
- Additional Bumblefoot Brochures (Raptors, Poultry)
- Veterinary Care for Your Pet Bird*
- Basic Care for Companion Birds*
- Behavior: Normal and Abnormal
- Caring for Backyard Chickens
- Caring for Ducks
- Digital Scales
- Feather Loss
- Feeding Birds
- Foraging for Parrots*
- Injury Prevention and Emergency Care
- Managing Chronic Egg-laying in Your Pet Bird
- Signs of Illness in Companion Birds*
- Ultraviolet Lighting for Companion Birds
- When Should I Take My Bird to a Veterinarian?*
- Zoonotic Diseases in Backyard Poultry*

**Available in multiple languages. All others are available in English only at this time.*

Online Resources

See Goodbirdinc.com for information on positive reinforcement training.

Follow AAV on Facebook (www.facebook.com/aavonline) for great tips and the latest news for pet bird owners. You can also find us on Twitter ([@aavonline](https://twitter.com/aavonline)) and YouTube!

Our website, www.aav.org, offers a Find-a-Vet tool to help pet bird owners locate avian veterinarians around the world. We also offer a variety of resources such as basic bird care instructions and more. Visit the website today!

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