

My budgie parakeets love to sit on a sand perch that I purchased to keep their nails short. I've heard that these kinds of perches can cause damage to the bird's feet, which develops into other problems since they spend the majority of their lives either sitting or climbing. Is this true? Should I routinely switch the perch to prevent them from sitting on it for too long? Also, is a sand covered perch better than a sandpaper one?

It is true that concrete perches or sandpaper covered perches are not as beneficial for the birds' feet as everyone hopes.

Since caged parakeets spend a lot of time sitting on their perches, the soles of their feet are more in contact with the rough surfaces of the sandpaper or the concrete than their nails. This can cause excess pressure and wear of the skin on the soles. This results in thinning of the skin, which can make the birds more susceptible to trauma and infections on their feet.

The hard perches can also cause increased "pressure" on the digital and metatarsal joints of the feet.

Several things need to be considered in choosing the right perch for birds:

1. Birds love to hang out on perches that are positioned higher in the cage - this gives them a feeling of security. Usually, when you observe your birds, you will notice that the more dominant bird may hang out higher than the more submissive one.

Since birds frequently sit on the higher perches, those should be the most comfortable ones for the feet.

2. Perches should be mounted in a way to encourage the birds to climb around. This will activate the use of the toes and nails and, therefore, the nails will be worn better.

3. To encourage a more natural use of the feet and toes, multiple perches of various thickness and surface should be offered. When we think of birds climbing in a natural tree outside, there will not be branches of the same thickness in the tree.

The following suggestions are recommended for perches:

1. Offer wooden perches of various thicknesses for the birds. Use the most comfortable perch as the highest perch in the cage.

You may check your birds' feet while they are sitting on your index finger or on a stick. You will see if the thickness of your finger or the stick is appropriate to allow the nail tips to contact your skin or the surface without stretching the joints of their feet. This is how thick a comfortable perch should be.

The wooden perches offered in the pet stores are okay to use and fairly easy to clean. The droppings can be washed off easily with warm water on a daily basis. The perches should be disinfected at least once every two weeks.

2. Offer natural branches - with leaves on them - to your birds. Any wood of untreated fruit trees is safe to use (Mulberry, cherry, apple, crabapple, etc.). Linden trees are okay as well; however, no oak or pine!

Branches have a variety of twigs to climb around on. The leaves give the birds more opportunity to forage and eat greens. The leafy branches also provide additional security. The natural wood is much cheaper than any fancy perches from the pet store.

3. If you enjoy your birds outside of the cage and they like climbing on you but the nails are still too sharp, you can condition your birds to sit still while you try to file the nail tips with a common cardboard nail file. You may offer them a specially loved treat during the procedure as a positive reinforcement.

This column is provided by the faculty of the OSU Boren Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital. The large volume of questions does not allow us to directly respond to specific email questions so please watch for your answer in the column. Email your questions for the column to dvmoncall@postoffice.cvhs.okstate.edu and watch for your answer.

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