

Selecting Perches for Caged Birds: Materials, Measurement, Maintenance, and Placement

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Birds spend the majority of their time standing on their feet, so good perches are essential. Just as you prefer a comfortable pair of shoes, birds need comfortable perches. Birds also use perches to rub their beaks on to remove pieces of food. An ideal perch is easily cleaned, comfortable to the bird, and of the proper material and diameter to prevent foot problems. Perches may be stationary or swinging. All cage items, including perches, should be selected knowing that birds like to chew, shred, and destroy things, and therefore items will often need to be replaced.



Materials



The most common perches are made out of wood such as dowels and natural branches. In addition to being good perches, natural branches also make good chew "toys" for birds. Wooden dowels are generally too smooth, and do not provide good traction. Perches made from fiber such as sisal, untreated cotton rope, clothesline, and cloth are also used. A cloth perch may be made by rolling up a long piece of cloth or by padding a perch made out of other material, such as a dowel. Flat-bottomed hutches can also be made or purchased. Plastic, acrylic, and PVC pipe have the advantage of being easily cleaned. Ideally, they should have an uneven surface so they are less slippery. Be sure they are made from a nontoxic material. If you find your bird easily chews off pieces of the plastic or PVC, avoid using those materials and find another type of perch.

Cement and mineral perches are also available. These perches have the advantage of helping to keep the beak and toenails from becoming overgrown. They may cause irritation if the bird uses them too much, so perches made from other materials should also be available. Sandpaper should not be used on perches as it can irritate the bird's feet.

Cleaning and maintenance

Plastic, rubber tubing, acrylic, and PVC are readily cleaned; they can be washed in disinfectant, rinsed well, and allowed to dry thoroughly before they are placed back in the cage. A good disinfectant is a 1:32 dilution of household bleach (½ cup bleach to 1 gallon of water). Avoid scented disinfectants and those containing pine oils. Dowels can be cleaned with perch scrapers; if heavily soiled, they too can be disinfected, rinsed, and dried. Rope, clothesline, and cloth can be washed, or simply replaced. Monitor such a perch closely for any fraying or loose ends, so the bird does not eat any of the strings or get threads wrapped around his toes. Natural branches and cement perches can be more difficult to clean since they have more crevices. Wire brushes can be used to clean soiled areas, and then the perch can be disinfected as described above, or boiled in water and then thoroughly dried. To avoid possible foot problems, any perch should be completely dry before being placed back in the cage.



Preparing natural branches: If using natural branches, they should be from non-poisonous plants and areas which have NOT been sprayed or treated with insecticides or herbicides. Good sources of natural branches include most fruit and nut trees, ash, elm, dogwood, and magnolia. Grapevines can also be tried. To avoid introducing insects or diseases from wild birds into the cage, the branches should be cleaned with a disinfectant, rinsed, and dried in the sun; boiled in water; or placed in an oven at 250° for 10-20 minutes (watch closely) depending upon the diameter of the perch.

Diameter

As a general rule, a bird's foot should wrap itself around about 2/3 of the perch. The perch should never be so small that the bird's front toes meet or overlap the back toe(s). The accompanying chart provides some guidelines as to proper diameters for various sizes of birds. Birds will do best if the perches are of unequal diameter along their width, as could be found with natural branches, and some plastic branches. If all perches are the same diameter, the bird will always be placing pressure on the same areas on the foot. This can cause thinning of the scales, redness, and possibly infection of the bottom of the foot. Having perches of various sizes and materials within the cage will also help prevent foot problems.

Placement

Perches should be placed in front of food and water dishes, so the dishes can be easily reached by the bird. To avoid droppings contaminating the food or water, AVOID placing

Bird Size	Species Examples	Perch Diameter
Small	Finches, Canaries, Parrotlets, Parakeets, Lovebirds	3/8" to 3/4"
Medium	Cockatiels, Conures, Lories, Senegals	5/8" to 1 1/4"
	African Greys,	

perches over the dishes. Perches should be placed so the bird's tail will not touch the side of the cage when sitting on the perch. Place perches at various levels within the cage, but avoid using too many perches, which could prevent the bird from flying (especially a smaller bird such as a canary or finch).

Large	Amazonas, Macaws, Cockatoos	1" to 2"
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