

Feather conditioning

An eight part series on making your bird look like the “**BEST IN SHOW**”! Or how to reduce your wild bird’s stress. (They are wild animals!)

ADVANCED BIRDIE QUIZ

Why do birds become totally quiet when it gets dark?.

Should you cover the entire cage at night?

Most hookbills are pretty good acrobats; True or false?

I grew up in the city where the working people lived in their very segregated neighborhoods. There was the Czech neighborhood with their bakery goods on the other side of the viaduct, Polish south of 31st Street provided cold cuts, cheese and sausage, the Italians who provided vegetables, were north and east of where we lived in the German neighborhood. We had the butcher shop and beer. The streets were concrete where the seams and occasional cracks were tarred each summer. We played baseball in the street. And each spring my Dad would try to grow grass in the little dirt patch of a backyard. It was unproductive because the only wildlife we had in the city were these soot colored birds that usually finished off the grass seed before my Dad got back from the tavern. “I’ll catch those birds for you, Dad. How do you do that?” Both answers were futile: salt on their tails was one. The other was to grab them when they go to sleep.

When a bird goes to sleep they don’t keep up their incessant chatter and tweets. They find a protected area and try to become invisible. Birds generally don’t see well at night and want to become inconspicuous. A small night light simulating the ambient night sky light would help their sense of security. They want a view of whatever might be crawling their way. A protected area means as high up as they can go with three sides and top secure with an escape route on one side and a view clearly below. Tree climbing predators would come from that direction. They won’t make a peep. Their feet are structured so that as the bird settles on the perch the toes wrap around

automatically and don't become unhinged until the bird releases. That's why they don't fall off their perch while asleep. Nest boxes make good sleeping areas but may also trigger breeding behavior. A similar idea is a commercially made sleeping hut. For larger birds a cloth draped over just one corner of the cage with a suitable perching area strategically placed below. You should not cover the entire cage. Any little sound outside the cage could not be identified for the almost night blind bird. The stress could turn into panic. You'll notice that your bird sleeps at the highest point where he can perch securely. If you place a perch even higher than the original, he'll seek the higher one. I am not fond of the round doll rod perches that come with most commercial cages, but my least favorite perch is made of manzanita; a decorative reddish and shiny branch that would make a better table piece. It is very slippery. Breeding pairs have a tough time delivering fertile eggs with manzanita in the breeding facility. Ever try kissing someone while ice skating? Sand blasted manzanita branches seem to do well for finches. A better choice if you want a hard wood perch is ribbonwood from California or dragonwood from Florida. They are just as hard to chew but have a rough surface that the birds can grip easily. Another good option is sand blasted grape wood. You would notice that your bird will become more active on these more sure footed surfaces. To really turn them into feathered acrobats try sisal perches. There are also cotton rope perches which lend themselves to surefootedness but can tangle the bird if they start pulling the rope apart. Sisal fiber breaks easily so the tangle problem is far less likely. Sisal tends to keep the needle sharp nails in check as well. Cement perches are better manicures. You only need one per cage placed in a strategic place, like the food dish, where you know your bird will visit at least once a day.

I never did catch those soot colored birds. The positive in my dismal failure was that I learned quite a bit about why they are so hard to find when the sun goes down. They turned out to be English sparrows. They were a lot cleaner when I saw them out in the country, but forgive me, that was the extent of our wildlife growing up in the city.

Next month: NEW SERIES from Dr. Greg Burkett Author: A graduate of North Carolina State with a BS degree in biology. He went on to earn his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine from North Carolina State. He went on with post DVM training specializing in avian medicine. He sat and passed this examination by the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners in Avian Practice earning Diplomate status in November, 2002. Fewer than 100 veterinarians can claim that status.