Northern Territory Government

NORTHERN TERRITORY ANIMAL WELFARE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

GUIDELINES FOR THE CARE AND WELFARE OF CAGED BIRDS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Birds provide enjoyment and companionship for humans. Humans in their turn have a duty to care for the birds so that the bird also has a fulfilling life free from undue stress and disease.

These Guidelines have been prepared to provide the basis for humane care of birds held in captivity. They recognise that the basic requirement for welfare of birds in aviaries is a husbandry system appropriate to their physiological and behavioural needs. They address the "five freedoms" of animal welfare:

- Freedom from hunger and thirst through ready access to fresh water and an appropriate diet to maintain full health and vigour
- Freedom from discomfort by providing a suitable environment, including shelter and a comfortable resting area
- Freedom from pain, injury and disease through prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment
- Freedom to express normal behaviour by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind
- Freedom from fear and distress by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering

(from the United Kingdom Farm Animal Welfare Council)

The aims of these guidelines are:

- to promote the humane and considerate treatment of birds and the use of good husbandry practices.
- to inform people responsible for the care and management of caged birds of their obligations.
- to provide the community with a set of guidelines for the care of caged birds.

The basic needs of caged birds are:

- ready access to food and water to maintain health and vigour.
- accommodation which provides protection from the weather and which neither harms nor causes distress.
- prevention and treatment of disease, injury or unwanted behaviour.
- space and opportunity to exhibit their natural behaviours.
- careful and proper handling.

The importance of good care and treatment of the birds cannot be over-emphasised. This includes a knowledge and understanding of the normal appearance and behaviour of birds. Owners should develop the knowledge and skills to appropriately care for their birds. This can be achieved by joining a bird club, or by reading books and other materials on the subject.

While children benefit from interactions with birds, they can also be a risk to a bird's wellbeing. Responsible supervision of children and the promotion of a caring attitude are essential to safeguard the welfare of the birds and create a lifelong appreciation of their role in our lives.

These guidelines do not deal with common or statute law requirements which have an impact on the keeping of birds, such as council regulations or nature conservation. Information on these should be sought through the appropriate authority.

For the purposes of these Guidelines pet birds are defined as all seed and nectar feeding birds that may legally be kept in a state of captivity and spend all or part of their time housed in cages[1]. Other types of birds, for example, insectivorous and birds of prey, waterfowl, ratites, pigeons used for racing, poultry, pheasants or quail used for the commercial production of meat or eggs, have specific needs and are not covered by these Guidelines.

These Guidelines do not apply to the keeping of birds in cages used for exhibition, quarantine or hospitalisation. Cages used for exhibition should be bound by regulation sizes controlled by the sanctioning body of the organisation conducting the exhibition. These cages should be designed to protect the welfare of the birds.

2. WATER

Clean water must be available at all times, at a temperature and quality that meets the birds physiological needs, and that the bird will drink.

Every effort should be made to ensure that water containers remain clean and free of faeces and other contaminants.

Water containers should be checked daily to ensure that there is an adequate supply of water.

Water containers should not be transferred to other enclosures without being thoroughly cleaned using a low toxicity disinfectant.

3. FOOD

Adequate food suitable for the particular species of bird should be available at all times. The advice of an experienced aviculturist or veterinarian should be sought if uncertain of a bird's requirements.

Food should be fresh and clean and stored in a manner that prevents deterioration or spoilage or prepared daily depending on the nature of the ingredients.

A varied diet should be supplied, and given the limitations of seasonal availability, alternating regularly between fresh fruit, vegetables and seeding grasses appropriate to the bird species being fed. Suitable pelleted food can also be used.

Mixed grit and a source of calcium should be available for those species requiring it.

Containers used to supply feed should not be constructed or used in a manner that may cause injury to the birds.

Food should be placed where it is least likely to be spoiled or contaminated. Open containers should not be placed below perches.

[1] A cage in this document is a receptacle or enclosure with an openwork of wires, bars, etc for keeping birds. An aviary is a large cage.

Except where it is a species requirement, direct feeding on the ground should be avoided and suitable containers used.

Checks should be made at least daily to ensure that there is an adequate supply of food. Feed should be changed regularly (rather than topped up).

To avoid the spread of disease through cross contamination, food containers should be regularly cleaned using a low toxicity disinfectant. Containers should always be cleaned prior to being used in other caged feeding sites.

4. HOUSING

Birds must be kept in housing that is suitable for their needs and at an appropriate stocking density. Young birds that are not self-sufficient may be excluded from the determination of the number of birds that may be housed in cages/aviaries. Once the progeny are self-sufficient the numbers should be reduced to comply with the recommended standards.

Birds can benefit from environmental enrichment. The advice of an experienced aviculturist or veterinarian should be sought in this regard.

Cage Environment

All cages should be kept in a state of cleanliness that is conducive to good health of the birds. Accommodation should provide:

- protection from extremes of climate in relation to the normal environment for the species;
- a draught-free shelter incorporating suitable wind breaks;
- protection from predators;
- a means of escape from or avoidance of other cage birds;
- a variety of different diameter perches with sufficient space for all birds;
- an adequate number of feed and water stations to meet the requirements of all birds;
- if birds are to be used for breeding, sufficient nesting sites with suitable nesting material.

In banks of aviaries there should be no common surface drains.

Cages should be of simple design with maximum space for flying and ease of cleaning (length, width and height). According to species' needs, birds should have sufficient clear lines of flight.

Where possible the cage floor should be kept dry. Any area that is persistently wet may present a health hazard and suitable floor drainage should be provided. Solid floors are recommended for reasons of hygiene.

Contamination on floors should not be allowed to build up to a level where it puts the birds at risk of disease. If floors are covered with absorbent litter (sand, etc), the material should be totally replaced at regular intervals, at least twice a year is recommended.

Cages should be maintained in clean condition. In small cages a removable tray is an advantage.

Roosting sites, and perches should be provided in a manner and position that is most appropriate for the species housed and should be regularly cleaned or preferably, replaced.

Where practical, the aviary door should not open directly to the outside, but rather open onto an enclosed area with a second exit door. This helps to prevent escape.

Bathing water should be available through a sprinkler or in a container as appropriate to the species.

Only compatible species or individuals should be held together in the same cage or aviary.

Cage design

Cages should be constructed of strong materials which can be thoroughly washed and cleaned.

Cages should not be stacked together in such a way that ventilation is impaired.

Cage construction should be such that it inhibits the entry of vermin. If bait stations or traps are used inside cages, they should be designed in such a way that it is impossible for birds to reach the bait or traps.

The use of rough uneven-diameter perches of natural non-toxic wood can help prevent overgrown toe nails. Perches and cage floors should not be coated with sandpaper as this may lead to abrasion of the footpads.

The interior of the cage should be free from any sharp points or edges and any dangerous obstruction.

Cages should be designed to exclude, as much as practically possible, pests and predators.

Indoor Housing

Indoor cages are cages that are normally kept inside a building. They include cages that house a single bird, cages where more than one bird is permanently housed and cages where birds are housed for short periods of the year, such as breeding cages.

The siting of a cage must avoid noxious fumes and extremes of temperature. Cages must not be left in the full sun, even indoors, without adequate shade being provided.

To provide adequate ventilation, at least half of the largest side of the cage should consist of a metal grill, netting or mesh.

Floors should be of an impervious material. Suspended wire cages should be hung over a floor that can be kept in a clean and sanitary condition.

Recommended minimum indoor cage dimensions are set out in Table 1.

Outdoor Housing

Any aviary or cage which is exposed to the weather should be constructed in such a way that every bird contained in the aviary/cage is able at all times to perch or roost in a place which is sheltered from the wind, rain and direct rays of the sun.

If protection is to be provided substantially by the solid construction or cladding of roof and walls, at least one-third of their total area should be covered, including a continuous area of three walls of the enclosure or aviary block, to provide shelter against prevailing winds. Where extended flights are incorporated into the cage design, this will not apply to the flight area.

Adequate ventilation should be provided. It is recommended that at least three-quarters of the area of one wall should be constructed from open weave mesh.

Predators should be excluded. This may be achieved by installing concrete barriers or galvanised steel or mesh, similar resistant material, buried to a depth of 300mm.

Recommended minimum dimensions for outside housing are set out in Table 1.

Wire

Galvanised wire may be toxic, especially to parrots. This is due to the presence of zinc and lead. The risk of poisoning can be reduced by thorough brushing of the wire to remove loose metal flakes and removing 'dags' of galvanised iron that may be ingested. With new wire washing with a mild acidic solution such as vinegar followed by a rinse with water or weathering the new cage for twelve months helps reduce the risk. Ideally, leave new wire mesh to weather naturally before using it to construct the cage. Regardless of these precautions, wire chewing birds need to be regularly monitored for signs of poisoning.

The selection of wire gauge size should be based upon the birds' potential ability to chew through the wire and the exclusion of local potential predators and vermin. The potential to chew through wire depends on species as much as size. 16 gauge (1.6mm) wire is suitable for most medium sized parrots and 17 gauge (1.7mm) is suitable for most small to medium sized parrots and finches. Mesh size depends on the size of the smallest birds. Common sizes are 12mm x 12mm for small birds, 12mm x 25 mm.

5. HEALTH

The health of aviary birds is a specialised area and the resolution of health problems is often not a simple matter. Veterinary advice should always be sought if birds are seriously ill or if there is an ongoing health problem.

Birds must be inspected regularly and any with problems dealt with promptly and appropriately.

Disease

Evaluating a bird's health regularly is a key step in ensuring good welfare and preventing disease. Indicators of health include:

- appearance of droppings (quality and quantity)
- amount of food or water consumed
- behaviour (e.g. ability to fly)
- appearance or posture (e.g. sleepy or fluffed-up)
- bodyweight
- rate and depth of respiration.

Changes in the above indicators could indicate a problem.

Particular signs that indicate a health problem are:

- discharge from nostrils, eyes or beak;
- excess loss of, or soiled or misshapen feathers;
- inappetence and weight loss;
- soiled vents;
- enlargements or swelling;
- vomiting or regurgitation;
- injury or bleeding;
- dull or closed eyes;
- lameness, wounded or swollen feet;
- lumps or wounds on the body;
- overgrown beak or nails;
- stains or scabs around eyes or nostrils.

Sick or injured birds should be isolated for observation and treatment or euthanasia. This will prevent further injury and restrict the spread of infections.

Parasite Control

Cage birds can be affected by internal parasites causing health problems which may result in death. Treatment can be administered via food or water but dosing of individual birds is the most efficient and effective treatment method. Individual dosing should be performed by experienced handlers.

External parasites should be eradicated by application of an appropriate insecticide to birds, cages and nest boxes, and may include dusting, spraying, oral medication, or contact insecticides on perches. It is important to have a year round parasite control program rather than only treating birds when obviously affected or losses are incurred.

Euthanasia

Where treatment to restore health or to repair injury is impossible or unsuccessful, euthanasia may be necessary. Euthanasia (a humane death) should be performed by a veterinarian or by a person skilled and experienced in the euthanasia of birds. Euthanasia must never be undertaken by an inexperienced person. Acceptable methods of euthanasia are: stunning and bleeding, decapitation, cervical dislocation (for small birds only), carbon dioxide gassing and overdosing with barbiturates. Using car exhaust gases is not acceptable.

Quarantine

Newly acquired birds should be quarantined for a minimum period of thirty days for treatment and observation before being released into permanent housing. After quarantine, a bird should only be released into new surroundings early in the day to allow time to adjust to the new environment before nightfall.

6. TRADING

Any person trading in birds should ensure that inexperienced recipients understand the feeding and general husbandry requirements of the species being traded. This should include the provision of written material.

A juvenile bird that is not fully feathered or self-sufficient should not be traded except to a person who has skills and experience in raising such birds.

A person trading in birds should provide carry cages appropriate to the species of birds offered for sale (see section 10: Transportation).

Sick, injured or infirm birds should not be traded without the full knowledge of the purchaser and a certificate documenting the nature of the health problem.

Where possible a potential purchaser is advised to look carefully at the breeder's or trader's facilities and the health of the birds, prior to deciding to purchase.

7. HANDLING

Capture

The capture of aviary birds is usually stressful to the bird. Birds should be caught by the least stressful method available and subjected to minimal handling. Children should not handle birds unless under supervision of an experienced adult. The pulling or holding of birds by wings or legs is not acceptable.

Restraint

Birds should be restrained for the minimum amount of time required. All of the body of the bird should be gently supported during restraint.

Tethering

Tethering of birds by any means, except by a body harness, is unacceptable. Restraint using a body harness requires close monitoring.

8. HUSBANDRY

Identification

Identification rings may be used on the legs of aviary birds. These should fit closely yet move freely on the leg of an adult bird. Over-large rings may get caught in obstacles such as vegetation or wire, and rings that are too tight may restrict blood flow to the leg. Special care is needed if a ring needs to be removed (for example a leg injury) as there is potential to injure the bird.

Microchips are a useful means of identification and should be considered.

Wing Clipping

Cage birds should have the ability to fly and wing clipping is not acceptable unless undertaken under the guidance of a veterinarian or an experienced bird-keeper.

If some restriction of flight is necessary to tame a young pet bird, wing taping under the advice of an experienced person is an option. Wing tapes should not be in place for prolonged periods as they may cause damage to feather follicles.

Pinioning of the wings is not acceptable except under exceptional circumstances.

Nail and Beak Trimming

Overgrown beaks and toenails should be trimmed carefully by an experienced person. Unskilled trimming can lead to haemorrhage and death.

Overgrown toenails can be prevented by using perches of uneven-diameter made from rough, natural and non-toxic wood, and by eliminating foot disease and obesity.

9. TRANSPORT

General Standards for all Transportation

Transport causes stress and therefore should be kept to a minimum, especially for birds that are unaccustomed to it.

Only healthy birds should be transported except those being transported to a veterinarian or other health professional for treatment.

Containers should be sufficiently robust for the species they contain and should be securely closed during transport to ensure no injury or escape is possible.

Transport cages should not be too large but should be spacious enough for the birds to move around and containers should be darkened. All wire metal cages should be covered with dark cloth during transport, taking care not to obstruct ventilation. In addition, transport cages should not be packed together in such a manner as to obstruct efficient air circulation between them.

Food should always be available during transport, especially for small or young birds, and water should be provided at intervals of at least every eight hours. In hot weather this should be reduced to every six hours. Water should not be placed in a container during transport unless it is in a non-spill container or in a fixed container using cotton wool soaked in water.

Birds should not be exposed to extremes of temperature. They must not be left in vehicles parked in the sun nor left in vehicles in hot weather.

A bird should not be transported in a container with a bird of an incompatible species. As far as is practical, birds should be transported one bird per compartment to avoid birds injuring each other due to stress (this may occur even with bonded pairs). Birds that may fight should be shipped in separate containers.

The floor of a carry cage should be such that birds can obtain a secure footing. The floor should be sealed and covered with a non-toxic absorbent material to stop the escape of urine or faeces.

Sizes for Transportation Cages

For the purposes of determining suitable cage dimensions a bird is measured from the tip of its beak to the tip of its entire tail when held in the hand.

Any container used to convey a live bird for any purpose by any means of transportation, should conform to the following measurements. An exception to this may be the transportation of very young birds that require a close environment with shared body heat.

Length: no less than 20 percent (one fifth) longer than the longest bird to be carried in it and no more than twice the length of the longest bird to be carried in it.

Width: 50 percent of the minimum length providing that if more than one bird is to be transported, the container should be wide enough for all birds to stand shoulder to shoulder.

Height: should be high enough for the birds to stand normally and no higher that 50mm above the bird's head when standing in a normal posture. Height should be such that the birds standing on the floor cannot obstruct ventilation holes.

Show cages of a size specified for individual species by the governing body of the organisation conducting an exhibition may be used for transport to and from the exhibition.

Short Period Carry Cages for individual birds (up to 2 hours)

A strong, clean cardboard box may be suitable for some kinds of birds. Larger parrots and cockatoos may chew through cardboard or softwood and for those species a substantial hardwood box or metal cage is necessary.

Containers should be constructed of non-toxic material. Containers such as milk cartons, jars, plastic ice-cream boxes, paper and plastic bags etc must not be used as adequate ventilation cannot be provided.

Adequate ventilation must be provided. Holes must not be blocked when the cover or lid is in place. As a guide, holes of a minimum 0.8-1 cm diameter in a line along both sides and both ends of the container at intervals not exceeding 4cm, provide adequate ventilation. The holes should be near the top. Ventilation holes should be clipped out or drilled out, holes which are made by perforating with a spike can easily become blocked.

Long Period Carry Cages for groups of birds (up to 36 hours)

All cages should be of wood, plastic or metal and be sufficiently sturdy to prevent the escape or injury of birds. Floors should be solid.

Cages should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected between consignments.

Carry cages should be stowed in a manner and position to provide adequate ventilation to all cages during transport. Where carry cages are stacked, square spacer blocks of at least 5cm should be

placed between consecutive tiers of cages (both vertically and horizontally) to ensure adequate air movement between cages.

For the bulk consignment cages, adequate ventilation must be provided. As a guide drill 1cm diameter holes at 10cm centres in two staggered rows along the back and each side of the carry cage. The holes should be in the upper one-third of each side.

As far as is practicable, birds should not be delivered to the dispatch point more than two hours prior to the scheduled departure time.

Wild, trapped birds must be held for two weeks after capture and be in good health before being transported for a long period.

Any carry cage being consigned unattended must carry a label measuring at least 10cm x 15cm upon which is legibly printed the following details:

- the consignees name, address, and telephone number;
- the consignor's name, address, and telephone number;
- the number of birds, and their species; and
- the time and date the birds were placed in the container.

The words "live birds" should be displayed on similar sized labels on at least two sides of the container.

10. TABLES

These tables provide the recommended minimum dimensions of aviary sizes for breeding pairs. The dimensions of holding cages for juveniles or single sex adult birds and for highly domesticated birds may differ from these. Advice should be sought from a veterinarian or experienced bird keeper.

TABLE 1

Minimum Indoor or Suspended Cage Dimensions

Size of bird (approx. length in cm)	Minimum Floor Area (Square. cm.)	Number of Birds	Minimum Height (cm)	Increased floor area for each additional bird. (square cm)
10	1,000	2	34	500
20	1,600	2	34	800
30	5,000	2	70	2,500
40	8,000	2	70	5,000
50	22,500	2	100	7,500
90	36,000	2	120	12,000

TABLE 2

Minimum Outdoor Aviary Dimensions

Size of bird (approx. length in cm)	Minimum Floor Area (square cm)	Number of Birds	Minimum Height (cm)	Increased floor area for each additional bird. (square cm)
10	3,700	2	180	1,800
20	7,200	2	180	3,600
30	10,000	2	180	5,000
40	15,000	2	180	7,500
50	25,000	2	180	12,500
90	50,000	2	180	25,000