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African Grey (*Psittacus erithacus*)

African Greys are popular parrots in today's pet trade. They are well known for their intelligence and excellent speaking abilities. The two recognized species of African Greys are the Congo (*P. e. erithacus*) and the Timneh (*P. e. timneh*). There is some debate over the possible subspecies called the Ghana, which is slightly smaller than the Congo. The Congo is larger at 12-14 inches (390-500 grams), compared to Timnehs, which are 9 inches (275-350grams).

Both species' coloration is gray. The Congo has a light red color to the tail, while the Timneh has a dark maroon colored tail feathers. Although there is no obvious sexual dimorphism, the females tend to have a lighter gray color. Also, Congo females usually have a gray tip on their red tail feathers. The iris of their eyes is gray at birth, and gradually changes to clear yellow once they are over a year old.

Unlike other large psittacines, the Grey is a relatively quiet bird. Although they all have the potential to imitate sounds, it is difficult to guess which individuals will talk proficiently. Most begin talking between 6 months and 2 years of age.

African Greys are strongly bonded to one person. They must be well socialized to people, or they will become extremely shy of other people they are not bonded to. They may even become protective of this person and attack others. In general, these birds are not as cuddly as cockatoos, but they do require a regular amount of preening.

An environment with low humidity will cause dry skin for African Greys. Regular bathing with a water spray bottle or in the shower will promote healthy skin and decrease the amount of dust in the house affecting the birds.

Housing:

The cage should be large enough for the bird to fully expand its wings without touching the sides. The cage should not be too large, since these birds are intimidated by large enclosures. The cage door should be large enough so that all areas of the cage can be reached when the door is open.

Food bowls and drinking utensils should be placed at perch height, and solidly mounted so that the birds cannot move or tip them over.

The perches should be of various thicknesses. The thinnest perch should be large enough that the toes cannot encircle the entire perch. A concrete perch is advised to help nail wear and reducing nail sharpness. The concrete perch should be placed at the roosting point of the cage or at the level of the food dishes.

Do not place the cage in front of constant, direct sunlight, or in front of vents. Cage toys prevent the bird from becoming bored with the environment. However, the toys should be evaluated for durability, toxic potential, and potential to be ingested. Since bored birds are more likely to develop bad habits, it is important to provide enough environmental enrichment to keep them engaged.

The cage bottoms should be cleaned daily to evaluate proper dietary intake and fecal production. The cage should be covered each night to allow the bird privacy and prevent sounds and flashes at night that may stimulate feather picking.

Behavior:

Greys are very sensitive birds and usually become extremely bonded to one owner. If they do not receive adequate socialization during their first years of life, they will develop bad habits, such as screaming and/or feather picking. While your bird is young, try to expose them to many different situations. This practice will habituate them to change and will prevent stress-related feather picking. Teaching a bird up and down commands is very important to maintaining your dominance and creating a well-behaved pet.

Diet:

We recommend that 75-90% of the diet is a processed diet formulated for Greys. The rest of the diet should be a mixture of fruit, vegetables and pasta. Due to their higher requirements for calcium, green leafy vegetables should be offered in generous proportions. Birds should not be given products that contain chocolate, sugar or avocado. Sunflower seeds and peanuts should be avoided, since they offer little nutritional value and are extremely high in fat. Try to always feed on a regular schedule.

Medical Problems:

Some of the common diseases in African Greys include: feather picking, bacterial, viral and fungal infections, papillomas, proventricular dilatation disease, toxicities, chlamydial infections and nutritional deficiencies.

Feather picking is a very large problem in this species of birds. If untreated, this problem can result in the bird's demise. There are many things that can initiate feather picking. A veterinarian should be consulted to rule out medical causes for this problem. To help prevent feather picking, socialize the bird well and offer them a normal routine.

Annual checkups with a qualified avian veterinarian should be performed to monitor for early signs of disease. Diseases are easier to diagnose and prevent with consistent monitoring.

When trimming feathers, only the first 5 primary feathers should be trimmed because their large body makes them more susceptible to keel damage from falling.

Through regular health checks and good husbandry, your bird can serve as a good companion for many years into the future.