

# Poicephalus Parrots

## Care Guide for New Owners

Parrot

Poicephalus Genus

Native to Africa

Stocky and Bold

### Species Covered in This Guide

Poicephalus is a genus of African parrots that includes nine recognized species. Several are commonly kept in captivity. This guide covers the genus as a whole, with species-specific notes where care differs meaningfully. Individual guides for Meyer's parrots and red-bellied parrots are also available from Boggy's Buddies for those specific species.

<b>Senegal Parrot</b>	Poicephalus senegalus   9 to 10 inches   4 to 5 oz   most widely kept Poicephalus
<b>Meyer's Parrot</b>	Poicephalus meyeri   8 to 9 inches   3 to 4.5 oz   calm and gentle temperament
<b>Red-Bellied Parrot</b>	Poicephalus rufiventris   8 to 9 inches   4 to 5 oz   sexually dimorphic
<b>Jardine's Parrot</b>	Poicephalus gulielmi   10 to 11 inches   6 to 8 oz   larger, bold personality
<b>Cape Parrot</b>	Poicephalus robustus   13 to 14 inches   7 to 9 oz   largest of the genus; endangered
<b>Brown-Headed Parrot</b>	Poicephalus cryptoxanthus   8 to 9 inches   4 to 5 oz   quieter disposition
<b>Ruppell's Parrot</b>	Poicephalus rueppellii   8 to 9 inches   4 to 5 oz   less commonly kept

### Poicephalus Parrots Are Parrots

All Poicephalus species belong to the order Psittaciformes, making them true parrots. They are native to sub-Saharan Africa, where they inhabit woodland savannas, forest edges, and open bush country depending on the species. They are stocky, compact birds with strong beaks, zygodactyl feet, and the cognitive complexity that defines parrots as a group.

Poicephalus parrots as a group have a reputation for being somewhat calmer and less prone to screaming than many South American parrots of similar size, such as conures. They are typically curious, playful, and capable of deep bonds with their owners. They are also capable of significant hormonal behavior and can become nippy and territorial without appropriate handling and cage management. They live 25 to 35 years across most species, making adoption a multi-decade commitment.

### **All Parrots Can Be Noisy**

Poicephalus parrots are moderate in noise level relative to many other parrots, but they are still parrots and will vocalize with contact calls, chattering, and alarm calls. Individual birds and species vary. Research the specific species you are considering.

## Household Dangers for Birds

Birds have an extraordinarily efficient respiratory system with continuous one-way airflow through air sacs connected to the lungs. This makes them far more sensitive to airborne toxins than mammals. Many everyday household items that humans barely register are genuinely life-threatening to a bird. Every person who brings a bird into their home must understand these dangers before that bird arrives.

### Non-Stick Cookware and PTFE (Teflon)

#### The Number One Household Killer of Pet Birds

Cookware, bakeware, and appliances coated with polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE), sold under brand names including Teflon, release invisible, odorless toxic fumes when overheated. These fumes cause acute respiratory failure in birds within minutes and are almost always fatal. A bird can be dead in under 15 minutes with no warning whatsoever. Non-stick cookware must not be used in any home with a bird. This includes non-stick pots, pans, waffle irons, air fryers, some drip pans and oven liners, and some ironing board covers. Check every appliance and piece of cookware before bringing a bird home and replace anything with a PTFE coating.

### Other Airborne Toxins

- Candles, incense, and wax melts: Scented candles, incense, wax warmers, and essential oil diffusers release volatile compounds that cause respiratory irritation and damage in birds. Never use these in a room where a bird spends time.
- Aerosol sprays: Hairspray, air fresheners, spray cleaners, perfume, and spray paint all pose serious respiratory risks. Ventilate thoroughly and keep birds away from any room where aerosols are used.
- Scented plug-in air fresheners: These release compounds continuously and should not be used anywhere near a bird.
- Smoke of any kind: Cigarette, cigar, wood smoke, vaping aerosol, and marijuana smoke are all harmful to bird respiratory tracts. Never smoke near or in the same room as a bird.
- Overheated cooking oils and burning food: Even without PTFE, combustion products from burned food can irritate birds. Ensure good kitchen ventilation when cooking.
- Fresh paint, varnish, adhesives, and treated wood: Off-gassing from new materials can be harmful. Allow full curing and thorough ventilation before the bird returns to any treated area.
- Household cleaning products: Bleach, ammonia-based cleaners, and many commercial sprays are toxic to birds. Use bird-safe alternatives for anything near the cage and rinse all surfaces thoroughly.

### Physical Dangers

- Ceiling fans: Always turn off ceiling fans before allowing a bird out of its cage. A bird in flight and a moving ceiling fan is a fatal combination.

- Exposed electrical cords: Birds chew. A bird that bites through a live wire can be electrocuted. Cover or hide all cords in any space where your bird has free flight time.
- Open water: Toilet bowls, full sinks, buckets, and aquariums can trap and drown a bird. Keep these covered or doors closed during free flight.
- Cats and dogs: Even a playful swipe from a cat can deliver fatal Pasteurella bacteria into a bird's bloodstream through a scratch. Never allow unsupervised contact between a bird and any cat or dog.
- Windows and mirrors: Birds cannot distinguish glass from open space. Mark large windows or cover them during free flight to prevent collision injuries.
- Hot surfaces: Birds can land on hot stove burners during free flight. Never allow birds in the kitchen while cooking.
- Small gaps and tight spaces: Birds explore and can get stuck behind appliances or inside small openings where they can injure themselves or cannot be reached.

## Housing and Cage Setup

The minimum cage for Senegal, Meyer's, red-bellied, brown-headed, and Ruppell's parrots is 24 inches wide by 24 inches deep by 36 inches tall with bar spacing of 3/4 inch. Jardine's parrots and Cape parrots are larger and need more space: a minimum of 32 inches wide by 36 inches deep by 48 inches tall with 3/4 to 1 inch bar spacing. Larger is always better for all species. Horizontal bars support climbing. Avoid round cages.

### Cape Parrots: An Important Conservation Note

Cape parrots (*Poicephalus robustus*) are classified as Endangered by the IUCN. Their wild populations are under significant pressure. If you are considering a Cape parrot, sourcing from a reputable, transparent captive breeding program with full documentation is especially important for this species. Verify that any Cape parrot you adopt is legitimately captive-bred and comes with documentation.

## Perches: Variety Is Essential

Perch quality and variety have a direct impact on foot health. A bird stands on its perches every moment it is in the cage. Providing only one type or diameter of perch causes constant pressure on the same points of the foot, which leads to bumblefoot, a painful and difficult-to-treat bacterial infection of the foot pads.

- Natural wood branches: The best option. Irregular shapes and diameters constantly shift foot position and exercise different muscles. Use untreated wood from bird-safe species such as apple, willow, manzanita, and dragonwood.
- Rope perches: Soft, comfortable, and good for variety. Inspect regularly for fraying, as loose fibers can wrap around toes and cause tourniquet injuries. Replace when significant fraying appears.
- Calcium or mineral perches: Provide texture and help keep the beak slightly worn. Fine as one option among several.
- Nail file or pedicure perches: Acceptable as one perch among multiple options to help maintain nail length. Should never be the only or primary perch, as prolonged contact with an abrasive surface damages foot pads.
- Dowel perches: Limit to no more than one per cage. Uniform smooth dowels provide no variation in diameter or texture and promote foot problems when used exclusively.

### **Place Perches Thoughtfully**

Position perches at different heights throughout the cage. The highest perch is where most birds prefer to sleep, so make it comfortable and secure. Never position perches directly over food or water dishes where droppings contaminate them. Ensure all perches are stable and do not wobble.

## **Toys and Enrichment**

Poicephalus parrots are playful and enjoy a variety of enrichment. A notable characteristic of the genus is that many individuals enjoy holding and manipulating objects with their feet, making foot toys particularly popular. Shreddable toys, foraging puzzles, swings, and climbing structures round out a well-enriched cage. Rotate toys regularly to maintain novelty.

## **Diet and Nutrition**

Diet is one of the areas where parrot care most commonly falls short of what these birds actually need. An all-seed diet is the single most common nutritional mistake made by parrot owners across all species.

### **Why Seed-Only Diets Are Harmful**

Seeds are high in fat and carbohydrates and deficient in many essential vitamins and minerals, particularly Vitamin A and calcium. A parrot eating only seeds is essentially eating nutritionally incomplete food at every single meal. Vitamin A deficiency causes respiratory problems, immune suppression, and organ damage over time. The high fat content leads to obesity and fatty liver disease, both of which are extremely common in seed-fed parrots and both of which shorten lifespan significantly. Seeds are fine as an occasional treat or a component of a varied diet, but they should never be the foundation.

### **Recommended Diet**

Boggy's Buddies recommends 50 percent high-quality pellets and 50 percent fresh chop daily. Harrison's Bird Foods is our top recommendation, followed by TOPS Parrot Food and Goldenfeast as a third option. We do not recommend ZuPreem, which contains artificial colors and is not nutritionally balanced to the standard of the above options. Choose pellet size appropriate to the species.

### Safe Fresh Foods

- Dark leafy greens: collard greens, kale, dandelion greens
- Bell peppers (excellent Vitamin A source)
- Broccoli, carrots, courgette, peas, corn
- Fresh herbs: basil, cilantro, parsley
- Small amounts of mango, papaya, apple, or blueberry (no fruit seeds)

### Never Feed These

- Avocado (toxic)
- Onions and garlic (toxic)
- Chocolate (toxic)
- Fruit seeds and pits
- Alcohol
- High-sodium processed human food

### Fresh Water

Fresh water must be available at all times. Change it daily and clean the dish or bottle thoroughly every few days. Many parrots enjoy a shallow bath dish or misting, which supports feather condition and provides enrichment.

### Never Pet a Parrot Below the Neck

Petting a parrot on its back, wings, belly, or vent area mimics the behavior of a mate and triggers hormonal responses. This applies to all parrot species. Chronic hormonal stimulation through full-body petting leads to behavioral problems, aggression, and in females, chronic egg-laying with serious associated health risks. Pet only on the head, cheeks, and around the beak. Never pet under the wings, along the back, or near the tail.

### No Nesting Items in the Cage

Do not place nest boxes, cuddle tents, snuggle sacks, or any enclosed fabric items in your bird's cage. When a bird is surrounded on all sides in a tight, cozy space, it registers this as a nest. This triggers powerful hormonal responses in both males and females: egg-laying behavior in females (which can lead to egg binding, a life-threatening emergency) and territorial aggression and frustration in both sexes. A hormonally stimulated parrot is an unhappy, difficult parrot. Comfortable perches at height are all a bird needs for sleeping and resting.

### Wing Clipping: Our Position

Boggy's Buddies does not recommend wing clipping as a routine practice. Flight is a fundamental natural behavior, and fully flighted birds are physically healthier, more confident, and more behaviorally balanced. Flight provides exercise that clipped birds cannot replicate, and birds who learn to fly develop better coordination and emotional resilience.

We recognize that clipping is not the wrong choice in every situation, and we support it in specific circumstances.

### **Situations Where We Support Clipping**

- An adult bird who has been clipped for most of its life and is unlikely to learn to fly safely. For these birds, being suddenly fully flighted without the skills to manage it poses a real injury risk from crashes and falls.
- A hormonal bird who is dive-bombing other birds, animals, or people. Clipping temporarily limits the ability to initiate attacks and can be a safety management tool during a hormonal period.
- Transport, veterinary visits, or other situations where uncontrolled flight poses an escape or injury risk.

#### **If You Clip, Do It Correctly**

Wing clipping should only be done by an avian vet or experienced avian professional. Incorrectly clipped birds cut blood feathers and can fall and injure themselves if left without any ability to glide. A correctly clipped bird should be able to glide slowly to the ground, not drop straight down.

### **Harness Training and Outdoor Time**

Supervised outdoor time in a harness offers real benefits: natural sunlight provides Vitamin D3 that indoor lighting cannot fully replicate, and new sights, sounds, and smells provide enrichment that indoor life simply cannot match.

For most birds, the Aviator harness is our first recommendation. It is well-designed, adjustable, and available in sizes ranging from very small to large parrot. The right harness is ultimately the one that fits and that your individual bird will accept. Some birds adapt to other designs more readily.

Harness training is a long process. We want to be completely clear about this. For most birds, the process from first introduction to comfortable wear takes weeks to months of slow, patient, positive work. Forcing a harness onto a bird who is not ready causes fear and trauma that makes future training exponentially harder. The process begins with simply letting the bird see the harness, then feel it nearby, then brief contact, then seconds of wear, and so on. Every bird moves at its own pace.

#### **Never Leave a Harnessed Bird Unsupervised Outside**

A harnessed bird outside is still a bird that can be attacked by a hawk, a cat, or a dog. Always supervise directly and never tie the leash to an object and walk away.

### **Grooming: Nails, Beak, and Wings**

Regular monitoring of nail length, beak condition, and wing feathers is part of routine bird ownership. With appropriate perch variety and foraging opportunities, beak and nail maintenance is often reduced but never eliminated.

### **Nail Trims**

Overgrown nails curl under the foot and cause pain and difficulty perching. Check nail length regularly. Trims can be performed by an avian vet, an experienced groomer, or a confident owner who has been shown correct technique. Always have styptic powder on hand in case a nail is cut too short and bleeds. Never attempt nail trims on an uncooperative bird alone.

### **Beak Maintenance**

A healthy beak wears naturally through chewing, foraging, and wiping on perches and mineral blocks. An overgrown, misshapen, or laminating beak requires veterinary assessment. Do not attempt beak trims at home. Beak trims require specialized tools and expertise and a mistake can cause serious injury.

### **Wing Trims**

See the wing clipping section above. Any clipping should be done by an avian vet or experienced avian professional only.

## **Senegal Parrot: A Note on Personality**

Senegal parrots are the most widely kept *Poicephalus* species and deserve a specific note on their personality. They are known for being strongly one-person birds, bonding intensely to one primary person and sometimes reacting with aggression toward others in the household. This behavior is manageable with appropriate socialization, multiple people handling the bird from a young age, and careful cage management. Be aware of this tendency if you have a multi-person household.

## **Common Health Issues**

### **Psittacosis**

Transmissible to humans. Test new birds from unknown backgrounds.

### **Aspergillosis**

A fungal respiratory infection seen in African parrots. Signs include breathing changes, lethargy, and weight loss. Requires veterinary diagnosis and antifungal treatment.

### **Fatty Liver Disease**

Caused by seed-heavy diets. Correct diet and veterinary care improve outcomes if caught early.

### **Feather Destructive Behavior**

A signal of stress, illness, or nutritional deficiency. Always warrants a veterinary assessment to rule out medical causes before addressing behavioral factors.

### **Egg Binding**

Life-threatening in females of all species. Avoid all nesting triggers. Requires immediate veterinary care.

### **Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (PBFD)**

A viral disease affecting feathers and immune system. New birds should be tested before introduction to others.

### **PTFE Toxicosis**

Non-stick fumes cause rapid respiratory failure. Remove all PTFE-coated items.

## Things Every New Poicephalus Owner Should Know

### **This is a 25 to 35 year commitment.**

Plan fully for what that lifespan means before adopting.

### **Remove all non-stick cookware.**

PTFE fumes kill birds within minutes. No exceptions.

### **Seeds are a treat, not a diet.**

Transition to pellets and fresh chop.

### **Never put nesting items in the cage.**

They trigger hormonal behavior and chronic egg-laying.

### **Pet only on the head and cheeks.**

Petting below the neck promotes hormonal behavior in all parrots.

### **Socialize from day one.**

Especially for Senegal parrots, ensuring multiple people handle and interact with the bird from the beginning helps prevent extreme one-person bonding and household aggression.

### **Find an avian vet before you need one.**

Identify one in your area now.

### **Questions? We're Here!**

Boggy's Buddies is always happy to answer questions. Reach us at [boggysbuddies@gmail.com](mailto:boggysbuddies@gmail.com) or find us on Facebook and Instagram.