

# African Grey Parrot

## Care Guide for New Owners

Parrot

African Grey

Native to Africa

Sensitive and Complex

### Quick Facts at a Glance

<b>Species</b>	Psittacus erithacus (Congo African Grey); Psittacus timneh (Timneh African Grey)
<b>Lifespan</b>	40 to 60 years with proper care
<b>Adult Size</b>	Congo: 12 to 14 inches, 14 to 21 oz; Timneh: 10 to 11 inches, 9 to 14 oz
<b>Activity Cycle</b>	Diurnal; active during the day
<b>Temperament</b>	Sensitive, complex, highly intelligent, and deeply bonded; requires significant time investment
<b>Cage Minimum</b>	32x36x48 inches (L x W x H); 3/4 to 1 inch bar spacing
<b>Diet</b>	50% high-quality pellets, 50% fresh chop; seed-only diets cause serious harm
<b>Noise Level</b>	Moderate; less shrill than many parrots but extremely vocal in other ways
<b>CITES Status</b>	CITES Appendix I; international trade heavily regulated
<b>Legal Status</b>	Legal in Wisconsin with proper documentation; verify local ordinances

### African Grey Parrots Are Parrots

African grey parrots belong to the genus *Psittacus* within the order Psittaciformes, making them true parrots. They are widely regarded as one of the most cognitively complex bird species on earth. Research by Dr. Irene Pepperberg with a Congo African grey named Alex demonstrated that these birds can learn to use words meaningfully, understand concepts like color, shape, material, and number, and appear to comprehend language in ways that go beyond simple mimicry. They are

genuinely remarkable animals.

They are also one of the most demanding parrot species to keep well. African greys are emotionally sensitive, prone to anxiety, and highly susceptible to feather destructive behavior when their social, environmental, and psychological needs are not met. An estimated 40 percent of captive African greys suffer from behavioral problems including feather plucking. This is not a coincidence. It reflects how frequently these birds' needs go unmet in captivity.

### **Wild-Caught African Greys**

African greys are listed on CITES Appendix I, which means international commercial trade is prohibited. Despite this, wild-caught birds continue to enter the trade illegally in some regions. Always require full documentation of captive-bred status when adopting any African grey. If documentation cannot be provided, proceed with extreme caution. Wild-caught birds are stressed, heavily parasitized, and typically very difficult to establish in captivity.

## **CITES and Legal Considerations**

African greys are legal to own in Wisconsin. However, as CITES Appendix I species, their import and export is strictly regulated. Captive-bred birds legally within the United States are not subject to import restrictions, but documentation matters. Request and verify documentation of captive-bred status for any African grey. If transporting an African grey across state lines, be aware of applicable federal regulations.

Verify local city and county ordinances before adopting. While African greys are not restricted at the state level in Wisconsin, local ordinances vary.

## 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 an African grey is 32 inches wide by 36 inches deep by 48 inches tall with bar spacing of 3/4 to 1 inch. Larger is strongly preferred. African greys are active climbers and need a cage that is well-furnished with perches, toys, and foraging opportunities at multiple heights. Stainless steel cages are the gold standard. Powder-coated steel is acceptable if the finish is intact and verified non-toxic.

Cage placement matters significantly for African greys. They feel most secure with the cage positioned against a wall or in a corner, giving them a sense of having their back protected. Place the cage in a room where the family spends time without being in the most chaotic, high-traffic area of the home. African greys are sensitive to stress and an overly stimulating environment causes anxiety.

## 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, Enrichment, and Routine

African greys need substantial daily enrichment and benefit enormously from routine and consistency. Changes to their environment, schedule, or social group can cause significant stress. Introduce changes gradually when possible.

Foraging is one of the most important enrichment categories for African greys. In the wild, they spend a large portion of the day foraging for food. Providing foraging opportunities in the cage, wrapping treats in paper, hiding food in puzzle toys, and scatter-feeding encourage natural exploratory behavior and provide mental occupation that is critical for psychological health.

## 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 pellet recommendation, followed by TOPS Parrot Food and Goldenfeast. We do not recommend ZuPreem, which contains artificial colors and is not nutritionally balanced to the standard of the above options. African greys have specific calcium requirements and Vitamin A needs; a varied fresh chop with dark leafy greens and bell peppers is essential.

African greys have notably high calcium requirements. Ensure the diet includes calcium-rich dark leafy greens daily. Some avian vets recommend calcium supplementation for African greys; discuss with your vet at your first appointment.

### Safe Fresh Foods

- Dark leafy greens: collard greens, kale, dandelion greens (calcium)
- Bell peppers (excellent Vitamin A source)
- Broccoli, carrots, sweet potato, courgette
- Fresh herbs: basil, cilantro, parsley
- Small amounts of pomegranate, mango, papaya, or apple (no fruit seeds)
- Occasional cooked egg or legumes for protein variety

### Never Feed These

- Avocado (toxic)
- Onions and garlic (toxic)
- Chocolate (toxic)
- Fruit seeds and pits
- Alcohol
- High-sodium processed human food
- High-fat seed mixes as primary diet

### 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.

## **Common Health Issues**

### **Feather Destructive Behavior (FDB)**

One of the most common problems in captive African greys. Can stem from stress, boredom, illness, hormonal issues, nutritional deficiency, or psychological factors. Always requires veterinary assessment to rule out medical causes before behavioral interventions. African greys that pluck are communicating that something in their environment is not right.

### **Hypocalcemia (Calcium Deficiency)**

African greys have exceptionally high calcium requirements. Signs include seizures, weakness, tremors, and difficulty standing. Requires immediate veterinary care. Ensure diet is rich in calcium-containing foods and discuss supplementation with your avian vet.

### **Psittacosis**

Transmissible to humans. CITES Appendix I status means wild-caught birds are a real concern. Test all new birds.

### **Aspergillosis**

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

### **Proventricular Dilatation Disease (PDD)**

Neurological disease causing chronic regurgitation and weight loss. Requires veterinary management.

## **Respiratory Infections**

Breathing changes, nasal discharge, tail-bobbing. Always a veterinary emergency.

## **PTFE Toxicosis**

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

## Things Every New African Grey Owner Should Know

### **This bird may outlive you.**

African greys regularly live 40 to 60 years. Estate planning, including designating a knowledgeable caretaker and providing resources for the bird's ongoing care, is something every African grey owner should address seriously.

### **Feather plucking is communication.**

A grey that starts plucking is telling you something is wrong. Take it seriously from the first sign and work with an avian vet to identify and address the cause.

### **Routine matters more than with most parrots.**

African greys are sensitive to change. Try to maintain consistent schedules for feeding, out-of-cage time, and sleep. Introduce environmental changes gradually.

### **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. Calcium-rich dark greens are especially important for this species.

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

They trigger hormonal behavior and chronic egg-laying.

### **Find an avian vet experienced with African greys before you need one.**

African grey medicine has specific considerations. Find someone with genuine experience 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.