Eating Poop

Provide good-quality meals for your birds, and let them enjoy food outside the cage to monitor their diet.

Q At certain times of the year, my pet cockatiel, Chiquita, eats her droppings with great gusto. Why is she doing this, and is it harmful to her health?

A The medical term for eating excrement is coprophagy. The practice of eating nonfood items is called pica or referred to as a deranged appetite.

According to board certified avian veterinarian Robert Monaco of the Old Country Animal Clinic in New York, "Coprophagy is common in dogs, but not many birds do this; we don't even know why dogs do it. Some theories for mammals suggest that it may be a vitamin or mineral deficiency. I'd advise making sure this bird has enough food in its cage, and run tests to rule out a metabolic problem or nutritional deficiency. In a best case scenario, birds don't have a lot of exposure to their droppings; keeping the cage clean can virtually eliminate this problem."

Droppings from sick birds could indeed be harmful to others sharing the same cage or area in the home. Contaminated droppings are an expressway to disease. They may end up in water dishes (a great reason to use water bottles) or on perches where birds may walk through droppings and consequently groom the dermis off their toes. Dried droppings eventually turn to dust, which may be infectious if inhaled.

Keep cages clean, be sure your bird is eating a balanced diet and, if your pet exhibits signs of a deranged appetite, take it to the vet to rule out medical conditions that may contribute to this habit. Providing cuttlebone or a mineral block prior to and during breeding season may also help curtail the ingestion of nonfood products.

Susan Chamberlain lives on Long Island, New York, where she shares her home with eight pet birds. She has been a contributor to BIRD TALK since 1984 and also operates The 14 Korat Parrot, a bird-related mail-order business.

I found New York City's Bronx Zoo, a Wildlife Conservation Society park, to be an ideal respite from the hustle and bustle of urban life. On my last visit, I observed great hornbills, possibly the only purple-bellied lories in North America, birds of paradise and a gorgeous St. Vincent Amazon. I also enjoyed the World of Birds exhibit, where species are housed in near-natural environments, an aquatic birdhouse and an impressive birds of prey exhibit. A pleasant "find" is the former bird-house, now an administration building, which boasts sculptured parrots and cockatoos on its rooftop (see photo.) For more information, visit www.bronxzoo.com or call (718) 367-1010.

— Susan Chamberlain