

The Importance of Water for Birds

By Debra McDonald

Water is one of the most important considerations for avian husbandry but is often overlooked. The water can be sourced from free water from bowls, as a component of foods high in water such as fruit, or from metabolic water (from the breakdown of carbohydrates and fats). Birds should always be provided with fresh water.

Nutrient Supplementation of Drinking Water

Vitamin and mineral supplements should **not** be provided in the drinking water as there is no way to standardise intake. Intake can vary with changes in environmental temperature, diet, species, level of activity, body size and stage of development. Diets high in protein may increase water intake as additional water is required for excretion of breakdown products. Feeding fruits high in water may decrease intake from water bowls and mineral content of the water can influence stability of vitamins. Concentrated nutrients in water can also encourage growth of microorganisms.

Water Intake of Birds

Water intake of birds varies but is generally estimated at approximately 2.4% of body weight. However, actual intake may be as high as 15-20% of body weight so birds should always be provided with fresh drinking water. Passerines generally have a higher intake than psittacines (25-30% compared with 4-6% of body weight). Many desert species rely on metabolic water from the breakdown of carbohydrates and fats due to the scarcity of fresh water in the wild but it is not necessary to replicate these conditions in captivity. Interspecific variations are evident with canaries having higher water requirements than budgerigars or cockatiels, so do not assume all birds will consume similar amounts of water.

Water Requirements of Psittacine Neonates

It is important to optimize the ratio of feed to water in hand rearing feeds. Chicks can easily dehydrate in the first few days post hatch, while insufficient solids for older chicks can result in slow growth rates. Generally, newly hatched chicks should be provided with about 10% solids for the first three days, increasing to 25% solids until they have been reduced to only two feeds a day when 30% solids is adequate. The frequency of feeds per day will depend on the species and the rate of digestion. *Dr Mac's Organic Origins* hand rearing diets contain a range of digestive enzymes that accelerate digestion and minimise risk of sour crop, so feeding frequency may be greater than other products. Birds may require feeding every 2-3 hours. Boiling water can be added to the hand rearing mix but food must not be fed out above 39°C or you will risk scalding the crop of your baby.