

It's Time for Vacation: Quick Tips to Idiot-proof the Birdsitter

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The flights are booked, hotel rooms reserved, newspapers canceled - it's time for that long-awaited vacation. In a perfect world, we'd be able to bring our birds along on every trip, but often it's just not possible. The first time I was about to embark on a trip that didn't include Bink E Berde, I reviewed the options: boarding him at the vet, having a pet sitter come to my home each day, or taking some good friends up on their generous offer to have an avian houseguest. As much as I hate to leave the little green guy behind, I feel very fortunate to have wonderful friends who are not only willing, but also eager, to care for Bink E.

Whatever option you choose, a few simple things can make the experience as pleasant and foolproof as possible. Make the introduction before your departure, for instance, whether your bird sitter will be coming to your home or graciously providing accommodations at theirs. It's a good idea to have a run-through - invite your sitter over to see exactly how you feed your bird, clean his cage and handle him. This will give you an opportunity to evaluate the caretaker's skill and comfort levels in handling your precious bird. And your bird will undoubtedly be more comfortable with someone who's not a complete stranger. Despite our good intentions, many birds will not be thrilled about a relative stranger taking over home and hearth. Unless the "intruder" is someone your bird knows well, you might want to discourage much handling.

Since your bird may experience considerably less out-of-cage and exercise time, make sure you've stocked the cage with his favorite toys (maybe something new and exciting). In the event the bird has to be removed from his cage (for cleaning or if - heaven forbid - a trip to the vet becomes necessary), he may not be too happy about being asked to step-up: providing a rope perch for your brave sitter's use is a good idea. And don't forget to leave a carrier in plain sight! You'd be amazed at just how much can fit on a kitchen table.

I'm a list-maker by nature, so I don't believe that the importance of very specific written instructions can be over-emphasized. I always provide my "birdwatchers" with a folder containing several pages of information. The first page contains Bink E's birthdate, species, sex and the name, address and phone number of my vet. Feeding information is next - and in as much detail as possible. When I initially created these instructions, I tried to remember how uncertain and unknowledgeable I felt right before I brought Bink E home. If I hadn't spent endless hours researching all things parrot, or if no one had told me, I would never have known, for example, that avocado is toxic to parrots. If you use distilled water for your birds, write it down. If your bird will eat greens only if they're woven through the bars of his cage, let it be known. There is no such thing as too much detail: take notes as you go through your bird care routine so you can address as many likely scenarios as possible.

It's also important to make sure your caretaker knows not to smoke or use air fresheners, cleaning chemicals and other toxic potions near the bird. If the sitter is coming to your home, it's helpful to leave a box with the cleaning supplies you normally use. If, like Bink E, your bird is going on his own little vacation, send along some of your preferred products. I also provide my itinerary, complete with phone numbers where I can be reached. If someone will be coming to your home to care for your birds, it's a good idea to have a card (preferably laminated and placed in as bird proof a spot as possible) for each bird that lists the bird's name, age, other pertinent information and any dietary restrictions or preferences. My info folder has evolved over time - you'll be amazed when you sit down and write it all out just how involved the care and feeding of our birds can be - try not to leave this until the last minute. The upside to this is that once you've got your folder assembled, you'll never have to write it all out again.

My kitchen is always busier than usual during the week before a trip. I bake birdie bread, plump corn, cook and bag up a bean/rice/veggie mix and make one or two of Bink E's favorite foods. As the majority of Bink's diet consists of fresh produce, I make a batch of yummy 7-layer salad [<http://www.jolleyfeathers.com/layeredsalad2.html>] that will stay fresh for several days. This eliminates

much of the need for the bird sitter to spend endless hours chopping fruits and vegetables. I also pre-bag daily portions of seeds and nuts to eliminate any temptation to over feed these items. I even provide detailed labels with portion information on each type of food.

We all know what sensitive creatures our birds are. Despite all my organization and planning, I wanted to come up with something that would ensure Bink E's psychological well-being. So keeping in mind a parrot's innate intelligence and sensitivity, I've devised a little scheme that seems to work well for us - even though many non-bird people would think I'm ready for those guys in the little white coats: About four or five days before departure, I sit down with the Bink and a wall calendar - the kind that has a square for each day of the month. I quietly explain to him that I have to be away for a few days and point to each day I'll be gone, saying "I'll be gone this day, this day and so on." As I point to the square for each day, I draw a circle within the square. All the while, Bink E watches with complete concentration. When we reach the date of my return, I put a star in the box, commenting that I'll be home on that day. Every evening before my trip, we repeat the exercise. Before departing, I give the calendar to Bink E's caretaker, who agrees to spend a bit of time with him each evening talking with the bird and drawing an "X" in the box for that day and reminding Bink E when I'll be home. Other friends of mine have tried this with their birds and all agree: the birds really do get something out of this exercise.

These are some of the things that have worked for me - I hope they are helpful to you. In any case, one thing's certain: with a little preparation and planning, vacation time can be a breeze.

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