

Birds & The

As a young, single professional woman who loves animals, I decided the time had come to get a pet to keep me company. My apartment was rather small, and the hours I keep and the expense of a dog walker ruled out the cocker spaniel I'd dreamed of. Frankly, the cliché of the spinster and her cat (not to mention the litter box) was a bit much for me to overcome, so a kitty would have to wait, too. And lizards, well, simply don't count as pets in my book. So I went shopping for a little songbird that could, I figured, add some color to my home, entertain me, and sing. Little did I know then that my avian fantasy was not a bird owner's reality.

Birds On A Working Girl's Budget

No wonder none of the girls on *Sex and the City* got a pet until they first found a husband to help. The combination of the decorative cage and rolling stand (\$129.99), books and videos (\$50), special finch seed (\$6.99 a lb.), vitamins and supplements (\$17.99), treats (\$3.99 per container), feeding accessories (\$1.99 to \$3.99), grooming products (\$32), natural wood perches (\$3.99 each), toys (\$1.99 to \$5.99 each), cleaning and sanitizing products (\$21.99), and annual vet visits (\$100) and medications (\$50), keep me from visiting Bloomingdales on a regular basis. Some months I swear I see the owner and staff of 33rd & Bird, my local bird shop, more than I see my shrink.

According to Bob Vetere, COO and Managing Director of the American Pet Products Manufacturer's Association, the average cost of owning a bird is \$650 a year, with the largest cost being an annual, preventive vet visit. Most bird owners I know spend way beyond that, including me.

I chose to buy a Lady Gouldian finch because they're less expensive compared to some of the large exotic birds (which are easily worth hundreds or thousands of dollars), but by the time you add up all the little

things that go into keeping my Sgt. Michael chirping happily, what's a working girl to do?

To keep bird costs from squawking out of control, I joined the 33rd & Bird Club. For \$29.95, I became a card-carrying member of the bird store which entitles me to 15-percent savings on "all purchases big or small," including already discounted items (but not birds, boarding or grooming). Because I'm a regular visitor to store anyway — I just can't buy enough for my beautiful little bird! — I find the savings are tremendous. Another money-saving method I have discovered is to visit my favorite avian product Web sites. For example, on one Web site, you can find a rebate coupon for \$2 off your next \$10. Although it is a lot of work to print out the coupon, complete the information, attach the sales receipts and the UPC Code from the product and mail them in, I appreciate the product manufacturer's passing additional savings on to me and have gotten the





Single Girl

What a difference a bird makes!
By Charlotte Reed
Photos By Carolyn A. McKeone

Dating With Feathered Friends
Forget meeting the parents — every time I meet a new guy I'm more worried about introducing him to my bird. Bird tales include: Sophie Johnson, telling me that her mischievous parrot, Simon, always poops on the heads of new gentleman callers, and Alisha Smith, her mid-town Manhattan neighbor told me her possessive conure, Mercedes, will scream and bite those who get too close to her. But Gwen Goldstein, an acquaintance I met at the bird shop, has the funniest problem: "Every time my boyfriend comes over to relax on the couch and watch television, my African grey drowns out everything with 'Hello, hello Charlie.' It was only until Danny, my boyfriend, heard my mother call my father by name did he truly believe Charlie was not the name of an ex-boyfriend."

So where does a hip, bird-owning singleton meet others with same particular interests? I saw a bird club flyer posted outside the local library and — they say birds of a feather flock together — I actually thought that my new avian interest might help me meet some interesting guys. Even if I didn't meet anyone to date, I figured I could at least spend the afternoon with people who are crazy about their birds, and with whom I could trade stories and seek advice.

Little did I know about female/male bird-owning statistics. The APPMA 2004 Pet Owners Survey reveals that 12 percent of bird owners are men and that was very apparent at the club meeting. Of the 35 women and three men who attended the meeting, one man was a lecturer, another was married and accompanied by his wife to the club meeting and the third was a single guy practically leashed to his girlfriend with what looked like the lanyard of a Flight Suit.

The Responsibility Of True Love
Why can't my friends understand that I just can't pick up and go away over the weekend now that I have a bird? Nor can I explain to my boss that it is not that I am really nervous

process down to a science. Also, by visiting my local pet store and monitoring its Web site regularly, I always find super savings and sometimes I buy so much that I even qualify for free shipping.

Like I said, I am working to keep my bird living in luxury.

MEDIUM SULFUR-CHESTED COCKATOOS: OWNER DEB IZZA



August 2004 - continued



MEDIUM SULFUR-CRESTED COCKATIELO, OWNER: GYNNA CHRISTIAN

about flying for that upcoming business trip but I'm just worried about finding quality bird care when I am away. Nothing ruffles my feathers more than my mother suggesting that I just leave a big bowl of food in the cage and purchase a bird water bottle before heading out for vacation because "it's not like it's a dog or cat, which need a lot of care."

From my discussions with other bird owners, I have come to realize that one of the biggest drawbacks of owning a bird is finding appropriate bird care. Glynna Christian, a lawyer and owner of two 15-year-old cockatiels, travels on business constantly. "Their cage must be cleaned daily and their special diet maintained," she says. "Plus they need lots of love and snuggle time, so finding a reliable bird sitter is imperative for my hectic lifestyle."

In my case, my summer plans revolve around renting a weekend beach house in the Hamptons with girlfriends. We all agreed that we would spend the summer in a no-pets allowed house — bird included. Finding a bird-sitter who could live up to my demanding standards was of utmost importance for me, so I called my veterinarian for a recommendation. My bird is like my baby — even though I like my sitter, I call constantly while I'm away to make sure Sgt. Michael is okay. I also double check with my doorman to make sure the sitter is showing up. Truth be told, I've even asked my neighbor to listen through the wall to see if he hears anything — either cheerful or mournful squawks.

Another alternative is to board your bird while you are traveling. Manhattan's

Bird Camp, a bird store on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, will board your bird, depending on the size of cage your pet needs, for \$14 to \$30 a day. The store provides your bird his regular diet, filtered water, toys, love and fun in a clean and congenial atmosphere.

Mother, I've Become A Maid

Who would have guessed that I'd be able to clean up after a bird when I've never quite been able to do it for myself? Unlike Mary Carter's rescued macaw, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde "who is talking sweetly one minute and throwing his peanuts shells in a frantic fit all of over the floor the next," Sgt. Michael just makes a mess when he eats. Although there is a seed

catcher around the bottom of his cage, it's no match for his enthusiastic feedings. There are seeds all over the floor — even the wall next to his cage is coated with a fine dusting of feathers.

Generally, I clean up after him by hand, Cinderella-style. For his health and comfort, I sanitize his cage and its contents every week. And daily, I change his papers in the bottom tray, wipe his perches down and wash his feeding cups. Many days, I am late for work, because I have to pull out the necessary but pricey animal vacuum that he doesn't like.

Being a bird owner has taken more commitment, sacrifice and money than I ever imagined, but it has brought more joy to my little apartment than I hoped for. And as soon as I've saved up enough, Sgt. Michael will be moving with me to a bigger place — an apartment just perfect for an aviary of finches—so he can have some friends, other than me. I'm a bird-brain, all right, and proud of it. **[E]**

Charlotte Reed is a pet expert and columnist for several magazines, including *American Magazine*, *Fido Friendly* and *The Resident*. A former attorney, Reed's love for animals led her to switch careers and found *Two Dogs & A Goat*, a New York-based complete pet care service in 1996. Charlotte has shared her expertise on pets with millions of people through her *Pet-Owning Made Easy* series of booklets and her appearances on CNN, *Good Day New York*, *Fox Pet News* and other TV shows. She is currently writing two books on pet-related topics.

Find Your Flock

- 1** Looking to make friends and socialize? Check out www.birdtalk.com to find the bird club nearest you. Many clubs offer discounts on supplies from local businesses or have vendors at the meetings.
- 2** If you're feeling guilty about leaving your bird alone while you are out at work or out for dinner, play him the Bird Sitter Video \$12.95 or DVD (\$14.95). Visit www.petsittervideo.com or call (888) 465-2287.
- 3** To reduce avian health care expenses, consider pet insurance. Visit www.petinsurance.com or call (800) USA-PETS. The VPI Avian Pet Plan covers major medical treatments and surgeries for accidents and illness, minor treatments as well as lab fees, prescriptions, x-rays and hospitalization. Birds are also covered for self-mutilation, feather picking, egg binding surgery, neoplasia surgery and more.
- 4** Looking for a bird sitter? Contact the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters (www.petsitters.org) at (800) 296-PETS or Pet Sitters International (www.petsit.com) at (336) 983-9222 to find a professional pet sitter in your area. Hire a bonded and insured sitter who has at least three references and will take care of your bird your way.

