

HOOPOE CARE

The Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*) is a colourful bird found across Europe, Africa and Asia. They can be widely found in Europe during warm, dry summers, but migrate South during the winter. Three separate species are recognised, with several sub-species, and these belong to the same family as Hornbills. Hoopoes are not common in captivity, so little is known about how to best provide the specialist care they need. Hoopoes are sexually monomorphic, meaning that they can only be definitively sexed by DNA testing, from a blood sample or feather pluck.

During the breeding season, females develop a change in the uropygial (preen) gland. The uropygial gland is situated on the back, just above the tail, and secretes a liquid that birds use for preening, waterproofing feathers, pheromones and sexual activity. In females during breeding and young chicks in the nest, this gland secretes a foul-smelling odour reminiscent of rotting meat. This helps to deter predators during a vulnerable time. Outside of the breeding season, no smell should be noted from this gland.

HOUSING

- Hoopoes will be happiest in a spacious aviary set up. This is best achieved outdoors. Outdoor enclosures should be made of strong wire mesh (which should be zinc free), with an easily cleanable floor and plenty of room for the birds to fly around. In addition to the flying area, a sheltered warm sleeping area should be provided to protect from the worst of the British weather. There should also be the facility to provide supplementary heating in the winter. The enclosure should also provide shade on sunny days. Perches can be placed at varying heights around the enclosure with branches of different diameters providing the most natural set up. It is also particularly important to ensure that the enclosure is secure, both to stop the birds getting out (double security doors are the best way to prevent an escape) and to stop predators getting in.
- In the wild, hoopoes require open ground for foraging. They use their long beaks to search for insects in soil and bark, etc. They are also nervous birds and like to be in areas with plenty of nearby escape holes or cover to hide. This can be replicated in captivity by providing soil boxes in which you can bury insects, with foliage around the edges of the aviary. Live plants are best, although ensure that these are non-toxic. Man-made nest boxes provide appropriate cover for breeding. These should be in addition to the warm, indoor sleeping area.
- Alternatively, if kept indoors, a large cage can be set up, however these birds may be more stressed indoors. The cage must be large enough to allow the bird to stretch its wings in all directions (as an absolute minimum) and ideally should be large enough to allow flight. The cage should be made of non-toxic material and be zinc free. It should be placed out of direct sunlight and draughts and situated away from any item that may give off toxic fumes. Certain household products such as tobacco smoke, Teflon from non-stick frying pans, air freshener plug-ins and deodorants can lead to irritation of the bird's respiratory tract and in some cases, can be fatal.

- We recommend the perches are made of natural tree branches. Fruit trees are preferred, and these should be washed thoroughly with an appropriate disinfectant before use. Natural tree branches prevent all the common foot injuries that we see, including pododermatitis, and prevent nail overgrowth. Sand paper perch covers should not be used as they simply abrade the feet and do not keep the nails short.
- Ultraviolet lighting is important for birds, being required both for natural behaviour and calcium metabolism. If kept indoors, specific bird lamps are available and have recognised health benefits. A good review of bird lighting can be found on the Arcadia website www.arcadia-bird.com/uv-lighting/. A bird lamp should be fitted above the cage to reflect light downwards as a bright light hitting the side of the bird can cause eye irritation. If kept outdoors, the birds should have an aviary where they can bathe in direct sunlight. Glass or plastic placed over the roof can absorb UV light, prevent the birds from accessing it.
- Different toys should be added and changed regularly to entertain birds. When purchasing toys or cages always make sure that they are “zinc-free” as zinc toxicosis is increasingly seen in captive birds. Be careful as some fixings can contain zinc, yet the toy is zinc free. Household items such as keys, old paintwork, and lead weights can contain heavy metals and be potential sources of toxicity. By researching the natural behaviour of hoopoes in the wild, you can make up your own forms of enrichment. This will keep them occupied and stimulated, preventing boredom and potentially harmful stereotypical behaviours from forming. An example of this is to provide natural foraging areas.
- Free flight is an essential requirement and birds should be given the opportunity for regular exercise. If indoors, it is important to ensure that the room they are allowed to fly around is totally secure with all windows, doors and chimneys blocked off, heaters and fans turned off and any potentially poisonous house plants removed. If started young, birds can be trained to perch on a finger and returned to the cage. An outdoor aviary should provide ample room for the birds to achieve sustained flight.
- The cage or aviary should be cleaned out at least once a week to help prevent disease. A suitable disinfectant, such as F10, should be used.

WHAT TO FEED

- In the wild, these birds eat a wide variety of invertebrates, although they will occasionally take seeds and plant material as well as larger prey items such as frogs and reptiles. In captivity, many of the live prey items found in pet stores can be high in fat and not nutritionally balanced. No commercial pellet food is available for hoopoes.
- Diet in captivity should include a variety of live foods, such as mealworms, waxworms and crickets. It is important to gut load the insects prior to feeding them to your bird. This can be achieved by providing root vegetables for them to eat, or ideally a commercial gut loader (e.g. Nutrogrub; Vetark). Live food can be dusted with a vitamin and mineral powder (e.g. Arkvits; Vetark) 2-3 times a week to help the diet remain balanced. Good quality seed mix, such as those marketed for canaries, can be offered in small volumes.
- A cuttlefish bone should be provided for additional calcium and to allow the bird to wear down its beak.
- Fresh water should always be available both for drinking, and in a shallow saucer for bathing.

ANNUAL HEALTH CHECKS

We recommend annual health checks for pet birds as medical problems are more easily treated if detected at an early stage – **you can register for automatic reminders.**

INSURANCE

We highly recommend that you take out a pet insurance policy. For a monthly fee your pet can receive the best treatment at an affordable cost. There is normally an excess to pay for each condition then after that costs are covered up to a set limit. Once you have the policy, please provide us with a copy of your insurance details. There are a lot of different companies and policies available and we suggest you contact a number of them for information- we have a leaflet advising what to look out for. Our advice is to choose a policy which provides cover for chronic illness for the life of your pet. If this policy is too much for you then the best cover you can afford will provide peace of mind in an accident or emergency.