

Caring for your **TOUCAN**



EMERALD FOREST BIRD GARDENS

Guide to Diet, Housing, and Health Management for Toucans, Toucanets, and Aracaris



Toucan 101: General Information

Toucans are members of the avian family *Ramphastidae*, which includes over 40 different species. Some of the smaller species are distinguished as Toucanets or Aracaris, and have various morphological traits that set them apart from their larger toucan counterparts. However, they are all Ramphastids, and are all generally referred to as “toucans” for the purpose of care and husbandry.

All species of Ramphastids are exclusive to the neotropics. Ranging from Central to South America, toucans live in the rainforest canopies and are highly adapted to a tropical climate. They are social animals, traveling in flocks of up to 20 or more birds, and are monogamous with their breeding partners. Toucans are primarily *frugivores*, meaning they feed mostly on raw fruits, but will also eat insects, small animals, and eggs for dietary protein. When properly cared for, toucans can have a lifespan of up to 20 years.

As companion birds, toucans are extremely curious, intelligent, and playful. They can be just as sweet and cuddly as any parrot, and bond strongly to their human friends. Toucans cannot talk the way parrots do, but have a variety of chirps and honks they use to communicate, and will often “purr” when being petted.

It is important to remember that toucans are exotic birds, with very specific needs, who require specialized care in captivity. Taking the time to learn the ins and outs of properly caring for your new toucan will ensure your bird is set up for a long and happy life.



Housing & Environment

GETTING YOUR NEW COMPANION COMFORTABLE

When your new bird arrives, keep in mind that the journey, however long or short, has been stressful. Your bird should be kept in its cage indoors for several days, under close observation, in order to be sure it is eating well and behaving normally. It is best not to introduce new toys or other potential stressors until your bird has had a chance to get settled.

If you are planning to house your bird outdoors:

Under no circumstances should you introduce your bird to its outdoor enclosure in the afternoon or evening. Always plan to release them in the morning – the earlier, the better. This will give them the majority of the day to familiarize themselves with their new surroundings, find their food stations, and begin to relax.

Never release your bird outdoors in bad weather, or during rain. Your bird needs time to determine how to shelter itself from the elements, and to gradually adjust to outdoor temperatures. Always choose a mild day during a prolonged period of nice weather (temperatures not to exceed 90°F) to release your bird.

SETTING UP THE LIVING ENVIRONMENT

Toucans can be housed indoors or outdoors, depending on your climate. They are reasonably weather tolerant, and are able to adjust to temperatures that drop to freezing at night, or rise to 100°F during the day. However, keep in mind that toucans are native to a tropical climate, and will need time to adjust to more extreme temperatures. Be aware that summer heat is potentially more dangerous than the cold. Whenever the temperature is capable of rising above 90°F, shade **must** be available at all times. If the temperatures can exceed 100°F, misters are required to aid in cooling.

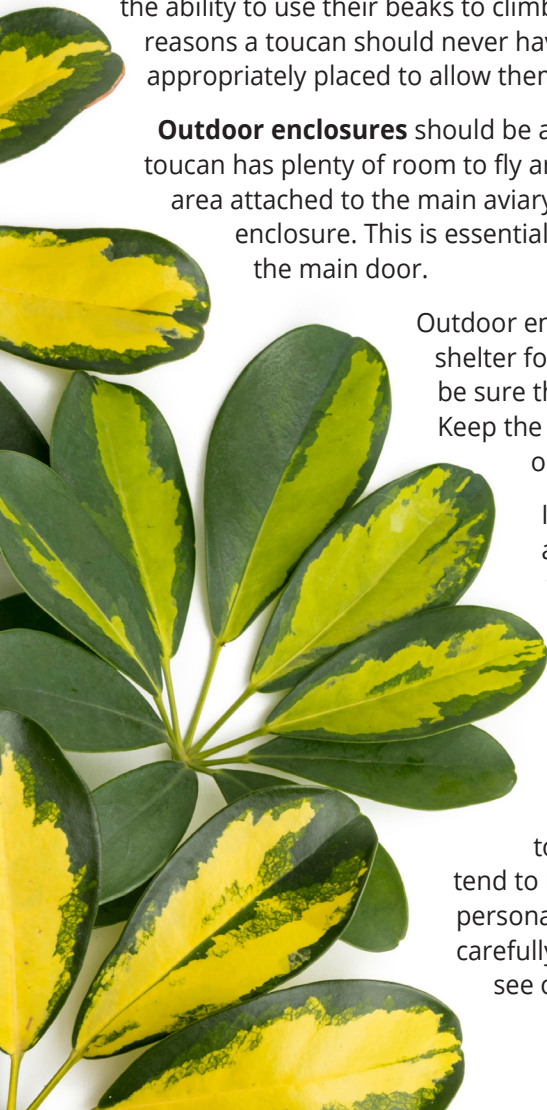
Indoor enclosures for companion birds should be, at minimum, the size of a large macaw cage. Toucans do not have the ability to use their beaks to climb, as parrots do, and instead, will hop or fly to get around. This is one of the many reasons a toucan should never have its wings clipped. If clipping is absolutely unavoidable, then perches need to be appropriately placed to allow them total mobility.

Outdoor enclosures should be a medium to large sized aviary, depending on the size of your bird, so your toucan has plenty of room to fly around. All outdoor enclosures should include a *safety aisle* (a secondary caged-in area attached to the main aviary door) to help prevent full-flight birds from getting loose when you enter their enclosure. This is essentially a 2-door system where you enter the outer door and shut it before opening the main door.

Outdoor enclosures must also be planted with bird-safe, non-toxic plants, and have shelter for your toucan to escape the rain or harsh sun. Monitor your aviary regularly to be sure there are no holes where wild animals can get in, or unsafe conditions of any kind. Keep the enclosure free of any hazards, including fertilizers and pesticides, rodent poison, or foreign objects that could be ingested.

It is important to note that toucans housed outdoors will likely try to eat small animals that enter their enclosures which would normally be prey items in the wild. This includes lizards, small rodents, snails, and insects. These animals are potentially harmful for your toucan if they have ingested pesticides (all of which have secondary kill potential), or are infected with parasites. The best thing you can do to prevent illness is to avoid using pesticides, including rodent poison, and keep up with regular vet checks.

Roommates should be chosen carefully, if it is desirable to add a friend. All toucans can potentially be aggressive toward other species in their family, and to smaller birds such as finches, which are often prey for wild toucans. Aracaris tend to be more docile than the other toucans, however, each bird has its own individual personality. Whenever multiple birds are housed together, they should be monitored carefully to ensure they are compatible. If you are interested in breeding toucans, please see our website for more information.





Diet & Nutrition



UNDERSTANDING YOUR TOUCAN'S DIETARY NEEDS

Toucans are frugivorous birds, whose primary diet is fruit. In the wild they consume fruits from as many as 100 species of plants and trees. They also consume a variety of insects, small reptiles, and eggs for protein, especially during breeding season. While it is impossible to approximate their wild diet, toucans can easily be properly fed in captivity with a variety of fruits and a high-quality pelleted diet. However, be sure to follow their dietary requirements carefully, as inappropriate diet is a common reason for many health problems in birds.

Unlike parrots, toucans do not have a crop for the storage of food. Instead, toucans have evolved a specialized digestive system to process fruit, and have a relatively short digestive tract, which makes for a very quick transit time. This means your toucan will eat a LOT, and will need access to plenty of fresh fruit and pellets every day. Toucans also get most of their moisture from fruit, rather than from drinking water. While you still need to provide clean drinking water for your toucan, you may find that they drink very little, compared to other bird species, and may prefer to bathe in their water bowl instead. Be aware that toucans are not adapted to eating or digesting seeds, and should never be fed seeds as part of their diet.


IRON STORAGE DISEASE

The biggest dietary concern for toucans is *hemochromatosis*, or iron storage disease (a toxic accumulation of iron in the liver), which is the leading cause of death in captivity. Because toucans are adapted to a tropical rainforest climate, they have evolved a mechanism for retention of iron as a stored mineral in the liver, and other organs, in response to the notoriously mineral-poor soils in their native environment. In captivity, they receive a diet composed of items grown in temperate climate soils, usually rich in minerals, resulting in iron overload. Therefore, it is imperative to feed your toucan a low iron diet. This requires paying careful attention to the types of fruit that are fed, and scrutinizing pelleted diets for iron content, which should be under 125 ppm.

Fruits that must be avoided are those high in *citric acid*. Citric acid binds to iron, increasing its bioavailability and aiding in its absorption, and should therefore never be fed. These acidic fruits are what we commonly think of as citrus, but also include fruits such as pineapple and tomatoes.


The only pellet that we recommend is **Mazuri Softbill Diet for Iron-Sensitive Birds**. This diet has been extensively tested in feeding trials at Emerald Forest Bird Gardens, and was found to virtually eliminate the problem of hemochromatosis. Every batch is tested for iron content, and rejected if it doesn't meet the standards. It is also free of *propylene glycol*, a common additive in many commercial pelleted diets that is toxic to toucans.

RECOMMENDED



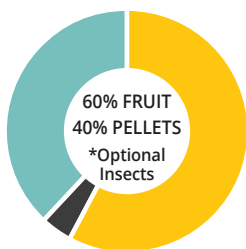
Mazuri
EXOTIC ANIMAL NUTRITION

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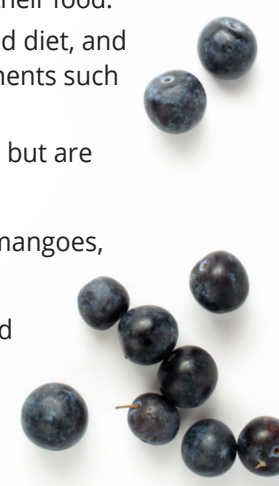
WHAT TO FEED YOUR TOUCAN



- **Fresh fruit** must be provided for your toucan *every day*, and should constitute 60% of their diet. Fruit should be cut into small, easy-to-swallow pieces, as toucans do not chew their food.
- **Pellets** provide all the protein, fat, vitamins, and minerals needed for a balanced diet, and should make up the remaining 40% of your bird's daily food. **Do not** feed supplements such as vitamins or minerals, as these can lead to gout or other metabolic diseases.
- **Optional** - crickets or mealworms may be provided on occasion, to add variety, but are not necessary due to the nutrition in the pellets.

✓ Recommended fruits: Papaya, cantaloupe, watermelon, honeydew, blueberries, bananas, grapes, mangoes, guavas, figs, dragon fruit, peas, peppers, and green beans.

✗ Fruits to avoid: All fruits high in citric acid such as oranges, lemons, limes, grapefruit, pineapple, and tomatoes.





Health & Well-Being

LOOKING AFTER YOUR TOUCAN'S PHYSICAL HEALTH

Toucans are reasonably hardy birds, however, it is always important to keep an eye out for signs of illness or distress in your companion. Birds are evolutionarily adapted to hide signs of weakness for as long as possible, and by the time they show symptoms, they are usually very unwell. Signs of illness in a bird may include excessive sleeping, drooping wings, fluffed feathers, labored breathing, weight loss, changes in food or water consumption, and changes in feces.

It is advisable to take your bird to a vet early on, for a wellness check, to establish a baseline for your toucan's health. It is highly recommended that you find an avian vet near you. You can locate a certified avian vet in your area on the website for the **Association of Avian Veterinarians** at www.aav.org. Maintaining a yearly check-up with your vet can help ensure your toucan is in optimal health and condition.



RESPIRATORY WELLNESS

Respiration in birds is much different than in mammals. Birds have evolved an incredibly efficient respiratory system to meet the high metabolic demands of flight. In addition to having lungs, birds also have nine air sacs along the sides of their bodies that help move oxygen quickly, and provide a continuous flow of air. This efficiency of oxygen transfer means that toxins in the air are also transferred more efficiently. Because of this, birds are extremely sensitive to any airborne toxins, including some that are seemingly harmless to humans. Whether your bird is housed indoors or outdoors, it is very important to keep their living environment free of harmful fumes. This includes Teflon fumes, household cleaners, *Febreze*, scented candles, fresh wall paint, pesticides, smoke, or other chemicals or sprays.

COMMON AILMENTS FOR TOUCANS

Bacterial infections: Toucans can contract certain bacterial infections when exposed, and when under stress. Most commonly, they can contract *E. coli*, salmonella, and yersinia – all easily treated when caught early. Exposure can come from spoiled food, dirty water, unsanitary conditions, or contact with rodents. Maintain a clean, rodent-free environment to avoid infection.

Parasites: Toucans can also contract internal parasites such as roundworms, proventricular worms, and capillaria worms, particularly when they are housed outdoors. These worms damage the gastrointestinal tract, and can be fatal. Fortunately, they lay eggs almost constantly, which can be identified through a fecal exam, and are easily eradicated with deworming medication. Worms can be acquired by eating contaminated food, or, more often, by eating insects, which serve as an intermediate host for the parasites. Outdoor companions may try to eat various snails and insects in their enclosure, and should be regularly checked by your vet.

Hemochromatosis: As mentioned under diet, hemochromatosis is a dietary disease involving the accumulation of iron. There is no way to diagnose this disease in living birds, except via liver biopsy, which is a stressful and risky surgery. The only known method of treatment for hemochromatosis is through regular phlebotomies (blood withdrawal), and is best prevented through a low-iron diet.

Foreign objects: Toucans, in their immense curiosity, will play with, and eat, almost anything. Foreign objects can potentially be fatal. Keep their environment free of small, easy-to-swallow items that could cause them harm, such as nails, tacks, marbles, broken glass, staples, small pieces of plastic, etc.

ENRICHMENT AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

All animals, including toucans, need some sort of enrichment to be mentally healthy. You can provide enrichment for your toucan through bird toys or games, or create foraging opportunities by hiding a piece of food for them to find. Be creative! Your companion will appreciate the mental stimulation and excitement that it brings.

Got more questions? Get in touch!

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