

Chapter 1

Parakeets: More than Just Pretty, Whistling Birds

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding what a parakeet is
- ▶ Telling the difference between the English budgie and the American parakeet
- ▶ Discovering the life of a wild parakeet

Most people remember having a parakeet when they were a kid, and most kids today either have one or want one. As a companion, the parakeet has it all. It's small enough for even the smallest apartment, is as affectionate as any lapdog, and can even talk. What more could you ask for?

First Things First: Using This Book

Parakeets For Dummies is a book I wrote for people interested in parakeets — whether you're a parent buying this book for yourself or your child or you're a kid buying it for yourself using your hard-earned cash. Maybe you just bought a parakeet and need the essential scoop on getting set up, as well as general care information. Or you may already have a parakeet and you need a refresher on the best way to take care of your pet or want to understand it better. Perhaps you're ready for a new pet but aren't sure if a parakeet is right for you and yours. If any of the above describes you, keep on readin'.

This book is a reference, so you don't have to read it in order from start to finish. Begin with Chapter 4 if you need basic set-up information, flip to Chapter 6 if you're trying to learn parakeet-ese, or head to Chapter 2 if you're still on the fence about adding a parakeet to your family. (Although if you prefer to start at the beginning and read until you reach the back cover, you're welcome to do so. I'll never tell.)

As you read, keep an eye out for text in *italics*, which indicates a new term and a nearby definition — no need to spend time hunting through a glossary. And `monofont` points out Web addresses for additional information worth checking out. You'll also run into a few sidebars (the occasional gray box); although the information in the sidebars is good, it's not essential to the discussion at hand, so skip 'em if you want to.

While reading *Parakeets For Dummies*, be on the lookout for these icons, sprinkled here and there:



This icon flags tips and tricks that will help you be the best parakeet pal you can be.



This icon points out information that's so important you'll want to be sure to remember it.



This icon highlights information on things that could harm you or your parakeet.



This icon flags information that you can use to impress your friends with your amazing bird knowledge, but it isn't absolutely necessary, so don't feel the need to memorize it.

What Is a Parakeet?

The word *parakeet* is a generic term for any smallish, slender bird in the parrot family that has a long, tapered tail. But when most people think "parakeet," they think of the small, brightly colored bird common to most pet shops and to almost everyone's childhood.

Parakeets are about 7 inches in length (with the English budgie at around 9 inches), and most of that length is taken up by the tail. It is found in large flocks in the grasslands of the Australian outback.



You may also hear it called the *shell parrot* or the *warbling grass parakeet*, but its most famous (and interesting) name is the *budgerigar*, an aboriginal word meaning "good to eat." (Just don't tell that to your new pet!)



Where parakeets come from

Parakeets arrived in Europe around 1838, brought from Australia by British naturalist John Gould and his brother-in-law, Charles Coxen, who raised the first *clutch* (batch of babies). Europeans found that these birds were easy to breed, and wealthy people fell in love with them. They soon became popular in Germany, Belgium, France, and Holland.

A yellow mutation occurred in Belgium around 1875, leading to other color mutations, including olive, dark green, gray-green, and light yellow. Companion parakeets were simply green until around 1881 when a Dutch bird keeper found a blue chick hatched in the nest boxes. This blue bird was responsible for other mutations: cobalt, slate, gray, and violet.

The parakeet arrived in America around the late 1920s, but didn't take off until the 1950s. Today, there are over 70 accepted color mutations and variations, and many other colors yet to be recognized. Even so, the most common colors are the most popular: green, blue, yellow, and white.

You Say Potato, I Say Po-tah-to: The American Parakeet versus the English Budgie

Though the American parakeet and the English budgie both got their start in Australia, the American parakeet is more similar to its wild cousin than the English budgie is. The English budgie is what hobbyists call an *exhibition bird*, because it is often shown in large budgie shows (kind of like dog shows, but for birds). It's nearly twice the size of the American parakeet, and it claims its English name because the British were the ones who bred it to be the size and shape it is today.

The English budgie is basically *domesticated*, which means that it has been bred to make it more “appealing” for bird owners. This kind of breeding is what humans have done with dogs for thousands of years. (Notice how the different dog breeds look so different from one another — it's hard to imagine that they all originated from a couple of species of wild dog.) Though no parrot is truly domesticated, the English budgie is close.

Though technically called the *budgie*, the terms *parakeet* and *budgie* are interchangeable (see Figure 1-1 for an illustration of the two varieties). Some people call the larger version of the parakeet the budgie and the smaller version the parakeet — but it really doesn't matter which term you use. For the purposes of this book, I refer to these little birds as *parakeets*.

Size difference

The American parakeet is smaller, thinner and more streamlined than its British counterpart. The English show budgie is stately looking, with a full, prominent chest and forehead. Its eyes are barely evident and its beak is tucked into the feathers of its face. It is 8½ to 9½ inches long and the American is about 7 inches long.



Figure 1-1: The English budgie (left) and the American parakeet (right)

Temperament

The American parakeet is feistier than the English budgie, and may be more active than its mellow cousin. Both birds are good companions. Whichever type you choose, you can tame the bird into a wonderful pal.

Lifespan

Lifespan is where the big difference between the parakeet and the budgie is evident. The big English budgie lives about 7 to 8 years, and the American parakeet can live 14 years or more.



This lifespan difference is because, in developing the English budgie as it is today, a lot of inbreeding was done (*inbreeding* is breeding birds that are close relatives of one another). Inbreeding can result in *congenital problems* (birth defects), shortening the lifespan of the bird.

The Anatomy of a Parakeet

Knowing the parts of your parakeet is a good idea. When you know your bird's anatomy, you can describe a problem to the veterinarian if you ever have to do so. You can also speak like an expert with other hobbyists. Here are the primary parts of your parakeet:

Crown: The crown is the top of the head.

Nares (nostrils): The nares are at the top of the beak.

Cere: The cere is the fleshy area above the beak that contains the nostrils. It becomes blue in mature male parakeets, and pink to brown in females. When parakeets are young, it's white to light pink.

Beak: The upper and lower *mandibles* (jaws) make up the parakeet's beak. The parakeet is classified as a *hookbill*, meaning that the beak is shaped like a hook and is perfect for cracking seeds.

Ear: Your parakeet has small flat holes for ears, and they're covered by thin feathers that protect the ear. This is why you can't see them.

Eyes: The parakeet's eyes are on either side of its head so that it can see a great deal around it. This is because the parakeet is a prey animal and needs to be on alert for predators. Parakeets, like many birds, have a third eyelid called a *nictitating membrane*, which is a thin, semitransparent lid that washes the eye like a squeegee and closes for protection.

Throat: The throat is just beneath the beak and extends to the breast.

Nape: The nape is the back of the neck.

Shoulder: The shoulder is at the top of the wing nearest the parakeet's back.

Breast: The breast is just below the throat.

Foot: Everything that most of us think of as a bird's leg is actually a bird's foot. That's why the "knee" appears to bend the wrong way — it's actually the bird's heel. The parakeet's foot is *zygodactyl*, meaning it has two toes in front and two in back, perfect for grasping and climbing.

Vent: The vent is where your bird eliminates. In a human, this would be a combined anus and urethra. Birds do not urinate.

Primary feathers: Parakeets have ten long primary wing feathers that aid in flight.

Secondary feathers: The secondary feathers on the wing occur after the primaries, closer to the body.

Rump: The rump is beneath the primary flight feathers on the parakeet's lower back.

Mantle: The mantle is the back of the parakeet.

Crop: The crop is a sac-like organ that's kind of like a "first stomach." It's where the food goes immediately after being swallowed and is located at the breast.

Syrinx: The syrinx is equivalent to vocal chords in humans. It allows parakeets to talk and vocalize when air is pushed through it.