

Views on Mineral Grit for Parrots

By EB Cravens

It has been nearly two decades since I first saw one of my pet amazon parrots crunching up sandy soil—and came to the realization that psittacines select and need grit in their diets. This conclusion has been reinforced over the years by my use of walk-in aviaries providing the ground, plus offering portable sand and soil flats with sprouting seeds for foraging. Some days, when I am weeding on the farm around my outdoor flights, my parrots will beg nonstop for me to give them one of the freshly pulled weeds. At first I was surprised when the birds would immediately go for the crunchy dirt clinging to the root ball. Not any more. It is their favorite part!

I have always paid close attention to use of grit by domestic hookbills. Any time I hear a lecture by someone working in the field with parrot species, I take notes on grit consumption and source. I read any articles I can find by recognized experts, which mention mineral and grit availability for psittacines.

Ever since I was told as a beginner that “parrots do not need grit since they chew all their food into little bits,” and “giving grit can kill birds by impacting their crops,” I have gone out and done my own observation and evaluation about what nature says of this debate.

The former myth was dispelled when I began to see the contents of parrot crops and their droppings in close detail. Just like humans, some psittacines will gulp food, eat whole peanuts, consume chunks of cracked corn and dry pellets, etc. which pass into their digestive tract in large pieces. Especially parent birds in a hurry to feed chicks will facilitate such food coarseness. Later I made it a point to ask of all the veterinarians and expert breeders I knew if they had ever seen a parrot larger than cockatiel or budgerigar which died of crop impaction due to eating too much grit. No one ever had, and if there is someone out there reading this that knows of an adult Senegal or amazon or macaw that has died of grit consumption, please contact me.

I suspect much of the "bad rap" acquired by grit offering to psittacines occurred in the seventies and early eighties when negligent owners of young parakeets and cockatiels used to keep them in those tiny little cages eating a seed-only diet out of tiny plastic cups large enough for one day at a time—plus a cup for water and another cup for grit. It only took one or two days for the parrot to become very hungry while forgotten and not fed during a busy weekend when owners were preoccupied. Presto, nothing to eat but grit and water, and now you have a dead parakeet with a crop full of grit, which the vets blame on the grit...

Over consumption of grit in the crop of a captive bird might result when the bird has been denied a proper source of trace minerals in its daily diet. When it finds itself offered grit for the first time, it could overeat in a vain attempt to satiate its mineral imbalances. The same is true of clay. If you offer it regularly to your parrots in moderate amounts only, they will not over indulge when it is finally given. Incidentally, parrots with poor mineral sources in their diet can also be very prone to chewing on cage wire and flaked paint, etc., to satisfy these needs. Dangerous! And, if a bird is in a small cage environment, under-exercised and not flying around, it may well be more at risk to crop impaction than those which are fit and active.

Grit serves many purposes in the avian diet. We know of all sorts of parrots that in the wilds come down to roadways or other ground patches to ingest small sands and clay and minerals

and grit. Clay licks in the news are not the only sources for wild psittacines. Grit can be small seed-like in size or nearly invisible to the human eye. After ingestion it is deposited in the parrot's gizzard (ventriculus) where it is utilized to help grind up any hard or particulate foods eaten.

Those soluble grit sources do not last as long in the gizzard, eventually dissolving and needing to be replaced. They provide a welcome source of calcium, magnesium, and various trace minerals for the birds. Silica sands and other insoluble grit will be worn down over time and then passed. Australian psittacines are some of the most prevalent grit eaters of all parrots. Crop analyses of deceased birds in that country seldom fail to turn up grit in the digestive systems. Anyone who has watched a group of rosellas, cockatiels, or galahs browsing on the ground will have seen grit-taking behavior. Aviculturists in Australia have recommended feeding of grit to cagebirds for many years, and most birdkeepers down under still provide grit.

In our flock, we vary our grit sources from clean beach sand to oyster shell to scraped cuttlebone and mineral block (if your bird ignores his mineral block just use a knife and scrape some on his wet food every day or two to enhance his mineral uptake). We also like to offer occasional clean soil flats with sprouting seeds to housebound parrots with no ground to forage upon. Just plain dirt or sandy soil, not any greenhouse or fertilized or additive bagged soil mixes.

When sprinkling mineral grit on our parrots' wet and raw and cooked morning feeding, we believe in small amounts only so there is absolutely no danger in getting too much. Salt and pepper amounts once a week or once every two weeks will not hurt your parrot; and you might be surprised to see him or her nosing through the food dish to find another particle or two to crunch up and consume. There is evidence that choosing to eat some small grits will aid in stress-free and more complete digestion of the bird's food.

One must be more cautious with unweaned and fledgling baby birds—we do not give them grit until they are older. Remember, they likely got some from their parents during the weeks being fed in the nestbox. Also, sick parrots with digestive problems have been known to try to cure themselves by over-eating grit, so avoid giving them any large amounts.

Our breeding parrots live with the ground--that is one reason we got rid of all those California style suspended cages--and they year round will scuff and dig and crunch up soil and sand and small rocks for nutritional and gizzard benefits. When given the opportunity they do this at varying rates. Especially important is the springtime grit eating the hens do prior to going to nest. When days turn dry and food fare is lean in the wilds here, we will see wild birds and sometimes our parakeet species eating more clay to fill crops, and even having droppings which are more concretions than is normal other times of year.

Truth is, sand, soil, clay and such are integral parts of the healthy psittacine diet and should be offered to pet and breeder birds say, once a week on average, more when in breeding mode. Small amounts are best.