



Some healthy bird treats, like Boca Nuts from The Higgins Group Corp., look good enough for people to eat—and they are, since the exotic mix is made from human-grade ingredients.

Bird Treats With Benefits

Innovative avian treats let you satisfy bird owners' desire to enhance their pet's diet and overall well-being. By Julia Ann Charpentier

Pet owners often misjudge treats as being unhealthy or unnecessary. However, birds can reap physical and psychological rewards from wholesome snacks—boosting their nutrient intake and overall well-being.

Sure, a caged bird doesn't need the extra nibble to survive, but birds love treats as much as owners love offering them. And treats are an important part of a bird's life when offered in moderation, said Kay Thomson, senior marketing manager for Kaytee Products Inc. (Chilton, Wis.), a division of Central Garden & Pet. "Many treats provide an opportunity for a bird to use his natural foraging instincts, which can help combat boredom and stimulate a bird's senses," she said.

The average pet owner will likely err in favor of overfeeding and pampering, but a bird that can't burn the calories it consumes runs the risk of developing medical problems. Therefore, treats should be included in—not added to—the bird's

caloric intake, and caregivers should be educated on the importance of restraint and portion control.

"Like in our human world, we say we're going to have a treat [but we] seldom reach for a bowl of broccoli or an apple," said Gail Shepard, director of marketing for ZuPreem (Mission, Kan.). "But that doesn't mean we go and consume an entire bag of potato chips."

There are plenty of new bird treats on the market that focus on nutrition, the human-animal bond and high-quality ingredients. Watch out for gimmicky fads, but pay attention to trends in this growing niche.

Healthy and Nutritious

Table scraps and processed foods can unbalance a proper diet—just like salty, fatty snacks can derail a New Year's resolution. But there's a slew of avian treats on the market designed to complement healthy bird diets.

In some cases, people can snack along with their birds. The Higgins Group Corp. (Miami) uses human-grade ingredients in its Snack Attack Natural Treats line, which includes True Fruits, a dehydrated fruit mix, and Boca Nuts, an exotic nut mix. They also avoid artificial colors and preservatives.

"I laugh all the time when I am greeted by bird owners and Higgins retailers who say their only complaint is that they can't stop eating their bird's treats," said Dean Reyes, director of sales and a marketing manager for Higgins.

The company taps into large birds' foraging needs with Fruit-N-Stix, which combines fruit with cinnamon bark, and Leafy Greens & Herbs, which contains chamomile flowers and bee pollen. For small birds, Soak & Sprout grows fresh, healthy treats.

Treats can supplement a bird's diet, said Stephanie A. Phillips, sales and marketing manager for Roudybush Inc. (Woodland, Calif.). "Additionally, treats can offer psychological stimulation that is very important to the health and well-being of pet birds," she said.

Roudybush offers both supplemental and occasional treats. Its rice-based treats are part of a maintenance diet and can be offered without tipping the nutritional



Harrison's Bird Bread Mix, available in original, hot pepper, and millet and flax recipes, is baked at home as an alternative to table scraps.

scale. Its baked cheese treats, on the other hand, are high in calcium and considered more of a splurge.

Kaytee also offers treats that can be integrated into the bird's daily regimen. A treat's nutritional value is especially important when it's used as a training tool, Thomson said. "Birds can be trained not to bite or squawk, as well as learn how to step up and other important behaviors, by using treats to reward them as they modify their behavior," she said.

Kaytee's Forti-Diet Pro Health Treats, like Nutra-Puffs and Healthy Bits, contain DHA omega-3s, prebiotics and probiotics. Kaytee's fruit-based treats, like the Southwest and Island Luau blends, are also good for birds. Many of the new Kaytee Fiesta Treats were previously sold under different sub-brands with a variety of package designs.

The company recently brought the treats together under the Fiesta umbrella, and rebranded and repackaged them for a more cohesive look—helpful for creating high-impact store displays.

Treats should make up less than 20 percent of a bird's diet, say most manufacturers. "Pet owners have the misconception that these birds need to eat what they eat in the wild," said ZuPreem's Shepard. "A bird in the wild is flying up to 40 miles a day. I assure you that my cockatiels are not flying 40 miles a day."

Interactive and Engaging

Some bird treats are interactive as well as healthy, and that can mean a wider variety of sales opportunities.

"If the treat is made from healthy, nutritious items and complements the daily diet, its uses are broad—from a foraging treat to a training reward," said Dr. Greg J. Harrison, medical director and developer of Harrison's Bird Foods by HBD International (Brentwood, Tenn.).

Harrison's Bird Bread Mix, available in original, hot pepper, and millet and flax recipes, can be used as a treat or to convert a bird to a new diet. The bread mix, which includes millet and sweet corn, is baked at home with eggs, oil and water. It's a healthier approach to feeding birds table scraps because it's created specifically for birds, and it's made with certified organic whole grains and legumes, steering clear of animal protein, byproducts, chemicals, preservatives and artificial colors, flavors and sweeteners. It's also an alternative for bird owners



For small birds, The Higgins Group Corp. offers *Soak & Sprout*, which grows fresh, healthy treats.



Consumable toys from PetAg Inc.'s Hawaiian Delights line contain cookies and nuts. The Nutri-Forage Pack-N-Snack from Lafeber Co. lets bird owners create unique foraging treats at home.

who like to bake fresh treats from home-spun recipes.

The Nutri-Forage Pack-N-Snack from Lafeber Co. (Cornell, Ill.) lets pet owners in on the action, too. The mix is warmed in the oven or microwave and then stuffed into the included pasta shapes, paper cups or additional treats, like pretzels. The nutritious snack food is 31 percent nutritional pellets, balanced with omega-3 and omega-6, and made with stabilized vitamins and chelated minerals to help absorption.

Edible toys are another innovative way to treat birds while providing mental stimulation. Hawaiian Delights by PetAg Inc. (Hampshire, Ill.) are toys assembled from all-natural, limited-ingredient cookies combined with nuts and other edible, bird-safe materials. "Birds are extremely attracted to these toys. Birds react to the key ingredients as cats react to catnip," said Darlene Frudakis, the company's president and chief operating officer.

The edible toys—the only ones of



“ Throughout my entire career in this industry, I've consistently relied on **PET AGE** for informed, thoughtful and accurate coverage of the retail pet trade. The magazine does an excellent job of going 'beyond the news' and getting to the heart of the key issues facing our industry. **It is must reading for anyone in this business.**”

—Harvey Solway, President and CEO, Pet Supplies "Plus" (Farmington Hills, Mich.)

petage

In Print. In Person. Online. www.petage.com

shelflife

their kind on the market, according to Frudakis—are produced in a human-grade bakery and were developed to fill a void in the market.

"Consumable toys like the Hawaiian Delights are great sellers because people return to buy more of the same toy, unlike other bird toys where consumers like to diversify and try different toys," Frudakis said. "Consumables have a consistent built-in customer base."

Selling Avian Treats

Today's bird owners, just like dog and cat fans, are increasingly interested in what goes in their pets' food. Retailers should arm themselves and their staff with knowledge.

"Store staff should have a basic understanding of bird behavior to help pet parents select appropriate treats for their birds," said Phillips, of Roudybush. "For instance, a bird that is screaming on a regular basis could potentially be helped by giving them something to do like a puzzle toy that makes them forage."



Kaytee's Forti-Diet Pro Health Treats, like Nutra-Puffs and Healthy Bits, are fortified to boost bird nutrition. They contain prebiotics, probiotics and DHA omega-3s.

ZuPreem doesn't offer treats yet, but has some in development. While researching, Shepard came across lots of retailer shelf space wasted on too many varieties of outdated snacks, like honey



Rice-based treats from Roudybush Inc. are part of a maintenance diet, but the cheese treats, which are high in calcium, should be offered only as an occasional treat.

Labels: Read Between the Lines

BIRD OWNERS WANT nutritional information just as much as dog and cat owners do.

"First and foremost, the retailer should realize that healthy, long-lived pet birds make the best customers, and that thorough education about the products they carry and the pets that eat them is essential," said Dr. Greg J. Harrison, medical director and developer of Harrison's Bird Foods by HBD International (Brentwood, Tenn.).

Because the organic movement in the pet food industry is growing quickly, he said, retailers and shoppers need to understand what organic really means.

"Customers should look for the third-party certification and a full paper trail of the origin of the ingredients. Without this, the customer cannot have confidence that the product is actually certified organic," he said.

It's also important to know if a product contains whole ingredients or byproducts.

"Whole ingredients have a higher concentration of fiber, germ and other natural compounds for a healthy life. Modern refining removes these natural components, resulting in the intended item and byproducts," Harrison said.

For example, "ground soybeans" indicates that whole soybeans were used. "Soybean meal" means the soybean was used for another purpose first—pressed or chemically treated to remove the oil, for example—and the soybean meal is the byproduct.

"While containing protein, fat and carbohydrates, research shows that foods made with grains and other foodstuffs in which 'refining' has taken place are not as beneficial as consuming the whole ingredient and letting the body use what it needs," Harrison said. "Adding beta carotene as a supplement is not the same as offering a whole food source that contains beta carotene."

—Julia Ann Charpentier

sticks. "That technology and packaging for a treat and that presentation have become somewhat passé," Shepard said. "It's not really interactive."

Cutting-edge customers want cutting-edge treats, so people who stop in for premium bird food are good targets for lessons in avian treats.

Reyes, of Higgins, has seen growth in his company's treat lines over the last year, even in the down economy, and predicts that the trend toward natural products will continue. He recommended merchandising treats alongside bird foods.

"Too many times I've seen the bird treats in a different area of the bird aisle or a different aisle altogether. By placing the treats in the area where the bird food customer has the greatest chance to see it will only improve the chances of a first-time sale," Reyes said.

Birds need variety and stimulation in quality treats that are given in moderation—something a smart retailer will remember to teach customers about. ■

Julia Ann Charpentier is a freelance writer based in Buffalo Grove, Ill.



Contact Katherine Hajduch at 312-578-1818 or khajduch@hhbacker.com.

KAYTEE PRODUCTS INC., ROUDYBUSH INC.