

Unravel the Mysterious Lifespan of Parrots: 2 Years to 80+

Explore the incredible diversity in parrot lifespans and the fascinating factors contributing to their longevity, reshaping our understanding of these intelligent creatures.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- There are more than 350 types of parrots, or psittacines; smaller parrots may live an average of eight to 15 years, according to some estimates, while others may live 25 to 50 years
- A study of more than 130,000 individual parrots uncovered a wide range of lifespans, including an average of two years for fig parrots and 30 years for scarlet macaws
- The sulphur crested cockatoo came in with an average lifespan of 25 years, but some birds lived much longer — more than 80 years
- When comparing lifespan and brain size, the researchers found that bigger brain size was associated with longer lives in parrots
- It's suggested that bigger brains are indicative of greater intelligence, which gives parrots a survival advantage

Parrots are intelligent, inquisitive and charming creatures that do best in the wild. While exotic bird sanctuaries are full of parrots in need of homes, these birds are among the most challenging, high maintenance and long-lived animals that humans like to call pets.

If you're considering adding a parrot to your home, being aware of their long lifespan is essential. In fact, they're so long-lived that estate planners may suggest adding care plans for your parrot in your will.¹

What's a Parrot's Expected Lifespan?

There are more than 350 types of parrots, or psittacines. It's long been believed that smaller parrots, like budgies, parakeets and cockatiels, have shorter lifespans than larger birds, like macaws and grey parrots² — the opposite of what typically occurs in dogs. Smaller parrots may live an average of eight to 15 years, according to some estimates, while others may live 25 to 50 years.

Anecdotal reports also suggest individual birds may live much longer — up to 75 to 100 years.³ Generally, parrots' lifespans and brain size tend to be similar to primates, though one study found birds with larger brains may enjoy longer lives than others.⁴ Researchers with the Max Planck Institute of Animal Behavior conducted a large-scale comparative analysis to determine how brain size and other variables influence parrot longevity.

“The problem has been sourcing good quality data,” lead study author Simeon Smeele said in a news release.

“Comparative life-history studies require large sample sizes to provide certainty, because many processes are a play at once and this creates a lot of variation.”⁵

Parrots May Live From 2 to 80+ Years

Using data from more than 1,000 zoos, the team was able to analyze information from over 130,000 individual parrots across 217 species. A wide range of lifespans was uncovered, including an average of two years for fig parrots and 30 years for scarlet macaws. The sulphur crested cockatoo came in with an average lifespan of 25 years, but some birds lived much longer — more than 80 years. According to Smeele:⁶

“Living an average of 30 years is extremely rare in birds of this size. Some individuals have a maximum lifespan of over 80 years, which is a respectable age even for humans. These values are really spectacular if you consider that a human male weighs about 100 times more.”

When comparing lifespan and brain size, the researchers found that bigger brain size was associated with longer lives in parrots. It’s suggested that bigger brains are indicative of greater intelligence, which gives parrots a survival advantage. “This supports the idea that in general larger brains make species more flexible and allow them to live longer,” says Smeele. “For example, if they run out of their favorite food, they could learn to find something new and thus survive.”⁷

In this case, greater development time, which is necessary for larger brains to grow, was not related to longer lifespans. However, it’s possible other factors are at play, like sociality and cultural learning, which the scientists intend to explore in future studies. Smeele says:⁸

“Large-brained birds might spend more time socially learning foraging techniques that have been around for multiple generations. This increased learning period could potentially also explain the longer life spans, as it takes more time but also makes the foraging repertoire more adaptive.”

One thing that makes us humans special is the vast body of socially learned skills. We are really excited to see if long-lived parrots also have a ‘childhood’ in which they have to learn everything from finding and opening nuts to avoid upsetting the dominant male.”

Parrots as Pets Require Specialized Care

Adopting a parrot may be a decades-long commitment — something to carefully consider before getting one for a pet. Aside from their longevity, parrots are well known for their **complex cognition**. While this likely gives them an advantage in the wild, helping them avoid predation and allowing them to adapt to environmental challenges, in captivity increased cognition demands careful attention to environmental enrichment.

Parrots need daily mental stimulation on par with what you would give to a preschooler. Without it, the birds may develop behavioral problems and many parrots do poorly in captivity as a result of their high intelligence.⁹ Further, in the wild parrots spend 40% to 75% of their time foraging,¹⁰ an activity that is often absent for captive birds. Providing daily, species-appropriate raw foods is important for mental and physical wellbeing.

Providing opportunities for foraging is one way to help reduce the risk of feather-damaging behavior, a stress-induced behavior displayed by up to 15% of pet parrots. This may include plucking, chewing and eating their own feathers.¹¹

Many parrots are abandoned at rescues when their owners decide they require too much attention and care. So, if you're considering a parrot for a pet, please do extensive research to be sure you're up to the challenge. Understanding their complex nutritional and physical needs is important before committing to these highly intelligent, high-maintenance animals.

I also strongly recommend every potential new bird owner (or owners struggling to keep the peace with their parrot) check out **The Animal Behavior Center's** online training program for parrot owners. And remember, due to their long life expectancies, you'll need to have a plan in place to care for your parrot for decades to come.

Sources and References

^{1,2,3} [PetMD July 19, 2023](#)

⁴ [Proceedings of the Royal Society B March 30, 2022](#)

^{5,6,7,8} [Max-Planck-Gesellschaft March 29, 2002](#)

^{9,10,11} [Proceedings of the Royal Society B October 6, 2021](#)
