



THE CENTER FOR

BIRD & EXOTIC ANIMAL MEDICINE

Understanding Your Parrot

What every parrot owner should know about his feathered friend

Birds are not born with an understanding of how to fit into a human family. Many things that are natural behaviors in parrots in the wild, and even essential to their survival, are not considered appropriate behavior in our eyes. Often misbehavior is the result of misunderstandings between the owner and the bird, or of unrealistic expectations the owner has about how the bird should behave.

All parrots will sometimes bite, scream, and chew and destroy things. The bird doesn't know these things are "bad" and need to be taught what is expected in order to build a good long-term relationship. A better understanding of how your parrot thinks and reacts to the world around it will help your bird to become an intrinsic part of your family, and will help you enjoy your parrot to the fullest. The following is a recommended way to work with your bird; there are many other schools of thought.

Bird basics:

From the beginning, it is important to set boundaries with your parrot. Even though they may be young and cuddly now, sexual maturity will come and their goal will be to challenge your authority. This is a natural phase that all parrots will go through, so a little work now will save a lot of bleeding later.

I. ***Keep your bird 1-foot away from your face in all directions.*** Don't let your bird on your shoulder, as this puts the bird in a position of authority (higher than you) where it is difficult for you to control him and he is the boss. This is also a position which he can severely lacerate your face if he so desires. Keep your bird's cage and play area so it is lower than your head, ideally at chest level when you pick him up. This again puts you, not the bird, in the highest position of authority, and greatly increases cooperation and reduces aggressive behavior. Lowering the cage of an aggressive bird may help to eliminate biting. Furthermore, close proximity to the face of another animal frequently occurs in pre-breeding behaviors allowing the closeness may be indicating that you are receptive to pair-bonding.

II. ***Keep your bird's wings trimmed.*** Do this not only for your bird's safety, but also to help make the bird more dependent on you to take him places. This also creates boundaries of where he is allowed to go without confining him to a cage. Your bird will be unable to fly away from you if

they lack the desire to follow your command.

III. ***Teach and enforce basic commands.*** “Step up” and “step down” should be taught and reinforced from a very early age, as soon as the bird comes home with you. If stepping up is a well trained, automatic response, it can be used to control a bird in the midst of a hormonal rage. Practicing step-ups on a regular basis also reinforces the fact that you are in charge. To build this further, you can require the bird to step up to leave or enter the cage, to get a favorite treat, or to get any reward, all of which further emphasizes the dominant role that you need to maintain. It is very important to realize that when a bird is learning to step up, it is natural for them to test the stability of the perch (your hand) with their beak, using it as an additional claw. Do not confuse this with the bird trying to bite. Pulling your hand away can quickly reduce the bird’s trust in you as well as teach them how to bite by making them grab more firmly next time.

The Good, the Bad and the Feathered

Punishing misbehavior in parrots with the same techniques used in domestic dogs and cats almost never works. Parrots don’t understand traditional negative reinforcement (spanking, a “bop” on the nose, loud noises) the same as domestic pets and may become frightened or phobic, or may interpret as normal social interaction (almost a reward). Parrots love loud noises and dramatic displays, so the owner running into the room and/or yelling in response to an improper behavior may be in fact a reward to the bird.

Instead of punishment, it is considered to be more effective to ignore negative behaviors and reward and reinforce proper behaviors. Since parrots crave attention and interaction with their human “flock”, they will quickly learn the behaviors that result in increased attention and rewards from their flock mates. Often, simply ignoring a misbehaving parrot is enough to send the appropriate message. If this is not sufficient, a “time out” can be used by covering the cage or placing the bird in a far-away room, but only if it is done immediately after the offending behavior.

Common Inappropriate Behaviors

Chewing: Although it is natural for a parrot to chew, it is important to provide specific items for them to chew and minimize contact with items that are not intended to be chew toys. Set up the bird’s environment so they have every opportunity to chew on the intended items to relieve stress, boredom or frustrations. Don’t let the bird wander around on the floor at will and then be surprised when he chews up your furniture. A bird who has been trained to stay on top of his cage or on a playpen is not able to destroy his owners prized possessions. Also, provide lots of acceptable chew toys as an outlet for this basic psittacine need.

Dealing with biting: With the bird sitting on your hand, correct biting by a quick wobble of the hand (not so much that the bird falls) –if the bird thinks a minor earthquake occurs whenever he bites you, he will soon stop this behavior. Don’t grab or flick the bird’s beak or this will most

likely just provoke further aggression. Also look to see if something you have done or in the environment has initiated the behavior. Move slowly around your bird and don't gesture a lot with your hands. Withdrawing your hand when a bird bites you only encourages the behavior by teaching the bird he can control your hand. Learn your parrot's body language and respect his moods. If he is crabby and doesn't want to cuddle, or is in the midst of an aggressive sexual display, don't force the issue.

Dealing with screaming: Screaming is a natural parrot behavior that cannot be completely extinguished. Parrots instinctively call to their flock at dawn and dusk, and vocal exuberance at these times is to be expected. Problem screaming develops when the behavior is inadvertently reinforced – by yelling at the bird, or picking him up or offering a treat to get him to be quiet. It doesn't take long for the bird to train the owner to give him attention whenever he screams! If your bird screams as a “contact call” when you are in another room, try to replace this with a quieter whistle or “hello.” If you answer the quiet call but ignore screams, the bird will quickly catch on. Also, make sure the bird is not housed in an isolated area of the home, but is allowed to be an integral part of the family.

A Reminder: To prevent behavior problems, make sure the bird's basic needs are being met – including proper diet with a selection of interesting foods, opportunities for bathing and exercise to work off excess energy, a variety of stimulating toys to keep the bird busy and to exercise his need to chew, a period of one-on-one interaction with the owner daily, even if only for 10-15 minutes, and a quiet, dark environment for 10-12 hours of uninterrupted sleep every night. It is much easier to prevent problems before they happen by creating a happy, satisfied bird.

Further Recommended Reading on Parrot Behavior:

“The Pet Bird Report” magazine by Sally Blanchard (see www.petbirdreport.com)

Guide to a Well Behaved Parrot, by Mattie Sue Athan, (Barron's Ed. Series, 1993)

My Parrot, My Friend, by Bonnie Munro Doane, (Howell Book House, 1994)

Birds for Dummies, by Dr. Brian Speer, DVM