



Parrot Behavior

ENJOY YOUR BIRD

In our efforts to protect birds from infectious diseases, drafts, and other environmental factors, we inadvertently sentence the bird to isolation. Birds are intelligent and sensitive animals that require diversity.

It is advisable to have more than one area where the bird spends time. Have a cage or t-

stand in multiple areas of the house. Some birds enjoy care rides. Bring them into the shower with you (there are perches made for the purpose).

The enjoyment you get from your bird depends on how much time you are willing to put into socializing them. Have fun and you and your parrot will both be happier.



Continuous confinement can lead to serious psychological problems.

TALKING

Teaching birds to talk simply involves talking to them. Start with short easy phrases and short frequent sessions. As the bird gains vocabulary, they learn easier. Many birds can

learn word associations or even more complex language skills. By using phrases in appropriate situations, birds will maintain more interest and may learn to use them appropriately as well.

Certain species are inherently better talkers, such as mynahs, African greys, Amazon parrots, and Lories. Some cockatiels are very accomplished whistlers.

HOUSEBREAKING

Many birds can be "housebroken". The principles of housebreaking a dog apply here but most birds have to "go" much more frequently. For most birds it will be at 10-30 minute intervals (shorter for smaller birds). Watch the bird to get an idea about the frequency. Select a place where

droppings are allowed. The bird is not held or played with until he passes a dropping. The bird is rewarded by giving him attention. Just before another dropping is due, the bird is put back on the selected area until a dropping is produced. Again, success is rewarded by attention. This process is

repeated whenever the bird is handled. The bird will eventually learn to go to the selected area. Care should be taken that the bird does not hold its droppings for extended periods as this may lead to medical problems.

DOMINANCE

Like dogs, parrots are social animals. In the wild, these birds live in groups and establish social hierarchies (pecking orders). In the wild, the most dominant bird has greatest access to resources. In captivity, birds need the guidance of their human hosts to adapt to the home environment. Dominant individuals will not accept this guidance and therefore can become very unhappy and very

unruly pets. While dominance issues are more likely to occur in the larger species of birds, some of the smaller species can be just as problematic. In order to avoid problems, several measures can be taken.

First, all birds should be taught the "up" command and the "down" command (stepping onto or off of the hand, respectively). Second, birds should be kept at chest height

or lower for greater control. Height gives a dominant bird greater confidence. Finally, the owner should acclimate the bird to various types of handling, such as laying a towel on the back, handling the beak and the feet, and extending the wings. These should be done gently but firmly. Start out with very brief sessions and extend the time gradually.

TRAINING AND TAMING

Training involves teaching a specific behavior. *Taming* involves removing the fear of humans. Both are important for the birds' benefit and for improving their pet quality. Handfed birds often do not require much taming since they are imprinted on humans. On the other hand, wild caught birds and birds who have never been handled properly may take weeks of work to become tame. Patience and positive reinforcement are the crux of both taming and training. The bird must be shown that there is nothing to fear from humans. Additionally, they must learn that people are the source of food and social interaction.

Finger or hand training involves offering the finger or hand as a perch and rewarding the bird

when it steps up. Clipping the wings can facilitate this. Parrots climb with the beak so do not pull your hand back when they reach for it. If you are afraid of being bit, a stick or perch may be offered instead of a hand. Gloves can also be used.

An alternative taming technique is called *towel taming*. It involves restraining the bird with a towel in a normal perching position. You can then scratch or "preen" the bird's head feathers. Eventually, they will settle down and begin to enjoy the petting sessions. These sessions should always be short and should leave the bird wanting more. If the bird does not settle down within 3-5 minutes, the session should be ended and tried again later.

Both finger training and towel taming should be done away



Taming frightened birds makes their life less stressful.

from the security of the bird's cage. This makes the bird look to the trainer for security. The combination of finger training and towel taming will result in a bird that will come to the owner and enjoy the attention and petting.

BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

As in any other type of pet, birds can develop inappropriate behaviors. These include abnormal sexual behavior, feather picking, excessive vocalization, biting or a syndrome called night panic. When dealing with any behavior problem, it is helpful to keep a log of the frequency, duration, and severity of behavior. This log will help your veterinarian develop a treatment plan as well as monitor the behavior over time. With treatment, the problem should reduce gradually. Rarely will a behavior just suddenly stop. Always consult an avian veterinarian for treatment.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOR:

Sexual behavior, including masturbation, regurgitation, and aggressiveness, can sometimes occur in parrots. Some of these are quite natural and cause no problems other than a bit of embarrassment for the owner. Suppressing these normal behaviors can lead to other behavioral disorders. Occasionally, the behavior becomes harmful to the bird or dangerous to the owner. In these cases, the behavior may be controlled by environmental or hormonal manipulations or behavior modification.

FEATHER PICKING:

Feather picking may be a sign of an underlying health issue. A full medical workup is indicated. If no abnormalities are found,

then the feather picking is characterized as behavioral or psychological. Behavioral feather pickers may be treated medically or with behavior modification techniques at the discretion of the veterinarian. Normal play, exercise, and preening are especially important in affected and in susceptible species (African Greys, Cockatoos).

SCREAMING:

Excessive vocalization, while sometimes a normal behavior, can be a plea for attention. Some birds call to keep contact with "flock" members. In the wild, losing contact with their flock can be fatal. Keeping up a constant whistle, hum, or song while moving out of sight can prevent excessive calling by the bird. Remember that birds are social creatures and need a certain amount of attention. Do not sentence them to a life of isolation. It also helps to provide the bird with a distraction, such as food or a favorite toy. However, if you give the bird something to "shut it up", you are rewarding the bad behavior. It is important to give the positive reinforcement for good behavior. Talk to your bird and



red winged parrot

give it attention when it is being quiet.

BITING:

The strong hooked beaks of parrots make biting a serious problem. Parrots bite for several reasons. The most common of these is fear. A bird that bites out of fear must be tamed and socialized so that it no longer fears humans. The second reason is dominance. If a bird feels that it is dominant to its owner, then it feels it has the right to bite as a way of disciplining the subordinate. The other common form of biting aggression is territorial aggression. Parrots will fiercely guard their nest areas (cages), mates (or perceived mates), and offspring. In these cases, the victims must be integrated into the bird's flock so that the bird does not see them as threats. The wings of aggressive birds can be clipped to slow down the attacks and to reduce the bird's "feeling of power" over the people it attacks. Your veterinarian can help provide measures to reestablish trust and dominance over the bird.

NIGHT PANIC:

Night panic, a sudden attack of fright at night, can usually be alleviated by providing a night light for susceptible birds, especially cockatiel mutations. Safe construction of the cage is also very important for these birds.

GAMES

HOUSE TOUR GAME:

Theory: In the wild, fledgling birds follow parents and flock mates around their environment. By seeing the response of the adult birds to various stimuli, they learn what to eat, what to fear, what to avoid, etc. This game is intended to do the same thing.

How to play: The bird must be tame and must know basic "step up" command. Carry the bird on the hand and walk around the house. Point out everything you see and say its name. Most importantly, be very calm. By seeing that you are not upset, they learn not to be. Don't forget to introduce all of the human and animal household members. Also, do not neglect sounds. Take the bird near the source of some

sounds and do the same exercise. The bonus of this game is that talking birds often learn how to identify people and things in the house.

COLOR GAME:

Theory: Parrots are very visually oriented and intelligent creatures. This game helps stimulate their curiosity.

How to play: Take pieces of colored construction paper. Say the color to the bird. Repeat for all of the other colors. Keep in mind that the bird sees colors slightly differently than you do, but can still distinguish them well. More advanced lessons will ask the bird what color. For even better results, do this game with another person in front of the bird. When the

person gets the answer correct, he/she is lavishly praised.

WHISTLE GAME:

Theory: In the wild, parrots vocalize to maintain audio contact with members of their flock. Being alone puts birds at an increased risk of predation. Survival depends on maintaining contact. If they cannot hear the response of the group, they think they have lost contact, and then they call louder.

How to play: In order to take the flock contact initiative away from the bird, announce where you are as you move about the house. This is especially true if you are out of sight. Try whistling, humming, singing, or talking as you go.

BEHAVIOR TIPS

- Teach all birds to "step up", "step down", and to "stay".



- Never hit, deprive, or otherwise cause harm to your bird.
- Too much cuddling and petting can cause abnormal behavioral development.
- Interact dynamically with your bird.



- Allow your bird to "hang out" with the family as much as possible.
- Don't allow your bird onto shoulders. It encourages pair bonding and aggressive behavior.
- Relax and enjoy your bird's company.

