Causes of Behavior Problems in Birds and Possible Solutions

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Because of the increasing incidences of behavior problems in companion birds, many are losing their homes. Problems that may develop include biting, screaming, feather picking, and phobias. The biting bird can terrorize the entire family and anyone else that comes within reach. The screaming bird can get the owner evicted. The feather-plucker may continue on to self-mutilation. The phobic bird suddenly acts like familiar people are deadly predators.

Behavior problems develop when the bird's basic needs are not being met. These needs include food, water, shelter, sleep, and proper social interaction. Once these needs are met in an appropriate manner, the behavior problems will be easier to resolve or at least control.

Cage Size: Overly small cages are a common problem with companion birds and cause stress, which often leads to behavior problems. Larger cages do cost money, sometimes hundreds of dollars. The bird may outgrow his original cage bought three years ago and need an upgrade. Be prepared for that need. An absolute minimum cage size for the larger birds is 1-1/2 times the bird's wingspan in width, depth, and height. This gives the bird room to stretch and move without damaging the wing or tail feathers on the cage bars.

Cage Location: Cage location can be critical. Some birds are very gregarious and need to be in the middle of the family activity as much of the day as possible. Some nervous birds need to be in a quieter room, but one that still is occupied by the family for social interaction. Placing the cage so one side is against a wall or providing a hiding place in the cage may relieve stress as the bird is able to relax and stop looking for predators. It is not advisable to place the cage in front of a window as a permanent location as the bird cannot relax his search for enemies.

Cage Height: The optimal cage height is slightly below eye level. Do not place the bird's cage on the floor as this may cause a nervous bird's anxiety to increase. The bird essentially has no way to avoid the predators that he is always on the lookout for if he is on the ground.

Height and Shouldering: Parrots should not be allowed to sit on shoulders especially as adolescents. Birds sitting on a human's shoulder are within easy reach of causing severe damage to the owner's eyes, ears, nose, and lips. The bird may cause damage intentionally (biting) or unintentionally (grabbing onto something to keep from falling). Either way, the damage to the owner and to the owner-pet bond has occurred.

Boredom: This is a major factor in behavior problems because the bird has nothing to keep him occupied so he finds something to do on his own. If the family members are gone to work or school for 8-10 hours a day, they must provide outlets for the bird's energy. In the wild, a bird divides his time between interacting with his mate and flock, finding and eating food, and grooming. Toys should be provided and rotated on a regular basis (every couple days or weekly) to provide new entertainment for the bird. Food can be hidden in toys, hung in the cage (make sure it is safe), or provided in large pieces the bird needs to break up before eating. Parrots are intelligent birds and you need to provide an outlet for their curiosity and energy.

Sleep Deprivation: Many companion birds originate in the tropics. They would normally see 10-12 hours of darkness year-round. Adult parrots should receive 10-12 hours of sleep each night. This is best accomplished by moving the parrot from the family room to a quiet darkened room for sleeping. In the morning, the bird is then moved back to the family room where he can interact with his family. A small 'sleep cage' can be set up and left in the bird's 'bedroom' and the regular cage left in the family room.

All pets have normal behaviors that can become problems for the humans in the pet's life. Normal dog behavior is to bark and dig. Cats normally scratch and climb to high places. Parrots normally chew on items. These become problems when they occur at the wrong time or place for the human family. The humans need to teach the proper behavior and set rules from the first time the pet comes into the household. For those owners who already have a bird with a behavior problem, help from an avian veterinarian or animal behaviorist may be necessary to correct the offending behavior. Typically, the human family needs to make changes in the way they handle the bird. Small things, such as the owner deciding when the bird will get a treat or leave/return to his cage will raise the ranking of the human in the bird's eyes.

With the proper education, the bird owner will be able to have a healthy, happy, well-adjusted companion bird.

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