Bird Biting: Why They Do It and How to Correct It

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

A common behavior problem reported by bird owners, especially parrot owners, is biting. Parrots have large beaks and their bite can cause severe damage, so this is a behavior problem that needs to be corrected. Several ways are available to help control and reform the offending parrot rather than finding him a new home.

Why do birds bite?

Birds may bite for a number of reasons, and it is important for you to know why your bird is biting. It may influence which behavior modification techniques you use.

Biting in parrots is not a common wild bird behavior. The beak is used to grasp items for balance or climbing as well as eating. A bird uses its beak like a hand. Conflicts in birds tend to be handled with body language and vocalizations not biting.

Baby bird behavior: Just as children and puppies tend to 'mouth' everything in sight, baby birds use their beaks to explore their surroundings. Young puppies who are playing will soon yelp if a sibling is biting too hard, letting the biter know he overstepped his bounds. Similarly, young birds need to be taught boundaries. Especially if raised alone without other nestlings, the young bird may not realize what pain its bite can cause. Unlike a puppy, who will change his behavior because he does not like the sound of the yelp, a baby parrot will think yelling is a fantastic response and it will actually reinforce the behavior, as we describe later.

Biting may also be inadvertently taught when the new owner reaches his/her hand to pick up the baby parrot. The young parrot will usually reach toward the hand with its beak as a way to grasp it and climb on. If the owner pulls his hand back too quickly, the baby realizes that to get picked up, he better grab quicker next time. And soon grabbing can turn into biting.

Fear: 'Fight' or 'flight' are the common mechanisms used by animals if they are afraid or hurt. Birds in the wild will generally take to flight if they are startled or afraid, and biting would rarely be used. Birds in houses, with clipped wings, however, do not have that as an avenue. They may bite if startled or hurt.

Control or Dominance: As we all know, groups of birds tend to have a pecking order, and the birds we have as pets are often no different. A bird may use biting as a way to defend his territory, and thus his status. This 'territory' may be a cage, another bird, or the human being to whom he is bonded. Some birds soon learn that if they bite, they get what they want, be it the drama of seeing their owner dancing around and yelling in pain, or a trip back to the cage where they can eat. Birds may also learn to bite to avoid doing something, such as getting their nails trimmed or being put back in their cage when they want to stay out.

Breeding behavior: For many species, sexually mature adult birds in breeding mode can become aggressive and much more protective of their mate and more likely to defend their cage as their area. It is important to distinguish if biting behavior may be hormonal driven and more of a 'phase,' or if the biting is a sign of dominance aggression.

Medical: If a bird does not feel well, they will often want to be left alone, just as we do. If biting starts in a bird who normally does not bite, or if you see other behavior changes such as eating or playing less, have your bird examined by a veterinarian.

Playing: During the course of play, a bird may occasionally bite. This can occur if the bird is overexcited, or the bird inadvertently grasps some part of human anatomy to keep his balance.

Learn to read the body language of birds. They will often show you how they feel. For instance, they may show signs they have had enough play or 'outside' time and need to go back to their cage. If you do not recognize this, the bird may start to bite to signal he has 'had enough.'

Correcting the biting behavior

To start correcting a biting problem, first determine the cause and correct any underlying problems such as treating an illness. Consider where, when, and to whom the biting is directed. Consider the other events that are going on when the biting occurs. Evaluate, also, what sort of "pay-off" the bird is receiving for biting. Next, determine what behavior you would like the bird to exhibit instead of biting, and how you can rearrange the factors that contribute to the biting. Be sure the rest of your birds needs are being met - proper nutrition, sufficient sleep, foraging and other mental activity. It will be much more difficult to change the behavior of birds who are stressed because their basic needs are not being met. Be consistenct in providing positive reinforcement (rewarding) good behavior and giving negative reinforcement (taking away something the bird wants) for bad behavior.

Correcting dominance/aggressive biting: The human needs to be seen by the bird as having a higher ranking. To start this, the parrot needs to be taught the 'step up,' 'ladder,' or 'up' and 'down' commands, which are used to get the bird to move from the perch to the owner's finger and back to the perch, or from one finger to the other. Short, daily training sessions should begin ideally from the first day the bird is brought home, before behavior problems occur. Training sessions should take place away from the bird's usual environment. If the parrot has already been biting for some time, and the owner is wary of the bird's beak, training may need to occur in a totally new environment. The bird will be much less likely to bite the only human he knows when he is in an unfamiliar place. Try your veterinary clinic, if needed. Family or friends may also let you use their

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*

house for the short training sessions.

Parrots respond to facial expressions and verbal praise. This type of positive reinforcement should be used when an appropriate response is given by the bird. If the bird responds inappropriately, raise your head above the bird's level and say "no" in a normal speaking voice. Do not use a loud voice or yell. They may think you are 'squawking,' which they love. No aggression or punishment is involved in the training. The daily lessons need to continue until the bird responds willingly to the commands. Once the commands are followed, discontinue the scheduled training but continue to use the commands during the daily handling of the bird.

It is best to keep a bird at slightly below your eye level. Do not allow these birds to ride on your shoulder. It puts your face, ears, eyes, and lips at risk of a serious bite. You need to learn to anticipate the biting and stop it with a stern look and command before it escalates to a bite.

If a bite occurs, reprimanding needs to be immediate and effective. If the bird is on the hand, you can drop the hand a short distance to unbalance the bird. If on the arm, the arm can be rotated causing the loss of balance. The bird should never be made to fall, just lose its balance for a second. The bird should not be rewarded with the drama of yelling. Some birds may need to be placed in a cage for a 'time-out,' but be sure this is not what the bird was hoping for when he bit you. Once the reprimand has been given, the episode is over. Do not continue to punish the bird, such as isolating him for a long period. Take into account the parrot's temperament when providing a reprimand. Some birds respond well to just a stern look, others need a stern look and a quiet verbal no, and others need a time out.

Correcting fearful biting: If a bird is biting out of fear, it is important to determine the exact thing or situation that is causing the bird to be afraid. Sometimes the fear may be understandable, such as the sound of a vacuum cleaner. Other times, it may appear illogical, but perhaps something happened in the bird's past that causes him to fear something we consider harmless.

Once you have isolated the cause of the fear, avoid exposing the bird to it. If that is not possible, try exposing the bird to it from a long distance, at which the bird is not normally afraid. Praise and give the bird a treat for remaining calm. Over the course of weeks, gradually move the bird closer to the fear-causing stimulus, always staying at a far enough distance to keep the bird calm, and giving him positive reinforcement. The bird may then learn to associate the stimulus with good things happening, and lose his fear of it.

Conclusion

To control biting behaviors of birds, it is important to know why they may bite. Then, with time and perhaps help from an experienced avian behaviorist, you can help your bird be much more fun to be around. Your bird will be happier, too.

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*