

Psittacine Bathing a fundamental aspect of care

Donna M. Hefton, Chicago, IL

Mankind has kept parrots in captivity for centuries, with reasons stemming from the ceremonial needs of primitive cultures to the ornamentation of palaces and living rooms. Today, when compared with other pets, parrots that are kept as companions are finding that their place is held in high regard.

Life shared with a parrot often changes one's view of the world. In recent years, a shift in attitude of how we have been keeping these birds in captivity has become apparent through the extensive publishing of material regarding cage dimensions, nutritional requirements, the safety of toys and materials employed around parrots, and the attention to the behavior and psychology of the animal itself. What these captive birds require is that we give them what they are missing from their natural environment.

For the past several years I have been studying psittacine bathing behavior and researching the rainfall data in areas to which various psittacines are indigenous. Since the majority of these data is more than obscure, the task of compiling this information has become greater than I had first imagined. To put it simply, if mankind does not inhabit a particular area there seems to be little need to know anything specific about it.

One of the more interesting points I have discovered about the range and distribution of the psittacines is that they tend to be situated in a sort of "geographic band" around the planet. Located in regions between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn, which are allocated 20° North and 20° South of the equator respectively, the psittacine has evolved in some of the most lush and humid places on earth. The exception to this are the species of New Zealand which seem to illustrate Darwin's concepts of adaptation and natural selection. The parrots of this area have adapted and are noticeably different than those residing in the 20° north/south band. There are a few

other species outside of the "tropical zone" also but this paper focuses on the vast majority of psittacines which *do* live within the tropics.

Rainfall amounts in the regions of the psittacines' natural evolutionary process can technically be measured in feet, rather than inches. An abundance of water is the general rule in this environment. Averages range from 90 to 350 or more inches, with more common averages of 250 to 350+ inches per annum. For many years we have been instructed to "occasionally mist our birds with a spray bottle" and with this type of information I feel that we have done a great disservice to this animal.

Allowing the parrot a good soaking with plain water is essential to the health of the plumage, which is the primary means of survival for birds through flight, warmth, and camouflage. The avian feather is brilliantly constructed to interact with water. The accumulation of dirt, dust, and the debris of our environment is eliminated by the simple wetting of the feathers with nothing more than clean water. Removal of debris in the feather allows for a better preening result and a more accurate "zipping" of the barbules. Parrots bathe to survive, and we thought that it just made them look good!

The Crop Bib

I am presently examining a theory as to the reason some parrots pluck their feathers. When presented with the question, "Why does my parrot attempt to jump into its water cup immediately after I shower him/her?" I have come to believe that this is due to what I refer to as an inadequately soaked crop bib. I am conducting studies of bacterial colony counts before and after a good soaking of the feathering that covers the crop. I call this area the crop bib. My thought is that since this area of the bird is the warmest, or a "hot spot," it may stand to reason that bacteria will grow rapidly here.

To take it a step further, consider the powdered species such as the cockatoos and African Greys which are notoriously known for plucking. Imagine bacteria on the skin covering the crop area. Now, place the bird's natural powder over the bacteria in this warmest of areas and you have created an incubator-like environment, allowing the bacteria to proliferate and grow on the skin. Trapped between the warmth of the skin and the powder produced by the bird, the microorganism is technically in the most conducive environment for growth. Without an adequate flushing or soaking of the skin in this area, the bacteria causes itching of the skin. This situation may lead to feather plucking as the bacteria grows down the skin toward the chest area where the bird can reach the feathers. A thorough flushing of this area is not unlike how we remove bacteria from our hands when we wash them. I intend to publish the results of this study when sufficient data is compiled.

Water Temperature

Water temperature used for bathing the parrot should also be considered. Human caretakers, with exposed skin and lower body temperatures, tend to prefer warmer water temperatures for their showers. Also, the surveys taken reveal that the primary caretakers of birds are women and most women traditionally take hotter showers than do men. A woman may set the water temperature and think, "Ah, that feels good," and proceed to put this water on an animal that is already "cooking" at approximately 104°F.

Cool down the water for your bird's bath. Rain is cooler than the ambient temperature in the environment. That's what makes it so refreshing. Parrots tend to respond more enthusiastically to water of cooler temperatures. Some species that prefer to pool bathe actually prefer ice water in their bath! Observe the bird to see which water temperature elicits the greatest response. The majority of parrot species really do exhibit a preference. Bathing with your parrot is fine as long as you can endure that lower water temperature, otherwise the parrot

should be allowed to bathe on its own in a proper temperature range.

Species-Specific Behaviors

The most enjoyable and frustrating aspect of my studies over the past three years has been that of observing the bathing behaviors of parrots, both in captivity and in their natural environments. Species-specific bathing behaviors have revealed to me some of the most fascinating revelations I have had to date. It is also a puzzle in some cases. The questions arise as to what method of bathing a particular species prefers and why does it prefer it?

As one questions why the pool bathers prefer to bathe in a pool, it is helpful to study the species in question. If your particular species has its heritage evolving along rivers, lakes, and streams, it seems logical that this is the reason it has become a pool bather. It is simply following in the footsteps of its forebears. With the parrots that prefer a shower bath the reasons are similar—their ancestors got caught in the rain.

I have, however, encountered two species that seem to throw a new slant on to the idea of evolutionary imprinting in the species-specific bathing behaviors of the psittacine. In observing the macaws and African Grey parrots I have determined that these birds can exhibit a more "personal preference" as to how they choose to bathe. In other words, they can go either as a showerer *or* as a pool bather. I am trying to determine whether these bathing behaviors are inherent behaviors or if they are behaviors learned through the observation of adult birds that exhibit that particular preference in bathing.

Those who have an African Grey

that pool bathes should not feel dejected because the bird will not shower. Attempting to satisfy *our* idea of how things should be done will lead us to disappointment. Allow a pool bather to be a pool bather without attempting to reconstruct the bathing method by trying to get him to shower. Have respect for the preference the bird exhibits. Be thankful your Grey will bathe.

The majority of the problems in bathing that I encounter are related to me by owners of Greys. Many of these birds will refuse getting anywhere near the water! And pity the poor macaw that wants a good bath and all that is available to him is the expanse of his drinking water container. It is heart-wrenching to observe a macaw trying to satisfy the urge to bathe by attempting to squeeze all of that plumage into its water cup. Provide a proper bathing area for all parrots, whether in aviary flights or in home situations.

Breeder Responsibility

Breeders of parrots need to become more aware of the responsibility that truly faces them when they make the decision to take over the instruction of their pre fledgling charges. The responsibility is one of great significance when you consider that you are now responsible for the early development of an animal that will probably outlive you. The natural laws are given by the parent birds with full instruction on how this little creature is to "be." When we take this responsibility onto ourselves, it had better be taken seriously.

Early education in the bathing process often begins *before* the fledglings leave the nest. According to Phoebe Linden of The Santa Barbara Bird Farm, hens will bring water into the nest on their breast feathers. This was noticed when the babies had nesting substrate stuck to them and the hen had substrate on her breast feathers. After observing her hen's activities, Linden concluded that the young are introduced to bathing by water prior to leaving the nest environment.

If you are hand feeding baby birds, you may want to consider the instruction into the fine art of bathing for your young birds. I have heard from several owners of parrots that do not bathe

willingly (and many of those that are plucking) that the breeders of their bird instructed them that the bird is not to have a bath until it is a year old! It is a constant struggle to teach these birds how to bathe and it is stressful, not to mention frightening, for a parrot to be introduced to bathing at such a late stage in its development. Do not take for granted that bathing will come naturally for all parrots. I suspect that it is learned from the parent birds.

Conclusion

Bathing the psittacine is essential to the health and psychological well-being of this animal. The moisture to the skin, sinuses, and delicate nasal passages is essential to an animal whose very evolution dictates that it be provided a humid environment.

Not bathing the parrot on a daily or frequent basis is similar to taking a goldfish out of the water and expecting it to thrive. Many parrots have survived in spite of us failing to realize their need for frequent bathing, yet we are still running around in circles and beating our heads against the wall trying to determine why a parrot will pluck out its feathers.

Perhaps it is as elementary as failure to provide regular bathing opportunities. Imagine yourself bathing as often as your parrot does and determine whether or not you would be clawing at your skin at that point! They are not much different than we are when you think about it in terms of our nearly equal life spans, the need for a variety of foods for balanced nutrition, and the nurturing and instruction given to their offspring for their very survival in the world.

The hygiene of parrots tends to mirror our own in the most basic sense. Understanding where the parrot developed, the need for good feather hygiene, and making an attempt to comprehend what the parrot needs from us while under our care should lead you to the conclusion that regular and frequent bathing opportunities should be presented to them. Giving back all that we have taken from them in a natural sense should be reestablished.

Because you love them, bathe them. ➔

A real treat for your birds!
Macadamia Nuts

Direct from California growers to you.
No salt. No chemicals.
No preservatives.
Raw. In shell. All natural.
\$1.90 per lb. (U.S.\$) plus s/h
50 lb. minimum.
Subject to change without notice.

We also sell nut crackers so your birds can share with you.

Gold Crown
Macadamia Association
P.O. Box 235, Fallbrook, CA 92088-0235
(800) 344-NUTS

C.O.D. orders OK