

Going Away and Coming Home

by Sherry Rind
Redmond, Washington

Finding bird care while you go away on vacation can be far more stressful and difficult than finding childcare. After all, experienced babysitters outnumber experienced bird sitters and who wants to trust a precious bird to a novice who may fear beaks?

A single pet bird can sometimes be taken to the home of a friend — but the friend must be familiar with birds. Anything ranging from three birds in ample cages to a large group can present major problems. Will someone come over twice daily to feed, check, and clean? Once daily? Would someone bird-sit in the house? This someone can be hard to find for, incredible as it seems, not everybody likes birds; and some who like them, such as the five year old next door, cannot be relied upon to care for them.

One couple I know does not go anywhere together for more than a weekend when they can leave their parrots with adequate pellets and water for a couple of days. Such a solution will not suit everyone. Highly imaginative worriers would never be comfortable leaving their birds alone for even twenty-four hours.

Any breeder knows that spouses or significant others cannot vacation together during handfeeding times. Some couples never get a chance to vacation together at all and they are fortunate if they believe separate vacations improve their marriages. Still others

simply give up on vacations — all their spare dollars go the birds, anyway. This article will consider such breeders as a breed apart and address itself to the moderate types who feel that a two-week getaway with spouse or partner is all that stands between them and an explosion that will terrorize the entire family and neighborhood, causing grave psychological scars to all concerned. You know the feeling.

If you are not already an active member of a local bird club, vacation alone is reason enough to join. Just placing a "Birdsitting Needed" ad in the club newsletter is not likely to get results unless you mention a very attractive sum of money to go with the birds. And the whole point here is to get bird care at low cost, right? The best method is to attend meetings, call your club friends, and ask, ask, ask. Word of mouth and personal reference are the best ways to make contacts just as they are the most effective ways to find a job. Why? Because people are much more likely to help you-the-person than you-the-ad.

Among your club friends there may be someone willing to look after your birds in their own home or in yours if you are lucky enough to live near each other. Or these people will help you spread a network by referring you to other people they know. You may end up, after twenty-five calls, contacting the third cousin twice removed of a friend of a friend that a club member met at an office party two years ago but if you get results, the long search will be worth it. Also, getting references from people you trust is helpful in determining whether or not to trust a stranger. You might not find any one person who will take all your birds but even if you have to go to the trouble of taking your birds to several different homes, you will be setting up your own network for now and the future.

If the bird club scheme does not work or you have no local club, there are pet shops and veterinarians who will board birds. For most people, this boarding is a last resort because it can be very costly and often requires additional health exams even if you had your birds checked only a few months ago. And you may not like the idea of your pet being cared for by busy people who cannot give it the TLC it deserves. If, however, you are very friendly with a


salesclerk, perhaps you can make personal arrangements for home care.

Another solution is to rely on family, friends, neighbors who may not much like birds but like you. Even if they do not give you the wholehearted devotion you undoubtedly deserve, maybe somebody owes you a favor. You might pay your caretaker; you might work out an exchange of services. In order to preserve friendships and make sure your bird (or birds) gets good care, *write everything down*. Go ahead and assume your caretaker is only dimly aware that birds have feathers and fly; it is better to inform too much than too little. Simplify and streamline your care routine as much as possible and describe not only what the bird eats, when, and how much, but also how to prepare the food and get it in and out of the cage. If you have a bird that likes to lunge at hands entering the cage, as I do, take steps to ensure your caretaker's safety. Maybe you will have to alter the cage by making a special food door. The same goes for birds that expect to be let out whenever the door opens. In such a case, it is better to make your bird stay in its cage all day rather than risk it to a well meaning person who may be unable to handle it. Lack of exercise is preferable to a terrified (both bird and caretaker) chase around the room, risking injury or escape. Even the sweetest bird can turn into a tyrant when it realizes the hand that feeds is shaking. Or the person may handle the bird too roughly and you will come home to a grumpy bird you will need to retrain.

When you are trying to educate the novice, give your imagination full reign. No event is too outrageous to envision and explain. Do not forget the mundane side. Leave notes on cleaning the cage and utensils, covering the cage or not, and the bird's habits and idiosyncracies. Describe the bird's usual activities and behavior; what is normal in your eyes may look sick in someone else's. The less you stress your caretaker, the less you will stress your bird. But do not tell the caretaker that you care more about the bird's comfort than hers or your own. She may think you are overdoing it; whereas a bird owner knows you can never overdo proper care.

Leave phone numbers where you or a trusted expert can be reached for information. Leave your vet's phone number and guarantee payment for even the silliest false alarm. Leave a bird carrier and make sure your caretaker knows how to get the bird into it. Do not merely describe; have a practice session on han-

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dling. The more confident your caretaker feels, the more she will enjoy your bird and the more likely she is to take care of it again next time. You will know the venture was truly successful if, upon your return, you can convince her to buy a bird of her own.

Even with the most minutely described directions, the care your bird gets will not be like the care you give it because each person has her own style, her own way of moving and giving strokes and endearments. Your bird, especially if it is young, might change a bit while you are gone, as I recently discovered. You need to keep an open mind.

Since my birds are not yet breeding and I have a bird-owning neighbor ("Raising a Military Macaw" Apr/May 1986), my husband and I were able to take a two-week summer trip together. We all had a slight panic when it looked like both households would be out of town at the same time and I had visions of desperate phone calls to club members and drives all over Seattle to deposit birds at different homes. My husband and I decided to delay our vacation to accommodate the birds.

Any departure, even for a weekend, necessitates long conferences between Susan and myself about the birds in question and the exchange of copious notes and directions. Each of us conscientiously follows the other's directions and more. We tell each other, "Keep it simple. Don't worry about giving eggs or asparagus." Naturally we prepare the eggs and asparagus and would make hollandaise sauce, too, if we thought the birds needed it. We say, "Go ahead and offer too much food. I'd rather you throw out the extra than have the birds get hungry." As if they were doomed to starvation without the watchful eye of mama hen!

During her absence, Susan left her macaw alone in the house. The bird spent days on an open perch with a radio for company and spent nights in a huge cage. By contrast, I could never trust one of my birds on an open perch all day. It pays to know your birds before you go on vacation.

I left my greencheek Amazons in their cages in "their" room. Afraid my hand-raised pet timneh would mope if left alone for two weeks, I moved her to Susan's house. Smidgen had private accommodations in Susan's sewing room, from which spot she could call back and forth along the length of the house to Susan's macaw.

My birds' reaction to my return surprised me. Perhaps I expected Smidgen

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to greet me the way the dog did. After all, I had known her since she hatched and a doggy greeting is not asking much if you know the attention span of an airedale. I walked into the room where her cage was installed, cooing the baby talk we all swear we will never, ever be caught dead saying: "How's baby birdie? Oh, you're soooo cute. How's pretty, pretty bird?"

She displayed no interest in me. I leaned closer to the cage to try some more endearments. "How ya doing, stinker? Did you miss me?" She ruffed up her feathers, looking as if she were about to growl. Susan walked in and Smidgen looked at her expectantly. So much for the sensitive African grey that attaches itself to only one person. Nobody told me this means one at a time.

I took Smidge out of her cage. She stepped readily onto my hand — she will step readily onto *any* hand that wants to give her a ride out. She loves being petted and will put her head down and turn it this way and that while I pet or scratch. This time she tolerated a bit of petting, then tried to walk up my arm.

Susan took her. She walked up to Susan's shoulder and proceeded to preen Susan's hair while we talked. She nibbled at Susan's ear. Susan's cooing and murmuring is far less inhibited than mine. The little creep ate it up.

Interestingly, Smidge had revealed a preference for Susan over Susan's husband and had, in fact, nipped Pat once. Inured to the bite of a testy macaw, Pat looked at his intact finger and said, "Is that all?" He became fond of Smidgen. It is my theory that Smidgen actually does like men. She finds them useful for times when she wants to play rough.

I took home the bird and the cage and discovered that Smidge seemed to have dropped "Pretty Sherry" from her vocabulary (Why teach a bird to praise itself when it can praise you?) and replaced it with a macaw's squawk. I groaned and told my husband I should have left her moping and starving in the living room. He said she would forget it in time. It is easy to be optimistic when you do not know birds.

Back in her old spot, Smidge looked around the room as if she had never seen it before in her life. She looked at me the same way. Yes, she let me pet her in the old way since there was no Susan in sight. Yes, she made her little trill when I brought her a treat. But the eye contact was not there when I talked to her. She did not listen. She was not

interested.

To top it off, the next morning I discovered she had forgotten what the command, "Poop," meant. It had taken many long hours of agonizing boredom to train her to defecate on command before I took her away from her cage to play. "Poop" first thing in the morning had been a habit for six months. She had dropped it in two weeks. Even the sight of a sunflower seed, given only as a treat, did not induce her to remember.

My unpaired greencheck, Pedro, was the surprise. He lives alone next door to Pita and Pico. Pico reacted the way he always does, with fear. I have had him longer than any other bird but he is neurotically afraid of people. He breathes hard and watches warily whenever I approach the cage as if I had been abusing him for years instead of employing the utmost gentleness. Even Pita displayed a little fear, retreating to the back corner for a moment before returning to her usual front corner where she places her back to the wire and stands as if crucified while shredding her tail feathers.

I do not anthropomorphize my birds. I do not expect a wild caught bird to be like a hand raised one. I certainly do not expect Pedro to be affectionate because, destined for breeding, he is not treated like a pet. A ride on the hand and the occasional head scratch are the most he gets.

Still, I swear he was very happy to see me. I let him climb out and we shrieked, "Hello," at each other. "Hello" in different tones of voice is the full extent of his vocabulary. Other than that, I imitate him and a wonderful release of tension it is. His pupils expanded and contracted the way they do when a bird is very interested. He stood on my hand, crouched low and spread his wings like a youngster wanting food. When I left the room, he made the panic call with which he tries to lure me back. He had done none of that for my neighbor while she was taking care of him.

It is wonderful to be appreciated. But I wanted Smidge to be bonded to me and Pedro to be bonded to birds. Fortunately Smidgen was young and impressionable enough to transfer her affections back to me within a week; although her vocabulary may never be the same. As for Pedro, I shall try to be optimistic, since I have finally located a hen for him after over a year of searching. She will arrive next month. My hope is that when they finally meet she will appear much more attractive than I in Pedro's eyes. I do not claim that I will not be jealous. ●



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