

Bert and Kong

Ravens in the House

by Gabriele Drozdowski
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Although ever since my childhood I dreamed of being close to animals, I never thought I'd share my house with two mischievous ravens. In 1995 my husband Jim and I had two of these most intelligent birds in our care under a special permit held by the Santa Barbara Wildlife Care Network. Kong was estimated to be between 25-30 years old. He spent much of his life in a small

wire rabbit hutch against the side of a house, and was rescued from that situation by a kind neighbor.

Bert

We acquired him to keep Bertram (then two years old and imprinted) company during the day. In the evening we brought them both into the house to break up their boredom — provided Jim and I were *both* available to watch them, since, as you will soon discover, it takes plenty of attention to watch two ravens.

Bert in particular was blessed with boundless energy, abundant curiosity, and the uncontrollable urge to use his fourteen-in-one toolkit beak, frequently to dismantle items I thought I had placed safely out of his reach. I found only one thing that kept him from objects of his desire — long skinny animal balloons. He was terrified of them. Without these blessed objects, life with Bert would have been impossible. Strategic placement of animal balloons around the house kept Bert from destroying our most precious possessions.

During the first few months of his stay here Bert's favorite night perch was in our bathroom on top of the shower door, his bottom conveniently facing into the shower. He quickly became territorial about this spot after dark, and anyone going in to use the bathroom would have to endure a

severe raven scolding. Bless our two teenage sons who decided on their own to give up taking showers after dark for Bert's sake.

I liked the bathroom perch idea. For one thing it was easy to clean up in the morning, and for another I could shoo Bert into the bathroom (the only room with a door in the house) when his antics got a bit much. He understood this arrangement too as became evident one day: I had just finished cleaning one mess he had made when I turned around and saw that he was already starting another project — he was intensely working on turning a loaf of bread into crumbs. Not that he was *eating* any of it — oh no! He was purely enjoying the act of dismantling it.

With each step I took toward him he began working faster and harder, until, when I had almost reached him, he dropped the bread bag, walked into the bathroom, and hopped obediently onto his shower perch as if to reprimand himself for his naughtiness.

As time went on, however, he resented the closing of the bathroom door more and more, and finally communicated this to us in his ravenly manner. One evening we had put him in the bathroom so we could safely go out to eat. When we returned I opened the bathroom door to let him out. But what a sight. Toilet paper — lots of it! The roll must have been first measured

for length, and then shredded. A spare roll was soaking in the toilet.

Much of what little jewelry I owned had been disassembled and, along with every one of our towels also stuffed into the toilet. Retrieving the jewelry proved difficult. Everything else formerly on shelves was on the floor, much of it in pieces. The garbage had been emptied, and the most private pieces of feminine trash selected, taken apart and colorfully arranged across the bathroom floor. The giant wrath of a two-pound bird.

Soon he figured out that if he simply didn't go into the bathroom any more there would be no door closing on him. He chose a new spot to spend the night: the topmost shelf above the kitchen sink where he could see all the action and join in at a moment's notice.

So night showers were okay again, but late-night food fixing was not, as it awakened the interest of both ravens who were expert thieves of not only food, but utensils, margarine tubs, salt and pepper shakers, or anything else that looked like it might provide some fun.

Split-second timing was essential in their thievery, as Bert demonstrated soon after his arrival — when the spoon full of ice cream travelling toward Jim's mouth arrived empty. During this time food preparation evolved into an art at

our house – not culinary, but martial.

Our sons did not always appreciate the inconveniences, and Jim and I became experts at sighing. When the lights dimmed, the ravens finally tucked in, *unless* Bert wanted to play a favorite game, which could only be played at night: it required patiently waiting for Jim to fall asleep. After all, surprise is an important element in successfully catching and killing toes covered up by blankets.

Surprise was also the key in swooping down and quickly biting innocent little dachshund's tails. Every opportunity was seized for this mischief, but Tad the dachshund got his revenge by sniffing out and eating Bert's hidden food stashes.

Jim and Bert often played together with a manzanita stick. Bert pretended it was prey, chased it across the bed grabbing it with his feet. When Jim pulled on it Bert held on, eventually lying on his back, feet up in the air, then hanging upside down on the stick. One could clearly see his brain whirring as he looked around contemplating his upside-down environment.

Bert inspected anything he could get his beak on, but his favorite objects were knives, especially my folding "Sodbuster" pocketknife. One time he flew through the house with a 24-inch stainless steel pruning saw in his beak, pirate-style.

Bert constantly searched for good hiding places for his loot. Not just any place would do. Several had to be tried out before he was satisfied. Once I thought my knife was gone for good, but three months later I discovered it behind some books on a shelf. I had been searching for hours – not for the knife, but for the source of a horrible stench in the house, which turned out to be a decomposed anchovy stashed away for a later snack – between the pages of Webster's Dictionary.

Bert watched us curiously, on many occasions staring into our books, and, for a long time, held the opinion that books were useless except as aides in turning meat into jerky. But one day he discovered the entertainment value of paperbacks: the right spot to stash stolen items is right underneath the front book cover. It takes some doing to make the cover fit over the object,

but once that's done it's time to check on the thing by hammering a hole into the middle of the cover with that cool toolkit beak – and peek in to see if it's still there. This of course brings up the next question: will the object fit through the hole? After pulling it out he realized that the place was no longer a secret now and flew off in search of a new hiding place.

I found out that pillowcases also make great hiding places after removing a mouse hindquarter from my ear after retiring to bed one night.

As time went on I got quite accustomed to these unique experiences, but still, Bert would have been evicted by me were it not for Jim, whose tolerance and understanding of Bert's nature helped me past my horrified reactions.

Bert escaped repeatedly by both figuring out how to open the aviary door, a three-step operation, or simply lulling us into a sense of security en route from aviary to house (we carried Bert cuddled against our chest). He'd

make a dash for it at a most unexpected moment.

During these accidental outings Bert *always* sought out large gatherings of people – especially at schools. True to his educational permit, he visited St. Vincent's School, La Colina Junior High School, The Open Alternative School, and Bishop Diego High School's football team. His fearless approaches and thievery (lunches, pencils, car keys) caused a wide range of reactions from delight to curiosity to fear to aggressive rock throwing.

He became quite famous on the local news when he decided to participate in a golf-tournament. He would pick up golf balls and place them where he thought was a better location for them. When the local flock of crows began dive-bombing him, he found refuge underneath a picnic table attended to by a group of golfers having lunch. The food however proved irresistible to Bert, and soon he was dining along with the cautiously amused golfers.



Photo by Gabriele Drozdowski

Kong on his tree stump perch.



Bert(a) in her flight enclosure.

Bert's latest escape took him on top of the entrance door to a voting location where he greeted surprised incoming voters. I think Bert found life out there a bit hard. He always decided to come back – or allow himself to become captured a few days later. On one occasion he returned with a head wound (probably from a rock hitting him), and another time he had a serious case of diarrhea.

Kong

Our second raven, Kong, arrived at our place in an almost catatonic state. He just sat on his perch for days on end, only moving from this spot to eat or drink – or to charge at me when I came in to feed or clean. He liked men, so my entries into the aviary were met by fierce attacks. I worked hard on establishing a more trusting relationship: I brought him treats, talked to him, and really went out of my way to change his mind about women.

After about four weeks we were apparently really getting somewhere. I

was sure of it. He had stopped the attacks, and would occasionally accept food from me (although Bert always tried to snatch it out from under him with split-second timing).

When I came in for one feeding I was feeling especially good about the improved situation, thinking how my kindness and positive thoughts toward him had been doing so much good after his long life of cruel solitary captivity. I was very involved in thinking about this positive stuff: how

Kong had changed, and how all I needed to do was to continue giving him love, think loving thoughts toward him, etc., etc.

Suddenly I noticed him moving towards me on the branch. "Yes," I thought, feeling quite moved myself, "love works! He understands! He's coming over to be friends." All of my love and tender feelings rose to the surface as Kong came closer seemingly just as enamored of me as I was of him.

His lightening-fast vice-grip bite went through several layers of cloth-

ing, and left a huge black and blue bruise on my arm for the next several weeks. After that I resorted to the garden hose a couple of times – and that stopped the whole thing.

After the hose incident, he *did* loosen up. My continued (although not quite so naïve, and definitely more cautious) efforts paid off when I quite by accident discovered his love for being "preened" around his eyes. I was standing outside the aviary one day when he walked over to me. I quickly tried to think up something safe to do with him, and broke off a little twig, which I playfully stuck through the wire. I expected him to tug on it or break it, but somehow ended up petting him with it around his eye area, and watched – to my amazement – how he melted into a soft black feather ball. His eyes glazed over as he fell into a trance that lasted for some time even after I stopped.

A couple of weeks later he was sitting on our table in the house – just sitting, not moving – as he often did. and I decided to pull up a chair and join him for a while. After we both had been sitting like this for several minutes, just feeling each other out, he walked towards me, looked me in the eye, and I got the definite feeling that he wanted me to "preen" around his eyes.

Well, I didn't have a twig handy, and still had that bruise on my arm, so I was understandably reluctant. Instead I decided to take the opportunity to get back at him. I told him in human language (which I knew he couldn't understand), that if he really wanted me to rub above his eyes he would have to prove to me that's what he really wanted by coming over to me (like, "God, if you're really there – give me a sign").

Of course I expected no such thing but to my amazement he walked right up to me and looked at me again – expectantly. Humbled I swallowed my fear and began to stroke his eyelids with my fingers. He did not bite, but proceeded to just "melt" into that black feather ball. It was a very special moment for both of us, which left me pondering the whole thing for quite some time thereafter.

I don't know whether he changed, or I just learned to read him better, but he stopped biting and charging after

that. His loud protests at Jim's handling in the evening (when it's time to come into the house) turned into his walking up to the aviary door in eager anticipation of the "house fun."

Then one day I realized that I had to re-assess my old opinion of him being easier than Bert to have in the house (as he never did anything except just sit there).

He started out in the morning by throwing his stainless steel water bowl off the refrigerator (where he likes to sleep) watching it carefully as it splashed and loudly crashed on the ceramic tile floor. Then he hopped onto the stove and, one by one, took each of the 4 metal grates off the burners watching them crash onto the floor (chipping the tile floor). Next he worked on the paper towel roll, shredding the paper so meticulously I had to admire his attention to detail. After gathering three cloth kitchen towels, he strutted King-Kong style (that's where he got his name) across the living room floor to his perch, a real tree stump Jim fixed up for him.

Kong began to rip bark into neat little shreds and carried it back – one beak full at a time – to a corner under the kitchen cabinets behind the dishrack. We had watched him climb over the dishrack into that corner a few times during past evenings wondering what he was up to.

As I watched him arrange dishtowels, paper shreds and bark it finally dawned on me. Could it be that he was making a nest? Of all things, this is the last thing I would have expected from this old raven. But then again, the one thing I *have* learned from my time spent with these incredible beings is that I can most definitely expect the unexpected.

The purpose of this article is to offer insight into the species' behavior and increase reader's awareness and appreciation of these birds. As you have probably discovered by now, ravens are frequently aggressive, unpredictable, and destructive and therefore do not make good pets. Keeping or breeding ravens is illegal.

Kong has since died of a large liver tumor, probably caused by the years of neglect and inadequate diet.

Bert, on the other hand, after DNA testing, turned out to be Berta, and is now doing wildlife education programs with "Zoo To You" (www.zootoyou.com) in Paso Robles, California. 🐦

Cleaning Safely

by Carolyn Swicegood, Hollywood, FL



Swicegood's natural air fresheners.

As the year 2000 approaches, there is hardly a corner of the world unpolluted by man-made chemicals. We as consumers created the demand for these earth-destroying substances and we now must do whatever we can to stop the destruction of our planet. A good place to start is at home.

Thanks to cleaning products and the many other chemicals that we use, our homes and indoor aviaries can be compared to miniature chemical factories. Indoor air pollution endangers not only human health but the health and longevity of parrots who are more sensitive and susceptible to damage by chemicals than we. Chemical levels can be up to 70 times higher inside our homes than outside. Over one hundred chemicals commonly found in our homes have been linked to allergies, birth defects, cancer, psychological abnormalities, skin problems, headaches, depression, joint pain, chronic fatigue, chest pains, dizziness, loss of sleep, respiratory disorders, and more. The better insulated our homes and aviaries are, the more toxic the indoor air can be.

Chemical sprays never should be used near parrots. Heating and air con-

ditioning systems can distribute the chemical toxins to every room in the home. Non-spray chemical solutions also can pollute indoor air. Even in outdoor aviaries, hazardous chemicals can be inhaled, ingested, and absorbed through the skin of birds' feet as they use perches with residual toxic chemicals improperly rinsed after cleaning. By becoming educated consumers and changing our methods of cleaning, we can improve the health and life expectancy of our birds and ourselves. By using non-toxic cleaning products, we protect the health of our families and birds while we promote a healthier environment. Here are some safe, alternative methods of cleaning our homes and aviaries.

All Purpose Cleaners

- Grapefruit Seed Extract (GSE) is a relatively new disinfectant that kills staph, strep, candida, salmonella, and e-coli microorganisms. It also is effective against Giardia. Citricidal is the powdered double-strength version of GSE and is available only through mail order. GSE is a liquid and is available in most health food stores. Nutribiotic, Agrisept, and ProSeed are some of the brand names of GSE. It is non-toxic

Photo by Susie Christian