

The Myth of Parrot Aggression

By J. Hooimeijer, DVM, CPBC

Avian veterinarians and parrot behavior consultants are dealing with the issue of “aggression” and “biting” in parrots all the time in companion parrots as well as in parrots kept in aviculture. Biting behavior has to be considered as not just biting behavior but as part of a complex behavior determined by the circumstances.

The main causes of aggression and biting will be discussed as well as the tools to deal with the problem without creating stress for the bird, the owner and the practitioner. Misunderstandings about aggression on the part of owners and veterinarians and the fear of getting bitten are constant issues.

One of the salient features of a parrot is an impressive beak. It is also often the source of considerable anxiety for parents who associate a beak with biting and are concerned about the damage that could be inflicted to themselves or their children. Therefore it is important to realize that a parrot does not use its beak in the wild in order to injure or kill, but for climbing, eating, preening, feeding youngsters, partners and for defending.

Understanding the background of behavior and proper handling of parrots will make all the difference.

Introduction

In general, there is still a lack of awareness that with parrots we are dealing with non-domesticated prey animals that are kept in captivity. Living with and working with parrots as care takers and veterinarians, it is essential to know and understand the basics of handling and manipulating the birds in a professional manner. A professional manner is about preventing problems from occurring, avoiding unnecessary stress and (self) trauma to the animal and avoiding biting to the handlers. It is within veterinary science that the major dogma dealing with parrots is Do Not Harm. Reducing stress is an important responsibility for everybody dealing with and working with parrots.

Without knowledge and understanding about normal behavior in the context of a non-domesticated animal, many owners consider normal parrot behavior, like being noisy, as a problem. Many owners also underestimate the high intelligence of parrots. Therefore, when normal behavior is misunderstood and parrot intelligence is underestimated, a wide variety of behavior problems are apt to occur depending upon the individual parrot, species and circumstances surrounding the bird. Screaming, feather picking and biting are common behavior problems.

Within the Clinic for Birds it is my experience that many parrot owners /caretakers show that they feel uncomfortable dealing with a parrot. It is also not uncommon that veterinarians show fear of the parrot and have a problem handling and manipulating the bird. Under those circumstances it is predictable that parrots

show behavior problems.

The beak of a parrot, especially a cockatoo or a macaw, is an imposing instrument that many bird owners regard with a certain amount of awe and anxiety. The power behind a parrot's beak is well known to everyone. In the wild, beaks are used to crack open hard nuts and strong seed coverings. Nesting holes in trees are enlarged using this same powerful tool. In captivity parrots adjust and destroy nest boxes, tree branches are turned into matchsticks, nuts fastened with a wrench are loosened from their bolts, and toys and furniture are reduced to fragments, all by these same beaks, and seemingly without effort. The amount of power that a parrot can exert with a lightweight skull and a lightweight beak is exceedingly impressive. By combining strong muscles and the hinge construction of the upper beak, parrot beaks can be as effective as a pair of strong sharp pliers.

Apart from eating and adjusting the nesting site, the beak also has many other important functions. It is used as a third foot when the birds are climbing to keep them steady. It is used to hold objects so that the sensitive tongue can investigate them. The beak is also the instrument that is used to care for the bird's own feathers and for those of his or her partner. Beaks also help care for young birds.

Biting is a frequently cited reason for relinquishing a pet parrot, who then disappears into the cycle of sale and re-sale, or is dumped in a rescue centre. It is the experience within the Clinic for Birds that the arrival of a baby in the house often coincides with the departure of the parrot because of the new parents' fear that their offspring will not be safe around their pet. If it's not the concern of the parents, then it is the concern of the grandparents. That beak—what damage that could do to little fingers, toes, ears or a little nose!

Parrots are Built and Behave as Prey Animals

Parrots are prey animals by nature. A typical anatomical feature of parrots as prey animals is the location of their eyes at the sides of their head as this enables the parrot to observe the whole environment. The eyes of predators are positioned in a way enabling the animals to watch straightforward with binocular vision. This enables the predator to determine the precise position of the prey and the distance between predator and prey.

The fear of being killed determines a major part of normal behavior. In situations in which a prey animal is not able to prevent a dangerous situation or escape from the predator one of the survival strategies left is to bite and intimidate the predator. It makes sense that under those situations biting is meant to cause serious damage to the predator as part of their survival strategy. The fear of being killed is also normal behavior within captivity.

Dealing with parrots without understanding the consequences

The Myth of Parrot Aggression

of the specific characteristics of parrots as prey animals can create problems. Humans have all the characteristics of a predator. The eyes of humans are positioned like those of dogs, cats, owls and birds of prey with binocular vision. Many well meaning people are intimidating their birds without realizing it. Being nice does not solve the problem. Demonstrating respect for the background of parrots will make a difference.

Breeding pairs sit or eat next to each other and observe each other with one eye. Positive social behavior includes turning the neck and back to the other bird to show the opposite of intimidating behavior. How different from human behavior among lovers. Lovers will sit opposite to each other in a restaurant looking into each others eyes. Parrots sit next to each other in a restaurant looking with one eye. Parrots that are intimidating another parrot mimic the posture of a predator looking straightforward with their body pointed towards the other bird. The same posture can be seen in frightened birds that have no possibility of escape. Under these circumstances "aggression" should be considered a defensive behavior instead of an aggressive behavior.

Biting Other Parrots in the Wild

There are many misunderstandings about use of biting behavior to establish dominance within the flock. There is no evidence

that this kind of dominant behavior exists among parrots in nature. There is instead a belief that a parrot who is sitting high in the tree must be the dominant bird.

Observing the behavior of birds that are looking for a high position, we can see that those birds are the first ones to alarm the other birds or are expressing territorial, defensive behavior at a nesting site but upon facing a predator these birds will fly away. It is striking that there is no significant data to support the idea that parrots inflict serious or fatal bite wounds on each other in the wild. Also, there is no evidence that indicates that deliberately wounding or killing their fellows is part of the natural behavior of parrots. Although they are equipped with a built-in lethal weapon that could easily maim or kill another bird of their own kind, such behavior is practically unknown in nature. Debilitating members of the same species does not seem to be in the interest of the preservation of parrot species.

When breeding pairs are in the neighborhood of their nesting site, territorial behavior is normal. Skirmishes certainly take place, but these are mostly displays and mock fights in which real damage is seldom done. Parrots learn early in their development to read the body language of their co-species and know precisely what is permitted and how far they can go in their combativeness. Playful romps with other youngsters are part of the learning and

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The Myth of Parrot Aggression

socialization process for every young parrot and there is no documentation known to the author that it has ever led to serious injury.

Biting Other Parrots in Captivity

In captivity biting problems are seen most frequently among cockatoos kept in aviculture, where males have been known to seriously injure or even kill a female. Birds of some species like love birds and forpus species have even been known to attack and even kill sick or wounded fellows. Within the Clinic for Birds, serious

head wounds have also been observed in budgies and cockatiels when they are housed in same-species groups. It is not uncommon that the dead birds are then cannibalized. The author is not aware to what extent, if at all, this occurs in nature.

Limitations due to the size of the housing of birds in captivity often hinder avoidance behavior or make it impossible for the birds to respond appropriately to body language that in the wild would elicit a retreat from a confrontational situation. Unable to flee, a bird becomes insecure and defensive. Defensive behavior is often associated with aggression. Attacking or biting other birds in such a situation can be regarded as unnatural behavior due to the unnatural circumstances of captivity. Colony breeding of captive hyacinths macaws was stopped after an incident in which a male got attacked and killed by another male.

We can regard biting in captivity as an expression of insecurity, and thus part of a behavior problem because of unnatural circumstances. Insecurity is observed in birds during periods of hormonal or sexual activity, and in instances of physical problems or sickness.

Birds with a strong attachment to their owner exhibit bonding behavior, which in turn causes territorial behavior towards other members of the family. This territoriality is often considered

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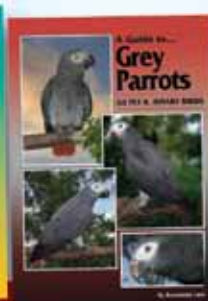
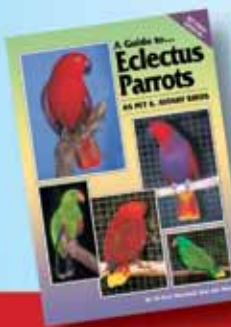


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The Myth of Parrot Aggression

aggressive or dominant behavior although it is actually insecure and defensive behavior. Away from his own territory, or when the partner/owner is absent, the bird behaves completely differently. The most striking examples are female lovebirds that act very territorial and offensive in their cage. The same bird outside of the cage in a neutral environment shows positive social and gentle behavior. A bird should not be labelled an aggressive biting bird without understanding the specific circumstances and background of the behavior.

Biting People in Captivity

Considering the interaction between humans as predators and parrots as prey animals it makes sense that parrots have reason to demonstrate a lot of defensive behavior. There is a constant stream of stories and anecdotes from parrot owners who report having been bitten by their pets. However, according to the experience within the Clinic for Birds, the number of instances where subsequent medical attention was necessary, is exceedingly rare. This is surprising considering the amount of damage a parrot beak could do if actually used with the intention to maim or injure. This shows that it is rare for parrots to intend to create serious injury. This is amazing considering that the human predator frequently intimidates the prey birds.

In the last 24 years, the Clinic for Birds has not seen a single incident of a parrot biting and causing serious damage to a child. In addition to that, consistent inquiry by this author as to personal, anecdotal or media-covered experience of bitten children has so far not uncovered a single incident. Again, considering the actual capabilities of a parrot beak, and the size of a child's finger, nose, or ear, one might have expected to hear stories of severed or mutilated young appendages. There is no guarantee that accidents like this will never occur but those accidents have to be considered as extremely rare and can be considered as unnatural even in captivity. Within the Clinic for Birds the experience is that parrots react completely differently to children compared to the way they react to adults. Apparently parrots view children in much the same way as human adults do. Children are not seen as threatening or intimidating and therefore do not make the birds feel insecure, thus creating defensive behavior. This is all the more striking when compared with the behavior of dogs. When a dog owner is afraid that his pet might bite a child, his insecurity confuses the dog and increases the chances that the dog indeed will bite the child.

In spite of the fact that most parents feel anxiety about the perceived risk that a parrot will bite a child, parrots do not respond to this by biting. At most, the bird plays a game in which he pretends to bite, but does not carry out the "threat." The frightened reaction of the parents can be regarded as a "reward" for this undesired behavior, thus reinforcing it. Even in situations where one could think that the parrot had every reason to bite, as when a child

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The Myth of Parrot Aggression

“pets” too hard, pulls a tail, or intentionally or inadvertently teases, parrots do not inflict the expected wounds. At most, a black-and-blue mark may be the result, and this is most often caused by pulling back of the finger or hand that was being “held” in the beak. Apparently parrots have a “natural” inhibition when it comes to biting children. This is all the more reason to respect their natural behavior. Parrots biting children is a sad myth.

Biting as Learned Behavior

As with any behavior, we have to consider that biting will

increase when the consequence of the behavior is rewarded. There is no such thing as “just biting.” It is not uncommon that caretakers warn me that a parrot hates men and bites them. This is an example of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The caretakers are surprised when a man not hindered by prejudice walks away with the bird on his hand after a few minutes.

Most owners do not realize that parrots use their beak as a tool to climb and do not have the intention to bite. This may be an explanation why biting in hand reared babies is a very common problem. Babies use their beak to explore. When normal behavior like grabbing a finger is creating a predictable response the behavior will be repeated and becomes unwanted behavior because it is rewarded. Withdrawing the hand, walking away from the bird, getting angry or any response can be considered as rewarding and a reason to repeat the behavior.

There are always specific circumstances, reasons and consequences that determined the behavior in the past, and which make the behavior occur over and over again. Any response can be considered as a reward. Asking the bird to be gentle can be reason to bite again to make you say it again. Waiting until exploring becomes hurtful and responding at that moment is creating unwanted behavior. Any punishment, even “a time out,” can become a reward as in young children who create a problem to

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make everybody angry or desperate. It can be a real challenge to find and acknowledge the reward that is the main reason for the bird to perform that behavior repeatedly.

Preventing biting behavior

Biting behavior is frequently determined by the circumstances as it is in nature. Territorial behavior is determined by the circumstances in which pair bonding and defending a nesting site are predominant factors. The same birds do not show any "aggressive" behavior towards other birds within a flock that are gathered at a site with plenty of food or water.

It is important to understand that the birdcage can be considered as the nesting site. When the bird feels insecure the instinct is to defend the nest with territorial behavior. It explains the defensive behavior of birds that are approached while sitting in or on top of their cage. The same bird can show very different behavior sitting on a separate play gym.

We also see a big difference depending the location of the parrot. A parrot sitting in a high place will usually show defensive behavior when approached. Sitting in a lower position that same parrot is happy to step up to the hand. It explains why the same bird, sitting on the shoulder or sitting on the hand of the owner is expressing different behaviors.

Our advice is to ensure that parrots have the company to be the socially interactive birds that they are. Any isolated social animal will develop insecure behavior. However we do not recommend human pairbonding in companion birds. "Pair bonding" with the owner creates "aggressive" behavior towards other family members. Having a male and a female of the same species can create typical territorial behavior that is creating a problem for the birds as well as for the caretakers. Having a parrot as a companion bird can be considered as a very unnatural situation, having a breeding pair of parrots as companion birds is even more unnatural. It is the experience of the author that having different species as companion parrots can prevent many behavior problems. A parrot placed on a table in the examination room in between the owner and the veterinarian creates defensive behavior in the prey animal. Having a bird on the hand next to our body or having the bird on the hand in front of our body makes a difference because parrots sitting next to each other feel comfortable.

Prevention starts with understanding the background of the biting behavior, looking at the circumstances, and the body language of the parrot. Prevention is about creating circumstances in which the bird is comfortable and secure. Prevention is about showing an attitude and body language as owner and veterinarian that is respectful. Prevention is about understanding the circumstances,



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The Myth of Parrot Aggression

the reason for the unwanted behavior and the consequences of biting behavior. It is vital to determine what is rewarding the behavior. It is vital to evaluate the reason for the parrot to show biting behavior even in non threatening circumstances.

Handling Parrots That Show “Aggression”

We always have to realize that dealing with “aggressive” behavior is dealing with the whole bird because there is never just “aggressive behavior.” Any unwanted behavior is created by and part of the circumstances and consequences of the past. The typical question: “how can we teach the bird not to bite,” is incorrect. The correct question is: “why is the bird biting, how have we reinforced biting and what can we do to reward a different behavior?” We need to approach a specific problem with a “holistic” approach.

As with humans, first impressions are very important. We can create a situation that causes the bird to show interest in the caretaker/veterinarian. The bird should understand that the caretaker/veterinarian is knowledgeable about the background of parrots and the species involved. One way to show that we care about the bird is to call the bird by name. To show respect for the bird as prey we can walk in the direction of the bird without looking directly at it, and by having a posture that does not look like a predator going after prey. Approaching the parrot indirectly without watching and turning our back towards the parrot is showing the opposite of intimidating behavior and will allow the bird to realize you are a friend. Watching the bird from aside telling the bird that they are beautiful will help the bird to relax. This positive attitude will create trust and prevent defensive behavior. This positive attitude will create a situation so the bird is willing to cooperate and step up onto the hand.

In the context of the veterinary clinic we have to realize that owners may also be nervous and uncertain about what to expect during the consultation, examination and treatment of their bird.

The attitude of the owner can have an influence on the behavior of the parrots in the clinic, and is an important factor for the veterinarian to keep in mind before approaching the parrot. The caregiver and the parrot need to experience a professional and friendly approach based on knowledge and experience. Professionals should show control, be nice and also interesting because a professional is also a teacher.

In daily practice dealing with “aggressive behavior” we learn that other behavior problems are often not understood or even acknowledged by the caregiver. A fearful, screaming parrot in the examination room is likely to have behavior problems at home and may be a biting bird. Caregivers usually explain that the parrot never screams at home and is just afraid of the unknown situation. We talk about basic behavior issues with the caretaker before approaching and dealing with the parrot. Not paying attention to the parrot during the conversation with the caregiver gives the



parrot the opportunity to learn who you are and what your intentions are. The owners sit on a chair while I stand. The cage is put behind my back or the parrot is put on a T-stand in the corner of the room instead of on top of the table where they are the focus of attention. The caregiver is asked to look at the whole situation and not the parrot. Every time the caregiver looks at the bird when it shows fear, it rewards and confirms the fear and uncertainty.

Every response to unwanted behavior like biting will/can be perceived as a reward by the parrot. Even ignoring can be perceived as a reward because it shows there is a problem. The caretaker/veterinarian should act as if there is no problem at all thereby not rewarding or acknowledging the behavior.

The Clinic for Birds has developed a five-step behavior protocol to show respect for the bird as a prey animal, to reward wanted behavior, to acknowledge the bird’s intelligence and to redirect unwanted behavior. Using this protocol, biting as an unwanted behavior is not rewarded. Touching, feeling and even biting a specific object becomes a wanted and rewarded behavior. Using this protocol, unwanted behavior is redirected into wanted behavior using positive reinforcement by rewarding a chain of wanted behaviors.

Using the 5 step behavior procedure for less than a minute makes it possible to towel the parrot for a physical examination, to take a blood sample or to groom the beak or nails without creating a traumatic experience for the parrot. Owners will be amazed to see that parrots, after handling, feel more comfortable than before handling.

Five-step Behavior Protocol

Although it is not possible to describe all the different possibilities dealing with each parrot and each species, there are common guidelines to follow when dealing with parrots. The most important aspect of dealing with parrots is the attitude of the person or persons caring for the parrot. A basic protocol for veterinarians

and caregivers of parrots can be summarized in five steps. This protocol can also be used with any parrot showing any problem behavior like biting.

STEP 1 Establish yourself as a leader through nurturing guidance. You must demonstrate to the parrot that you are in charge through your confidence and self-assurance. Show that you are comfortable and that you don't have a problem with anything. Be a positive role model. This should be conveyed without looking at the parrot and without interaction!

Be silly, play with an item, throw a little ball against the ceiling or whatever to get the birds attention. Parrots feel comfortable with people who are comfortable in the presence of parrots and with themselves. Your interaction around the parrot will tell him all about you. It means that people often have to act and play a role around the parrot.

STEP 2 Step 2 can be considered as rewarding the behavior that has been manipulated by our attitude performing step 1. Looking at us and observing that we feel great/happy under all circumstances makes the bird become comfortable. That's reason to reward the bird with a sideway body position. Establish yourself as the one who is showing unconditional love and care. Tell the parrots that it's the most beautiful creature on this planet and how precious the bird is to you. Show the parrot that you love him as the most beautiful creature you have ever seen and mean it because your positive attitude is a reward. Be a professional actor.

STEP 3 It is important to reward the intelligence of the parrot by sharing, in detail, what there is to see around him, i.e. birds in the trees, toys on the table, colors, shapes, sizes, objects. Establish yourself as the best teacher the parrot can wish for. At the same time you show your own intelligence. Make him feel important with a comfortable and positive posture. Parrots truly enjoy anybody who is sharing knowledge and enthusiasm. No question about it they will listen, watch and learn. Reward the bird for listening, watching and learning.

STEP 4 As a reward for listening and learning tell the bird that it's okay to touch your pen, toy, paper or towel and praise the bird enthusiastically for doing so. Only let them touch items when you tell them it is okay. When they reach out for anything, just take it away without a word and present it after a few seconds after telling them that now it's okay to touch or even bite into the item. They are then in general, very gentle touching with their tongue. Allow the bird to participate in the learning process by offering him new, small, nonthreatening objects. Allow the bird to touch and feel the objects and allow it to investigate. Praise each positive move. Each time you present your hand showing that the bird may step-up and he does it, praise him enthusiastically. The parrot will perform the wanted behavior because it is being positively reinforced according to the principles of positive reinforcement and not because of a command.

STEP 5 It is important to create circumstances in which we feel comfortable. When we feel comfortable there is reason for the bird to feel comfortable. When the parrot shows fear, do not reassure the bird or explain that there is no reason to be afraid!! Reassurements can easily create more fear and insecurity because it is in a way confirming that there is reason to be insecure. It is the experience of the author that after point 1-4 there is a situation created that can be described as mutual respect and mutual trust. When the bird fears an object like the towel, be understanding and start over again with step 1 of the protocol. Soon the bird will discover what behavior is rewarded and what behavior is not rewarded. When the bird is showing that it feels comfortable by touching an object it has previously feared, reward the bird by telling how brave and wonderful he/she is. Each time he overcomes a fear, reward the bird. All parrots need to overcome fear and insecurity and this will help to stimulate self-esteem. The outcome is to create a situation in which a parrot accepts novel situations. It can be examined, have blood taken, groomed, wings clipped, gently toweled etc. Owners are often amazed to see how their parrots feel comfortable and step up after taking a blood sample or giving injections. This protocol is a way of desensitizing the parrot. Showing respect and trust creates respect, trust and self-esteem.

It is critical to always use the five points in the correct order. The whole protocol may take less than one minute and can even be performed within 30 seconds. Within the Clinic for Birds, the minimum length of high quality time spent per day with a parrot experiencing behavior problems is 20 minutes. Working with a bird for 10 minutes, two to three times a day can make all the difference in the world. At the same time, it's important not to respond to undesirable behavior of the parrot all the time. Responding to behavior that is not manipulated is rewarding that behavior. Behavior that is rewarded that way can easily become unwanted behavior.

The five-step protocol is creating a relationship based on mutual respect and trust. It's amazing that it doesn't take a lot of time to create a positive situation. Depending the situation, and on request of the caregiver, birds can be hospitalized because of behavior problems like biting, severe feather picking or self mutilating. Within the Clinic for Birds I use some of my own birds to show the frightened parrots that they can trust me and the situation. This works very well because birds learn by observing.

Within the examination room it may only take a few minutes, using the five-step protocol, before performing any handling to ensure that the birds understands that the veterinarian does not intend to do harm but is using positive reinforcement to achieve positive behavior even under scary circumstances. It's like educating blind guide dogs or police horses to not experience fear of fireworks or other loud noises. It's amazing to see how parrots easily accept procedures out of trust and respect. After doing a good job they show even more respect and trust.

The Myth of Parrot Aggression



Parrots respond to the positive situations that are in their environment. The most powerful positive situation has to be handling the parrot. This teaches the parrot and the owner to be calm and confident. It is impressive how parrots are able to adapt to fearful situations. Wild caught parrots have shown that over the centuries. Parrots can easily overcome fear in a way that most humans can not. This demonstrates their impressive intelligence and survival skills as a result of their evolution.

I tell my clients that I do not expect them to get the same results within 10 minutes. They should have realistic expectations, and I share my experience and knowledge as a parrot behavior consultant and avian veterinarian over the past 25 years. It is a joy to see that owners are able to make a dramatic change in their attitude but it may take weeks or months before owners are able to consistently change their attitude towards the bird, learn the proper timing of positive reinforcement and redirect unwanted behavior.

Wing-Clipping as Part of Parrot Care

As social and intelligent birds, parrots need to be part of social interactions with family members inside and outside. It is also vital for any bird to be outside as much as possible because of the need for sunlight and fresh air. Birds that are allowed to fly around in the house in general do not come outside because the cages are often too large to handle and it happens only infrequently when everyone is drinking tea in the garden. It is a risk however that birds that are allowed to fly inside escape because the window or the door is open. It is the experience of the author that very few owners are capable of dealing with a fully flighted parrot. Losing a bird that way is a tragedy, especially when it happens in the winter during bad weather conditions and the bird disappears and is never found again. Over the years, wing-clipping has become a major part of taking care of a companion parrot.

Most parrots are able to fly with the well-known exception of

the Kakapo (*Strigops habroptilus*). Flying for parrots is essential for survival as they look for a place to eat, drink and for a safe place to sleep. Considering that parrots are prey animals, flying is also a way to escape from predators. Flying can also be a part of their natural courtship behavior and providing food for their partner and youngsters. In nature flying takes only a very small part of day. We have to consider that flying is a dangerous activity making the bird a target for birds of prey. In nature flying has different functions and most of them are no longer valid as a companion parrot or as parrot within aviculture. In captivity parrots mainly fly to look for a safe, higher place.

Within the Clinic for Birds, wing clipping is never performed simply because it has benefits for the owner. Wing clipping is done only with thorough behavioral consultation. Wing clipping is more than just clipping wing feathers. Wing clipping has to be part of responsible care of the needs of a parrot that is kept as a member of the family. We do not perform wing clipping until the owner is well educated about the risks of flying parrots. Wing clipping should only be performed in parrots that have learned and practiced flying as part of their physical development. In young parrots wing clipping should be done gradually over a period of several weeks.

Within the Clinic for Birds the first time the procedure is performed it is in combination with a behavioral consultation lasting at least an hour. Owners receive a written report and recommendations and are asked to call after 7-10 days with an update. The caregivers are encouraged to keep a logbook to write down specific situations and questions that arise. In the Clinic for Birds the next behavior consultation is recommended after 4 weeks to reevaluate the situation, answer questions, to discuss future possibilities and to further educate the caregivers.

In our clinic we recommend that the owner visit the clinic with their bird at least once a year for a physical examination and for a behavior consultation. Many owners visit every 6-8 months.

Parrots with clipped wings have many advantages:

- Birds develop a higher self-esteem, and they show less fear under different circumstances.
- The parrot can join the caregiver in more activities ensuring better bonding.
- Parrots show less fear/ defensive / insecure/ “aggressive” and other unwanted behaviors.
- Birds can be taken out into the garden daily, hiking or biking into the woods, on a boat trip etc.
- Other members of the family and friends are able to take the bird on their hand and interact with them.

Birds with a full wing are not able or allowed to participate in all kinds of family activities and are confined to spend their time in a cage waiting till the family comes home again. Wing-clipping can be done in a series of sessions and is always symmetrical



so the bird is in balance and can exercise wing flipping as a normal part of its behavior. It is advised to wing-clip young parrots after giving them the opportunity to fly as part of their physical development. After a period of time, depending on the species and the circumstances, wing-clipping is performed so that the bird is able to fly for about three meters to prevent injuries. The number of outer wing feathers that are clipped is dependent on the species. For African grey parrots we clip about eight feathers, for cockatiels more. The feathers are clipped about 2 cm from the upper wing cover feathers.

During molting, clipped feathers will be replaced by new feathers. It takes about three to four weeks to create a new feather the same length as the clipped feathers. The number of times new feathers have to be clipped depends on the species and the molting activity of the individual bird. Wing-clipping is a reversible procedure. Owners are educated to perform the procedure of wing clipping as a daily routine to ensure that the procedure is experienced as a positive part of the daily routine ending with rewarding the bird for its behavior. This daily routine also ensures that the parrot cannot "suddenly" fly again. The same procedure is advised for trimming the nails using a file.

In daily practice we experience fewer problems with wing-clipped parrots when there is a need to manipulate them for a physical examination, treatment or injection. They show respect and trust when we need to do the nails and beaks and show self-confidence afterwards. They do not develop what would be described in human behavior as "hard feelings." Birds that are not wing-clipped in general show fear and are more difficult to handle, thus experiencing a simple procedure as a stressful event. They show a lack of trust, and no self-esteem.

Owners send photographs of the events they have undertaken. Walking, biking and playing outside with their birds in the woods and in the sun, taking the birds for a holiday or visiting friends. Even parrots that are kept for decades in a cage, easily adapt after being wing clipped and when the caretakers change their behavior. These birds show, in a short time, the benefits of the owners change in attitude and behavior. Owners often recognize that wing clipping has been a huge advantage for their bird's welfare, well being and health.

It has become my experience that wing clipping as part of taking care of a parrot can prevent common problems. Wing clipping provides the birds more freedom and joy than having the

The Myth of Parrot Aggression

opportunity to just fly free in the house rather than being taken out for a walk and becoming a part of “the human flock.” It is the opinion of the author that for the average parrot owner, it is the only way to take care of your bird and ensure the health and well being of that bird. Wing clipping can also have advantages for parrots within aviculture when the birds are housed in cages too small to give them the opportunity to really fly. Wing clipping enables the aviculturist to take the birds out of their cages and interact with them in a positive and trusting way.

NOT on the Shoulder

There are many misunderstandings and contradictions concerning responsible ownership, nutrition, housing, behavior and educating parrots. Behavior problems are very common among parrots and are the main reasons that parrots are donated to rescue facilities or end up in the trade again. Within the Clinic for Birds, the most important and most common behavior problem we are faced with is insecurity. There are major misunderstandings concerning the issue of parrots on the shoulder.

Parrots showing insecure behavior look for a higher position, which is the main reason parrots want to sit on the shoulder. Parrots sitting on the shoulder in general show defensive behavior. This behavior is often interpreted as dominant behavior while the behavior is actually based on insecurity. These birds often refuse to step up on the hand. These birds are usually shy, show a strong bond to one person, and show unreasonable fear for certain objects or situations.

Most birds that sit on the shoulder also bite, scream and feather pick more often. The owner has no control over the bird on the shoulder and commonly gets bitten on the ear or cheek. In our experience, birds sitting on the shoulder may like the owner but do not show respect for the owner. At the same time, owners with parrots on their shoulders show that they love the parrot but do not show respect for the bird. Above all, the behavior and attitude of the owner determines the behavior and attitude of the parrot. Owners often have good intentions but lack the education and experience to deal with an intelligent parrot.

When a bird sitting on a shoulder is frightened they can fly or fall off and the owner can do nothing. This can lead to dangerous situations while walking, biking or visiting a zoo as examples. Owners often use the argument that it is convenient to have the bird on the shoulder. Falconers kept their birds on their hand for thousands of years and not on their shoulder. Falconers have a long tradition of handling, dealing and working with raptors in captivity and this knowledge shows in their expert handling. Despite all the differences between raptors and parrots, owners of parrots can learn from the expertise of falconers. Well educated parrots show self esteem, respect for the owner and people in general, and are playful, interested in learning, and in the

opinion of the author do not need to sit on the shoulder.

Organizing a Parrot Walk/Picnic

For the health, welfare and well being of a bird and to prevent unwanted behavior it is essential that the bird is outside as much as possible. The general rule is that a bird should be outside at least once a day to have the benefit of direct or indirect sunlight and fresh air. At the Clinic for Birds we explain that even criminals in prison have the right and privilege to go outside every day. Sunlight is an essential part of the well being and health of man and animal.

People can develop serious psychological problems when there is too little sunlight. People are provided light-therapy to address sleeping disorders and depression. Lack of sunlight can cause serious health problems, the most common is bone deformities in young children. Rickets, as in baby parrots or decalcification in older people or parrots. Sunlight is crucial in the formation of vitamin D3 and, therefore essential in bone-formation.

Go for a walk with your bird, take it to visit friends, go for a walk on the beach or to the zoo. Both you and your parrot will enjoy being outside the home and bonding.

When dogs are hardly ever taken out and spend their lives inside a kennel, they develop behavior problems like aggression. A dog in a kennel will always behave like a dog in a kennel.

Since 2000 the Clinic for Birds has organized annual Parrot Picnics-Parrot Walks for invited clients. The event is supported by and sponsored by Harrison's Bird Foods -The Netherlands and by the Society for Parrot and Parakeet Welfare (SPPW). In 2006 five outdoor parrot events were organized as the result of the cooperation between different organizations.

Organizing a Parrot Walk for owners of parrots has proven to be a great and stimulating event. Complete strangers became friends and were even more motivated to do the right thing, ensuring and promoting the welfare of their parrots. Exchanging experiences is fun and a learning process at the same time. By organizing these events there has been local and national media attention in newspapers, radio and television. The media attention helped to bring attention to the welfare issues of parrots, both wild and in captivity. The events are also used as an opportunity to bring attention to the ongoing tragedy of parrots that are captured in their natural habitats. Participants have created a petition statement against the importation of parrots from nature.

The parrot-walks have become one of the most rewarding days I have experienced as an avian veterinarian and parrot behavior consultant over the past twenty five years. Clients/owners look forward to the next parrot Picnic/Parrot-Walk. At this moment we have about 1000 families on the invitation list for the next event.

We are creating a network of dedicated owners to ensure that when problems occur within families, others are available to help, including a network of families that are willing to become foster

homes for those parrots that we have to re-home. In this way we are trying to create a social network to ensure the wellbeing of the parrots under our care. We are fortunate that the list of possible adoption homes is longer than the list of parrots that need to find a new home.

I would like to encourage everyone, to organize these events and networks. They can be organized by avian veterinarians, parrot rescue organizations and organizations like the Society for Parrot and Parakeet Welfare (SPPW). They help to make everyone aware of the responsibilities of taking care of a parrot. It is also a great way to bring attention to the many parrots that are living under devastating circumstances all over the world because of ignorance, neglect or being just used for commercial purposes.

Conclusions

- Biting behavior needs to be considered as part of a complex of behavior, determined by the circumstances.
- Biting behavior is a natural defensive behavior in prey animals as part of their survival strategy.
- Biting behavior is a natural territorial defensive behavior.
- Biting behavior can become learned behavior in parrots because the behavior has been (unintentionally) rewarded.
- Under parrot-friendly circumstances biting does not intend to create serious injuries.
- Parrots have no intention at all to bite children or cause serious injuries.
- Biting can be prevented and replaced with positive/wanted behaviors using the five-step behavior protocol.

There is every reason to have much respect for the intelligence and the social behavior of parrots. This is certainly the case when we realize that they are capable to adapt to extremely unnatural circumstances and to integrate in captivity as companion birds. It is up to avian veterinarians and owners to change their attitudes and behavior to create circumstances in which parrots flourish and have no reason to express aggression or biting behavior.

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