

PET PARROT BEHAVIOUR

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HIGH Expectation's

Very FEW THINGS Are more exciting to a parrot-lover than the impending arrival of a new bird. Whether an adopted older bird is in need of a new home or a freshly weaned baby bird, preparing the household to bring in a new feathered companion can bring about full nesting mode in any human.

However, even the best-laid plans and expectations can be dashed when our bird comes home and isn't quite as friendly, Loving or snuggly as the pictures and videos of it at the breeder's property or its previous home suggested. We may try to interact with it just as we saw others doing cuddling it against our chest to 'show it' that it will really like the other pets, after all, attempting to scratch its head or cornering it in its cage To get it to step up as the breeder promised it to do.

Nothing will prolong the way to a trusting relationship more than spending precious early moments mirroring how we think our feathered friend should be behaving rather than responding to the behaviour we see in front of us,

This can be particularly hard on a new parrot owner for a few reasons. Firstly, most of us are used to domestic animals, such as dogs and cats that have been bred for hundreds of years to do things very differently from their ancestors, including generalising behaviour to new situations and locations. So, while a dog still will most likely not respond to a stranger the same way it would its favourite human companion, it will probably adjust to a new space more quickly than the average bird. It is, therefore, wrong to expect a bird to pop out of its carrying cage and be ready for the next adventure like the furry family pet,

Secondly, the nursery or bird store in which a parrot grew up is very different from the bird's new home, and there were probably a lot of firsts that that bird has had to undergo to get there—car rides, plane rides, new cage, new toys, fresh faces, kids, dogs, cats, even furniture. So it's perfectly natural and expected for it to act a bit bewildered or overwhelmed by all of 'the new.'

Finally, new bird owners often take it personally when their baby bird comes home and doesn't immediately act the way they expect it to. These unmet expectations and hurt feelings can, in turn, manifest themselves in a host of ways. We are about to explore how we can damage these fragile early beginnings with good intentions, how this has impacted the bird-breeding and rearing industry, and how to establish socialisation protocols that will set the stage for a long-tasting friendship built on confidence and trust.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The beginnings of a relationship with a new feathered friend are critically important for a variety of reasons. The saying "you never get a second chance to make a first impression" is true. The experience and learning history between you and your new companion are limited, so each integration carries much greater weight than it will a month and years down the track. One negative interaction against thousands of positive ones means much less than one negative interaction against two positives. Similarly, a huge transition such as moving into a new home affects stress hormones. Studies have shown that these stress hormones increase the "fight or flight" response and make memories of the stress-inducing time last longer and remain stronger. Therefore, anything that happens during this time holds even greater weight. A new human companion reaching into the cage to persuade the bird to participate will have much more lasting effects on the bird's relationship with that human and make its transition in to the new home more difficult.

Individual birds handle stress and change differently, just like humans. There is quite a bit of variability across species, just as there is variability from bird to bird. This difference could be accounted for in how baby birds have been raised by their breeders or simply how a bird responds to its environment. Even sibling birds can go to different homes and react in different ways. Some babies may step out of the crate without missing a beat and be ready to take on the world, while others may take a few days, or even a week or two, to regain their former confidence and pick up their foundation skills of stepping up, playing with their favourite toy and so forth. Again, it is the expectation that a new owner has of how their new baby bird 'ought' to be behaving. Thus, persuading the bird into behaving in such a way or feeling that

there is something wrong with the bird can lead to frustration, fear, or avoidance-based behaviours. And a rapid degeneration of the relationship once bursting with potential.

UNWEANED BIRDS

So common is this scenario that it has led to a few different trends in the companion parrot industry. The first is selling unweaned baby parrots- a sale technique to help the baby bird bond with its new human parent.

Unfortunately, this practice is unnecessary, but it has also proven quite dangerous for the bird. As parent-rearing or hand-feeding, fledging, and weaning is critical periods of the bird's learning, growing. Socialisation development and, as many breeders are aware. So much can go wrong during this time.

Even with experienced hand feeders, a youngster can experience slow crop, crop burn, aspiration of food or foreign objects, or low-grade bacterial infections that can turn deadly overnight. These are among a host of medical issues that the novice hand feeder may not even recognise.

In addition, the social aspect of a young parrot progressing through the weaning phase cannot be understated. At this stage, a bird is trying out new activities, learning to fly, experimenting with its environment, mimicking its siblings and parents, etc. Selling an unweaned parrot sends the bird into a home either on its own without any role models or with birds it is unfamiliar with that wouldn't effectively serve as sibling surrogates. The fallout of this practise can have far-reaching consequences. Much like Puppies that are removed from the litter too early, a parrot hand raised in the absence of other birds can be more prone to over-imprinting and over-dependency on humans, which can manifest in various ways. Weaning a baby bird for the first time is incredibly challenging, leading some babies to be hand feed far beyond the normal duration- in some cases, years. Even an experienced hand feeder can experience difficulties taking a nestling out of the nursery full of other parrots to hand feed it in the home.

Selling unweaned parrots to promote a bond is entirely unnecessary and takes the risk off the bird breeder and puts it onto the new owner. Parrots are capable of bonding and re-bonding with multiple individuals several times over

the cause of their lives. Even once a parrot is weaned in the wild, it doesn't typically disperse right away, often staying around its parents. In some cases, it may even help feed the next group of hatchlings. This 'parental' bond is often misunderstood as something we want to emulate with our birds, yet nothing could be further from the truth, both from our perspective and our bird's. Instead of fostering a parent-offspring relationship, a teacher and friend can establish helpful interactions based on positive reinforcement. Parents and typically that one eventually leaves to increase genetic diversity. Focusing instead on the relationship through the lens of positive reinforcement helps us understand how to relate to our feathered friends in a mutually beneficial way. In the end, buying an unweaned baby may get you a bird sooner, but the risk to the bird increases exponentially. In Australia and some other countries, it is illegal to sell an unweaned bird for the reasons outlined.

PREMATURE WEANING

Another trend that addresses new owners' expectations to have a snuggly baby parrot from the start is for breeders to force-wean their birds at a premature age. This practice creates babies that are extra dependent on humans for attention and even food because they haven't developed the skills needed to set them up for a lifetime of wellbeing. A breeder who yields to the pressure of demand for 'snuggly baby birds' is not helping the parrot owning Community what it takes for birds to build their skills to keep them happy and psychologically fit over the long term.

A breeder who waits until fully weaned at the babies own pace, and even a few weeks after that, so that the youngsters don't regress to an unweaned state with the stress of upheaval to a new home, sets everyone up for success by helping to build the proper foundation for a more confident parrot.

Yes, it is difficult for the anxious prospective parrot buyer to wait 3 or 4 months for a Sun Conure or 6-7 months for a macaw or large Cockatoo to wean. It is also understandable that some breeders might be fielding calls from new parrot owners who feel frustrated. When, after waiting for so long to receive their new parrot, they do not find the bird springing from its pet carrier

straight into the human's loving arms with eternal gratitude for the patience and effort that went into acquiring it in the first place. However, the same skill and understanding required to help the baby parrot adjust to a new home and family are those that will help the human family create an environment supportive of the correct behaviours, prevent undesirable ones, and give them a toolkit to navigate challenges as the bird fills out its behavioural repertoire through adolescence and beyond. The new parrot owner will be well served in the future by developing a sensitivity to the nuances in the environmental antecedents that predict behaviour as well as awareness of positive reinforcement

SET FOR SUCCESS

Here at Avian behaviour International, we make every effort to set our birds up for success when they first arrive. While it is true that every bird is different, the key is to move at the bird's pace and let the bird make choices. Its cage is set up in an environment where it can feel comfortable, and the cage can be accessed without the bird being forced into an uncomfortable situation. This means organising appropriate perching, food and water bowls and arranging them conveniently around doors, whether primary or auxiliary, as well as placing the cage in a location that suits the new bird's ability to engage in the activity level of the home or retreat as needed.

ARRIVAL

Once the bird arrives, the first introductions are critical because that is its first impression of us. Its future teachers and hopefully lifelong friends! Is it comfortable enough to step out of the carrier, or does it need to move out on its own? We always sit the carrier on the cage floor and let the bird choose. Sticking a face and big head into the bird's face in the carrier during an already stressful situation can potentially make a negative first impression

SETTLING

Once the bird is out of the cage, care must be taken that it is allowed to settle and adjust without being disturbed. We might test its readiness by slowly approaching the cage watching its body language, and offering what we know is a favoured treat. If the bird shows even the slightest sign of discomfort or

that it wishes to flee our approach, we stop and possibly back up. We only advance when it shows signs of calm behaviour. We do this dance-- approaching slowly and only when the bird's body language allows—every time we need to service the cage. For example, if the bird takes food from our fingertips through the cage bars, we teach it to hop to perch near the door and take treats. Otherwise, we drop treats in a bowl, back away a couple of feet, and let it approach. A few repeats, and soon it will take treats from the bowl with us close by... with our hands close by...and then from our hands.

Even opening the cage door may need to be approximated at the clanging, and the justling of the lock can be jarring. So, we give the bird treats from our hands as we slowly work with the cage door and then offer treats through the crack on the cage door.

STEPPIN UP

Once the bird is taking treats from the open door, it can be (re)introduced to the step-up with positive reinforcement. For some babies, this can take time, as they can be clumsy, but some pick it up with ease. The most important thing to remember is to stay close to the cage, keeping your baby bird doing repetitions near the perch because it hasn't learned to generalise to other locations just yet.

Positive interactions are far more important than the possibility of negative interaction and having to use force and thus induce a fearful integration with your new baby bird. So, first, teach other family members how to use positive reinforcement to step up the baby, so everyone learns the mechanics. The next stage is taking the bird to the perch, holding the bird 1-2cm from the cage and stepping it up and down from there and returning to the cage. With practice, your baby parrot can learn to step up off the top of the cage with positive reinforcement, learning to come to the hand from across the top of the cage.

BROADENING HORIZONS

Once these basic cues are learned, we start letting the baby broaden its horizons, setting up play gyms a few metres from the cage and allowing the bird to spend a few hours of supervised time out, flying from station to station to play. Of course ensure windows are covered or marked with soap or painters

tape, so the bird learns to recognise them and avoid the danger. The bird has learnt these stations are filled with fun things to eat and play with, and at any given time, we can come over to step it up and play with it as well.

Each time the bird meets someone, it is with extreme care and supervision that it is stepped up for its favourite treat, and the duration is kept short and filled with a high rate of reinforcement and toys to teach the bird how to behave properly while sitting on the hand. This helps a young bird to understand what to do with that ever-inquisitive beak.

At its own pace, we offer gentle snuggles, but keep in mind that our goal is to have a companion for life, one that knows how to entertain itself as well as how to appropriately seek our attention with desirable sounds or appropriate behaviour, rather than one that has learned that the most annoying noise will be the one that gets us to come the fastest.

CONCLUSION

New owners can make informed decisions when choosing an enclosure by mimicking the birds' natural environment, responding to the youngster's needs, and recognising critical biochemical development periods that can affect your birds psychological wellbeing for years to come. With each baby, companion parrot owners can influence the avicultural industry to make great strides in providing parrots destined to stay in their homes with families better equipped to manage the realities of living with an intelligent feathered friend. 😊