

5 Things Every Parrot Owner Should Do

January 10, 2013 by [Liz Wilson, CVT, Parrot Behavior Consultant](#)

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Editor's note: The bird community lost Liz Wilson when she passed away on April 13, 2013. Please visit our [dedication](#) page for her full biography, photos and comments from her colleagues.

Part II of Do's & Dont's for Living With Birds



If you are just tuning in, this is the second of two parts. In the first, I discussed the “[Don'ts](#)” – things to avoid when cohabiting with birds. This column discusses the “Do's.” As previously explained, this is a simplified list, and things are cataloged haphazardly, not in order of importance. I should also add a disclaimer. This is a perfect list for a perfect world. I, for one, have not managed to avoid all the negatives — far from it! Nor have I achieved all the positives.

But I'm still working on it.

As previously mentioned, thank you for the excellent input from members of the [parrot](#) division of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants: Lisa Bono of Barnegat, N.J., Chris Davis of St. Charles, Ill., Jon Peterson of South River, N.J., Karen Webster of Anchorage, Alaska, and Jamie Whitaker of Houston, Texas, as well as Linna Reusmann of Cataula, Ga.

DO:

1. Read and learn, and make an educated decision about which pet parrot species is right for you and your household BEFORE you buy. It is often useful to ask the opinion of multiple educated parrot people, but not those who have something to gain from their answer. In other words, avoid personal agendas (such as store sales people who have *just the right bird for you*) and seek the help from those whose only motivation is helping you find the right pet bird.

2. Make sure you and your human family can tolerate the voice of a particular parrot species prior to bringing one home. Noise sensitivities vary and different parrot voices can grate in different ways. I've lived for 45 years with large [macaws](#) – birds whose vocalizations can practically shatter windows. Yet one of the most aggravating vocalizations I've ever encountered was a [cockatiel](#) whose shrill “Weep? Weep? Weep?” drove me *crazy*. It has to do with auditory frequency, and I reacted as if it were fingernails on a blackboard.

3. Find an experienced avian veterinarian NOW, PRIOR to emergency. The last thing you need to do in the face of an emergency is start looking for an experienced bird veterinarian. And if you are lucky enough to find someone, you will be dealing with a stranger, not someone you already know and trust. Additionally, many veterinarians do not take new clients as emergencies. Now is when you need to find an experienced avian veterinarian – *not a dog and cat vet who does birds on the side*. I am not exaggerating that your feathered friend's life could depend on it.

4. Teach your bird to eat a varied, nutritional diet. Since malnutrition is the underlying cause of most medical problems in companion birds, the best way to prevent such problems is to make certain a pet bird eats an excellent diet. You are the one in total control of that diet, unless your bird has access to the refrigerator when you are not home. It is total garbage that a pet bird won't learn to eat a nutritious diet. The only obstacle is the human giving up too soon. Work with your avian veterinarian on this, as it is crucial to your pet bird's health.

5. Research the dietary needs of your chosen pet bird species prior to purchase. This will allow you to budget how much your grocery bills will increase with the addition of fresh vegetables, nuts and fruits.

6. Take your bird to your avian vet for annual well-bird check-ups. Birds are masters of disguise when it comes to illness. Waiting until symptoms are obvious usually means the bird is now so sick it cannot hide it anymore, and the odds of saving it decrease exponentially. Annual check-ups allow avian veterinarians to catch problems early. Additionally, they provide your veterinarian with a healthy baseline against which to compare in the future should problems arise.

7. Plan for the future in case your pet bird outlives you. Parents know they need to make arrangements for their kids should anything happen to them. Since parrots can have a lifespan that rivals that of humans, parrot owners must do the same. Besides, our “feathered kids” won't grow up and leave home like human children do (or should).

8. Whenever possible, teach your bird (or dog, cat, child, husband or wife) with positive reinforcement by instantly rewarding behaviors that you like and totally ignoring behaviors that you do not wish to continue. This is much easier and effective than using aversives (like distasteful punishments) to try to erase unacceptable behaviors.

9. Work to PREVENT problem behaviors from starting. As with health, behavior problem prevention is always easier and cheaper than trying to fix something later.

10. Work to FIX problem behaviors that have already started. Don't wait until you can't stand an obnoxious behavior to seek help. People routinely get rid of birds because of a

problem that could have been fixed easily if stopped earlier. The longer you wait, the less likely you are to have the necessary patience to successfully change a behavior.

11. Invest in a large, good-quality cage. One would think this is a no-brainer but sadly, no. People often spend all their money purchasing a bird, so they try to save on the price of the cage. Very bad mistake.

12. Seek help with management problems. For instance, if you have a hard time keeping a cage clean, you may need a different cage or different substrate. Ask experienced parrot people for guidance.

13. Never stop reading and learning. No matter how much you think you know, you do not yet know enough. None of us knows enough. I have lived with parrots for 45 years and worked professionally with parrots for 40, and I will never stop needing to learn more.

14. Understand that a bird's motivations might be alien to you, so do not try to interpret a behavior to mean what it might signify if it were a human. The misunderstanding of motivations creates endless problems between people, and we're all the same species and speak the same language. Since birds are totally different from humans, one can only guess at the expanse of potential misinterpretations between them. A classic example of this is the human assumption that parrots are "angry" when they yell, when the opposite is more likely.

15. Open your mind to the experience of sharing life with a bird, an extraordinarily vivid life form. You are cohabiting with a flighted being, a fragment of a vanishing rain forest. Keep your mind open and the results can be extraordinary and the wonder endless.