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# Common Psittacine Behavioral Problems

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The 1980's saw a dramatic increase in the popularity of pet psittacine birds in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Owners of psittacines revealed that many had misconceptions as to what kind of a pet their bird would be.<sup>2</sup> Even though some owners do research about their pets before obtaining them, most are poorly informed about normal behavior. A practicing veterinarian should be prepared to answer questions regarding psittacine behavioral problems. The intent of this paper is to discuss the causes, management, and prevention of such problems.

## Destructive Behavior

It is important for owners to learn about normal psittacine behavior. Parrots are naturally intelligent and curious, and have a need to play.<sup>3,4</sup> Caged parrots are often the victims of boredom and loneliness, which promotes behavioral problems such as screaming and feather picking.

Wild psittacines spend much of their time in play activity.<sup>5,6</sup> This includes flying, climbing, and acrobatics on swaying tree limbs. Cages must therefore be large enough to allow birds to flap their wings and should contain at least two perches for jumping and swinging. Playful attacks with sticks and screaming contests have also been recorded.<sup>7</sup> However, the foremost display of psittacine play is destructive behavior. All parrots have an overwhelming instinctive need to chew. This is particularly strong in cockatoos, macaws, ringneck parakeets, and conures. Wild parrots chew branches, shred leaves, and strip bark from trees. This need must be satisfied in captivity, often at the expense of furniture, books, tele-

phone cords, plants, and wallpaper. The larger psittacines can snap broomsticks, so damage can be considerable. If a parrot is kept in its cage permanently with nothing to chew to prevent such damage, behavioral problems may develop.<sup>8</sup>

Providing expendable material to satisfy the parrot's need to chew has repeatedly proven effective. Simple wood scraps and paper products suffice and chewing toys are available. Psittacines should never be left unsupervised just because they have toys. Their curiosity will lead them back to destroying furniture.

Psittacine eating habits can be viewed as an extension of their destructive play behavior. Most parrots eat a tremendous variety of foods.<sup>5</sup> Color, size, shape, and texture all contribute to the appeal of a particular food, since psittacines are reported to have a poor sense of taste.<sup>9</sup> A food that is a challenge to eat satisfies the need to play and helps to prevent boredom. Examples include: pomegranates, corn on the cob, brussel sprouts, string beans, cooked chicken bones, coconuts, and pasta. Typical behavior would be for a parrot to sample a small portion of what interests it, and dispose of the rest by throwing or shredding.<sup>9</sup> It is thought that this activity is an attempt by the parrot to form pieces that can easily be held in one foot.<sup>9</sup>

## Screaming

All but the smallest psittacine species are capable of deafening noise levels. Wild parrots are normally quite vocal. At dawn, parrots call to each other from their respective roosting sites. The group takes to the air and the birds call to one another until foraging grounds are reached, often miles away. This pattern is repeated in the evening when the flock returns to its roosting site.<sup>5</sup> Parrot owners can therefore expect their birds to be noisy at dawn and dusk. Because this is normal behavior, attempts to limit it can be difficult. One way to limit morning vocalization is to

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predict when the screaming will begin and feed beforehand (usually before dawn). It must be stressed that the parrot not be rewarded with food during the screeching, as this will reinforce an undesired behavior.<sup>10</sup>

Early-morning screaming also can be decreased by placing shutters or shades over the windows, or covering the parrot's cage. The shades or cover should be removed after the sun has risen. This technique removes the stimulus of increasing sunlight by transforming night into day instantly.<sup>11</sup>

One of the fundamental causes of screaming is to gain attention from the owners. A recent survey found that sixty-five percent of the respondents do reward their bird's screaming with some form of attention.<sup>12</sup> Obviously, this only reinforces the parrot's motives for screeching. Shouting back at the bird should be avoided, because loud vocalization from the owner encourages the parrot's instinctual urge to call other members of its flock.<sup>5</sup>

The most successful means of dealing with attention-getting vocalization involves a period of social isolation. Placing a dark cover over the cage, or placing the cage in a closet generally produces silence. The parrot should be isolated for five minutes after the screaming stops, but no longer than fifteen minutes in all. Parrots will generally forget the reason for being isolated after this time.<sup>13</sup> Screaming might also be limited by providing the bird with plenty of attention before screaming begins, or simply by giving it a variety of toys.

Once the parrot has been quieted, the cause of the screaming should be identified. Boredom and loneliness are frequent causes of screaming as psittacines are social animals.

It is important to note that a decrease in vocalization could indicate an underlying disease process. Psittacines are famous for masking signs of illness, and any decrease in activity or vocalization should be investigated promptly.<sup>14</sup>

### **Biting and Aggression**

Biting and aggressive behavior by parrots often prompts owners to seek advice. There are three predictable age-related stages psittacines go through that explain biting and aggression. Psittacine babies experience something similar to teething in human babies, and after three months of age (for the larger species) they will start chewing on everything that is available. Problems

arise when the parrot's beak strength catches up with its curiosity. The young bird does not yet know the power of its own beak. With consistent, yet gentle, verbal discipline, the young parrot must be taught that fingers are unacceptable chewing objects.<sup>15</sup> Toys or food are alternatives. The owner of a young Indian ringneck parakeet coped with this problem by offering the bird wooden chopsticks before picking him up, thereby sparing his fingers.<sup>16</sup>

The next stage of psittacine biting and aggression has common characteristics including rapid mood swings and temper tantrums, accompanied by screaming and biting. During this phase, the young parrot will establish a sense of territory and test the owner's dominance. Psittacine confrontations in the wild are based on bluffing.<sup>17</sup> For example, an Amazon parrot will raise its head above the rival's eye level, and approach with an open beak. This is the point where many owners give in to their bird's demands.<sup>15</sup> The owner that gets bluffed allows the bird to establish a dominance pattern that is difficult to change. Parrots do outgrow this stage, and owners that have maintained control will have a more enjoyable pet.

Control of a young psittacine is maintained through regular training exercises. Teaching a parrot simple instructions such as stepping up on a hand on command is effective in regaining the bird's attention.<sup>17</sup> Keeping the parrot below a human's eye level also reasserts the owner's dominance.

The third stage of age-related biting and aggression begins when the parrot reaches sexual maturity.<sup>18,19</sup> Tight pair bonds are formed in the wild, but in captivity psittacines will readily bond to a human, regardless of sex.<sup>17</sup> This presents problems for other people that must handle the bird.

The bonded psittacine may consider other people to be threats to the relationship with the owner, and will not hesitate to bite the assumed rival. Parrots can be taught to accept other people, but it requires much time and patience.<sup>20,21</sup> Surprisingly, the bonded human often receives the bite when a rival approaches. Explanations for this behavior are that the parrot is attempting to drive its mate back into the safety of the nest, or that the parrot is punishing its mate for not fighting off the rival.<sup>20</sup>

Most behavioral complaints arise during the breeding season, which extends from mid-winter to mid-summer. During this time, mature psittacines experience sweeping hormonal changes

corresponding with increasing daylight and availability of food in the wild. Captivity has produced non-seasonal breeding, though. General advice to owners is to be patient. Most birds survive and return to the normal disposition when the breeding season is over.<sup>22</sup> Some psittacines, however, severely pick feathers, scream excessively, and become so intractably vicious that they are given up as pets and introduced to a breeding program.

One behavioralist continuously stresses the importance of owner dominance, especially during the breeding season. In her consulting work, she has observed fewer sexual problems when the owner has established dominance over the parrot. In a bonded pair, breeding activities are usually initiated by the dominant partner. Therefore, if the owner avoids stimulating the bird, its sexual behavior will be limited.<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, some parrot owners do not realize that they are stimulating sexual behavior. Examples include stroking the back, under the wings, and around the tail base. Bonded psittacines feed each other, and play tug-of-war games. All owner-parrot interactions should be limited during the breeding season, and stopped altogether if the parrot displays receptive sexual behavior. Such behavior consists of spreading the tail, holding the wings and body low, dilating and constricting pupils, strutting and dancing, copulating with the owner's hand, and regurgitating on the owner.<sup>17</sup>

Mature psittacines in the wild establish territory for the purpose of feeding and nesting. Since intrusions into an established territory (the bird's cage) are met with resentment and aggression, owners are generally advised to handle the parrot when it is out of its cage, on the roof or the door.<sup>23</sup> This viewpoint is sharply opposed by one author who contends that a parrot that is bonded to the owner should welcome that owner into its territory. Any display of territorial aggression simply indicates that the owner has not established complete dominance over the parrot.<sup>17</sup>

Psittacines can become defensive not only of their territory, but of objects within those boundaries. This is an extension of abnormal bonding. A bird that does not have a close relationship with the owner may bond to objects or toys in its cage.<sup>24</sup> Budgerigars often have mirrors in their cages, so that their reflection will keep them company. Abnormal bonding is evident when the budgie regurgitates on the toy or mirror, as mutual feeding is an important part of psittacine courtship.

A final comment about psittacine aggression and territoriality deals with wing clipping. Some owners elect to keep their birds fully-flighted so the bird can exercise and enjoy flying. From a safety standpoint, as well as a behavioral standpoint, this should be discouraged. Accidents are far too common, often times involving windows, mirrors, electrical cords, doors, open toilets, and pots of boiling water. Flighted birds also develop an independence that promotes aggression and biting. Furthermore, a flighted parrot considers the whole house its territory. Wing clipping is a proven, painless method of promoting acceptable psittacine behavior.<sup>25,26</sup>

### **Feather Picking**

Grooming is a normal and essential behavior among wild psittacines.<sup>27</sup> An exaggeration of this behavior, feather chewing or feather picking, is one of the most frustrating syndromes the avian practitioner will encounter. The cause can be either physiologic or psychologic.<sup>28</sup> Because many cases of feather picking do have a physiologic basis, the affected bird must be taken to a veterinarian for a complete medical examination. Malnutrition, organ dysfunction, parasites (*Giardia* and tapeworms), granulomatous abscesses, hormonal imbalances, and folliculitis have all been diagnosed as causes of feather picking.<sup>28</sup> Pathologic processes that cause feather loss without feather picking, include Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease Syndrome.<sup>28</sup> An excellent reference is available that correlates the location of the feather picking with different diseases.<sup>29</sup>

Other factors must be considered once a physiologic condition has been eliminated. A parrot kept in an aviary or with its mate could be having feathers picked by another bird.<sup>28</sup> Sexually mature birds in the breeding season, feather pick as a manifestation of sexual frustration. It is normal behavior, however, for psittacines to pick a brood patch on their chests. This bare patch of skin aids in regulating the temperature of incubating eggs.<sup>30</sup>

The boredom and loneliness some parrots experience often drives them to feather picking. It would seem that the birds chew and pull their feathers to gain attention from their owners, or because there is nothing else available in the cage to chew. A variety of toys and types of food that require work to eat are recommended to divert the parrot's attention from its feathers.<sup>30</sup>

A parrot's craving for attention can be satisfied by spending quality time with the owner. Many owners pay attention to the parrot at the same time each day.<sup>31</sup> Others leave a radio on to keep the bird company when it is alone.<sup>30</sup> The establishment of routines is not without drawbacks as psittacines do not like changes in their schedule. A deviation from an established schedule may encourage the behavior problems the schedule was designed to prevent.

Wild psittacines living in jungles are accustomed to frequent rain showers. Parakeets from drier climates enjoy bathing in dew that collects on plants. Caged psittacines do not have the opportunity to shower or bathe, unless the owner provides it. Bathing promotes normal grooming habits by lifting keratin flakes, and softening feathers and feather sheaths.<sup>27</sup> Plant misters can be used, and many owners let their parrots perch in the shower stall while they shower. Both adequate sleep time (parrots prefer eight to twelve hours) and the opportunity to bathe are necessary to prevent depression and frustration that can lead to feather picking.

Many practitioners advocate the use of an Elizabethan collar in the feather-picking bird.<sup>32,33</sup> These physically prevent the parrot from habitual picking. This allows the veterinarian to investigate possible causes, and to initiate appropriate management changes. However, most parrots initially resent the collar, requiring that the bird be observed for several hours in the hospital.<sup>27</sup> The use of collars also is controversial because they prevent normal preening and eating, which may further stress the parrot.

It is essential that feather picking be controlled as soon as possible. A blood feather could inadvertently be picked and the parrot could potentially bleed to death. Many chronic pickers, especially Moluccan cockatoos, Amazons, and Mini-macaws, develop the mutilation syndrome, in which feathers are violently pulled from the wings, breasts, and legs. This is believed to be related to a staphylococcal sensitivity.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, chronic pickers may cause scarring of feather follicles, thereby permanently preventing feather replacement.<sup>35</sup>

Psittacines do make warm, affectionate, and entertaining companions. Having an owner maintain dominance, satisfy the need for social interaction, and both understand and accept normal psittacine behavior will minimize behavioral problems and produce a rewarding parrot-owner relationship.

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