



## **SEXUAL BEHAVIOR IN COMPANION PARROTS**

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### **The Reality Of Sexual Maturity**

Many of the people who keep companion parrots are just starting to deal with issues of sexual behavior in their pet birds. People with young parrots are often quite apprehensive that their parrot will become some sort of raving blood thirsty monster when he or she becomes sexually mature. Actually, if people have done a good job setting a foundation of positive interaction with their parrot, in the majority of companion parrots sexual maturity should not present a big problem. In fact, I get calls from some people with 5 and 6 year old birds, who wonder when their parrots will start the dreaded stage. They are not even aware that their parrots are actually remaining consistent and loving despite the fact they have already entered adulthood. The truth is that once parrots are sexually mature, they will be sexually mature for the rest of their lives. It is not something they get over. However, this certainly does not mean they can not remain good pets. It simply means there may be a few times a year when a parrot may be more difficult to get along with. Sexual maturity certainly does not mean the parrot has to go into a breeding program. Parrots are not just simply two-dimensional sexual animals. There are many aspects to their personalities and the people who raise their parrots with 'Nurturing Guidance' rarely have serious behavioral problems.

Over dependent parrots who are allowed to overbond with one person and are dominant in their relationship with that person are more likely to create serious problems for the people in their lives when they become sexually mature. It is not funny when a mature parrot chases another family member around the house trying to do bodily harm. Nor is it amusing when they are sitting on their primary person's shoulder and bites his or her face when another person comes in the room. These are often the behaviors of an overbonded parrot who perceives himself as his owner's sexual partner. In a positive relationship with a parrot, the primary person establishes him or herself as the dominant partner in the pair bond. Consequently, they rarely experience sexual aggressive behavior since the parrot defers to their dominance and is less likely to initiate sexual behavior.

Without realizing it, people may actually be increasing the sexual behavior of their parrots with physical affection that may be misunderstood as sexual "foreplay" by the parrot. During the times hormones are exerting a strong influence on our feathered companions, interactions which would normally be perfectly fine causing no problems, may create sexual arousal and serious confusion in our pets. During these periods, in many birds, it may be best to avoid petting under the wing, pulling on the tail, encompassing the body, putting hand pressure on the back or rump area, touching near the vent, and beak wrestling.

Hormonally-influenced, strongly bonded parrots may try to initiate copulation by rubbing their vent on their owner's hand, leg, etc. When this occurs I advise my clients to return their parrots to a T-stand or their cage without making a fuss. This form of sexual behavior in companion parrots is a displacement substitute for natural biological behaviors and should not be punished. It should essentially be ignored and neither encouraged or discouraged. It is best not to encourage sexual bonding from our companion parrots. Nest building, sexual seduction, masturbation, and even egg laying may be common behaviors in some pet birds. However, these are instinctive responses to internal and external stimuli and do not mean the parrot wants to breed and raise a family.

## **Overriding Natural Behavior**

There are many variables which can influence and even override the natural tendencies in parrots. With hand-fed babies, early socialization can have a tremendous impact on whether a parrot will have quality pet potential. Socialization is not just the number of birds or people the young bird relates to in its early development. It is the process by which young animals learn their social and survival skills. Poorly socialized chicks raised in production type aviaries may not be able to form a trusting bond with anyone, parrot or human because they have not been exposed to nurturing. On the other hand, many young parrots will be able to bond with another parrot or a person if they have been properly socialized -- whether the nurturing has come from their natural parrot parents or human surrogates. I believe that the reason so many domestically raised parrots do not transition to breeding situations has more to do with the fact they have received very little socialization rather than the fact that they have "imprinted" on humans instead of parrots. The concept of imprinting suggests that once a bond is formed, it will not change. However, it is clear to me from working with companion parrots over the last twenty years that their social bonding is not "engraved in stone." Parrots are clearly capable of bonding and rebonding on many different levels throughout their lives. I believe that with the proper gradual transition, most companion parrots can become successful breeders. However, if a person chooses to keep their parrot as a lifetime pet, they should not be made to feel guilty for this decision.

## **Concerns For The Pet Owner**

Pet parrot owners seem to be at the low end of the power curve in aviculture, pawns in a much larger game played by people with far more power and money. We depend on aviculture to protect the interests of the people who keep parrots in captivity. However aviculture sometimes seems to be "shooting itself in the foot" with companion parrot owners. People who are happy with their physically and psychologically healthy pet birds are the best advertising to sell more pet birds. For years, pet owners have been told that their parrots need to be put in breeding programs as a cure-all for almost any behavioral problem. I have talked to owners of parrots less than a year old who have been pressured in to giving up their bird to a breeding situation because it "needed a mate." Although there are many reasons people do not keep their parrots, I doubt it is a coincidence that "ill-behaved" pets are now one of the major sources for breeding birds. Certainly with the cessation of importation, there will be a shortage of breeding stock in certain parrot species and most likely increased pressure for pet owners to put their parrots in breeding situations.

Parrots can, with the right guidance, remain good human companions throughout their entire lives. Parrot behavior is not cast in stone and can be modified. Is it fair to suggest that a pet owner should pay anywhere from \$500 to \$2,500 or more for a companion parrot, make a significant emotional investment, and then give their pet up for breeding? Certainly not all pet parrots are well cared for but I have consistently found that well-nurtured parrots are content to be lifelong pets. From my experience, serious behavioral problems are rarely caused by "sexual frustration" but are usually the result of poor early socialization and a lack of guidance and rules that start long before a pet reaches sexual maturity. With guidance, we can "override" many normal behaviors thus creating a far less confused parrot.

A classic example of a behavior that is too often mistakenly dismissed as "sexual frustration" is feather plucking. Although there are some birds that may naturally pluck a few feathers as part of their nesting behavior, the majority of feather plucking in parrots has much more complex causes. With captive parrots, it is most often caused by disease, a drastic change in attention, or poor care which includes bad diet, isolation, poor lighting, low humidity and lack of bathing opportunities, a cramped environment, no exercise and little mental or physical stimulation. I have consistently found that plucking will either stop or improve considerably when many birds begin to receive proper care, whether it is in a pet or breeding situation. I believe that one of the major causes of plucking in domestic hand-fed parrots (particularly African greys) is poor early socialization — rarely 'sexual frustration.' These birds are not taught at the critical time to explore and accept change in their lives. The plucking is often a phobic reaction to the panic these birds feel when change does occur in their lives. The solution to this problem is to gradually introduce the parrot to change in safe ways so that change does not cause such panic and insecurity. Putting these birds into breeding situations often aggravates the problem and the plucker may end up plucking its new mate also. One of the stories that I hear frequently that frustrates me the most is when a parrot owner has told me that they have been advised to put their year old African grey in a breeding program because it is plucking.

Not too long ago, I talked with a woman who owned a 9 month old Eclectus. A veterinarian started the bird on hormones because he believed the plucking was due to sexual frustration. Sexual frustration at 9

months? Part of the problem was a heavy first moult not uncommon in young Eclectus. I also found out that the pet store that sold her the bird told her to feed it a seed mix with at least 50% sunflower seed and had never mentioned the critical importance of bathing. I recommended her to a competent avian veterinarian. We converted the bird to a pelleted diet supplemented with lots of high vitamin A vegetables and fruits. On my advice, she also started sprinkling wheat grass on the bird's soft foods. She added extra lighting above her bird's cage and started misting him on a daily basis. The bird no longer plucks.

This is not the only time I have talked with the owner of a baby parrot who has been told to put their bird in a breeding program because it has behavior problems. This misconception of turning parrots into breeders to solve their behavior problems is so common and the advice is often given in total contradiction to the reality of the situation. Don't even consider putting a bird in a breeding program until it is actually sexually mature and physically ready to breed. A bird that exhibits courting behavior is not necessarily sexually mature. Just as children 'play house' before they have the hormones to back up their behavior so do parrots practice being adults before they are actually ready to breed. Placing a young hen that is not yet ready to breed with a mature male may result in serious aggression or even death in several species.

Certainly reproduction is a natural part of a wild parrot's life cycle, so is the raising and parenting of young to independence -- an important part of the life cycle which aviculture must ignore in raising chicks for the pet trade. Unfortunately, there is very little that could be called natural in the life of a captive-bred, hand-fed parrot raised for the pet trade or the lives of the parents that produce them. But the truth is that parrots do adapt very well to a life in captivity, if their needs, both physical and emotional, are properly met.

Are birds really happier as breeders than they are as human companions? Not necessarily. It depends on the quality of the pet home and the quality of the breeding situation. With both, there are ranges from excellent to atrocious. Personally, I think it is acceptable to keep parrots as human companions as long as they are cared for properly and are content in their situation. A well-nurtured companion parrot may be very traumatized by being suddenly ripped from its home and placed in a breeding program. Quite frankly, many (but not all) parrots are in far better lifelong situations with caring owners than in many breeding programs.

Some time ago, I read a statement that the fact that birds breed in captivity is proof they are cared for properly. This generalization troubled me a great deal as I am aware of many situations where birds have produced chicks (at least for the time being) in spite of extremely poor care. Clearly, not all breeding birds receive proper care. Several times a week, I hear from people who think they are doing the right thing by placing their well-loved pet in a breeding situation simply because of pressure from breeders or pet shops (possibly with hidden agendas?).

### **Happily Ever After?**

Owners who think that they are doing their beloved parrots a favor by putting them in a breeding situation may be very mistaken. Although there are certainly a great number of fine breeders who take excellent care of their breeding birds, there are many who don't. Just as there are quality bird shops, mediocre shops and 'hellholes' that sell birds, there are extremely good, mediocre, and horrible breeders who are just in it for the money and could care less about the welfare of their breeding birds or babies.

The concept that good ol' Alex and sweet little Angel will be able to fall in love, settle down, raise a family and live happily ever after may be just as much of a fantasy for the birds as it is for us. Many parrots in production type farms become virtual egg factories. Understanding little about parrot behavior, there are unfortunately some breeders who feel that any activity other than copulation is not necessary and consequently provide their breeders with a limited diet, minimal space and no toys or play objects. The parrots may be stimulated by light, diet and humidity factors to lay many more clutches of eggs than would be normal or even healthy. The eggs are often removed immediately for incubation in the hopes that the birds will quickly replace them. The parents never get a chance to raise their babies at all for fear they might not do as good a job as the breeder. If the birds don't produce, the pair may be split and one or both of the birds sold or traded.

### **Get Rid Of The Guilt!**

I have talked to many parrot owners who have been made to feel guilty for keeping their sexually mature pet. The argument that it is not fair to keep a bird past breeding maturity and that it should be in a breeding program is both pervasive and persuasive. Unfortunately, it does not always take the real circumstances into consideration. A client of mine was strongly pressured to sell her female yellow collar macaw to a breeder. Instead of being truthful and saying that she was desperate to have a hen for her male and couldn't find one, the breeder lectured my client about ethics and the destruction of the rainforest. My client was feeling quite guilty until I explained that her happy domestically-raised little companion couldn't do a thing to save the rainforest but might eventually help the breeder's bank account. I told her that if she wanted to assuage her unnecessary guilt and help the wild parrots, she should donate some money to R.A.R.E. or the World Parrot Trust in the breeder's name.

Often there are other factors to be considered. Sometimes for one reason or another, it is impossible for a person to keep their parrot. Because of misinformation or loss of interest on the part of the owner, some birds are better off in new homes. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to find a good pet home for each and every parrot, especially those with behavioral problems. If the problems are not too serious, these birds might adjust well to a breeding situation. Some wild-caught parrots just never seem to trust humans and may always seem uncomfortable in a pet situation. These birds may be much happier with a mate in a quality breeding situation. I certainly do not believe that a pet parrot needs to be put in a breeding situation just because it reaches sexual maturity and exhibits courtship and mating behavior. Many well-nurtured birds form a strong gratifying bond with their owners that can last their lifetime together. However; there may be other considerations. Many parrots, particularly the large macaws, are seriously threatened or endangered in the wild. Because of this, some owners feel an obligation to return their companion parrots to the gene pool. Care should be taken that they are placed with a highly ethical quality breeder who considers the welfare and care of their birds the number one priority.

### **Finding A Quality Breeder**

If you have consulted with a parrot behaviorist, exhausted other options, and still feel that the best situation for your parrot would be with a quality breeder, how do you judge whether a breeder takes proper care of their birds? First, ask your avian veterinarian and anyone else you know who is knowledgeable and takes good care of their birds. Interview the breeders. Don't just accept their answers, ask them why they do things the way they do too. I can usually tell if a breeder takes good care of their birds by talking to them. They have a sense of affection and respect for their birds that shines through the rhetoric. Although it is hard work, they really enjoy their birds and will tell you wonderful stories about the time a certain parrot did such and such. Good breeders often have well-loved pet birds. Ask them what they feed their birds and what kinds of toys the birds have. Breeding birds should be fed a healthy varied psychologically stimulating diet. They should be given wood to chew, extra branches or safe bird toys to stimulate activity, exercise and courtship. Ask them how they introduce the parrots to each other as it is important that potential breeding birds should be introduced carefully with supervision, not just thrown into the new cage together. Ask the breeders about the size of their aviaries and how they are set up. Parrots should have roomy cages or large flights with multiple perches with space to climb or fly. Cleanliness is important. Ask them how they raise their babies and how they sell them. The fact that a breeder incubates eggs instead of letting the parents raise them is not in itself a negative if the parents are well cared for and allowed to raise some of their own babies. Ask how many babies they raise and how many people take care of their breeders and babies. Just one or two people caring for large numbers of parrots and babies can mean problems for the parrots. Ask the breeder what will happen to your parrot if it isn't compatible with a mate or doesn't produce babies. If they will allow you to, ask to see their aviaries. Don't be surprised or concerned if they won't allow you to see their breeding facilities or nurseries. Many quality breeders are concerned about strangers disrupting their breeding birds or even bringing disease into their aviaries.

### **A Contented Lifelong Companion**

It is my opinion after working with so many parrots for so many years that a well-nurtured pet parrot that has been properly raised and cared for by its owner will be very content to remain a lifelong human companion. The bird may go through varying degrees of sexual behavior a few times a year but the relationship will be fine the rest of the year. The owner just needs to understand why the bird is behaving the way it is and adjust their behavior towards the bird temporarily. Most behavioral problems in pet parrots are not related to sexual frustration. They are the result of improper care or misunderstanding of a companion parrot's behavioral needs. When a parrot is in control of its own behaviors instead of being guided into those that make it a good pet, a successful parrot/human bond is difficult to achieve. Mating and reproduction are only

a part of the life cycle of any animal. Parrots can live very contented lives as well-cared for pets. The strong bond with a human companion can be very satisfying to both human and bird. A tame parrot that lives with people who respect and care deeply about its happiness and welfare is very lucky.