

LEARNING MADE EASY



2nd Edition

Parrots

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Bring home the
right parrot for you

Connect with your
feathered friend

Expertly tame and
train your bird

Nikki Moustaki, MA, MFA

Companion parrot expert and advocate



Parrots

2nd Edition

by Nikki Moustaki MA, MFA

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand

Parrots For Dummies®, 2nd Edition

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Introduction

Welcome to *Parrots For Dummies*, Second Edition, a detailed guide to parrothood. Get ready to dive into the wonderful world of parrots . . . and the not-so-wonderful world of parrots. Though a parrot may seem like the perfect pet, you'll see that parrots aren't even *pets* at all, but wild companions to be respected, catered to, and cared for with extreme attention to detail. I wrote every sentence in this book with the human/parrot relationship in mind. I know, that might sound over-the-top now, but keep reading, and I promise that you'll understand.

About This Book

Parrot care and behavior can be baffling. Most of it is counterintuitive because human intuition doesn't work well with parrots. You have to learn what they need and want, because recognizing those things aren't in your natural hard-wiring. You're programmed to read subtle cues in other humans and even in some other mammals, but not so with parrots. But when you live with parrots long enough, and you take the time to understand them, your human intuition shifts, and you begin to think using *their* modes and standards.

In this new edition, I add some new and updated information about the following:

- » How to teach your bird to know colors, to count, and maybe even read
- » How to communicate with your parrot on a higher level
- » How to make a parrot piñata for your bird to play with and destroy
- » Ten things that may surprise new parrot guardians
- » Updated nutrition advice and meal plans

You can read more about the following topics here to discover more tips and tricks to being a parrot guardian:

- » **The lowdown on different parrot species and which type of feathered pal is right for you:** From the tiny parrotlet to the giant macaws, you have a

lot to choose from. I also help you figure out where and how to purchase or adopt your bird.

- » **The practical nitty-gritty of sharing your home with a parrot:** You can find what you need to know on providing parrot housing and accessories, bringing a parrot home, parrot-proofing your home, and properly interacting with your parrot from day one.
- » **The care for your parrot:** Parrot nutrition, grooming, and health care are important topics.
- » **The ways parrots behave:** Parrot behavior isn't simple. Parrots do the funny and odd things that tend to baffle guardians. Read about normal and abnormal companion parrot behaviors, as well as advice for living in a multiple-parrot household.
- » **The ins and outs of taming and training and more:** No matter whether you're a new parrot guardian or an expert parrot guardian, you can find some strategies for beginning and more advanced training your bird. You can also find out more about breeding and showing your birds in bird shows.

Getting inside the mind of your parrot is important. It's not going to happen the other way around. I have had parrots nearly all of my life (for *all* my adult life), having bred them, rescued them, gone through just about every avian illness and injury with them, tamed and trained them, and lived with them as companions and friends. I worked in pet shops for most of my teens and early 20s, and managed an all-bird shop for a while. I learned a lot in those years, dealing with just about every species you can mention, and my personal flock grew as I took in many homeless parrots.

I became heavily involved in large and small bird clubs in my area and even wrote a newsletter for one of them for a couple of years. I had wonderful “birdy mentors” in those days, people who had been involved with birds for decades. I kept myself in the birdy loop, reading everything I could on the topic (and still do). My whole life was birds. Eventually, I became a birdy mentor too, and started my avian behavior and care consulting practice.

I use *he* and *she* interchangeably in this book when referring to parrots. I didn't want to settle on one pronoun, because both are commonly used in the parrot community. (Parrot guardians sometimes even use *it*.) In general, people usually assign a gender to their parrot when they first get it, usually starting with a name, and then they use the corresponding pronoun. This can backfire, however. Case in point is my African grey parrot, Hope, who turned out be male after I confirmed his gender with a DNA test. I mention this particular bird quite a bit in this book.

Foolish Assumptions

I wrote this book assuming any of following about you, my dear reader:

- » You're considering getting a parrot and you're doing your birdy homework.
- » You a new parrot guardian and are looking for all the basic information to get started.
- » You've been a parrot guardian for a while and want to find some valuable tips and information.

No matter how much experience you have, I give you some sophisticated methods of parrot care, taming, and training. So whether you're parrotless for the moment or you have a whole flock, this book is for you.

Icons Used in This Book

Every *For Dummies* book has pictures in the margins called *icons* that help you navigate the text of this book, and this one is no different. Here's the lowdown on what each icon means:



TIP

Gives you practical information that you can put into practice right away.



WARNING

This icon tips you off to dangers to your parrot's health and safety. Please heed these warnings.



REMEMBER

Here's where I repeat important information, generally for clarification. This is good info to tuck away as you become more involved with your parrot.

Where to Go from Here

Chapter 1 is a good place to begin if you want to get a solid overview of the rest of the book so that you know what to look for as you read. If you want to dive right into things, start with Chapter 2. If you're looking for something in particular, the table of contents is a quick reference to a basic section. For a much more thorough reference, check out the index. You can also go to www.dummies.com and search for "Parrots For Dummies Cheat Sheet" to access some other helpful information.

1

Introducing the Parrot — Your Wild Child

IN THIS PART . . .

Discover the essentials of what it's like to live with a parrot if you're considering welcoming one in your home.

Find out what you can expect from parrot guardianship.

Uncover the important characteristics and details on the variety of the more popular parrot species.

Recognize how to choose the best parrot species for you, your family, and your living arrangements.

- » Announcing the parrots
- » Creating a good parrot home
- » Reflecting a bit on parrot behavior
- » Becoming friends with your parrot

Chapter **1**

Meeting the Parrots, Just the Basics

Welcome to the wonderful world of parrots. It may be wonderful, but it's not utopia. There's a lot to know and a lot to do in order to make a parrot happy and keep him healthy in the average home. This chapter gives you an overview of this entire book and shows you where to look for the important information you'll need to get started with parrots.

Introducing the Parrots

If parrots were human, they'd be supermodels. They'd want their spring water and their carrot sticks, and they'd want them *now*. Parrots are beautiful, temperamental creatures that need a lot of handling from a good manager — that's you, the parrot's guardian — to make sure they're cared for properly (see Figure 1-1). It's in the fine print of the parrot's contract: You'll do the bird's bidding, and you won't ask any questions.

FIGURE 1-1: These tame budgies are wonderful companions and are as close to officially domesticated as parrots get.



Photo by Priscilla Schmidt

Well, doing the bird's bidding sounds a little un-fun, doesn't it? I don't mean that you're the bird's servant, though it can sometimes feel that way. What I mean is that parrots have a lot of requirements that need to be met *or else*. The *or else* means high veterinary bills, a very unhappy parrot, and perhaps even a dead bird. The *or else* isn't a place you want to go.

You have to feed the parrot right, house him right, and give him your full and total attention. You have to provide him with toys, friends, things to do, health care, and everything else he needs. A parrot is a complicated companion, far more so than a dog or cat. If you read this book cover to cover, you'll have a great handle on how to properly care for your bird.

From pet to companion

The first and most important thing to know about parrots is that they're not like other pets. They're *companions*. Rather than being the owner, you're the *guardian*. This is the vocabulary I use throughout this book. The language you use to describe other people is how you perceive and relate to them, and the same goes for the language you use to describe the animals in your life. You can find out more about all of this in Chapter 2.

MASTERING SOME BIRD LINGO

Here's some lingo you might see or hear in bird circles. Most of these definitions apply to the bird world:

- **Birb:** A playful internet nickname for birds, mostly used online for videos or photos of birds behaving silly or cute. According to www.knowyourmeme.com, the first example of the word used online was on Twitter in 2012.
- **Borb:** Chunky bird.
- **Fids:** Feathered kids.
- **Floof:** Fluffy bird.
- **Hooman:** What a birb might call you.
- **Parront:** The hooman guardian of a birb.
- **Seeb:** Bird seed.
- **Scratches:** A combo of *scratches* and *itches*, used when you gently pet a bird's head or face, usually against the feather growth.
- **Smol birb:** An adorably tiny bird.

I use some of these terms throughout the book.

A little bit of wilderness

Having a parrot in your home is like bringing a little bit of the rainforest, grasslands, or plains inside. A parrot is a wild animal and always will be, no matter where the parrot lives. When you live with a parrot, you have the unique responsibility of caring for a truly natural (not human manipulated) creature, one that hasn't been domesticated in any way. Captive parrots and wild parrots share the exact same instincts, developed over millions of years of evolution to keep them safe and help them find food, shelter, a mate, and rear babies. See Chapter 11 for more details on how instincts inform your parrot's behavior.



REMEMBER

Some parrots are indeed easier to care for than others. Which parrot you choose should depend on how much space and time you have. There's never really enough time in the day to give a larger parrot the attention he wants because a parrot that's bonded to you will want to hang out with you all day, the way he would with a mate in the wild. Smaller parrots, such as parakeets and lovebirds, are often kept happily in pairs, which is a great option when you can't interact with your bird enough. Large parrots love each other's company as well. Because parrots are social, flock-oriented animals, they tend to like to be together. Chapter 3 gives you

the lowdown on which parrot species might be right for you (as in Figure 1-2). Chapter 4 shows you how to choose a healthy parrot from the right kind of place.

FIGURE 1-2:
Parrots have some funny behaviors, like this caique eating a big cookie with one foot.



Photo by Shari Markowitz

Home Tweet Home: Welcoming a Parrot into Your Home

The average home must be modified to accommodate a parrot, whether it's a little budgie or a large macaw. You have to parrot-proof your home the way you'd kid-proof it for toddlers. Parrots can get into even more trouble than toddlers, because not only can a parrot open the cupboard under the sink, but he can also get up to the cupboard above the refrigerator. He can eat through drywall, pick at the chipping paint near the window, and dunk itself in the toilet. He can get outside and never come back again. Parrot-proofing is crucial. See Chapter 7 for parrot-proofing ideas.

Making birdy comfortable

After you've parrot-proofed, you have to find acceptable housing for your bird. In parrot circles, the idiom *bigger is better* is applied to bird cages, aviaries, and

habitats. Birds are meant to fly, so it's great if you can offer a safe flying space. Flying is essential for healthy respiratory, muscular, and skeletal systems.



Where you place the bird's housing is also crucial. Parrots like a secure spot close to a wall, out of drafts, and in a room where there's a lot of traffic. A parrot relegated to the garage or back room is a lonely and miserable bird. Chapter 5 gives you lots of housing do's and don'ts.

Parrot paraphernalia

After you decide on housing, you need a lot of parrot paraphernalia. Fortunately, manufacturers of birdy stuff have gotten incredibly creative over the years, and a cornucopia of parrot accessories are out there that will make your bird more comfortable, give him things to do, and perhaps even save his life. Check out Chapter 6 for your parrot shopping guide.

Parrot Care 101: Taking Care of Your Bird

There's a lot more to know about parrot care than tossing some seed and water into a cage and hoping for the best. Much research has been done on parrot health and nutrition in the last three decades, bringing parrot people to a new level of awareness and allowing parrots to live longer, healthier lives. Though some species of parrots are long-lived, some with a lifespan of more than 80 years, most don't even live past a decade. The information throughout this book shows you how to ensure that your parrot lives out his full lifespan. Most people think that budgies (parakeets) only live a few years. With the proper care, budgies can actually live to be well over 15.

The following sections highlight health care and nutrition — two areas important for taking care of your bird.

Health care

Parrots are complex organisms that have very different systems than humans do. Common household items that don't bother humans at all can kill a bird instantly. For example, the fumes from nonstick cookware, avocados, and aerosol sprays are deadly for birds. By far the most deadly thing for birds, however, is lack of proper health care. Getting your parrot to an avian veterinarian is crucial to keeping your bird healthy and alive. Check out Chapter 10 for more information on illness. While you're at it, delve into more health tips in Chapter 9.

Nutrition

One of the most deadliest things for most parrots is poor nutrition. A parrot that's suffering from vitamin and mineral deficiency has a weakened immune system and is susceptible to many diseases and ailments, not to mention behavioral problems. Read Chapter 8 for a lot of good tips on proper parrot nutrition.

Parrot Behavior: Checking How Your Bird Acts

It's too bad parrots don't come with owner's manuals — well, until now. You've got a great one in your hand. But as with just about everything, you're going to discover more about parrot behavior by trial and error. If your parrot bites you, hopefully you'll figure out what caused the bite and won't repeat the events leading up to the incident. Chapter 11 gives you some insight into wild parrot behavior and why your bird behaves the way he does.

These sections examine what you need to know when your parrot is acting like a typical parrot and what you need to know when your parrot is driving you nuts.

Normal behaviors

Some behaviors that seem really odd are actually quite typical. You can't try to understand parrots by using human intuition. It's very easy to anthropomorphize parrots, giving them human qualities. They definitely do some things that seem quite human, but for the most part, the things they do are all part of a complex communication that's really designed for other parrots. From body language to vocalization, your parrot's behaviors all mean something. The key is to get inside that feathered head and figure out what the parrot is trying to tell you. Check out Chapter 12 for more on normal parrot behavior, body language, and vocalization. Chapter 15 is all about parrot intelligence and will help you understand your feathered pal as well.

The parrot monster

Some of the behaviors that are normal for parrots can be annoying or baffling to their human guardians — screaming, biting, beak banging — they're enough to make a human guardian pull her own hair out. Because parrots aren't really meant to be kept inside a home, they can come up with some terrible behaviors due to frustration and loneliness, such as feather plucking and loud vocalization. Chapter 14 fills you in on how to handle birds gone wild and gives you options for getting help.

Parrot Pals: Socializing with Your Bird

Most people want a tame, hands-on parrot companion. Some people do have *watching only* birds (birds that you don't handle, but enjoy in an aviary or flight cage), generally the smaller parrots, but when referring to the medium to large parrots, many guardians seem to be looking for a friend. That's great, actually, because parrots bond well to gentle, kind humans who have their best interest at heart and behave accordingly. But remember, you can't just *intend* to do right by your parrot — you actually have to walk the walk — and sometimes a parrot simply doesn't want to be befriended. This section takes a closer look at socializing with your parrot and breeding birds.

Making friends with your parrot

Most relationships go bad when expectations exceed actuality. In a parrot/human relationship, it's usually the parrot that loses, which is pretty tragic for him. Check out Chapter 16 for advice and step-by-step tips on taming and training that will help you make good friends with your parrot and help you have the correct expectations. This chapter helps you discover how to create trust and a lasting bond with your bird. Chapter 17 goes above and beyond standard training to show you how to train your parrot to read and to communicate on a more human level.

Breeding parrots: Use caution

Breeding parrots isn't a great idea for a variety of good reasons:

- » Way too many parrots already are homeless, most in shelters or sanctuaries that are full to capacity.
- » Breeding birds is a risky business. Your veterinary bills will likely far exceed any money you make, and you put your parent birds in danger of illness and death, not to mention how delicate the babies are.
- » The endeavor is one of the most time-consuming things you'll ever undertake.

That said, some of the smaller birds, such as budgies, lovebirds, and cockatiels, have a healthy following of hobbyists who do breed them for show (refer to Figure 1-3). **Note:** There's a shortage of good homes for parrots, so check out a local parrot rescue organization before you breed your birds. If you're interested in this, or you just want to find out how your parrot came to be, check out Chapter 17.

FIGURE 1-3:
Baby parrots are
ugly-cute, but
breeding them is
best left to
people who are
experienced.



Photo by Mary Jo Yarberry

A Caveat to the Wise

Hundreds of books about parrot care and behavior are available, and you can find thousands of websites offering tips and advice. Everyone has a slightly different way of doing things and a slightly different parrot philosophy. There are different parrot *camps*, each with its own intense convictions. I try my best here to offer you a variety of viewpoints. Mainly, I focus on what has been successful for me all these years working with parrots, both my own and those of my clients in my care and behavior practice.

You're not going to find absolutely *everything* you need to know about parrots in this book. This book is a great primer to get you started, and even intermediate and advanced parrot people will find a lot of valuable information here. In any case, you're going to run into situations that you may not know how to handle, and perhaps you'll remember something from this book that will help you deal with the problem, or at least point you to a good reference where you can find some solutions.

- » Loving parrot guardianship
- » Considering the details before buying a parrot
- » Making your parrot happy
- » Gathering data on what a companion parrot expects

Chapter 2

Knowing What to Expect with Your Companion Parrot

The reason this chapter isn't called "Knowing What to Expect *from* Your Companion Parrot" is because it's your job as the human to make your parrot's life great, not the other way around. I want you to be more interested in what the parrot wants out of life than what you want from the parrot.

Yes, parrots do add a lot to their humans' lives — friendship, music, color, company, humor, love, and great photo fodder for an Instagram account — and though I don't want you to think of the relationship as one-sided, I do want to stress that the one with the opposable thumbs is pretty much accountable for the one with the feathers. This chapter discusses what your parrot expects from you and why those things are important to having a good relationship with your avian friend.

Defining a Companion Parrot

All parrots, no matter where they live — whether in a rain forest, desert, grassland, or in your living room — are still wild and have the same needs. Parrots aren't cows or even dogs or cats for that matter.

Parrots aren't domesticated. They still have all their wild instincts intact. They don't rely on people for survival unless they're kept in captivity and have no choice. It's kind of like keeping a whale in a backyard swimming pool. Sure, someone can feed the whale, clean the water, and love the animal, but it's still a wild animal with wild-animal needs, and its life isn't really going to be complete and healthy.

I'm not trying to make you feel guilty here. Remember, I have parrots in my home too. I love them and feed them and clean their housing. But do they have everything they'd have in the wild? Nope. Not even close. It doesn't make me a bad parrot guardian, it just makes me . . . well, a parrot guardian. That's the situation companion parrots have been given. It's too bad for them that they're so beautiful and intelligent. If they weren't, most people wouldn't want to keep them, and they'd probably be better off. Check out Figure 2-1 to see a wild parrot in its element.



FIGURE 2-1:
This wild,
green-winged
macaw not only
enjoys flying — it
also *needs* to fly
for survival.

Photo by Bonnie Zimmerman

PARROTS AND DOMESTICATION: NOT YET

Bear with me for a moment. Somewhere around 9000 B.C., people realized that they could get more from wild cows than just meat and began milking them. Eventually, through selective breeding, the cow became what it is today — a docile creature that some humans use for meat, milk, and leather. There are more than a thousand different breeds of cattle. Some produce a lot of milk, and some are very lean. This process is called *domestication*. The same was done with dogs, which is why the Pug and the German Shepherd look and behave so differently. Other animals, such as horses, cats, sheep, and pigs, have also gone through the domestication process.

The process of domestication, which takes many years, hasn't been realized in parrots. They don't really "help" from mankind the way cows and dogs do, so not a lot of effort has been put into making parrot species into breeds. The closest thing to a domesticated parrot is the English budgie. This large version of the native Australian budgie isn't found in the wild. It was bred to be large and have certain features. A budgie society in England sometime in the early 20th century decided that being big was an asset, and so they bred big budgies to other big budgies, and eventually the English budgie became its own breed. Like the dog, it's different just because people encouraged it to be that way through breeding practices. However, this bird still behaves like and has the same needs as its smaller wild cousins.

Just Being Themselves

There are some lovely ways to keep parrots that allow them to be themselves and get more of what they need in captivity. In the past few decades, zoos around the world have been exchanging their philosophy of small cages for natural habitats. It's clearly far better for any captive animal to have as much wilderness as possible. For parrots, that includes a safe place to fly. In fact, flying is the healthiest activity for parrots. Let parrots just be themselves (see Figure 2-2).



REMEMBER

A cage is a synthetic environment for parrots. They know as well as you do that they aren't supposed to be living their life in a closely confined area. Being a creature of boundless space is in the parrot's DNA. A lot of private parrot guardians have managed to allow their birds to enjoy a natural setting. Smaller parrots do great in an aviary setting where they can fly. Larger parrots need a much larger place to fly, so you'd have to have substantial space and funds to create a secure and practical area for a larger bird to exercise its right to flight.



FIGURE 2-2:
Parrots can be lot
of work, but
they're worth it.

Source: 123 RF, Sarah Richardson

Before you throw up your hands and toss this book into your parrot's cage for use as a shredding toy, let me say that I have cages for my parrots. I'm also an advocate for free flight and habitats. I'm realistic in that not everyone is going to create a habitat for their parrots, though it would be great if everyone could. I'm not going to tell you not to get a parrot unless you can build a flying space or aviary, because most people reading this book probably already have one or more parrots. I simply have a responsibility to tell you how to properly use both options. Chapter 5 discusses parrot housing in greater detail.

Recognizing the Joys of Parrot Guardianship

Living with a parrot can enrich your life and bring you lots of joy. They're wonderful companions, but they're nothing like dogs and cats. They don't have a pack hierarchy, as do dogs, and they don't consider themselves rulers of all they see, as do many cats.

Most parrots expect to be treated as equals. They don't like to be talked down to or shoved aside as just another thing in the house. That attitude is part of the joy

of having a parrot in your home. You can truly be friends with a parrot as equals. Here are some things that a parrot offers its human guardians:

- » Parrots are relatively long-lived, depending on the species.
- » Parrots offer some joyful noise to a household. Well, joyful to certain ears, in any case.
- » Parrots talk. Depending on the species, you can carry on a simple conversation, even one based on clicks and whistles.
- » Parrots are intelligent, allowing you to really have a friendly relationship based on being equals, not on a hierarchy.
- » Parrots are beautiful and funny, giving you a lot of shareable photo and video opportunities. #birb #sillybirb #lovebirb
- » Parrots give you social opportunities to meet and engage with other parrot people.

Pondering Important Points about Buying or Adopting a Parrot

Becoming a friend to your parrot isn't difficult if you take its needs and its psychology into consideration. You can't expect the bird to do this for *you*, so you have to get into parrot mode to come to a mutual understanding. The workings of your parrot's birdy brains are different than yours. As predators, humans have reactions to certain stimuli that are much different than those of prey animals, such as birds, and so communicating with birds isn't intuitive for people. Most of the time it's counterintuitive, which means that you have to figure out how to do it because the behavior doesn't come to you naturally. I talk more about this in Chapter 11. For the moment, this section discusses some things that make a regular human into a spectacular bird pal.

Recognizing who's getting the parrot

The first consideration before even thinking about getting a parrot is: Who's going to take full responsibility for its nutrition, veterinary care, housing, basic care, and attention? A parrot of any size shouldn't be bought on a whim. You have to consider whether you're the right person for this particular bird. Do your homework, and look at the personality traits of each species before making your decision. A bird isn't a good impulse purchase.

For example, take two birds of relatively similar size: a sun conure and a caique. The conure is persistently noisier and the caique is beakier (uses its beak to test out the world, which would include your fingers). They're both equally beautiful. Which one you choose has everything to do with what you can handle as a guardian.

Answering why you want a parrot

Just because a parrot is easy to shove inside a cage and close the door on doesn't mean it's an easy companion. Sure, it doesn't need to be walked, but a parrot's care is actually a whole lot more complex than a dog's care. Speaking as someone who lives with, trains, and writes a lot about dogs, I can vouch for that. In the time it takes to make the food for the parrots every morning, I could walk the dogs, give both of them a bath, and play a hardy game of fetch. As it stands, the dogs just hang around in the kitchen waiting for some of the parrots' food to fall. See Chapter 8 for more information on feeding your parrot properly.



WARNING

If you're getting a parrot because you can't have a cat or dog, remember a bird isn't a substitute companion. But if you really want a parrot and you know that you can deal with whatever comes up in the relationship and that you can offer proper care, then you're on your way. If you really want a puppy but you settle for a parrot, you're likely to be disappointed.

Factoring in the parrot's personality

Parrots aren't hatched sweet and tame. They're hatched with a full set of instincts that tell them to flee from predators and danger and to fight back if threatened. It's amazing then that they can adapt to the average human home. Just about everything humans do to parrots can be seen as threatening to a prey animal. Yet they accept people voluntarily if treated well and even come to think of some guardians as mates and flock members. As far as I know, marriages between human and parrot aren't legal yet, but don't tell that to the parrot in love.



WARNING

Parrots require a lot of attention to remain as sweet as when they are babies. The wild-child part of a parrot's personality does emerge if the bird is neglected. Some parrots — lovebirds, for example — will *revert* (become cantankerous and wild) if left without handling for only a few weeks, and even the bite from a small parrot, such as a lovebird, can be fierce.

The reason why parrot sanctuaries are overflowing with birds is because parrot personalities can change, often drastically, and sometimes overnight. Teenage and adult hormones can kick in, someone or something frightens the bird, or the bird is just a “little” neglected for just a “little” too long, and before you know it you have a beautiful barbarian on your hands.

When the biting starts, guardians usually become afraid of the parrot. The more afraid they are, the less trust the parrot has in them, and the parrot becomes fearful, which can show itself either as aggression or fleeing behavior. The parrot gets neglected even more and may begin screaming and plucking. It's a nasty cycle.

At that point, many guardians decide to relegate the parrot to the basement or back room, give it away, or get it a mate, hoping that will help. The parrot gets shuffled from home to home, or it may land in a sanctuary. What could have been a great relationship wasn't even given a chance. It's certainly not the parrot's fault. So, know ahead of time what you're getting into with a parrot. The bottom line is, if you meet *all* of the parrot's needs possible in captivity, its personality should be pretty constant (with the exception of breeding season, which I discuss in Chapter 17).

Contemplating the parrot's home

If you don't have room for very large housing for a very large parrot, don't get one. Size down to what you do have room for. If you really want a macaw, but you don't have a lot of space, consider a mini-macaw or an even smaller bird. A small bird in the largest space you can provide will be a lot happier than a large bird in the same area.



REMEMBER

Parrots are hardwired to thrive in boundless space. See Chapter 5 for more information on how to best choose your parrot's cage or habitat.

Going on vacation

Who's going to take care of the parrot when you're away? It's not like a cat or dog. Most pet sitters are used to cats, dogs, hamsters, and the like. Birds don't show their illnesses until it's too late for someone unfamiliar with the bird to notice — usually, the bird is belly up in the cage by the time a pet sitter figures out that something's wrong. You, as the bird's guardian, will notice small changes in behavior or eating patterns that can indicate illness. You'll also be able to detect changes in feather quality and in the droppings. Someone else watching the bird may not. I know people who never, ever take vacations or go out of town because they're so worried about their birds. This is an extreme situation, however. If you choose a good parrot sitter, you should be able to leave town!



TIP

Of course, you can always take the parrot with you. I give you some good travel tips in Chapter 21, including finding a parrot sitter.

Remembering parrots have a longer lifespan

When considering welcoming a parrot into your home, be aware parrots have longer lifespans than other traditional pets. Some smaller parrots, such as parakeets and lovebirds, live about 15 years with proper care. The medium-sized parrots tend to live 20 to 30 years or more. Greys are said to live about 50 years, and Amazons more than 70. The larger birds, such as the large macaws and the cockatoos, have been known to live more than 80 years. A blue and gold macaw named Charlie, once thought to be owned by Winston Churchill (who taught the bird some choice language that will not be repeated here), is said to be 114 years old. Look for his story online. He's remarkable.



TIP

Where will you be when your parrot is 15, 20, 50, or more? For a larger parrot, you're going to have to consider who's going to care for the bird when you can't anymore. Leaving a legal trust for parrots is becoming popular these days. You'll have to see a lawyer to draw up the necessary paperwork, and you'll have to designate a trustee — someone who knows and loves your bird — as well as a sum of money for the trustee to receive for caring for your bird. That's one other expense to think about when you're tallying up your parrot financial bottom line. Refer to the section, "Estimating the costs of parrot ownership," later in this chapter for other costs.

Dealing with allergies

Before you get a parrot, make sure that no one in the household is allergic. Some parrots — like cockatoos, cockatiels, and African greys — emit copious feather dust, which can trigger allergies in some people. However, these aren't the only birds that cause allergies.



TIP

If you're allergic, placing a good quality HEPA filter near your parrot's housing can help, as can misting the parrot every other day or so with clean, warm water. Don't use an ionic filter or ion setting near your bird, however, because they can cause respiratory problems (the same goes for humans).

Estimating the costs of parrot ownership

Speaking of the parrot total cost, parrots aren't cheap . . . er, cheap. After the cost of the parrot itself, housing is the next most expensive proposition on the list and can be more costly than the parrot. Here are some basic costs:

- » **Parrot:** \$15 to \$30,000
- » **Housing:** \$150 to \$3,000 to the sky's the limit
- » **Accessories:** Toys, perches, and so on can run \$30 to \$250 or more and are an ongoing cost
- » **Food:** \$25 to \$75 monthly — more if you buy organic
- » **Supplements:** \$15 to \$75 monthly
- » **Veterinary care:** \$200 to \$1,000 or more per year
- » **Time off work to spend with your parrot:** Priceless



REMEMBER

If you spend \$25 a month on your parrot (and many people spend a lot more, taking into account veterinary bills and housing upgrades), you'll need \$3,000 for ten years of your bird's life. That amount grows to \$9,000 if you expect your bird to live 30 years. Be sure to set something aside each month if you plan to leave your bird to someone else.

Being cognizant of the responsibilities of parrot guardianship

There's no such thing as a low-maintenance parrot. That's what a lot of people ask for when they walk into a pet shop or call a rescue organization: "Which one is easy to care for?" Well, I admit that it's easier to take care of a pair of birds who love each other — for example, male and female parakeets, lovebirds, parrotlets, cockatiels, and others (the small and small/medium birds). If these birds have the proper spacious housing and care, they don't need any human interaction other than feeding, cleaning, and veterinary care. If you want your bird to be your best buddy, then you'll need to have a more hands-on relationship.

Anecdotal evidence shows that many parrots, from the little parakeet to the large cockatoo, get shuffled to a different home about every two to five years. It's said that the average parrot has at least three homes in its lifetime. If the relationship between you and your parrot is irreconcilable and you simply need to break up, then rehoming the bird is a better choice rather than delegating it to a lesser quality life. I don't want anyone to feel badly about having to give a parrot up. I'd rather people go into the relationship with open eyes and choose the right parrot from the outset; Chapters 3 and 4 can help you.

However, most parrots don't live even half of their lifespan. It's not so much that parrot parents are lazy about proper care; it's more that people need quality information about proper avian nutrition, care, and medicine. That's another reason why this book exists.

The majority of parrot food found in pet shops is still seed or seed based, but that's changing. As an alternative, manufacturers also make birdy pellets as a whole diet for birds, the way kibble is a whole diet for dogs. However, neither an all-seed nor all-pellet diets is truly whole and complete. Fortunately, people who have had birds a long time have come up with pretty good dietary regimens for parrots, though nothing's perfect. The right diet for a parrot takes a lot of effort and the willingness to purchase a multitude of the correct kinds of items and to prepare them properly. I talk more about diet in Chapter 8.

Spending time with your parrot

Timewise, think dog, cat, hamster, turtle, and fish tank *combined*, and you can understand how time consuming a parrot can be. Yes, creating the proper diet takes time, as does cleaning poop, feathers, and fallen food, but more time goes, or should go, into interacting with your parrot — the fun stuff. The more time you can spend with your bird, the better. Even just being in the same room and watching television is good time spent.



WARNING

You can't expect to spend half an hour in the morning and half an hour at night with a parrot and expect it to be happy and thrive. That's when behavior problems arise. Parrots can also become ill due to neglect. The immune system becomes compromised because the bird is stressed. Remember, parrots aren't used to being alone all the time.

Preparing for mess and more mess

There's no such thing as a non-messy bird. There are only degrees of mess. Small birds will make smaller messes, and large birds make larger messes. Get ready for some heavy-duty cleaning. If you're not into having food all over the floor and walls, and can't deal with some poop here and there, then reconsider getting a parrot. Poop happens.

Getting used to the noise (Sorry, I can't hear over my screaming parrot)

As with mess, noise comes in degrees. The smaller the parrot, the smaller the noise; the larger the parrot, the louder the noise, as with the blue and gold macaw in Figure 2-3. But this doesn't mean that small parrots aren't noisy — what they might lack in decibels, they make up for in persistence. All parrots make noise. Some just make less annoying noise.

FIGURE 2-3:
When humans truly understand and respect parrots, a positive relationship often results, and screaming can be reduced.



Photo by Nikki Moustaki

Whether the noise bothers you depends largely on your own ears and noise capacity. Most parrot parents get so used to their parrot's noises that they don't even hear the bird anymore. People come over to my house and ask, "What did he just say?" when my African grey talks. I'm always surprised. "Oh, did he just say something?" I don't even hear him a lot of the time because I'm used to tuning him out. Well, certain noises I *always* hear, unfortunately, such as his version of police and fire-truck sirens, garbage trucks backing up, the microwave beeping, and a multitude of car alarms.

Understanding What a Companion Parrot Expects

This section focuses on the nitty-gritty of this chapter: what your parrot expects from you. Fortunately, this is all stuff that you probably already have, especially if you already live with a parrot.

Tolerance

Only the most tolerant of people will be able to coexist with a parrot, especially a medium to large parrot. Not only is there noise and mess, but there's also the occasional bite, mischief, fussiness, and stressful, unexpected moments. You have to take it all in stride.

Empathy

Realize that a parrot isn't really meant to live in a home, though he can be quite happy if cared for properly. Don't get angry if your bird is demanding. He's just acting like a bird. Try to empathize. Imagine what it's like to be that parrot. Is he locked in a cage a lot of the day? Does he have the right things to eat? Does he have enough to play with? Try to look at life through his eyes.

Sense of humor

If you can't laugh, you'll end up crying. Parrots do all kinds of chaotic things, such as chew the piano legs, make holes in walls, and poop on your taxes. Turn your back for an instant, and you never know what your bird is getting into. But remember, *it's not your bird's fault*. So have a laugh at the things your bird does. Parrots can be quite humbling.

Attentiveness

An attentive parrot guardian knows her parrot so well that it's obvious when there are any changes, either physical and behavioral. After these signs become readily visible, it may be too late to help the bird. However, if you know your bird well, you'll know all his little nuances.

Decisiveness and action

If you do happen to run into a birdy emergency or you believe your parrot is ill, you can't sit around and wait for things to get better. A parrot needs a decisive guardian who will rush to the veterinarian when necessary. If your bird becomes lost, you need to spring into action immediately or risk never seeing him again.

Constant companionship

Parrots aren't fond of being alone and won't stand for neglect very long. Behavior problems result from loneliness, as do physical issues. If you have a lone parrot, or even a few parrots that all consider you their main squeeze, you'll have to set aside a considerable amount of time to interact and play.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION . . . WATCHING PARROTS IN FILM

Parrots look great on screen, and so have become the featured stars in some fabulous films. Check out these films to discover more about your featured pal:

- *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill (2003)*: A homeless man befriends a flock of wild South American parrots in San Francisco in this mesmerizing documentary.
- *A Bird of the Air (2011)*: A fictional story of a man who finds a parrot, and in his quest to return it to its owner, also finds love.
- *Rio (2011)*: A 3D animated romp in which a rare Spix's macaw is reintroduced to the Amazon rainforest where he falls in love with another Spix's macaw after a harrowing adventure.
- *Parrot Confidential (2013)*: Parrot guardians share their stories about the beauty and adversities of keeping parrots.

A loyal friend

Above all, a parrot needs you to be a loyal friend who doesn't run at the first signs of trouble. Before you ditch the relationship for whatever reason, do yourself and your parrot a favor and consult an expert. Many good bird behaviorists and consultants are available to help you with issues that arise. No need to dump the bird, even if it seems like he might be dumping you. Behavior issues are often temporary or remedied with a simple plan of action.

Living with a Parrot around Nonbird People

People who don't live with parrots often don't appreciate or understand the joys and tribulations that come with keeping an animal like this inside your home. Part of what confounds nonbird people about birds is that birds don't have facial expressions, the way even a dog might. No wrinkling of the brow, no smile, no ears to perk up or pin back. Birds look stoic and unfeeling to the uninitiated, but nothing could be further from the truth.

You have to be a little offbeat to keep birds because they aren't like any other companion animal. For one, many parrots can talk. Take that, cats, dogs, and turtles! Parrots are sensitive and opinionated and silly; they can be loving and stubborn and quixotic. But after you find yourself truly communing with a bird, most other animals seem to pale in comparison.

Once a friend came over to my house in the late morning for coffee as I was chopping up bananas, grapes, apples, plums, and kiwis. I stirred all the fruit in a bowl and then doled it out into stainless steel dishes and put them onto a tray. My friend was appalled when I excused myself to go outside for a moment to where many of my birds lived. "I thought we were having fruit salad," she said, disappointed. I looked down at the tray in my hands and laughed. It had never occurred to me to ask her if she wanted any of what I thought of as bird salad.

In college, I once took a group of baby conures to a house party because I had to hand feed them every three hours. I know the other partygoers thought I was strange. I also used to take baby birds to my college classes and stow them under my chair. They'd start cheeping in the middle of class, and I'd have to tap on the plastic box for them to settle down. One teacher said I was the weirdest student she ever had, but that's nothing compared to the looks I'd get when I hand fed baby birds in the college cafeteria.

You may find yourself a little bit alone in this bird fascination, but don't worry . . . you'll find bird clubs and online groups to keep you surrounded by other feathered fanciers.

- » Knowing what to look for when selecting the species right for you
- » Hearing the word on noise
- » Finding a less messy parrot
- » Profiling species

Chapter 3

Choosing the Right Companion

Selecting the best species for you is the most important decision you'll make as a parrot guardian. Choose the wrong species for your lifestyle and capabilities, and you may wind up with an animal in your home that you don't like, don't want, are afraid of, don't have time for, and wish you had never brought home in the first place.

How do you know which species is right for you? It's certainly not a matter of choosing the prettiest parrot. I know you've heard this before, but it really is what's inside that counts. Many people end up with a beautiful parrot that they can't stand and eventually give away because not all species are created equally. They all have their quirks, some of which are easier to deal with than others. This chapter helps you weigh your parrot options. For a bunch of great photos of different species, see the special color section of this book.

Keeping Certain Considerations in Mind As You Choose a Species

Parrots are long-lived animals. Even a bird with a shorter lifespan, such as a budgie or a lovebird, can be a child's companion from kindergarten to college. Don't choose a bird while standing in the pet store admiring that big macaw or a bouncy caique. Instead, consider the following when picking a parrot.

Parrots are individuals

I can tell you about the general qualities of different species, but there will always be individual parrots that don't conform to these characteristics. You can choose a parrot based on species, but you really have to spend a little time with an individual bird to know his habits, temperament, and companionability.

For example, Amazons are known to be feisty and aggressive, but some Amazons wouldn't bite anyone. African greys are known for their talking ability, though some don't talk much at all, preferring to whistle and mimic household sounds.

The chemistry between the two of you

Not every person is going to get along with every parrot. You'll find that you have a rapport with some parrots but not with others, even within the same species. The only way to find out if you have chemistry is to spend some time with several birds, the way you would with puppies — or other people, for that matter. Chapter 4 discusses more on what to look for in an individual parrot. Also consider that some species tend to be one-person birds rather than family birds, wanting to bond with just one person in the household, and that person may not end up being you, even though you're the person who brought the bird home.

Not all species are created equal

The reason why you can't just walk into the pet shop and choose the prettiest parrot is because each species has different needs and behaves in a unique manner. You have to know what you're getting into before you think about taking a bird home. For example:

- » Poicephalus parrots like a dark area inside their housing where they can retreat from commotion.
- » Amazons, conures, and macaws need a lot of chewing material, especially wood and paper.

- » Cockatiels and budgies are lighter birds and need a more extensive wing clip than other birds (you can find more about wing clipping in Chapter 9).
- » Caiques tend to be beaky birds who use their hard beaks to explore the world, which can include a guardian's fingers.
- » Cockatoos need lots of preening toys and rope toys. (Check out Chapter 6 for more about toys and other accessories you can buy.)

Noise: deafening or extremely deafening

A big reason why some parrots are re-homed is noise. Parrots are demanding and can become quite vocal about their desires. They're also programmed to make a racket at sunup and sundown, and there's nothing you can do about that. What you *can* do is choose a parrot whose volume and voice isn't as offensive as some others.



REMEMBER

Noise is directly proportional to the size of the parrot. The smaller the bird, the smaller the noise. This doesn't account for the *amount* of noise the bird creates, just the volume. The *volume* indicates loudness and tends to go up with the number of birds as well. The *amount* of noise indicates the time span in which noise is made; for example, some parrots only vocalize for a couple of hours a day, but others do it nearly all day long. One cockatiel's vocalizations are tolerable, whereas a flock of them can be deafening because they're all competing with one another to be heard. But a racket is in the ear of the hearer, isn't it? One person's unbearable din is another person's sweet melody.

African species tend to be a little quieter than other birds, whereas South American and some Australian species tend to be louder and more raucous. For example, most poicephalus species, such as Meyer's parrots and Senegals, aren't as persistently noisy or loud. Cockatoos, on the other hand, are ear-piercing and persistent, noise being one of the main reasons they are re-homed or given up to rescue organizations. Of course, this generalization changes with the number of birds housed together and the state in which they're kept. Unhappy birds will often screech to get attention.

Space: Bigger is better

All birds need space to move around, and ideally, the space should be large enough to allow for flight. The long-tailed species, such as the keets, cockatiels, and macaws, need very large, tall housing, or their tails become ratty and they become unkempt in general.



TIP

Don't skimp on housing size for larger parrots. A cramped bird is very unhappy, and unhappy birds can develop some unfortunate habits, such as screaming, biting, and feather plucking, to mention just a few. Some parrot species are diminutive, like the parrotlet and the lovebird, but even these need large housing to receive the critical exercise they require. I discuss housing in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Lifestyles of the neat and messy

All parrots are messy. They scatter seed and wet foods, poop wherever they want, and spray water all over the place when they bathe. I was once horrified to discover that millet seeds had literally begun to sprout in my carpet!

Parrots shred paper and can destroy items in the house if allowed to roam. There are no species that are less messy than others. However, the smaller the bird, the easier it may be to contain the mess. Birds known to be particularly messy include

- » **Eclectus:** This species is known for messy eating, spreading wet foods all over the walls and floor. Eclectus guardians often invest in a special acrylic cube where they offer wet foods.
- » **Lories and lorikeets:** These are among the messiest of parrots. Because they eat soft and liquid food, they have soft and liquid waste, which they somehow manage to spray all over the outside of the cage. Twice-a-day cleaning, at least, is required.
- » **Lovebirds:** These feisty parrots love to fling every seed out of the dish and onto the floor. They're also notorious for shredding paper.
- » **Amazons:** These destructive birds will shred and chew just about anything, making them quite a handful to clean up after. Lots of supervision is required with many individuals.
- » **Quaker parrots:** These lovely little birds manage to get poop well outside the cage and like to toss food around.
- » **African grey parrots, cockatoos, and cockatiels:** These species in particular spread around plenty of feather dust.



TIP

To combat mess, some parrot owners fight fire with fire — or, bird with bird. Some people buy small quail to keep inside or near a large aviary. Budgies and cockatiels usually get along with these little ground birds, but most other parrots won't. Just keep an eye on the quail to make sure they aren't being bullied and remove them if they are.

From easily affordable to taking out a loan

The most inexpensive parrot is the American parakeet (budgie), from \$7 to \$14. The most expensive parrot commonly offered for sale is the hyacinth macaw — about \$10,000 — and some of the rarer parrots cost even more. Somewhere in between are the rest, from the green Quaker parrot at between \$100 and \$200, to the Moluccan cockatoo at between \$1,500 and \$2,000. One thing is for sure: Parrots aren't *cheap*. Of course, prices change all the time depending on availability, as with anything else.



REMEMBER

What are you prepared to spend for a parrot? Remember that no matter what you spend, the cost of veterinary and general care is the same. You're going to spend as much money caring for a \$14 budgie as you will for a \$450 turquoise pied parrotlet.

Talking ability

Some parrots are well known for their talking ability, but others may never talk at all. Most will whistle or make other sounds common to your household. You can find more information on talking parrots in Chapter 16. The most famous chatterboxes include

- » African grey parrots
- » Indian ringnecks
- » Parakeets (budgies)
- » Yellow-naped Amazons

Child-friendliness

There's one irrefutable rule in the bird world: If it has a beak, it can bite. Some individual parrots may never bite anyone; some will bite every time someone is unlucky enough to come near its beak. Though some species are less likely to bite than others, parents should realize that any parrot can give a child a good nip, which can be painful and scary to younger kids. Children may not understand that a bite isn't personal.

Species that may make good hands-on companions for children in this order include

- » Budgies (parakeets)
- » English budgies

- » Cockatiels
- » Pionus
- » Rosellas
- » Bourke's
- » Pyrrhura conures



WARNING

Though it seems logical that smaller birds would be more suitable for children, some small birds are actually pretty feisty and can be too nippy or temperamental for younger kids to handle. These include

- » Caiques
- » Lories
- » Lovebirds
- » Parrotlets

Of course, you can always have a pair of parrots for a child to care for, but not handle. Parrots tend to get along best in male/female couples, but not exclusively. Budgies (also known as parakeets) and lovebirds are especially suitable if they're a compatible pair. They're colorful, chatty, enjoy each other's company, and can live upwards of 15 years if cared for properly.

One, two, or more

Some parrots enjoy each other's company, whereas others will fight to the death with their own or a different species. There's no guarantee that buying two birds of the same species will result in fast friends. You may notice two parrots canoodling with each other in the same cage. This may be a *true pair*, a male and female who like each other. Same-sex birds can also bond and be good friends, and you won't have to worry about babies resulting from the pairing. Just be careful about how you introduce same-sex pairs (see Chapter 13 for more information on introductions).

The parrots most likely to be able to be peaceably housed together, given enough space, such as a very large aviary, are

- » Conures (but only with other conures)
- » Cockatiels and budgies
- » Hanging parrots, budgies, cockatiels

The parrots of different species most likely to become aggressive and even kill each other if housed together are

- » Caiques
- » Cockatoos
- » Lories
- » Lovebirds
- » Some macaws



TIP

If you want to house birds of different species together, buy two young parrots and raise them together, though you can't always be certain that they'll remain friends forever. You can find more information about having more than one bird in Chapter 13.

Looking Closer at Species Profiles Commonly Kept As Companions

Here are profiles of the parrots most often kept as companions. Realize that there are always exceptions, and some individuals will vary from the descriptions here. I include the most common traits of each.

African grey parrots

African grey parrots are recognized in two distinct subspecies: the Congo African grey (*Psittacus erithacus erithacus*) and the Timneh African grey (*Psittacus erithacus timneh*). The Congo African grey has a natural range wider than just the Congo, but it's the most common name for the red-tailed parrot of this species. Large Congos are sometimes incorrectly called Cameroons. Because the African grey's native range is so expansive, these birds tend to come in a variety of sizes and shades of grey, which can lead owners to believe that they have different subspecies.

The Congo grey has prominently scalloped feathers, a black beak, and a tail that becomes scarlet at maturity. The Timneh is smaller, with a darker grey body and horn-colored beak, and its tail ranges in color from maroon to dark grey or black. Both parrots make similar companions, and one isn't considered superior over the other.

The intelligence and sensitivity to outside influences of the African grey is unsurpassed among companion parrots, with the probable exception of the cockatoo. This sensitivity is part of the grey's charisma but can also lead to behavioral issues. Even a slight change in routine or environment can lead to plucking and fearfulness.

Not only do most African greys develop outstanding vocabularies, but they may even come to understand words in context. However, not all African greys learn to talk. Some learn a variety of other household sounds as well as the beeping microwave, your phone's ringtone, and garbage trucks backing up. Greys aren't loud and don't usually annoy sensitive neighbors, however, some individual parrots will learn some pretty loud and annoying sounds. For example, if you have a noisy cockatoo, the grey will learn to sound just like it. Even a cockatiel's voice will be amplified by a grey, the master of repetition. If you don't want to hear a sound or phrase a million times, don't let your grey hear it.

Intelligence is one of the main factors making this species one of the most popular companion parrots. Greys are also social animals that welcome a lot of attention from a human guardian but aren't known to appreciate intense physical contact — though some don't mind snuggling and petting. They aren't known to get along terrifically with other species, though cross-species friendships do happen. They can live upwards of 50 years in captivity.

Amazon parrots

More than 30 species of Amazon parrots exist, some of which are endangered or rare and aren't kept regularly in captivity. They're native to Central and South America and on some Caribbean islands. They're long-lived (80 years with proper care), and most are companionable, although they can be feisty. Some are unpredictable, especially in the spring, when breeding season commences. Amazons are hardy, exuberant birds, and most are best for an experienced bird guardian. They tend toward obesity and require a nutritious diet and proper exercise. Here are short profiles of a few popular species.

Blue-fronted Amazon

The blue-fronted Amazon (*Amazona aestiva*) is one of the most popular parrots worldwide because of its beauty, talking ability, and clownishness. This type is one of the calmer Amazon parrots, though they can act up during breeding season and aren't particularly easy to keep for a novice. They're fabulous talkers and can scream so loud that the neighbors will definitely know you have a parrot. Their markings are diverse, with the amount of yellow, blue, and red differing on each individual. This bird is becoming rare in its natural habitat, but oddly, a flock of blue-fronted Amazons and their hybrids (along with other species) is living in Stuttgart, Germany.

Lilac-crowned Amazon

Also known as the Finsch's Amazon (*Amazona finschi*), this inquisitive and affectionate 13- to 14-inch bird is as fearless and feisty as the other Amazons, though its temperament can be calmer, making it a better choice for a bird novice. Though it's not as flashy or talkative as some of the other Amazons, it has become more popular recently, even though breeders hadn't concentrated on this Mexican native in the past.

Orange-winged Amazon

The orange-winged Amazon (*Amazona amazonica*) used to be an inexpensive bird, brought into the United States in large numbers before importation was made illegal. In the years since, its numbers have dwindled, and breeders are now making an effort to bring back the species. It's an affectionate bird, though sometimes temperamental. Talking ability is limited. People often confuse it with the blue-fronted Amazon because of the blue on the face, but the markings are quite different — the orange-winged has a blue mask and a hint of orange on the wings.

Red-lored Amazon

The red-lored Amazon (*Amazona autumnalis*) is popular and abundant. They're affectionate, calm, and can be quite a clown. Talking ability is limited, but they'll learn to whistle and mimic household sounds, and they aren't as noisy and loud as some of the other popular Amazon parrots. They love to chew, like many of their Amazon cousins, and can tend toward being a one-person bird, though they can be a family bird if everyone in the household takes the time to offer treats and affection.

If you want to read a great book about a red-lored Amazon, check out *The Parrot Who Owns Me: The Story of a Relationship* by ornithologist Joanna Burger (Random House). She adopted the 36-year-old parrot, and he becomes one of the most complex relationships of her life. It's a truly fabulous read.

Spectacled (white-fronted) Amazon

The spectacled Amazon (*Amazona albifrons*) is the smallest of the Amazons, at just 9 to 10 inches long. This Central American species is *dimorphic*, meaning males and females have different appearances. Males have red feathers on their shoulders, whereas females have green. They can be a little noisy, but not particularly loud. They're popular due to their size and beauty. They have big personalities and can become great talkers and mimics.

Yellow-naped Amazon

The yellow-naped Amazon (*Amazona auropalliata*) is one of the most popularly kept Amazons, probably because of its supreme talking ability and intelligence. It's a quirky bird, tends to be unpredictable in breeding season, and can become aggressive. These birds aren't noisy in general, but they aren't quiet parrots. The nominate bird (the color most often found in the wild) is stout and green with a yellow patch at the back of the neck (*nape*), but the blue mutation has a white spot on the nape instead of yellow and can cost \$30,000 each. They tend to be one-person birds.

Brotogeris

There are nine species of Brotogeris parrots. These little parrots have become more popular over the years, especially the grey-cheeked and the canary-winged species. They were once imported into the United States by the thousands, but they went out of vogue until a few years ago, when breeders realized that they were going to lose the species if they didn't start paying more attention to them.

Brotogeris are 7 to 9 inches long and are primarily green in color, with a long, slender tail. Handfed babies make good companions and aren't loud, though a flock of them will get raucous and noisy. They're a hardy species and can live upwards of 30 years with the proper care.

Budgies

The budgie (*Melopsittacus undulatus*), also known as the *American parakeet* and the *budgerigar*, originates in Australia and still exists there in large flocks. The wild budgie is comparable to the companion budgie, though it's smaller and only found in the nominate color, green. Budgies are about 6 to 7 inches long and are bred in a large assortment of colors and patterns, called *mutations* — you can find hundreds of variations.

Budgies are dimorphic, and it's easy to establish gender at about 6 to 8 months of age, when the birds mature. The adult male's *cere* (the flesh above the beak) is blue, whereas the hen's is pink or brown. You can't tell the gender of babies, so you have to just choose the birds you click with.

The budgie is the most popular species of parrot in the world. It's affectionate; easy to tame; isn't loud (though it's extremely chatty and does make noise just about all day); and is the best talking parrot of them all, able to learn hundreds of words and phrases. Lifespan is about 14 years with good care.

IS YOUR PARROT A GIRL OR BOY?

Some parrots are dimorphic, and some are monomorphic. With *monomorphic* parrots, the male and female look identical (to the untrained eye) and can't be easily distinguished from each other. In *dimorphic* parrots, males and females have obvious differences. For example, mature male budgies have a blue *cere* (fleshy spot above the beak), and females have a cere that ranges from pink to brown. In most mutations, the male cockatiel's face is brighter than the female's, but the female has a barring pattern on the underside of her tail, and the male doesn't. In black cockatoos, the male's beak is black, and the female's is horn- or light-colored. In red-bellied parrots (*poicephalus*), the male has a red/orange belly; the female, green. The eclectus male is bright green; the female, red and violet. There are other dimorphic parrots as well, though most commonly kept parrots are monomorphic. Most people who breed parrots have their little tricks to try to determine the gender of their birds, but it's really a 50/50 guesstimate most of the time.

The budgie could do with some rebranding. Its image is one of a beginner or toss-away pet, like a goldfish. I would argue that no companion animal is a toss-away pet, even a ten-cent goldfish. Pet stores that sell budgies usually have an array of small, pastel-colored cages as part of a starter kit. Unfortunately, these cages aren't suitable for a stuffed bird, much less a live one. Budgies deserve as large of a space as you'd give a much bigger, more expensive bird, and they deserve just as much love and attention. Just because a bird doesn't command a high price tag doesn't mean its care should be cheap, too.

At nearly twice the size, the English show budgie is also a popular companion. The temperament of the two birds is similar, though the English may be more docile. The English budgie's lifespan is about 7 years, half that of the American parakeet.

If you want a pair of budgies, but the group you're looking at is too young to tell male from female, watch them for a while and you may see pairs that have already formed. Typically, a pair will follow each other from perch to perch, canoodling and fending off others from their beloved.

Caiques

The caique (pronounced *kai-EKE*) is a medium-sized, stocky, blunt-tailed, colorful South American parrot that has become popular in recent years. The black-headed caique (*Pionites melanocephala*) and the white-bellied caique (*Pionites leucogaster*) are the two most common. The yellow-thighed caique, a subspecies of the white-bellied, is less common.

Caiques are known as clowns — they're bouncy and very active, full of antics, always rolling around and playing. They're also beaky, which basically equates to being nippy. They aren't loud birds, but they aren't silent either. They don't have great talking ability, though some individuals do amass a decent vocabulary. They're known for bird-on-bird aggression and should be kept from other birds or at least properly supervised.

Cockatiels

The cockatiel (*Nymphicus hollandicus*), a native of Australia, is second in popularity only to the budgie. It's lively, affectionate, and easy to tame. It's also very easy to breed, making it reasonably priced. Cockatiels are easygoing, but not unintelligent. Females are said to make better hands-on companions than males, which have feistier personalities. These birds are excellent whistlers, and the males are decent talkers. Though not loud, they're persistent, calling and whistling for most of the day.

The cockatiel has a head crest that it displays when excited, delighted, or frightened. It comes in a variety of mutations, including lutino (yellow), white, grey, pearl, and pied, and either has a rouge spot on each cheek or a bright white face, as in the fancier mutations. Cockatiels are sexually dimorphic, so it's easy in most mutations to tell the sexes apart in mature birds. Males have brighter faces; females have horizontal bars on the underside of the tail, no matter the mutation (though they are very difficult to see in albinos).

These birds can be kept together peaceably and will even get along with budgies, finches, and canaries if given enough space. They can live more than 20 years with the proper care. Cockatiels have one particular quirk: They tend to have *night frights*, thrashing around the cage in the middle of the night, afraid of something in the dark. A nightlight often helps with this problem.

Cockatoos

There are more than 20 species of cockatoos and a great many more subspecies. They range in size from the small Galah (also called *rose-breasted*), at 14 inches, to the large palm cockatoo, which can grow up to 28 inches in length. Cockatoos are popular, known for cuddliness and affection. What most parrot novices don't know is that cockatoos are also very demanding, unpredictable, neurotic, and can be quite aggressive. The cuddly baby soon turns into a belligerent adult that can be destructive and deafening. Cockatoos have two sharp points on either side of the lower mandible (beak), making their bites even more treacherous. They aren't a great first bird.



TIP

For a good laugh, search online for “cockatoo tantrum.” You’re in for a treat — and perhaps you’ll have second thoughts about wanting a cockatoo!

Cockatoos are also a long-term commitment, with a lifespan up to 80 years or more. They’re prone to self-mutilation and the infections that result from that behavior. Another serious consideration is the powder (feather) dust that cockatoos emit, which can irritate people with sensitive respiratory systems or allergies. Regular bathing with clear, warm water helps. Many people have to give up their cockatoos because of an allergy or sensitivity to this dust. Following are profiles of some popular cockatoos.

Galah cockatoo (rose-breasted cockatoo)

The galah cockatoo (*Eolapphus roseicapilla*) is prized for its good looks, much like the Major Mitchell’s cockatoo (I discuss later in this section). It’s on the smaller side of the cockatoos at 14 inches and is mostly pink and grey in color with a white head. It’s sweet, intelligent, social, and cuddly, but can be temperamental. Galahs like to play.

They’ll play happily alone if given the proper toys and playthings. They’re one of the quieter cockatoos, though when they do vocalize, they can be very loud. They can be mischievous and naughty, loving to chew on everything they can get their beaks on. They’re dimorphic; the males have dark brown eyes and the females have red to pink eyes. They can be one-person birds and can mimic speech, but they aren’t known for speaking ability.

Little Corella (bare-eyed) cockatoo

The Little Corella cockatoo (*Cacatua sanguinea*) is one of the smaller cockatoos and is named for the fleshy, light blue ring around its eyes. They’re clowny, social, and affectionate, but like most cockatoos, they demand a lot of attention. They can mimic human speech, but not especially well, and they can be noisy. Like the galah, they’re known for independent play, but they can become destructive and neurotic if left alone too much.

Major Mitchell’s cockatoo (Leadbeater’s cockatoo)

The Major Mitchell’s cockatoo (*Cacatua leadbeateri*), named after Sir Thomas Mitchell, is simply gorgeous. Its coloring is shades of pink with a yellow and salmon crest. These cockatoos live long lives with individuals reported to living past 80 years in captivity. Like most cockatoo species, they’re high-maintenance, can be fussy and temperamental, and need a lot of attention. They’re highly intelligent and tend to be one-person birds. Although they’re pricey, you may be able to find one in rescue, because they’re challenging to keep.

Moluccan cockatoo

The Moluccan cockatoo (*Cacatua moluccensis*) originally from Indonesia, is also called the salmon-crested cockatoo because of its salmon-pink head crest feathers. The Moluccan is a large bird that can out-yell most any other parrot. Because of this, they're likely given away or neglected more than any other species. It takes a very special household to be able to live with a Moluccan. They aren't known to be great talkers, but they'll learn a few words.

A quick search online will bring up hundreds of videos of Moluccan cockatoos screaming and talking, many of whom have learned some choice NSFW words. You can also find videos of these cockatoos dancing. They're quite the music connoisseurs and can keep a beat.

Moluccans crave attention and love. They aren't very good at playing alone and will constantly vie for your attention. Like most cockatoos, Moluccans are sensitive and become neurotic and upset when neglected. Also like many of the cockatoo species, they're prone to plucking when upset. It's not uncommon to see a completely naked cockatoo, with only its head feathers left.

They also have powerful beaks and can be temperamental. I once heard a story of a man in Australia who had a portion of his finger bitten off when he got too close to a wild Moluccan in his backyard. I've also seen gruesome photos of Moluccan bites to the face.



TIP

Check out rescue organizations if you're set on a Moluccan — they seem to be overflowing with them and will often place them in dedicated, experienced homes.

Sulfur-crested cockatoo

The sulfur-crested cockatoo is the generic name for a variety of commonly kept cockatoo species and subspecies. These cockatoos are placed in two groups:

- » The lesser sulfur-crested from Indonesia, New Guinea, and the surrounding areas
- » The greater sulfur-crested from Australia

These two groups combined comprise ten distinct subspecies, though only five of those are commonly found in the companion bird trade. All the cockatoos in these species and subspecies are white with a yellow or orange crest, which is how they got their name. They range in size from 12 to 20 inches.

In general, the sulfur-crested cockatoos are intelligent, sensitive birds with the capacity to be either good household companions or a family's worst nightmare. Much of the companionability of this bird has to do with its upbringing, socialization, housing, nutrition, and daily care. When a cockatoo isn't getting its needs met, the results are often disastrous. Check out these others:

- » **Greater sulfur-crested (*Cacatua galerita*):** This Australian native has four subspecies. The bird most commonly called the *greater sulfur-crested* is the largest of the cockatoos in this species at 20 inches, rivaling the Moluccan in size. Its distinctive characteristics, other than size, are the bare, white eye-ring; lemony-yellow crest feathers; slightly yellow coloring over the ear coverts; and yellow on the feathers beneath the tail and the underside of the wings. It's an amiable and sensitive companion.
- » **Triton cockatoo (*Cacatua galerita triton*):** The triton cockatoo is a subspecies of the greater sulfur-crested and is one of the more commonly kept cockatoos, known for its antics on the television show *Baretta*. It's slightly smaller than the greater sulfur-crested at 18 inches, and its eye ring is a distinct blue that's hard to miss. The triton is known for its loud mouth and its extreme intelligence.
- » **Eleonora cockatoo (*Cacatua galerita eleonora*):** This subspecies of the greater sulfur-crested is the smallest in the group at 15 inches and is often called the *medium sulfur-crested*, but *Eleonora* is the most common name. This popular bird has a lemony-yellow crest and a slight tinge of blue on the eye ring, but not as blue as the Triton. Search online for "Snowball the cockatoo" if you're interested in being distracted for hours by some serious cockatoo dance moves.
- » **Lesser sulfur-crested (*Cacatua sulphurea*):** The lesser sulfur-crested (and its subspecies) is from Indonesia and the surrounding islands, not from Australia. The crest is yellow, as are the ear coverts, and it's 12 to 13 inches in length.
- » **Citron-crested (*Cacatua sulphurea citrinocristata*):** This subspecies of the lesser sulfur-crested is easily identified by its orange crest (the other sulfur-crested cockatoos have yellow crests). Its ear coverts have an orange tinge. This subspecies is a popular companion, amiable and intelligent, but it requires a lot of hands-on time (as do all cockatoos).

Other subspecies can be found in captivity but are less well known. The subspecies in the greater sulfur-crested is *C. g. fitzroyi* from Northern Australia; the other subspecies in the lesser sulfur-crested are *C. s. abbotti* (becoming more common), *C. s. djampeana*, *C. s. occidentalis*, and *C. s. parvula*. Because of cross-breeding (hybridization) among the subspecies, some individuals may be difficult to identify.

WHAT'S UP WITH THE CREST?

Some cockatoos, such as the sulfur-crested, have a recursive crest, and others have a recumbent crest, such as the umbrella cockatoo. The feathers of the *recursive* crest are curved, so when the crest is down the feather tips curve upward, making the crest a conspicuous characteristic in these birds. With the *recumbent* crest, the feathers are straight and lie flat against the head when the crest is lowered, such as in the Moluccan. Other cockatoos have a combination of the two, with only slight curving of the crest, or have a very short recumbent crest.

Umbrella cockatoo (white cockatoo)

The umbrella cockatoo (*Cacatua alba*), shown in Figure 3-1, also known as the *white cockatoo* or the *great white-crested cockatoo*, is well known in bird circles as one of the most affectionate and affable companion birds. An Indonesian native, the umbrella is slightly smaller than the Moluccan but bigger in personality and charm. This outgoing cockatoo is famous for its outlandish antics and for being clingy with its human companions. It can be loud and nippy, but also affectionate and silly. The umbrella cockatoo loves companionship and won't do well if left alone too often, turning to plucking its feathers as a sign of unhappiness.



FIGURE 3-1:
Umbrella
cockatoos have
large, all-white
head crests.

Photo by Sandy Tubbs

The umbrella can be distinguished from other white cockatoos by its entirely white crest that raises like an umbrella when the bird is excited, agitated, or ready to play (or bite). It's prone to bouts of loud screaming, especially if it's isolated, locked in a cage, or doesn't get its way. It can learn quite a few words and may substitute them for screaming (if you're lucky).

HYBRIDIZATION — WHEN PARROTS OF A DIFFERENT GENUS BREED

Many parrots of the same genus will breed together (cross-breed) to create *hybrid* birds. For example, different species of macaws will breed together, as will different species of conures and different species of lovebirds. This hybridization taints the gene pool for future generations. Because most commonly kept parrots are endangered, rare, or threatened in the wild, most breeders make concerted efforts to keep the genes of these parrots as pure as possible. However, if you see a hybrid parrot in a rescue that needs a good home, there's nothing wrong with keeping these parrots as pets.

Also, there's a limited supply of parrots in captivity, so keeping the genes of each species intact is important. To keep your birds from nesting, simply don't supply them with a place to do so, and separate them for most of the day in the spring and summer if they persist. You can also limit their daytime hours to under 12 if you have artificial lighting. Bird pals of different species are fine to interact, but try not to let them nest and raise chicks.

Conures

There are more than 60 species of conures, all from South and Central America. Most are small to medium-sized stocky birds, 8 to 18 inches, ranging in color from lime green to bright yellow. They're notorious for their loud mouths and destructive behavior, though they're affectionate companions. Many do end up in shelters because of their raucous and persistent vocalization, so be sure that you can deal with that before you get one. They generally get along with other conures, no matter the species, but should not be allowed to cross-breed. Conures can live up to 30 years, perhaps more, with proper care. Following are profiles of five popular species.

Popular conures

The *Aratinga* conures are among the most popularly kept species. They're beautiful, relatively small, and easy to keep, though some species in this group can be persistently loud and raucous. The smaller *Pyrrhura* conures are a little quieter, but just as sweet. Here are some of the more popularly kept conures in a variety of genus:

- » **Sun conure (*Aratinga solstitialis*):** This subspecies is one of the more popular conures due to its stunning plumage, extraordinary disposition, and exceptional quality as a companion. The sunny is lively, vocal, and extremely playful.

It's 12 inches long and most recognizable by bright orange and yellow coloring, often mottled with splotches of green. It has a black beak, white rings around its eyes, and a long tapering tail. Immature birds don't reach their full coloration for about two years.

Although you can't visually differentiate between the sexes, males are a bit brighter in coloration. Males are also said to have squarer, flatter heads, and females rounder, smaller heads, though only experienced breeders are good at eyeing the birds and making an educated guess. The sun conure isn't known to be an extraordinary talker, but it can learn to say a few words. It will appreciate another conure as a friend and won't lose its companionability if the owners are attentive to both birds. Because it's in the *Aratinga* group, it can be paired with a jenday, mitred, nanday, half-moon, gold-capped, blue-crowned, or another *Aratinga*, but *not for breeding purposes*. Some breeders create "Sundays" or "Jensuns," but this type of hybridization taints the limited gene pool.

- » **Jenday conure (*Aratinga jandaya*):** This subspecies is one of the favorite medium-sized conures, just below the sun conure in popularity, but not in personality. The best attribute of these parrots is the intense affection for their human companions. The jenday's body is primarily green, with a bright orange and yellow head. The colorful head appears only in the mature bird; juvenile jendays are mostly green with a mottled yellow head until they're about two years old. Like most conures, the jenday is persistently noisy.
- » **Nanday conure (*Aratinga nenday*):** This bird has a bright green body and a striking black head. These parrots are companionable and sweet, though very noisy and persistent in their vocalizations. I used to have a few of them, and every evening a flock of feral nanday conures (probably a result of a few companion birds escaping or having been released) would visit the top of my patio to talk to my conures. The result was a crazy cacophony of conure voices that eventually led to the neighbors leaving a letter of complaint on my doorstep.
- » **Central American half-moon conure (*Eupsittula canicularis*):** This subspecies is a popular bird, being medium in size, not especially loud, and a good talker. They're boisterous and sweet, offering a lot of love to their chosen person. They have a very unique nesting habit, digging holes in termite mounds and laying their eggs inside. They're the smallest of the *Aratinga* conures at about 9 inches.

Blue-crowned conure

The blue-crowned conure (*Psittacara acuticaudatus*) is one of the larger of the conure species at more than 14 inches in length. This subspecies is threatened in the wild, as are many parrot species, but these birds are popular in the pet trade

because of the movies in which they starred: the 1998 film *Paulie* and the 2003 documentary, *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*. They can be louder than their conure cousins, but are also quite proficient talkers as compared to other conures. They're quite striking in appearance with a bright green body and blue suffusion around the face and head. They love to chew and can be destructive, so they need a lot of toys to keep them stimulated.

Mitred conure and cherry-headed conure

The mitred conure (*Psittacara mitratus*) and cherry-headed (also called *red-masked*) (*Psittacara erythrogenys*) conure are both green with a red face and white, fleshy eye-rings. They're capable talkers and make good family companions. Like many of the other larger conures, they're noisy and may irritate close neighbors. They can revert to being nippy, so a guardian must play with them daily. They have both been introduced in the United States in places where they thrive in large flocks, such as Florida, Texas, and California. For a great documentary on these wild feral parrots, check out the 2003 documentary, *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*.

Patagonian conure

The Patagonian conure (*Cyanoliseus patagonus*), a native of Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, also known as the *burrowing parrot*, is one of my favorite species. They're the largest of the conures at more than 17 inches. There are three subspecies, identical except for their difference in size. Referred to as *patties*, these birds are as gorgeous as they are loud. They're a great family bird, able to bond with multiple individuals, and they aren't known to be nippy or aggressive if handled often and with care. Like most conures, they love to chew and need a lot of toys to keep them happy. They're a protected species, though they become a pest to farmers and are often killed because of it. They're unique among the conure species in that they nest in colonies on the side of sandstone cliffs.

Maroon-bellied conure and the green-cheeked conure

The maroon-bellied conure (*Pyrrhura frontalis*) and the green-cheeked conure (*Pyrrhura molinae*) are two intelligent, energetic, playful parrots. They're similar in appearance and are often identified incorrectly. They're both about 10 inches long, but the green-cheeked is a bit brighter than the maroon-bellied and has gray barring on its chest, fading into a slightly reddish belly. The maroon-bellied has a golden barring on its chest and distinct, heart-shaped maroon shading on its belly. Their talking ability isn't renowned, but they'll learn a few words. They are considered the *quiet* conures, if there can be such a thing — they're simply quieter than the others.

Black-capped conure

Also referred to as the *rock parakeet*, the black-capped conure (*Pyrrhura rubicola*) is one of the smallest conures and are as affable as the other *Pyrrhura* species. They're one of the quieter conures and make great companions for someone who has the time to spend with them.

Eclectus

Eclectus parrots (*Eclectus roratus*) have nine subspecies, including the grand eclectus, the vosmaeri, and the Solomon Island eclectus (*Eclectus roratus solomonensis*). Be careful that you don't buy a hybrid eclectus, because some unscrupulous breeders breed different subspecies together. This doesn't affect the companion quality of the bird. However, though this practice may seem harmless, it's important that the gene pool of these birds remain pure.

Eclectus are dimorphic — the males are bright green and have a horn-colored beak, a splash of bright blue on the wing, and a bright red underwing. The females are red with deep violet bellies and black beaks. These birds weren't bred successfully for many years because breeders put males with males and hens with hens. It wasn't until a few decades ago that someone realized that the green birds were male and the red ones female. The feathers on this species don't have a distinct outline like the feathers of other birds; instead, they look as if they're covered with a fine fur.

Eclectus aren't prone to excessive noisiness, but they can be quite vocal and will develop an extensive vocabulary. They're intelligent, gentle birds if raised properly, though they won't tolerate frantic activity or constant disturbing household noise. A bored eclectus has the tendency to pluck its feathers. I've seen them naked as a result of self-mutilation. They tend to be hearty, messy eaters but will need to be encouraged early to eat a variety of healthy foods.

Hanging parrots

Hanging parrots are found in a wide geographical range, including Indonesia, India, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Borneo, Java, Bali, Sumatra, and other Asian countries. They live primarily in woodlands and orchards, and feed on fruit, flowers, nectar, insects, and some seeds, much as lorries do. They get their name from their unusual sleeping habit: hanging upside-down. They also feed this way, stretching upside-down to dip the beak into an open flower. Hanging parrots are dimorphic, though you might have to look hard on some of the species to know which is which. In the blue-crowned hanging parrot (*Loriculus galgulus*), a popular species, the male has a blue crown and a red spot on the throat, and the female doesn't. Immatures look like females.

The blue-crowned needs constant attention to maintain its companion quality. It's a lively bird but can become shy easily if not well socialized. These birds aren't known talkers, but they'll mimic whistles. They're less noisy than lorries and can be kept peaceably in pairs or as a colony. Because of their endangered status in the wild, many hanging parrots are kept exclusively in breeding programs.

Hanging parrots eat a wet diet, which tends to attract bacteria. Keeping clean, fresh food available at all times is extremely important and challenging. Warmth is especially important for the hanging parrot, which succumbs to cold easily. But it's prone to infections due to the combination of warmth, wet food spoilage, and droppings in and around the cage. Vertical cages aren't recommended for this species because the droppings tend to land in all directions. Thin sleeping perches also help to keep the droppings inside the cage.

Hawk-headed parrots

Hawk-headed parrots (*Derophtus accipitrinus*) have large, colorful crests, wider than those of cockatoos, which they raise when threatened. This is their claim to fame. They aren't widely known as companions, but they're becoming more popular as people are being exposed to them. They do make decent companions, though they're extremely active, excitable, and can be unpredictable. Some people find them to be affectionate, easy birds, but they are best left to a more experienced keeper. At 14 inches in length, they aren't very large, but that flashy crest can be intimidating.

Lories

Lories, like hanging parrots, need more care and attention than other common companion birds. They require a much different diet from that of other hookbills because their less-powerful gizzards can't crush seeds. They have a brushlike tongue that they use to pick up nectar and pollen, and though some lories will crack a few seeds, their main diet is fruit, such as bananas, oranges, melon, and apples; they also eat flowers, such as hibiscus. The staple diet in captivity is a nectar made from juice mixed with specially formulated lory diet powder. This liquid diet causes very loose droppings, which tend to get sprayed outside the cage. Someone living with a lory will spend a lot of time cleaning. There are dry diets specifically for lories that will make the droppings less soft, but this diet should only supplement the liquid diet. Lories are also partial to mealworms and grubs. There is a common myth that lories don't need water, which is untrue.



WARNING

The lory personality is intense, bubbly, enthusiastic, playful, and constantly busy. Their antics are entertaining for most people, but they can become more than a handful. These active birds tend to be mischievous and destructive, and they'll get into trouble quicker than someone can save them from harm. They're also often nippy and will generally bite out of excitement or fear.

Most lorries don't get along with other bird species and may become vicious even with birds of their own species. They're territorial and should never be left unsupervised with other birds.

For the record, lorries have a blunter, more rounded tail, and lorikeets have a longer, more tapered tail. There are more than 130 recognized species and subspecies of lorries and lorikeets.

Rainbow lorikeets

Originating from Australia, the 12-inch rainbow lorikeet is one of the most beautiful companion birds available. Rainbow lorries (*Trichoglossus moluccanus*) are hard to miss, with their bright reds and greens, vibrant blues and violets, and splotches of lemon yellow flowing into intense oranges. The rainbow is more than just bright on the outside. The rainbow lorikeet is a highly intelligent bird, able to learn complex behaviors, such as escaping from the cage.

Lories can be noisy, and the rainbow is no exception. Their voice is high-pitched, with a squeaky-squawky repetitive bark. They're wonderful talkers and will learn to speak many words and phrases clearly and frequently, though the rainbow isn't the best talker of the lorries.

Lories bathe exuberantly and often, and they have a penchant for sleeping lying upside-down on their backs, often rattling the nerves of their guardians, who occasionally think the birds are dead. Rainbow lorries can live 20 to 30 years, but it's the lucky and unusual lorry who lives that long.

Red lorries

The red lorry (*Eos bornea*) is striking in appearance, with a bright red body, orange beak, and electric blue markings on its wings, face, and tail. Like all lorries, they can be difficult to keep, especially if you don't like mess and noise. They're best kept safely outdoors in a large aviary because of this, and you have to make sure that their nectar and other fresh foods don't spoil. They're intelligent and mischievous and require an attentive guardian. They're best for the intermediate or experienced bird keeper.

Lovebirds

There are nine species of African lovebirds, but only three are commonly kept as companions in the United States: the peach-faced, the Fischer's, and the masked. The others are rare or more difficult to breed in captivity. The popular species breed like bunnies, making them far more available.

Peach-faced

A lone peach-faced lovebird (*Agapornis roseicollis*), commonly referred to as the *peachie*, is an affectionate companion. Pairs are fun to watch but eventually won't appreciate human hands-on attention once they mature. If neglected, even for a couple of weeks, lovebirds tend to become snappish. They live about 15 years with proper care.

The peachie is 6 inches long and comes in an artist's-palette array of colors. The nominate bird is green with a shiny blue rump and rosy peach face. Other colors (mutations) range from creamy white to almost black and everything in between, including all shades of green, blue, yellow, violet, and pied; their faces are most notably orange and white but do come in different colors as well.

Temperament differences are minimal among the mutations. Males tend to be smaller and thinner, and females are often noticeably plumper. Males are generally sweet and reserved, whereas females are spunkier, nippier, and argumentative.

The peachie isn't a noisy bird but is prone to bouts of chattering and whistling in the morning, evening, and when excited. Talking ability is slim, perhaps one in a thousand. I personally have been lucky enough to have two talking lovebirds, each saying just two or three words in kind of a mumbled voice. Very cute.

Fischer's and masked

The Fischer's (*Agapornis fischeri*) and the masked lovebirds (*Agapornis personatus*) are second in popularity to the peach-faced but are just as powerful in personality. These species come in a variety of color mutations, though not quite as many as the peach-faced. The primary difference between the peach-faced and these species is the prominent eye ring, a fleshy circle around the eye that makes them quite distinctive. These eye-ringed lovebirds are known to be nippy and temperamental if not handled every day.

Macaws

There are close to 20 species of macaws (sources differ on the exact number), all from South and Central America, ranging in size from 12 to 39 inches. These popular birds are known to be loud and destructive — but they're also affectionate, talkative, and intelligent.



WARNING

Some popular types of hybrid macaws have parents of two different species. This is highly frowned upon in most of the bird community, though some breeders still produce these babies. The resulting birds are no less affectionate or beautiful than the purebred macaws, and some are quite stunning.

Blue and gold macaw

The blue and gold macaw (*Ara ararauna*), also called the *blue and yellow macaw*, a native of South and Central America, is the most popular and widely found macaw in the United States. Before the ban on imported birds, the blue and gold macaw was brought into the United States in astounding numbers, allowing for many breeders to obtain good breeding stock and keeping the price relatively low. Like most macaws, the blue and golds are noisy and prone to bouts of screaming. They're apt talkers, able to repeat simple words and phrases. If a blue and gold remains healthy, it can live upwards of 70 years.

Green-winged macaw

At about 35 inches from its crimson head to the tip of its tapered tail and weighing in at between 2½ to 3½ pounds, the green-winged macaw (*Ara chloropterus*) is one of the largest birds in the macaw family. This big Central and South American beauty hails from roughly the same area as the blue and gold macaw.

Many people mistake the green-winged for the scarlet macaw, but it's easy to tell the difference: The scarlet has bright yellow feathers on the wing, whereas the green-winged has green feathers; the green-winged has bands of small, red feathers lining the fleshy patch on its face, and the scarlet's face is naked. In most cases, the green-winged is also far larger.

This bird's huge beak can look intimidating, but the green-winged is actually the gentlest of the large macaws and is not known for biting and mood swings. The green-winged can talk but isn't known as a chatterbox; instead, a guardian can expect loud, intermittent screeching. The green-winged's size alone is a deterrent for many bird owners, who don't have the room for such a large animal. A small cage will ruin its tail feathers and put it in a raggedy and miserable condition.

Hahn's macaw and the noble macaw

Originally from South America, these two closely related subspecies (*Diopsittaca nobilis nobilis* and *Diopsittaca nobilis cumanensis*) are compact and companionable. Though they aren't as flashy as their larger cousins, the Hahn's and the noble macaws are highly prized for their large macaw personality in a mini macaw body. They're easier to find than some of the other macaw species, especially the Hahn's, which is a favorite of breeders.

The smallest of the miniature macaws, both the Hahn's and the noble are primarily green with a fleshy white face patch. The noble is slightly larger than the Hahn's, and although both birds are smaller than some of the larger conure species, they can easily be mistaken for a conure by a novice. These birds are between 12 and 14 inches long, making them a good apartment bird (but only if your

neighbors are deaf). These are noisy birds, especially if you have more than one, and their voices are grating. They are wonderful talkers and are good whistlers, too, but may take to whistling over talking. These birds are reported to live for more than 40 to 50 years if cared for properly.

Hyacinth macaw

The hyacinth macaw (*Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*) is the largest in the macaw family. Originally from Brazil, the hyacinth is the Great Dane of companion birds, with the mature male reaching more than 40 inches in length. Often called gentle giants, the hyacinth is indeed affectionate, but *gentle* it is not. Hyacinths play rough with other birds and with their person. The beak can snap a broomstick in half with one crunch. This bird is best left to very experienced bird owners.

In the wild, the hyacinth's diet consists almost wholly of palm nuts from the queen palm. This diet is high in fat, and you can substitute queen palm nuts with Brazil nuts, walnuts, almonds, macadamias, coconut, pistachios, and cashews. You will probably never see an obese hyacinth, as these birds seem to metabolize fat very easily.

Military macaw

The military macaw (*Ara militaris*) is a lively, energetic bird and is considered one of the larger macaws, though at 27 to 29 inches it's smaller than the blue and gold macaw. There are three subspecies of military macaw, though to the untrained eye they look quite similar, with just slight shades of green differentiating them. There's no difference in companion quality among the three subspecies. The majority of military macaws sold in the United States are thought to be of the Mexican subspecies, a little larger than the other two. In the wild, the military can be found in regions of Central and South America, though it has all but disappeared in some of its natural habitat and is on the CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) list of endangered species.



REMEMBER

The military macaw is sometimes confused with the Buffon's macaw (*Ara ambiguus*), but the Buffon's is much larger. Though the coloring is remarkably similar, the Buffon's has a much more prominent tuft of red feathers at the base of the upper mandible (upper beak). Both macaws have a rose-colored naked face patch that blushes bright red when the birds are excited.

The military macaw earns its title only through its attire — ready to march in a parade in full regalia. But its personality is less salty sailor than boisterous recruit. It's great at *buffaloing* its human friends, putting on a show of being aggressive when actually just bluffing. Most individuals can be socialized to be sweet and affectionate.

Scarlet macaw

There's nothing flashier than a scarlet macaw (*Ara macao*). It's not unusual for someone to begin a birdkeeping habit with a scarlet, even though this 32-to-39-inch bird isn't a great choice for a novice. Sassy and filled with energy and personality, the scarlet is highly intelligent and a capable escape artist. The beak is formidable and can pack a wallop of a bite. Even the tamest of these birds can become nippy and sometimes even scary to get its way.

The scarlet has an enormous natural range in Central and South America and is found in two subspecies:

- » *Ara macao cyanopterus*, which hails from Central America, primarily Belize, Guatemala, Panama, Mexico, and Nicaragua
- » *Ara macao macao*, found in South America, including Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Peru, Surinam, and Venezuela

The Central American scarlet is said to be larger and have more blue than green on its wings than the South American, which barely has any green at all.

Some scientists believe that these aren't true subspecies, but the final word isn't in yet, and many scientists hold rigorously to the distinct classifications. Others break the scarlets into three groups, based on size and coloration: Mexican, Central American, and South American. In general, the Mexican is smallest and has less yellow; the South American is a little larger and has a little more yellow on the wing; the Central American scarlet is the stunning prize of the three, a large bird with a wide band of yellow on the wing.

It might happen that the scarlet you buy from a breeder who may not know better is a hybrid, which doesn't harm its beauty or quality as a companion, but serious aviculturists recommend against such pairings because they dilute the gene pool, and eventually the regional differences will be lost.

Other parakeets

There are hundreds of different kinds of *parakeets* (long-tailed parrots), far too many to list here, many of which have lovely and exotic names — for example, the turquoise grass parakeet, the scarlet-chested parakeet, the rosy Bourke's, and the rock pebbler. Following are some commonly kept parakeets.

Psittacula parakeets

There are around 13 species of psittacula parakeets. Because of the psittacula's long tail, it needs larger housing than another bird of the same relative size. Psittaculas are known to be noisy and loud, though their beauty makes up for the loud mouth. The two most common are



TIP

» **Indian ring-necked parakeet (*Psittacula krameri manillensis*):** This subspecies has been kept as a pet for centuries and remains a favorite companion bird today. As its name suggests, it originates from India, where it is still found wild in great quantities, even in urban areas. This bird is playful, exuberant, and has a remarkable talking ability. However, it can become nippy and is very loud for a bird of its size. It needs attention every single day or will lose its companionability.

This bird is 16 inches long and is available in a variety of mutations: blue, yellow, pied, albino, and others. The color of these birds seems almost airbrushed on, and you can barely distinguish individual feathers. The Indian ring-necked parakeet is dimorphic, the males having a distinguishing ring around the neck at maturity. They can live for more than 30 years.

Search online for “talking Indian ringnecks” to see an absolutely adorable deep dive into this species’ talking talent. It may convince you to get one.

» **Afro-Asian Alexandrine parrot (*Psittacula eupatria*):** This subspecies is a bright, gentle, independent, medium-sized bird known to be hardy and relatively quiet compared to its ring-necked cousins. This bird is a favorite among fanciers and is becoming more popular due to growing popularity with breeders.

The nominate Alexandrine has green plumage and an immense beak. As with many of the ring-necked variety, color mutations are becoming more available, including lutino (yellow) and blue. The Alexandrine has five distinct subspecies, some slightly larger or smaller than the nominate bird.

WHAT IS MUTATION, WHAT IS NOMINATE?

Some parrots come in colors not commonly found in the wild (or not occurring in the wild at all). These colors are called *mutations* and are completely natural. A bird that is the color most commonly found in the wild, such as a green budgie or a grey cockatiel, is called normal or *nominate*. So when someone says that she has a normal peach-faced lovebird, she means the bird is green — not that it doesn't need psychotherapy.

Lineolated parakeet

The South and Central American lineolated parakeet (*Bolborhynchus lineola lineola*), (sometimes also called the *barred parakeet*) is sexually dimorphic, about 6 to 7 inches long, quiet and generally docile, and can learn to say a few words and phrases. These tiny parrots will perform a variety of antics in an aviary setting and are quite companionable, though not as popular in the United States as many other parakeets. Commonly referred to as linnies, they come in a variety of color mutations, making them a favorite of bird fanciers who like to breed for color.

Neophemas

Neophemas are making surprising leaps in popularity even though they've been an aviary staple in Australia for many years. The neophemas include

- » Bourke's parakeet (*Neopsephotus bourkii*), reclassified from *Neophema bourkii*
- » Elegant parakeet (*Neophema elegans*)
- » Orange-bellied parakeet (*Neophema chrysogaster*)
- » Splendid parakeet (*Neophema splendida*)
- » Turquoise (turquoise) parakeet (*Neophema pulchella*)
- » Rock parakeet (*Neophema petrophila*)
- » Blue-winged parakeet (*Neophema chrysostoma*)

They're great apartment birds, because they aren't loud and don't make a ton of noise. They're also great family birds when they're handfed. They aren't terrible chewers, but they do love preening toys.

These birds are known collectively as the *grass parakeets* of Australia, each of which occupies a relatively small natural region in that large country. They're called grass parakeets because they feed on wild grasses and grass seeds. Because they feed on the ground, these birds are naturally skittish and always on the lookout for predators. You have to make sure that you don't step on them because they spend a lot of time on the ground. Feeding them at the bottom of the cage or aviary is preferred, so make sure you clean the bowls regularly when they become dirty.

Neophemas make excellent aviary birds but shouldn't be housed with larger, more aggressive birds. Take care that two different species of neophemas don't successfully nest and rear young. As a group, neophemas are dimorphic. Males are generally brighter in plumage and may have more colors than the females, though it's easier to tell the difference only in the splendid and the turquoise.

The most popular and widely available bird in the group is the Bourke's parakeet, slightly larger than an English budgie at 8 inches in length. The Bourke's comes in a variety of mutations, including the Rosy Bourke, a bright pink version of the more muted nominate. The Bourke's can be a shy bird, but a diligent guardian can train it to be as affectionate as a budgie, though many owners keep them as watching-only companions.

The turquoise and the splendid are the most visually stunning of the neophemas. The turquoise comes in a variety of spectacular mutations, most notably the yellow mutation. The turquoise can be more bird-aggressive than the others in this group.

Rosellas

There are six species of rosellas and many more subspecies, all hailing from Australia and the outer islands. The golden-mantled rosella (*Platycercus eximius*), often called the *eastern rosella* or the *white-cheeked rosella*, is the most colorful and popular of the rosella family. It's 12 inches and has a crimson head and chest, white cheeks, bright yellow belly, cobalt shoulders, flight, and tail feathers, a pale green underbelly, and a darker green back.

This species isn't a consistently noisy bird and not a great talker, but it may pick up a few simple words and will learn to whistle well. Most don't stand for much cuddling but are content to ride around on your shoulder. A very tame rosella is a good bird for a child who is mature enough to behave properly around it.

Parrotlets

There are seven species of the tiny parrotlet in the *Forpus* genus: green-rump, Pacific (celestial), Mexican, blue-wing, Sclater (also called the *black-billed parrotlet*), spectacle, and yellow-face. The Pacific and green-rump parrotlets are the most widely available. There are some stunning mutations available too, including lutino (yellow) and blue. Don't let their diminutive size fool you — they can be quite fierce and nippy and aren't great companions for kids.

The Pacific parrotlet (*Forpus coelestis*) has quickly one of the most popular small birds and is the most common of the various parrotlet species. Originating in Mexico and Central and South America, this "pocket parrot" has caught on fast. Its personality is fearless and feisty, packing a lot of intelligence and vigor into a tiny package about 5 inches long.

Pacifics are dimorphic. Males are green with blue on the rump and part of the wings with a blue streak on the face. Females are mainly different shades of green. Some recent color mutations have been developed, including blue, yellow, and a darker green, among others.

Pacific parrotlets aren't noisy birds. They'll repeat words and simple phrases but aren't known to be the finest talkers of the parrotlet family. They can live for 20 to 25 years or more if cared for properly.

Pionus

The pionus isn't the most popular parrot — it's often outflashed, outcolored, outtalked, and outnumbered by many of the more commonly kept parrot species. The pionus isn't much like its South American cousin, the Amazon, though it is shaped like a smaller Amazon.



TIP

The pionus is the best-kept secret of the bird world. It has all the good qualities of the popular companion species with few of the negative aspects. Of the eight species of pionus, five are regularly available in the bird trade, and each has subspecies, though many of those aren't available in the United States. The pionus family consists of the blue-headed (*Pionus menstruus*), bronze-winged (*Pionus chalcopterus*), dusky (*Pionus fuscus*), Maximilian's or scaly-headed (*Pionus maximiliani*), coral-billed or red-billed (*Pionus sordidus*), plum-crowned (*Pionus tumultuosus*), white-crowned (*Pionus senilis*), and white-headed or white-capped (*Pionus seniloides*). The five most available species are the Maximilian's, dusky, blue-headed, white-capped, and bronze-winged.

Pionus are all roughly between 10 and 12 inches in length and are basically the same shape, with a short, square tail like the Amazons; they all have a bare, fleshy eye ring circling the entire eye; and they all have red feathers at the vent (underneath the tail). Those are the only physical characteristics they share — they differ so vastly in color, experts often puzzle over why the field biologists put them all in the same species. They used to be called *red-vented parrots* before the name *pionus* came into vogue.

The pionus, in general, is affectionate (though not a love sponge), quieter than other parrots (though not silent), and attentive and sweet. As with all parrots, the way a pionus is raised by its human guardians makes the difference between a shy bird and a great companion. Pionus aren't known as the best talkers, but some individuals can garner an impressive vocabulary.

Poicephalus parrots

As a family, these stout African parrots are known for their good nature and relative quietness. They're affectionate and very companionable, and can live upwards of 30 years. Following are a few of the more popular species.

Meyer's parrot

The Meyer's parrot (*Poicephalus meyeri*) is one of the favorites of the poicephalus group because of its outstanding companionability and calm nature. Primarily a muted gray-brown, it is often overlooked among flashier parrots — it takes a real bird fancier to fall in love with the Meyer's.

The Meyer's is a quiet bird in comparison to most other companion species. They cluck and click and will occasionally emit a piercing squeak, but not often. Meyer's have been known to repeat a few words as well. It's a calm bird, content to ride around on a guardian's shoulder and just hang out. The Meyer's isn't known to be nippy but can be as capricious as any other parrot and can bite on a whim.

Red-bellied parrot

The red-bellied parrot (*Poicephalus rufivetris*) is similar in size and temperament to the Senegal and the Meyer's, but it tends to be a better talker and mimic. They're dimorphic, which makes distinguishing between the sexes easy. The male has a bright red-orange belly, while the female is mostly gray. They're friendly and sweet and love to chew, so provide plenty of toys and paper for shredding. They tend to be one-person birds.

Senegal parrot

The Senegal parrot (*Poicephalus senegalus*) is the most common of the poicephalus and is fairly easy to find in pet shops. Senegals are good-natured and less expensive than their poicephalus cousins. They're about 9 inches long, mostly dark green and brownish-grey with an iridescent green throat, orange thighs, and yellow chest. The beak and feet are black, and the eye is a light yellow-orange, set off by the darker grey of the face. Some individuals can learn to talk quite well, but they tend more toward whistling and clucking. Senegals can be very sweet and tend to get very attached to their humans, tending toward being one-person birds.

Quaker parakeets

The Quaker parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*), a native of South America and also commonly referred to as the *monk parrot*, is one of the most popular parrots of its size due to its availability, low cost, and outstanding mimicking ability. The Quaker is reported to live more than 30 years with the proper care. This intelligent 12-inch bird is found in large, feral colonies from southern Florida to the Northeast and Midwest, and is a charming addition to the landscape of those areas, though many places consider them pests and have outlawed them. Because they are so prolific and destructive when they colonize in the wild, Quakers are illegal to sell or own in some states, so check state laws before you purchase one.

The nominate Quaker is primarily green in color. The distinguishing features are its grey face, neck, and chest. Quakers are often confused with conures because of their size and coloration. There have been some recent mutations of these birds in blue, yellow, and cinnamon (a lighter greenish-yellow), though they are very expensive.

Possibly the most distinctive behavioral feature of the Quaker parakeet comes from its namesake behavior: quaking and shaking. The young birds bob their heads and quake in a way that appears abnormal, but it is actually a natural behavior exclusive to this bird.



WARNING

Someone with noise sensitivity should think twice about bringing home a Quaker. They're very noisy and persistent, though their affectionate nature wins over bird lovers who can overlook this irksome characteristic.

Vasa parrots

Vasa parrots are possibly the strangest of the parrot species, hailing from Madagascar and the surrounding islands. They look a little like crows and are much darker in color than the African greys. The vasa comes in seven subspecies, including the black or lesser vasa parrot (*Coracopsis nigra nigra*) and the greater vasa (*Coracopsis vasa*). It isn't often kept as a companion, though it's worth mentioning here; the vasa is becoming sought-after by fanciers because it is one of the more different parrots. Handfed babies are affectionate, playful, and lively.

- » Finding the perfect parrot for you
- » Looking for a healthy parrot
- » Getting a health guarantee

Chapter 4

Purchasing or Adopting a Parrot

Where to acquire a parrot can be as difficult a decision as what kind of parrot to get. This chapter shows you how to choose the correct place to find your parrot, what specs you want in a parrot, and how to know if it's healthy.

You can just walk into any pet shop and pick up the prettiest bird you see. But that's not an informed way to choose a companion that can be with you for 15 to 70 years. Of course, if you've already done that, you're not alone. Many people have chosen parrots in just this way, your lovely author included. Sometimes it's just love at first squawk.

Considering Your Parrot Options

You have a few options to choose among after you decide on a species:

- » Does your new parrot have to be a baby, or would you rather have one that's a little more mature?
- » How tame do you want the bird to be?

- » What are your expectations for physical contact? Best friend or charming housemate?
- » Are you willing to adopt a bird that no longer has a home?
- » Are your neighbors or family members sensitive to noise?

These considerations are serious. People often think longer about what kind of shoes to buy than they do about what kind of animal to bring home and whether or not the animal will be happy living there. Animals are often impulse purchases, especially birds. You don't even have to try them on. They *seem* easy, and they can be so sweet. There's no question they're beautiful. The larger parrots are also status symbols. Walking around with a Hyacinth macaw or an umbrella cockatoo on your arm is quite the flex. No wonder so many parrots get dumped into shelters every year. But if you're reading this book, you're doing your homework, and that's great. You'll be able to distinguish the right parrot from a feathered nightmare.

Do you want a small bird, a large bird, one that talks, one that's not too loud, one you can handle, or a few that you can keep in an aviary? The following sections can help you answer those questions and decide what kind of bird is right for you.

Comparing handfed versus parent-raised birds

When choosing a parrot, consider whether the bird was handfed or raised by his parents. These two sections break down the two distinctions in plain English.

Handfed parrots

A *handfed* parrot is one that has been taken from the nest at a young age and fed by hand by a human. Parrots are *altricial* birds, meaning they're totally dependent on their parents from the time they hatch until they completely *fledge* (leave) the nest. The contrast is the *precocial* birds, like ducks and chickens, who can leave the nest and begin eating on their own soon after hatching.

Handfed parrots are bonded to humans from the beginning and lose their fear of being handled. Many handfed parrots even love humans so much that they prefer them to other parrots. Handfed parrots that are socialized properly are considered tame (in other words, able to be handled easily) and make good companions as long as someone takes the time to continue handling them.



REMEMBER

If you personally handfeed your new bird, it may begin to reject you when it becomes sexually mature. Birds are programmed to leave their family units to find a mate without the same DNA. If you handfeed your bird, you're like a parent more than a mate, and your bird may try to find someone else to bond with, such as another family member or friend. This isn't a certainty, but it does happen.

Parent-raised parrots

Parent-raised parrots are those that have been raised by their parents and have had no human contact. They'll need to be tamed to be hands-on companions — no easy task, depending on the species.

People who breed parrots often allow parrots to raise their young if they want the young also to be breeders. Some evidence suggests parent-raised babies are better parents from the very first *clutch* (group of eggs), though handfed birds do get the hang of it and can be great from the beginning too. However, handfed breeders aren't scared of humans and will defend the nest far more viciously than parent-raised birds, who will be more likely to flee the nest when the breeder wants to inspect it.

Birds such as budgies and cockatiels are often *handled* without being handfed. The breeder will hold and pet the babies while they're still in the nest so that they are semi-tame so that when they leave the nest, they're easier to hand tame.

Choosing an age

Because many parrots are long-lived, you have the opportunity to welcome a baby or a senior into your home. Yes, there's a difference between baby behavior and adult behavior, but even if you get a baby parrot, you're going to experience its adult behavior sooner or later.



REMEMBER

It's a myth that baby parrots bond more deeply to human families than adult parrots when placed in a new home. Parrots are very adaptable animals and appreciate people who are respectful of them — aside from above-adequate housing, nutrition, proper lighting, and veterinary care, that's about all they ask of you.

An adult parrot in a new home can become very bonded to his new family. On the other hand, an adult bird with social problems may never become affectionate and may never even like its new guardians, but that has less to do with age than it does with how the parrot was raised and treated by its previous humans.

Here I look closer at what you need to know about parrots of different ages.

Baby parrots

Baby parrots are sweet and practically beg you to take them home. Unfortunately, baby behavior isn't really an indication of adult behavior. Remember that the sweet baby is going to grow up, become an adult, and display all the adult behavior typical to its species.

Baby parrots go through five basic baby stages:

- » **Neonate:** A *neonate* is any baby parrot that isn't yet eating on its own and relies on its parents or a human to feed it. Typically, this term refers to very young babies with their eyes still closed, also called *hatchlings*. All neonates can also be called *chicks*.
- » **Nestling:** When the baby gets a little older and its eyes are open, you can call it a *nestling*. It still relies on a parent or human for food.
- » **Fledgling:** When a parrot begins to fly, it's considered to be *fledging* the nest and is called a *fledgling*. It may be eating some food on its own, but it still relies on the parents (or a human) for food.
- » **Weanling:** A *weanling* is a baby parrot that is in the process of *weaning* (just starting to eat on its own).
- » **Juvenile:** A *juvenile* is a baby that is *weaned* (independent of its parents and eating on its own) but isn't yet sexually mature.

The time from hatching to juvenile is different for every species. For example, budgies can be weaned in about six weeks, whereas hyacinth macaws can take nine months to wean. Do your research about weaning before getting a bird so that you don't get one too young if you aren't equipped to hand-feed.



TIP

Juvenile parrots are the same size as adult parrots. The only real way to tell age is by looking at the bird's closed leg band, which a breeder may slip on the leg when the baby is a day or two old. If the bird doesn't have a band, you can often tell a juvenile parrot by the color of its eyes, which will often be darker or a different color. Plumage in some juvenile species is also different. For example, sun conure juveniles are greener than they are orange and yellow. These birds *feather out*, or grow into their mature-colored feathers, after a year or two.



WARNING

Don't buy a parrot that is still dependent on handfeeding formula if you're not experienced in handfeeding. Some breeders will allow you to finish handfeeding a baby if you prove that you can do it properly, but most won't. Even highly experienced parrot breeders can accidentally aspirate (choke) a baby bird. The formula can be too hot or cold, or you may overfeed, causing the crop to expand too much,

which can allow bacteria to flourish or cause the baby to spit up, which can also aspirate it. Handfeeding isn't an exact science and takes a lot of practice and patience. You can buy a baby when it's nearly weaned and still eating soft, warm, nearly solid food but not when it still has to be handfed with a syringe.

Mature parrots

A mature parrot is one that can breed and produce young. It has passed the juvenile stage, and its personality is already formed. Don't rule out a mature parrot as a companion. If a lovebird is three years old, it's in the first fifth of its lifespan. If a blue and gold macaw is 10 years old, it's in the prime of its life, with 70 more years to go if cared for properly.



REMEMBER

In the wild, baby parrots wean and then leave their parents to find mates. In captivity, many handfed parrots *turn on* their handfeeders (stop being friendly), preferring instead someone else in the household. It makes sense to the bird to leave its genetic family, so a mature bird may actually appreciate bonding to someone beside the human parent who raised it.

Older parrots

An older parrot is in the last third of his lifespan — for example, a lovebird that's 10 or an African grey that's about 35 years old. Unfortunately, most parrots don't even make it to an age where they can be considered older. It's the lucky parrot whose guardians are conscientious enough to keep it alive and happy into its golden years.

A PARROT FOR EVERY AGE

Parrots can live long lives, so think of a parrot's lifespan when deciding what bird is right for you. If you're in your 20s, consider that the parrot you choose may be with you for most of your life. You may experience many life changes in your future, such as moving several times, changing jobs, getting married, having kids, and so on. Can you say for sure that you can keep a parrot through all of those milestones?

On the other hand, if you're close to retirement or are already rocking your golden years and you adopt a young parrot with a long lifespan, you may not be around or able to care for it for *your* entire lifespan. Take your current age and add to it the number of years that any parrot you're considering may live, and then subtract how old the parrot is now. If the number you arrive at far exceeds most human lifespans, consider another bird.

There's no reason why you shouldn't welcome an older bird into your home. Yes, its personality is pretty much formed by the time the bird is well into its adulthood, but if you can accept the bird as an individual, then you may find a good friend, even if you had nothing to do with its upbringing.

Contemplating degrees of tameness

Most people want their parrots to be hands-on companions. Acquiring a tame parrot makes that wish a lot easier. What I really mean by *tameness* is allowing physical contact and how often you're going to get bitten. The first thought most people have when acquiring a *recycled* parrot (one that has had a previous home) is whether the bird is going to bite them.



REMEMBER

Most parrots do bite at one time or another. Your parrot may not bite you, but he'll probably bite someone if the bird feels the situation demands it. Friendliness is relative. Here are the general levels of tameness, of course:

» **The cuddler:** This bird wants nothing more than to be in your presence, preferably somewhere attached to you. This bird loves petting and *scratches* (that's parrot-ese for scratching affectionately). The cockatoo is known as a cuddlebug — most want to be sewn to their humans — but they can be unpredictable, too. Of course, it's up to the individual bird and how it was raised. Some birds begin life as cuddlers and then become more aloof when they reach sexual maturity.



REMEMBER

You won't be immune from a cuddler's bite! Even very tame parrots can bite for a variety of reasons.

» **Hand-tamed:** The *hand-tamed* parrot is content to sit on your hand and will stand for some petting but won't really want any intense contact. This bird may never bite — it just may not want an abundance of physical affection and may become afraid (or bite) if you push it. The African grey parrot is a good example: Some individuals do like to cuddle, but for the most part they don't love being manhandled.



WARNING

» **Semi-tamed handfed:** The *semi-tamed handfed* parrot was taken from the nest as a baby and fed by a human but hasn't been handled a lot since weaning. Because this bird was handfed, it's not *really* afraid of humans. But because it's not used to human contact anymore, it's liable to bite when someone gets too close. It will react to fear by biting far more often than it will react by trying to flee. This is perhaps the worst combination of circumstances and is why it's important to keep handfed birds socialized if they're ever to find good second or third homes.

- » **The bronco:** The *bronco* bird is absolutely untamed. It wasn't handfed, was perhaps wild-caught (in this case, it would have to be quite old now, because bird importation stopped in the United States in 1992), and has never really been handled by humans. Just because a bird is a bronco shouldn't put it out of the running as a good companion. Some birds tame easily — for example, the budgie, the cockatiel, and even the hyacinth macaw. Others, like Amazons and lovebirds, are more difficult. The broncos' main defense is flight, though most won't hesitate to bite if they feel threatened and trapped, and your finger is conveniently close.
- » **Breeders or pairs:** *Breeder* birds and *pairs* aren't really interested in human contact. They're less likely to pick up human words and sounds (though sometimes they do) and are more difficult to tame, regardless if they were handfed or not. They make good hands-off companions.
- » **The sometimes biter:** Most parrots fall into this category. Like people, most parrots are friendly sometimes, cranky sometimes, and sometimes give their human companions a well-placed bite. Hopefully, your human friends aren't biting you, at least if you don't want them to! There's not much you can do to determine whether or not the recycled parrot will end up being a biter. Most of what determines that is how much handling you offer the bird and how you care for it. But even the finest-bred and most socialized parrots bite sometimes.



REMEMBER

The bigger the beak, the harder the bite. A bite from a budgie or cockatiel does pinch, but a bite from a macaw can knock you to the floor. I have scars all over my hands, mostly from macaws and Amazons I've endeavored to tame. If you're squeamish about being bitten, keep beak size in mind.

The talker in the bunch

If you want a talking parrot, your best bet is to get one that's already talking, or you can try one of the species that is a well-known talker, such as:

- » African grey parrots
- » Amazon parrots, particularly the yellow-naped, the double-yellow headed, and the blue-fronted
- » Budgies (parakeets)
- » Indian ringnecks (and other ring-necked parakeets)
- » Macaws, particularly the blue and gold and the scarlet

But how do you choose the parrot in the bunch that will be the most vocal when you get it home? Figuring out how much a bird will talk just by watching for a short period of time is difficult. Certainly, if you're watching a group of parrots, the one that's creating a racket is a vocal bird and will probably be the most interested in mimicking the voices and the noises in the world around it.

However, you may be watching the birds after a long day of playing, and the most vocal bird in the group might be sleepy and quiet. If you're buying the parrot from an experienced breeder, she should have a good idea of which one of the babies is most apt to talk. After a while, breeders come to know their babies, and a good breeder may tell you whether or not a particular bird might grow into a feathered chatterbox. Just realize that no one can really predict if and when a bird will talk.

Finding the Perfect Parrot for You

Walking into your local pet shop may not be the best idea for finding a parrot for a number of reasons, depending on the quality of the store. It may seem like a great idea to find a breeder, but how? Read on for places you may be able to buy a parrot to welcome home.

Pet shops

A general pet shop may have some birds for sale. Depending on the type and quality of the store, the birds may or may not be in good condition. Here are some things to look for in a pet shop:

- » **Cleanliness:** The water dishes should be spotless, the cages and floor pristine, and the birds themselves in a generally clean condition. If you notice a foul odor (no pun intended) or the birds look messy or dirty, don't buy from that store.
- » **Food:** Do the birds have enough food? Are they being offered more than just seed or pellets? The birds should have a variety of foods available.
- » **Toys:** Do the birds have anything to play with? They should have an abundance of toys available.
- » **Perches:** The birds should have perches of varying size and diameter. If there are no perches in the cage, immediately let the store manager know.
- » **Employees:** Do the employees know anything at all about birds? Do they know where the birds in the store come from? Are they paying any attention to the birds? If they don't know anything about birds, you aren't going to get any help from them after your purchase.

- » **Conditions:** Are they crowded together in small cages? If so, leave immediately. Disease is more likely spread in crowded conditions.
- » **Illness:** Make sure all the birds in the pet shop at least *look* healthy to you. A lot of diseases don't have very visible outward signs, especially in the beginning stages, so even if the birds look healthy, that's no guarantee. I discuss common illnesses in Chapter 10.
- » **Large parrots:** Do the larger birds have enough space to move around, flap their wings, and play? If not, the store isn't properly caring for the birds.

Bird shops

The employees in an all-bird shop usually know a lot more about birds than those in the general pet shop, and they'll give you more help after your purchase if you have a problem. Bird shops typically have a larger variety of choices, such as different species, ages, and so on.



TIP

Bird shops are generally pretty obsessive about preventing disease, and rightfully so. If the shop asks you to wash your hands with special soap or to disinfect your shoes before you walk into a room with their babies, you're probably in a decent place.

Online classifieds

A search in the online classifieds will bring up a lot of ads listed by people who need to rehome their bird. Why? A lot of birds aren't particularly easy companions to keep happy, and because they are so long-lived, they may not fit into their human's lifestyle when it changes.

Online classifieds, such as Craigslist, Hoobly, or Birdsnow, have ads for birds. A breeder, a bird shop, or a *bird broker* — someone who buys birds from breeders and marks up the price — may have placed these ads. Or perhaps someone can't keep their bird anymore and is choosing to sell or rehome it through the classifieds.

You don't really know who's on the other end when you respond to an ad. You could be getting the most reputable breeder in your area or someone who just stole a bunch of birds and is looking to unload them quickly. Keep the following in mind as you vet them:

- » It's a good sign if you hear a lot of birds in the background when you call.
- » It's a great sign if the person seems to love talking about birds and gives you a nice slice of time on the phone.

- » It's a red flag if the person only communicates via text or email.
- » It's a bad sign when the price of the birds is way too low. Beware of a deal that sounds too good.
- » It's a yellow flag when the person wants to meet you in a parking lot to show you the birds. Then again, people are wary of having strangers come to their home these days, and I can't blame them.

Finding a bird that needs a new home isn't a bad way to buy your bird, especially because most birds who need a new home will come with a cage and supplies. Usually people will charge a rehoming fee, which is fine. Sometimes free animals go to people who mistreat them, so consider that someone charging a fee does care about her bird's future life. Getting a bird this way also eliminates the need for the bird to go to a rescue, which may already be over-*bird*-ened (sorry, I love a good pun!). Here are some questions to ask:

- » How old is the bird?
- » Why are you rehoming it/them?
- » Has the bird seen a veterinarian? Is it healthy?
- » Does the bird have any behavioral problems?
- » What does the bird come with — cage, toys, perches, and so on?



WARNING

It goes without saying, but be careful when meeting a stranger. Take someone with you or meet in a neutral place. Don't let a stranger come to your home.

Reputable breeders

A reputable breeder is someone who comes with references, is very involved in the parrot *fancy* (a dedicated hobbyist), is a member of parrot clubs, and is a responsible parrot guardian. This person should be willing to chat with you on the phone and help you choose the right bird for you. Don't be put off if the breeder refuses to sell you a type of bird or a particular bird — this is common practice with breeders who really care for their parrots' lives after they leave the nest.



REMEMBER

A parrot breeder isn't like a backyard breeder of dogs or a puppy mill. Most parrot breeders breed a few pairs because they love their chosen species and want to see it thrive in the United States, where parrot importation has been banned since 1992. If there were no parrot breeders, certain species would be even more endangered in the world than they are in the wild. Good breeders keep their birds in prime condition and don't overbreed. Be wary of a breeder who is pumping out babies at the expense of the parent birds. Some what I call *parrot factory breeders*

have hundreds of pairs and breed for the pet trade, but because the birds are the breeder's livelihood, the birds are usually well cared for and have spacious accommodations and good food to eat. Remember, if parrots are unhappy, cramped, ill-fed, and don't have their other needs met, they won't breed, or they'll produce just a few babies instead of many.

Going to a breeder's home is a real treat. You get to meet your bird's parents and see the way the breeder keeps her birds. You'll have a chance to get a vibe from the breeder. Is this someone you want to have a long-term birdy relationship with? Remember, you'll probably be calling the breeder from time to time to ask questions.

A good breeder

- » Doesn't breed a pair of parrots more than two or three times per year, depending on the species. Birds need to rest for a few months a year. Babies of overtaxed parents can be weak and more susceptible to disease.
- » Feeds a healthy, varied diet.
- » Provides regular veterinary care. Find out who the avian doctor is.
- » Doesn't say things like "I just do this for the money."
- » Takes the time to answer your questions with patience, kindness, and respect.
- » Doesn't send you home with a bird that's not right for your lifestyle.
- » Makes you wash your hands before handling any babies and wants to know if you have been near any other birds — you can carry disease into an aviary on your clothes and shoes.
- » Makes sure that the babies are fully weaned before they go home with new guardians.
- » Doesn't keep aggressive mates together. Some species are known for mate-on-mate violence.
- » Is nice to the birds and seems to genuinely care for and respect them.

Flea markets

Some flea markets allow the sale of live animals, so it isn't unusual for a couple of bird vendors to be there. These birds may be perfectly fine. However, what if you have a problem when you get home? Whom will you call? Will the vendor be at the flea market the next week? Be careful in this situation and ask a lot of questions.

Bird shows or expos

Bird shows, expos, or marts are generally held by local bird clubs once or twice a year. There are usually birds for sale at these shows. Fortunately, most of the vendors are club members and are held to some sort of standard, though there's no real way to ensure that everyone at the show is legitimate.

Unfortunately, bird shows are a great way to spread disease, especially if unweaned babies are present. You never know when you're going to get a diseased bird from a show or expo. You can go to ten great shows and then get stung on the eleventh. Your best bet is to get names and phone numbers of the vendors and then call about the birds you're interested in seeing again.

Adopting a Rescue Parrot

Adoption is a fantastic way to acquire your bird. In fact, lots of wonderful birds end up in rescue, maybe because their guardian died or someone in the home became allergic to feather dander. Sometimes a person simply gets too many birds and needs to thin the flock because of a move or lifestyle shift. Sometimes a person's new spouse, partner, or baby can't tolerate the bird for whatever reason. Even a handfed and super tame bird can become inconvenient or a problem as someone's life circumstances change. Not all rescue birds have issues.



REMEMBER

A rescue organization doesn't give away birds for free. You'll have to pay an adoption fee that covers your new bird's past medical care, housing, and feeding. Rescue isn't the place to get an inexpensive bird, although a bird from a rescue will come with its own cage and supplies, which is helpful.

Is it easier to buy a bird? Yes. But you may find it more fulfilling to adopt one instead. When you adopt a bird, you free up the space for another bird to go into rescue. Some rescues have a waiting list of up to a year before they can take in a bird.

You may have to wait a while to adopt a bird if you're looking for a particular species, but just have some patience, as most of the more common species do come up for adoption frequently.

Identifying which birds are available for adoption

If you're considering adopting a parrot, investigate the array of birds available. Although any species, size, and age of parrot can find itself homeless, larger cockatoos, Amazons (see Figure 4-1), and macaws are often abandoned to sanctuaries.

FIGURE 4-1:
This untamed
Amazon parrot
pair was adopted,
and his new
owner loves him
just the way he is,
plucked breast
and all.

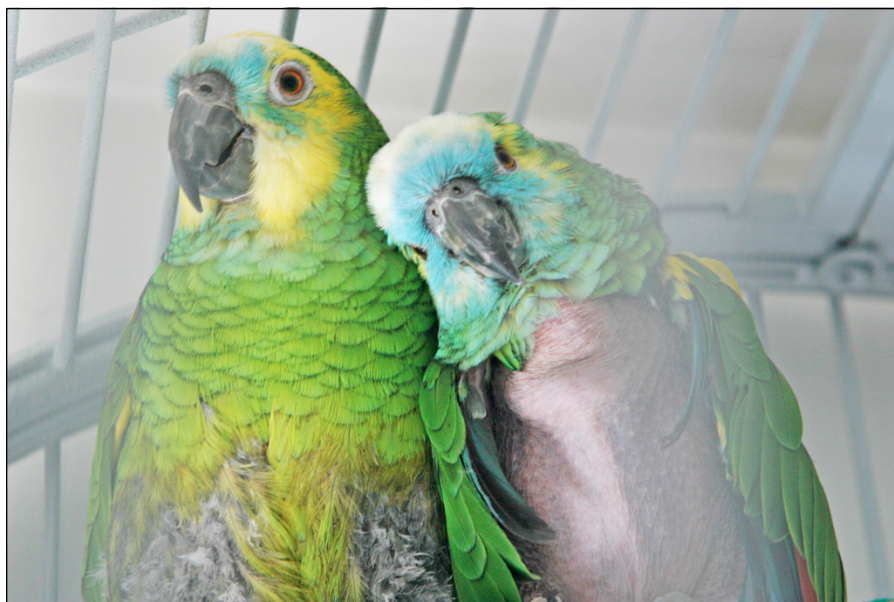


Photo by James Parsons

As parrots mature, they can get noisy and destructive and may turn into chronic pluckers or biters if they don't have the proper housing, nutrition, and social contact, and some people aren't prepared to deal with any of that behavior. Second-hand birds can become loving, joyous companions when they're allowed to be themselves and blossom into the parrots they were meant to be.

You can find just about every species of parrot in rescue, from the tiny parrotlet to the huge umbrella cockatoo, and everything in between. One great reason to adopt from a rescue is that you can be sure that your new bird has seen a veterinarian and has been given a clean bill of health, or if not, you'll be made aware of any health issues. You may not get this assurance from a pet store or breeder, so ask if you're prospective parrot has had a veterinary check or vaccinations.



REMEMBER

Local rescues are overflowing with parrots. You can be a real hero to a bird that just wants a comfortable place to live and someone to love.

Look online for bird rescues in your area because many bird rescues aren't centralized. They often have a network of foster families who temporarily take in birds, so you may have to chat with several people to find the right bird for you. You may also have to wait a while and check in with the rescue often.

Because parrots can be so long-lived when cared for properly, adopting a 10-year-old or even a 20-year-old bird is still like adopting a youngster. Don't let a bird's age deter you.

Completing the rescue application

Any good rescue will want to know all about your home and lifestyle before adopting a bird to you. You may need to take an online tutorial, watch some videos, or even attend a bird care class before or after filling out an adoption application. Here are some questions that may be on the application:

- » Are you 18 (or 21) or older?
- » Why do you want a bird?
- » Do you own or rent your home? If you rent, will your landlord allow you to have a bird?
- » Who is going to be the bird's primary caretaker?
- » How many hours a day will the bird be alone?
- » Does anyone in the house smoke?
- » Do you use nonstick cookware?
- » Does anyone in the household have asthma or allergies?
- » Are there small children in the household?
- » Does everyone in the home want the bird?
- » Do you have any past experience with birds?
- » Do you have an avian veterinarian?
- » What will happen to the bird if you're unable to care for it?
- » Are you aware that birds make noise, are messy, and can bite?
- » Where will the bird live?
- » Do you have any other pets, like cats, dogs, snakes, or fish?
- » Are your other pets up to date on their vaccinations?



REMEMBER

Many rescues won't adopt to someone out of state, so don't bother looking too far afield. Some rescues will adopt regionally to a group of close states. Most rescues won't ship birds, so be prepared to pick the bird up yourself.

Being prepared for the rescue home visit

If you pass the application process, the rescue will schedule a home visit. The whole process may take a few weeks. The person visiting is often a volunteer who is taking time out of her day to meet with you to see where the bird will live and

to evaluate your ability to care for a parrot. The evaluator may consider some of the following:

- » Do you seem knowledgeable about bird guardianship or are you willing to learn?
- » Do you have screens on your windows? Are there any easy escape routes?
- » Do you have other animals that can harm the bird?
- » Are there close neighbors who will be annoyed with the parrot's noise?
- » Is your home tidy?
- » Do you have plants in the home that are toxic to parrots?
- » How long will it take from your home to the nearest emergency avian veterinarian?
- » Do your other pets seem well cared for?
- » Is there a lot of alcohol around and/or drug paraphernalia?
- » Does the home smell of cigarettes or other smoke?

If you pass the home visit, most rescues will allow you to foster the bird for a few months, giving you both the time to get to know each other to see if it's a good fit. If not, the rescue will take the bird back. Don't feel badly if it doesn't work out the first time. Rescues want to make sure that you and your bird are going to be a long-term match, and they understand that not all birds will be suitable in all homes.



REMEMBER

If you get chosen as an adopter, the rescue will likely ask you to sign a contract that states how you'll care for the bird. Most rescues will take the bird back if for any reason you no longer want the bird. You may be fined if you rehome the bird yourself.

Looking for a Healthy Parrot

Buying or adopting a healthy parrot is extremely important. This may seem obvious, but you have no idea how many people make a pity purchase when they see a sick bird. I've done it myself more times than I care to admit.

You can discover more about parrot health in Chapter 10. For now, look for the following obvious signs of physical condition that should be easy to see when you visit the pet shop, bird rescue, the breeder's home, or wherever you get your bird.

Bright eyes

A parrot's eyes should be shiny, bright, and alert. If you notice any growths on the eyes or any crust or discharge, there's definitely a problem. Don't worry if the irises of the bird's eye are *pinning* (going from small to big and back again). That is normal in many species and doesn't indicate a health problem.

Clear nose and nares

A parrot's nose (well, parrots don't really have a nose like ours!) consists of two nostrils on the *nare*, the area just above the beak. On some birds, the nare is fleshy and very obvious, and on others, it is covered with feathers. The nostrils should be dry and clean. Worry if you see any kind of discharge from the nostrils. Sometimes the nare is flaky, which can indicate parasites, a dry environment, or other health issues.

Beak

The *beak* consists of the upper and lower mandibles. Both should be intact. Mites can attack the beak in some species, causing it to become crusty and overgrown. Malnutrition can also cause the beak to become distorted and overgrown, as can illness.

Sometimes a beak is misaligned — this actually isn't a big deal and can be fixed gradually by a veterinarian. If part of the beak is missing, a veterinarian can bond it. In an African grey or a cockatoo, a healthy beak is powdery, not shiny. A shiny beak in these species and others can indicate a fatal virus called Psittacine Beak and Feather disease.

Shiny feathers

Feathers should be shiny and tight in most species. In African greys, cockatoos, and mealy Amazons, feathers should be tight and powdery-looking. Ring-neck parakeets and eclectus parrots have feathers that seem painted on.

There should be no obvious signs of missing feathers, which can be an indication of disease, self-mutilation, or mutilation by another bird in the same cage. Cockatoos and cockatiels sometimes have a bald spot beneath the *crest* (feathers on the top of the head of some species that can be raised and lowered), which is completely normal.



REMEMBER

A healthy bird has very clean feathers. A bird that's ill may not have the energy to preen itself and may let vomited food and defecation crust on its feathers.

Young birds tend to play and clamber around a lot, making their feathers ratty, especially the tail. Birds housed in too small a space may also look ratty, especially those with long tails. This is normal and should clear up after a few baths and the bird's first *molt* (a periodic general loss of feathers and regrowth of new ones) at home.

Feet

Feet should be clean and should grasp the perch tightly. Swelling, lameness, and crustiness are all signs of unhealthy feet.

Vent

The parrot's *vent* is where the waste and eggs come from and is on the bird's underside where the tail meets the body. The vent should be clean. If you notice crustiness or discharge, the bird is probably ill.

Attitude and stance

A healthy bird should show an attitude of health. It should be active, vocal, and interactive with the world around it. A fearful bird may not show the best attitude, so you'll have to use the preceding factors to decide whether the bird is simply afraid or if it's ill.



TIP

A bird that's puffy and sleeping on the bottom of the cage may be ill. It is trying to retain heat and energy. Of course, birds that are being picked on by other birds may exhibit the same behavior, especially if there's a bully parrot that won't let the other bird onto a perch. Parrots sleeping on two feet may be ill as well — healthy parrots pull one foot up close to the body when they sleep.

Requesting a Guarantee

Wherever you decide to get your bird, you have to request a health guarantee. Don't take the bird home without one. At the minimum, you should insist on a 48-hour return privilege — hopefully, you can get one that's at least 72 hours. This gives you time to take the bird to an avian veterinarian for a battery of health tests.

Of course, most people don't return the bird if the tests show an illness that can be taken care of easily. After you've had the bird in your care for a couple of days, it's tough to take it back, especially when you know that the place it lived before is responsible for allowing it to get ill in the first place.

If the tests come back showing a fatal or incurable illness, it's a judgment call whether or not to take the bird back. Many do. I personally couldn't do it, because I'm a softie. I fall in love with the birds in my care, if even for a few days, and I go above and beyond to help them become healthy again (yes, it has happened to me). But it's totally within your right to ask for your money back, and you should if it's important to you. If you have other birds, and the illness is contagious, it is definitely important to get the ill bird out of your home.



WARNING

Sometimes a bird will die within a couple of days of your bringing it home. In this case, your health guarantee will come in handy, especially if you've purchased the bird. Of course, you'll need to get a *necropsy* (a bird autopsy) performed by an avian veterinarian so that you know for sure what killed the bird. Sometimes something in the new environment kills the bird, and the guardian unwittingly blames the breeder or pet shop.

Knowing What to Ask Before You Buy or Adopt

Before you buy or adopt any parrot, there are things you'll want to know about your bird and his background. The place where you're buying or adopting the bird should have adequate answers for you, or you shouldn't buy or adopt from there. Here are some potential questions:

- » **How old is the bird?** You should be able to confirm the bird's age by examining the closed band around the bird's leg, which has the year of hatching imprinted on it. Some birds don't have bands, so telling how old an unbanded bird is can be difficult.
- » **When did the bird become fully weaned?** Make sure the baby is eating fully on his own before you take him home. Nobody should sell unweaned babies to inexperienced people. If someone offers to sell you an unweaned baby, turn him down unless you're experienced with hand-feeding baby parrots.
- » **How do you handfeed your birds?** Some breeders feed slowly with a syringe or a bent spoon. Some *tube feed*, shoving a flexible tube down the throat into the baby's crop (first stomach) and then pumping in the food. This method

doesn't give the baby any individual time with the breeder and doesn't allow for natural feeding behaviors.

- » **What has this bird been eating?** You'll want to continue with the same diet for a while, gradually adding lots of other healthy foods.
- » **How much time is spent playing with the birds here?** Some places that sell birds don't play with them at all, which is very sad for these social creatures.
- » **How long is your health guarantee, and what does it cover?** You'll want at least 72 hours to be able to take the bird to the avian veterinarian.
- » **Can I call here if I have a problem? Who will help me? How much does this person know about birds?** You'll want to know that there's someone reliable to call if you run into a problem. Rescues will always be happy to answer questions, whereas some pet stores may not.
- » **Is this bird vaccinated against the polyomavirus?** This virus is deadly in young birds and is extremely contagious. Most parrots today are vaccinated against it. Vaccines are also available for Pacheco's disease, avian pox, and Newcastle disease. Your bird may already come with one or more of these vaccines. Discuss them with your veterinarian, who will recommend whether or not your particular bird needs any of these. (Refer to Chapter 10 for more information about vaccines.)

2

Bringing Home Your New Parrot

IN THIS PART . . .

Choose the best cage, aviary, or habitat for your parrot so he feels safe and comfortable in his new home.

Shop for your parrot to keep him happy and healthy.

Keep your parrot engaged with toys, either by buying toys or making your own toys to keep your parrot entertained.

Find out how to parrot-proof your home to keep your feathered friend safe.

- » Matching the housing to the species
- » Avoiding cage dangers
- » Placing housing in the best spot
- » Getting the word on aviaries and flight cages

Chapter 5

A House to Call Home: Choosing Proper Housing

Allowing a parrot to have free rein in any household isn't safe because your home has too many hazards for a curious parrot to find. A bird needs proper, safe, roomy, and easily cleaned housing of its own.

Unfortunately, the words *bird* and *cage* have been associated for so long, most people think that parrots belong in cages. That's like saying whales belong in fish tanks. But as any parrot guardian will tell you, a parrot needs physical boundaries in the average home. So what's the solution?

The answer is to give the parrot the absolute largest and best housing possible. Ideally, the parrot should be able to actually fly around inside the housing. At the very minimum, the bird should be able to stretch both of her wings freely and be able to flap and perch hop for exercise. Remember, a cage isn't a prison, it's a home, like a parrot's bedroom, where she should feel safe and comfortable, not confined.

This chapter guides you toward choosing the best housing for your particular bird. Here I also share some important information on how to best clean your parrot's cage or housing.

Matching the Housing to the Species

Don't think about housing size in terms of the size of the bird. A lovebird will be well off in a cage of the same dimensions as one for a large macaw. The difference is in how the cages are built. I wish I could give you an idea of the exact dimensions of housing for each species, but that's impossible. In short, like boats, bigger is always better.



REMEMBER

Remember, parrots in the wild fly for miles a day to find food and water. That doesn't compare at all to the few feet of space that most captive parrots have. Those little pastel cages found in most pet stores and labeled for budgies aren't acceptable for any bird. Think *big*.



WARNING

The cage bars should be spaced such that the bird can't stick her head through. If the bars aren't close enough together, the head can become stuck, and the bird can panic and break her neck. Smaller birds should have bar spacing no more than 1/2-inch wide.

The size of the bars is also important, depending on the species. Larger birds need thicker bars because they're powerful animals and can break thin bars, which can be extremely dangerous. A bent area in the cage can create a choking hazard. I discuss more about considering size in the section, "Cage shape," later in this chapter.

Finding the Right Cage for Your Bird

Although there's no real right cage for a parrot, some housing choices are better than others. Because parrots like to climb and their feet are designed to do so, housing should have both horizontal and vertical bars. Horizontal bars give the parrot something to hang onto.



REMEMBER

The most important factor, other than size, is safety. A cage should be made of safe materials and contain no safety hazards. Ideally, parrots should be housed in a space large enough for flight, so keep that in mind. The following sections address the additional factors you need to consider when looking for a cage for your bird.

Cage shape

Rectangular cages, shaped horizontally rather than vertically, basically are best. Most parrots don't really use the bottom part of the cage much (except for those

that like to *ground-forage*, like African greys, neophemas, and cockatiels) and will prefer to remain in the top third. They do most of their living in the higher area of the cage. A square cage is also okay, as long as it's large enough. A dome top or a top shaped like a house is okay as well. Some cages come with play gyms built onto the top, which is a nice addition, and will give your parrot more space to roam.



WARNING

Avoid round cages and cages shaped like pagodas or other complicated structures. The bars are often tapered as they reach the pinnacle of the cage, and a bird can get her neck or foot trapped in the small spaces. Imagine that the bird may stick her head through the bars in a larger spot and then climb up, wedging her neck in the smaller space between the bars — this can cause panic, which can cause injury or death. Also, decorative cages tend to be built more for the human than the bird and can contain scrollwork and other flourishes that can hurt the bird. Don't go for fancy, go for practical.

Sturdiness and material

A flimsy cage or a cage built for a small bird isn't safe for a large parrot. Some of the larger parrots can exert more than 500 pounds per square inch of pressure with their beaks. The large hyacinth macaw can open nuts that you'd have a hard time cracking with a hammer. Such a bird can easily break out of a flimsy cage and harm herself on the broken, sharp metal rods.

The better materials for caging are metal, preferably stainless steel, wrought iron, or regular steel coated with durable, nontoxic paint or powder coating (paint that's sprayed on as a powder and then baked onto the cage at high temperatures). Stainless steel (see Figure 5-1) is the best because it's sturdy and easy to clean, and there's no danger of paint chipping off. Good quality stainless steel also doesn't rust, which is a plus, especially if you live near the ocean.



TIP



WARNING

Make sure that the cage you buy is from a reputable company. Check out the company's website. Most good companies will have copious safety information.

Stay away from cheaper no-name cages. Some cages may look safe, but the decorative parts or locks may contain lead and other toxic metals that can kill your bird pretty quickly. Also, the paint can chip on inferior cages, which is part of the reason why uncoated, medical-grade, or marine-grade stainless steel cages are so popular, even though they're more expensive, sometimes more than twice the price of a powder-coated cage, though powder-coated cages are a fine substitute and are what most people use.

FIGURE 5-1:
Stainless steel is
thought to be the
premium caging
material.

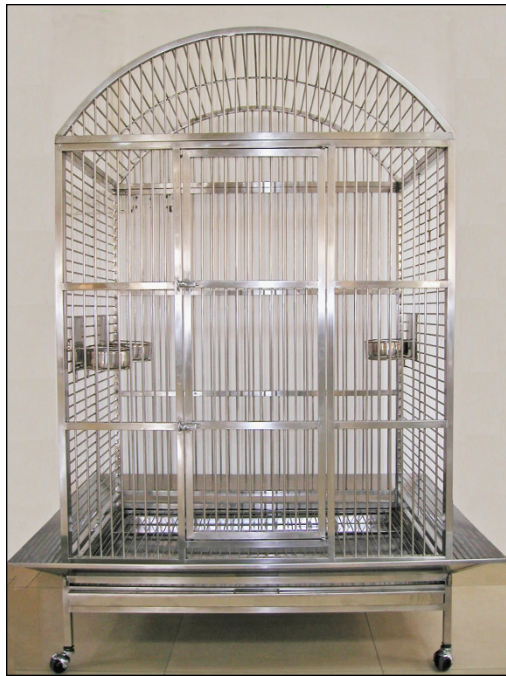


Photo by Carol Frank, Avian Adventures



WARNING

Never put a parrot of any kind in an all-wood cage. It *will* chew its way out. Even if the bird doesn't chew the cage to bits, wood becomes damp and harbors bacteria, which can make a parrot ill. Wood can also harbor mites that infest birds. Also, beware of the cages that incorporate wood with acrylic or glass. These are lovely and look like a beautiful piece of furniture, but they're a nightmare to clean, and I've heard of parrots becoming very ill due to living in them.

Acrylic cages are becoming popular and are great for people with allergies because they keep much of the mess and feather dust inside, and some even offer a ventilation system. Acrylic cages are a nice alternative to a cage with bars, both aesthetically and psychologically. They're beautiful, though they can be expensive, because many are custom made. Because parrots are climbing birds, if you decide on an acrylic cage, make sure it includes plenty of perches and ropes so that your bird can get around easily. Another plus for an acrylic cage is that it's less permeable to household predators, such as the family cat, dog, or snake. Keep your acrylic cage inside in warmer weather so it doesn't become a sauna.

Housing bottom

The bottom of the cage should have wire grating. Some parrots, like African greys, who are ground-foragers like to play around in the bottom of the cage, and if there's no grate, they'll play in their waste, which isn't sanitary and can lead to

illness. In the wild, adult birds are never in contact with their own waste. An aviary or habitat can have a clean sand bottom that you can rake and sift through regularly.

The cage should have a tray that pulls out so that you can easily change the newspaper. The bottom can be metal or plastic and must be washed and disinfected weekly.

Door types

The best doors fold downward (like a drawbridge over a moat) or open to the side, like your front door. The worst doors are the guillotine-style that slide up and down. They're very dangerous for mischievous parrots who try to escape, only to find the door slammed down on their neck. Some birds become proficient at lifting these types of doors. I had one lovebird who would let himself out, let his mate out, then fly around the bird room and let all the other birds out! I'd come home to find a free-for-all — a perfect example of how much birds don't like to be confined. Eventually, I hired someone to build a huge walk-in aviary outside.

If your cage does have guillotine doors and you think you may have a future escape artist, clip them shut with a safe clip, like a stainless steel quick link. You can find these oval-shaped links at any hardware store, but make sure they're stainless steel, not another metal, and that they aren't coated with zinc. Don't use a carabiner because it's spring loaded and a parrot might get its beak caught in the clip.

Most larger parrots need a lock on their cage doors. Many cage manufacturers have come up with some ingenious locks that can withstand even the cleverest feathered Houdini. Don't use a padlock, though. You may need to reach your bird in an emergency, and it will take longer to help him escape. Also, some padlocks are made of dangerous metals. Of course, some birds do need a padlock if they keep escaping. In this case, find a stainless steel lock and keep the key on a peg near the cage. This type of lock isn't my favorite solution, but it's better than having a rogue parrot on the loose get hurt or get into mischief while wandering around the house unsupervised.

Cage dangers

Some metals, such as lead and zinc, are highly toxic to birds. Metal wire or mesh that you find at the hardware store is often *galvanized*, meaning that it's covered with zinc to withstand the weather without rusting. Galvanized wire isn't good for bird housing unless you manage to strip off the zinc, which I discuss in the next section.



WARNING

Beware of cages that have a sliding plastic component to the doors. The plastic doesn't slide up and down easily, and your parrot's head can become caught. Also, beware of any spaces in the cage that your bird can fit her head into because a stuck bird can panic and injure herself.

Building Your Own Cage

You may want to build your own bird cages with wire (often called hardware cloth), j-clips, and a j-tool, which can be a less expensive alternative to store-bought cages. However, if you try it, you have to make sure that you build a safe cage. You can use a wooden structure, but the wood must be untreated, and every bit of wood should be covered completely with wire, or the parrots will chew it. I've built many cages, and I can tell you that they didn't turn out pretty, but they were practical and large.

Most hardware cloth is *galvanized*, which means that it has been treated with zinc, which is toxic for your bird. Galvanized wire can be made safe by spraying it with a lot of white vinegar and scrubbing it with a stiff wire brush. Then rinse it well and leave it out in the weather for about a month (preferably in rain and sun). It should be safe after that, but your best bet is to try to find nongalvanized hardware cloth. Some experts say never to use galvanized wire. I have used it for years with no issues after I've treated it, but again, ungalvanized is far preferable just to be safe.



TIP

If you house your bird in an outside cage, make sure the cage has adequate shelter from the weather and the sun. If you're in a cold climate (where temperatures get below 55 degrees Fahrenheit), the cage should have a solid shelter area made of untreated wood with wire on the inside so that the birds can't chew it too much. Many people also include a heater in an outdoor aviary, but you can't just stick a space heater in the cage. The heater must be made specifically for aviaries and birds, and you must follow the directions that come with the product.



WARNING

Stay away from chain link fencing. You may think that chain link fence material is good for an outdoor cage for a large parrot, but it's typically galvanized and the spaces between the wire are so large that rats and other small predators can get into the cage easily and hurt your parrot, or at the very least, eat your bird's food and leave dangerous waste behind for your bird to ingest.

For any outdoors cage, double the wire with one layer of wire placed over another and about an inch between the layers. Predators like raccoons, opossums, and rats lurking outside can pull a bird (or part of a bird) through even the smallest space in the wire. This double-wired cage is like a cage inside a cage. Imagine the area where your birds will live encased by another cage that is only about an inch or two larger all the way around.

Placing Your Cage to Ensure Your Parrot Is Comfortable

Keeping your parrot's cage in a location where your bird is safe and comfortable is one of the most important decisions you make for your bird. If you're keeping your parrot indoors, put your parrot's cage in a part of the house that gets a lot of traffic, but not so much traffic that the bird won't get any rest. The best spot is a family room or the room where everyone watches television. Don't place the cage in a bathroom, garage, or the kitchen, because these rooms have too many temperature fluctuations and fumes, and the bird won't get enough socialization there. Furthermore, a busy hallway isn't the best choice.



TIP

Place the cage against a wall, preferably in a corner, where the bird will feel secure, and not too out in the open. Don't place the cage against a window, because the view may stress your bird if there are predators outside or cars going by. If the bird can see outside through the window or the cage is partially against a window, that's great, but it shouldn't be the bird's only option.

GOOD-NIGHT BIRDIE: YOUR PARROT'S BEDTIME CAGE

Some birds enjoy sleeping in a smaller, covered cage, especially if they live in a very large cage or aviary. A dark room and a small cage can also make a parrot comfortable if the daytime cage is in a room that gets too much morning light or that becomes noisy early when someone is getting ready for work.

Warning: Your parrot should never, ever sleep in the bed with you. Many parrots have been killed by a sleeping guardian rolling over onto them. Your parrot should sleep in her cage or in a separate bedtime cage.

Cleaning the Cage

Keeping your bird's cage clean is essential to maintain your bird's health and wellbeing. Would you like to live in your own poop and mess? No, so don't make your parrot live like that. The following sections give you some pointers when cleaning and advice about which cleaners to use (and not use).

Simplifying your cage cleaning

When deep cleaning your bird's cage, you can do so without stressing out. Just keep the following pointers in mind to help when cleaning:

- » Always remove your parrot to a play stand or another cage when you clean. Don't spray anything around your bird, even if you think it's safe. Make sure the cage and accessories are dry and free of any cleaner before you return them or your bird to the cage.
- » Clean the bottom of the cage and replace your bird's soiled cage papers with clean papers every day or every other day with newsprint or safe litter, like crushed walnut shells.
- » Thoroughly clean the cage at least twice weekly, including the bars, perches, and bottom grating.
- » Soak everything in a cleanser (see the next section for the ones to use), and scrub to remove debris. Don't let poop build up anywhere on the cage — that's just asking for health problems.
- » Clean the rest of the cage once a week or so, using only water. Allowing the cage to become damp and filthy is a good way to make your bird ill. Dampness allows mold and other fungi to thrive, which can give your bird a respiratory infection. Dried fecal matter can become airborne and infect the lungs, including yours.
- » Wash your parrot's coop cups so they're clean enough that you'd eat and drink from them.
- » Scrub, disinfect, rinse, and dry the perches and toys at least once a week.

Choosing the right cleansers

Most household soaps and cleansers can be deadly to use around your bird. They can be toxic and may leave a residue, even if you thought you rinsed well. Plenty of nontoxic materials found in the average home clean just as well as, if not better than, commercial cleansers. Use the following to clean:

- » **Baking soda and a stiff brush:** If you need to scrub with something abrasive, use baking soda and a stiff brush
- » **Plan vinegar mixed with water:** To disinfect the cage safely, mix a 1-to-1 solution of white vinegar and distilled water in a spray bottle.
- » **Lemon juice:** For an extra kick, put a tablespoon of lemon juice into your water/vinegar mix. Lemon juice can kill mold and bacteria, and it will make your mix smell nicer.
- » **Grapefruit seed extract (GSE):** Use GSE as an excellent nontoxic disinfectant (one drop per ounce of water, so in a 16-ounce spray bottle, for example, use 16 drops of GSE for 16 ounces of water).

You can also use a 10 percent bleach solution (10 percent bleach, 90 percent water) as long as you rinse *very* well and make sure it's dry before returning your bird to its housing (bleach fumes aren't good for you or your bird, so be sure to ventilate well when you use it). Rinse everything three times; then rinse again, even if you're sure all the cleaner has washed away.

You can also use commercially made bird cage cleaners on the market that use enzymes and other natural ingredients.

There are cage deodorizers available on the market. However, if your cage smells, then you aren't cleaning enough or something is wrong with your bird. Bird poop doesn't really smell, so if there's a bad odor, you need to investigate.

Considering an Aviary

An *aviary* is an enclosed space where birds can fly free. Flying is great exercise — indeed, parrots were meant to fly, and it's the most natural thing they do. An aviary is usually located outside the home, but some larger homes may be able to have one inside. It's my housing preference for any parrot, though I know it can be impractical depending on your space. You can build one or purchase a ready-made walk in aviary.



REMEMBER

If you're building or buying a walk-in aviary outdoors, remember to build a double door. You'll enter the outside door and then close it, enclosing yourself in a small area with the door to the aviary in front of you. This way your birds won't escape as you come and go from the aviary.

Even if you live in a cooler climate, you can maintain your indoor cages and create an outside aviary. In nice weather, your bird can enjoy some outdoors time. Just make sure that the aviary is predator and escape proof.

Here are some larger housing suggestions.

The flight cage

A *flight cage* isn't quite an aviary, but it's considered larger than a regular cage. The idea is that the birds inside are able to fly, and the cage is small enough that it can fit inside a home. Be wary of so-called flight cages that seem too small for your birds to actually take flight.



TIP

You can find many custom cage manufacturers online. Although some of these custom cages are amazing, they do tend to be pricy, but you'll get a cage made to your exact specs. Many of these cages are large, walk-in, and mess-proof. Furthermore, they're many are made from acrylic rather than bars. Some have built-in filtration systems and lighting.

The habitat

A *habitat* is an aviary on a grand scale, one that attempts to mimic a parrot's natural environment (refer to Figure 5-2). Building a habitat is easier than you might think. A small aviary can be fitted with nontoxic trees and branches and a little waterfall. Voila! A habitat that will stimulate your parrot physically and psychologically. You can even build a small habitat in an apartment if you have an extra room.

FIGURE 5-2: The guardians of these macaws have built them a very large habitat so that they can fly and enjoy the weather.



Photo by Bob and Liz Johnson

Potentially safe trees and branches to include in your habitat (not an all-inclusive list) are as follows: Acacia, almond, apple, arbutus, ash, aspen, bamboo, beech, birch, bottlebrush, citrus, cork, cottonwood, crabapple, dogwood, elm, fig, fir, guava, hazelnut, hibiscus, hickory, lilac, madrone, magnolia, manzanita, mesquite, mimosa, mulberry, palm, papaya, pear, pecan, pine, poplar, rose, sassafras, spruce, sweet gum, sycamore, walnut, and willow.

Unsafe trees and branches to include in your habitat (not an all-inclusive list) are as follows: Apricot, cedar, cherry, hemlock, holly, nectarine, peach, plum, red maple, redwood, sumac, wisteria, and yew.

- » Furnishing the cage
- » Finding the best toys
- » Using nighttime accessories properly
- » Cleaning . . . and more cleaning

Chapter 6

Going Shopping: Avian Supplies and Accessories

When you go to the bird section of your local pet shop, pet superstore, or favorite online retailer, the multitudes of products to choose among can be dizzying. Which ones does your bird need? Which are useful, effective, and safe? Don't worry, you're in good hands here with an expert shopper on all things related to birds. Come along and discover the wonderful world of *bird stuff*.

After you have your bird's housing set up and placed in the appropriate spot (see Chapter 5), you need to furnish it with all the supplies that your parrot needs to remain contented and healthy. Read on to discover the essential accessories.

Giving Your Parrot a Place to Stand: Perches

Your parrot will spend most of his life standing. *Perches* are branches, wooden dowels, concrete cylinders, and a variety of other rods or horizontal bars onto which birds can stand. Parrots don't lie down to sleep, so you'll have to pay special attention to the health of his feet. Birds that stand on only one size and texture of perch can develop sore feet. Imagine wearing one pair of not-so-comfortable shoes day in and day out. Not a happy prospect.



TIP

Don't think of perches as permanent additions to the cage. Think of them as something for your parrot to chew and for you to replace. Many perches even come with toys attached as a bonus.

Fortunately for you and your parrot, many types of perches are available today. There's no one miracle perch on the market. To maintain foot health, you'll have to include various perches in various widths and materials. I discuss the main types of perches in the following sections.

Wooden perches

The cage you bought probably came with smooth, straight pine dowel perches. These are okay, but they certainly lack creativity. Better are twisty manzanita wood perches, holey cholla wood perches, hard cow wood, and other natural branchlike perches. Perches with various widths and textures promote foot health, and soft woods are great for chewing. So that plain old pine perch is fine, just not as the only perch your parrot has. A voracious chewer is going to make toothpicks of it quickly anyway.



TIP

If the plain pine dowel is too large for your smaller bird and he seems to be losing footing, use high grit sandpaper to give the perch some texture by rubbing the sandpaper over the perch (don't leave it on the perch). Then score the perch every half-inch or so using a razor blade. That should make it easier for your bird to hang on.

You can even make your own wooden perches from trees you have in your yard. Just make sure that the tree is nontoxic and hasn't been sprayed with pesticides or fertilizers. Rinse any branch with plain water and give it a good scrubbing before putting it in your bird's cage, or consult your avian veterinarian on how best to clean it. Leaving a branch out in the sun after cleaning will also disinfect it. Nontoxic, fresh branches with leaves attached are especially fun and enrich the bird's environment. Sometimes the branch is nontoxic, but the leaves may be toxic, so consult your veterinarian about that as well.

Concrete and cement perches

These types of perches are rough and come in many sizes, shapes, and fun colors. The concrete or pumice perch helps with nail trimming, and your bird will also use it to file his beak. Make sure to clean these types of perches weekly by removing them from the cage, scrubbing, and rinsing with water to remove any food and poop that might have accumulated. You can also use a 10 percent bleach solution (9 parts water, 1 part bleach), but be sure to rinse well before placing it back into the cage. Some rough perches come with a flat area or are shaped like a platform where your bird can rest and clean his feet and beak; just make sure that the flat area doesn't become a poop catcher.



WARNING

Some people are stuck on the practice of slipping those little sandpaper sheaths over their bird's perches, thinking that they help with nail trimming. Actually, those sheaths can hold moisture and potentially cause foot problems for your parrot. They're mostly used for small birds such as finches and canaries. Stick with the concrete perch that you can clean and disinfect easily.

Rope perches

Rope perches, usually made from sisal, hemp, or untreated cotton, offer something else in the cage to tear apart and/or preen. Make certain that you cut off any fraying threads as they appear. Rope threads can wrap around your parrot's neck or feet and can cause injury and death. If you notice that your parrot is ingesting the pieces of rope that he tears from the perch, take the perch away and replace it with something less dangerous. I'm not a huge fan of rope perches, but they're fine for some parrots. If you have a voracious chewer, rope isn't a good option.

WARM AND COMFY: HEATED PERCHES AND ACCESSORIES

If you're in a cold climate or you like your air conditioner on a low setting, you should invest in something to give your bird an opportunity to warm up if he so desires. Many parrots are tropical and don't thrive in the cold. Here are a few options:

- **Heated plastic perches:** Plug them into a wall socket to maintain a low-grade heat. Most birds love them. There is a concern that the birds might chew the cord (which is reinforced to prevent just that), but a properly supervised parrot shouldn't be able to get into that kind of mischief.
- **Heater:** A heater made especially for birds (best for smaller, nondestructive birds because it goes inside the cage) to snuggle around to keep warm.
- **Ceramic bulbs:** They emit heat, but not light, and won't break when water is splashed on them. A ceramic bulb should last at least a year. They don't go inside the bird's housing, so you'll need the appropriate wattage clip-on or floor lamp and a way to keep your bird away from it when he's outside of his housing.
- **Infrared bulbs:** They emit red light and are good for your bird's health, but these bulbs can become extremely hot, so you need a cage structure around the bulb (easily found in any hardware store), and you *must* prevent your bird from getting to the bulb. For all bulbs, consult your avian veterinarian for proper use and practices.

Plastic perches

Plastic is easy to clean, but it doesn't promote great foot health. One plastic perch is fine for a parrot's cage, as long as the bird has many other types to choose among.

Keeping the Food and Water Accessible: Coop Cups

Coop cups hold your parrot's food and water. The coop cups that come with a cage are often plastic and too small, and you probably received only two, one for food and one for water. Your parrot needs at least three dishes in its housing at all times, one each for:

- » Basic diet (seeds or pellets)
- » Water
- » Fresh and cooked foods



WARNING

Don't ever mix fresh or cooked foods inside the seed or pellet dish. Seed and pellets tend to get moldy when damp, so make sure you have separate coop cups for each.

Replace all your plastic dishes with stainless steel or ceramic dishes. Stainless steel is easy to clean and durable. Ceramic is nice because it's heavy and easy to clean, though it may break or chip, and if it does, you must replace it. Stainless is best because it doesn't scratch easily. Even tiny scratches in plastic or ceramic can harbor bacteria.



TIP

Buy two sets of dishes for your parrot. Make sure that the dish holders are compatible or that the bowls have their own bolts. Each morning, remove the old, soiled dishes, and replace them with new, freshly filled dishes. You can then thoroughly clean and dry the first set for the next morning's feeding. This saves time and ensures that your bird's dishes remain clean, an important factor in keeping your parrot healthy. Some dishes are dishwasher safe, but be sure to rinse them after dishwashing to remove any soap residue.



TIP

For a messy bird that likes to fling food everywhere, buy a covered crock or dish that has an opening in front for feeding. A covered dish is also protected from being soiled by waste or water. Just make sure that the opening in the cup is large enough for the bird to get his head in and out of easily. You can find some really cute acrylic feeders that offer a no-mess feeding option.

Entertaining Your Parrot: Toys

Toys are extremely important to your parrot's mental and emotional health. Yes, birds have feelings, and though their feelings may be different from yours in some ways, they do have the capacity to become very unhappy, which can lead to neurotic and self-mutilating behaviors. Toys may not prevent or solve these problems, but they can help keep your parrot busy, which is a start.

Hanging a few indiscriminate toys in your parrot's cage won't necessarily make him content. Different types of toys offer different types of stimulation for your parrot (see Figure 6-1). The purpose of a toy is to allow your bird to expend energy. Remember, parrots in the wild fly many miles a day in search of food. They also engage in nesting activity and spend time raising their young. Your bird probably doesn't do these things. Toys simulate natural behaviors and may prevent your parrot from turning its pent-up energy on itself — or you.

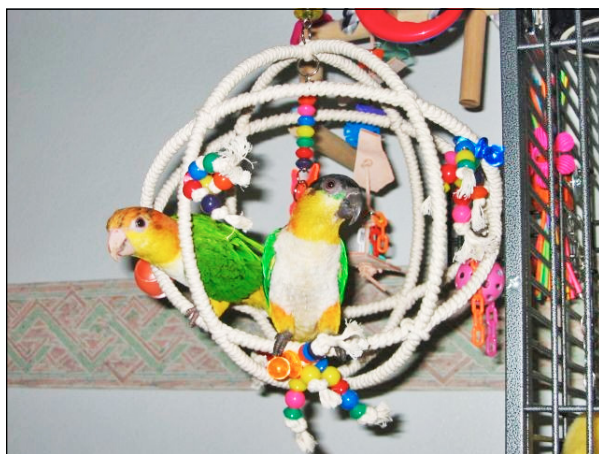


FIGURE 6-1:
Many parrots
love playing with
elaborate toys
such as this rope
geodome.

Photo by Vicki Johnson



REMEMBER

Sometimes parrots are afraid of a new toy. Of course, it's going to be the most expensive one you bought. In this case, leave the new toy on a table near your bird's housing for a few days. After that, move it a little closer each day, but don't put it inside the housing yet. You're trying to acclimate your parrot to this new item. Play with the toy with your bird outside the cage, and place it inside after the bird seems comfortable with it.

Invest in more toys than will actually hang in your parrot's cage at any one time. Rotating toys in and out of the cage weekly keeps them new and entertaining. If your parrot has a particular favorite, keep that toy in the cage and rotate the others. This gives you a chance to clean and maintain the toys before you put them back into the cage at a later time.

When you're considering which toys to buy for your parrot, keep the following sections in mind. Here I discuss the most important topic — safety — and look at some of the options you have.

Ensuring safety at all times

Make sure that the toys you buy for your parrot are safe to use while unsupervised. Following are some tips for making sure a toy doesn't end up hurting your bird:

- » Avoid toys that have jingle bells on them, which can easily catch a toe or beak.
- » Avoid flimsy plastic toys.
- » Avoid toys with very small parts, such as the clapper in a small bell (remove the clapper).
- » Supervise any playtime with wiffleballs. Smaller birds can get their beak or toes caught in the holes, and larger birds may break the balls and ingest the little pieces.
- » Inspect all toys that have chains because parrots can catch a toe in chain links that aren't closed properly.
- » Stay away from toys with unnatural materials that can be torn apart and ingested, such as stuffed animals, bird tents, or toys made from PVC plastic. They're inappropriate for your parrot and will be dirt and bacteria holders.
- » Let your parrot play with plush and fabric huts or tents only *outside the cage*. They're fine around the *play gym* (a freestanding play stand for parrots; may also be on top of the cage; I discuss play gyms more in the section, "Considering Play Gyms and Stands," later in this chapter), but just make sure you supervise your parrot. If you notice the bird chewing holes in it or fraying edges, remove it immediately, because this poses a strangling or ingestion hazard.



WARNING

A determined larger parrot can break a toy designed for a smaller bird. Make sure that any toy you buy is appropriately sized for your bird. Rings of any kind are especially dangerous if the toy and the parrot are mismatched. Many a parrot has stuck his head through a ring and been unable to get it out. Many of these cases result in death.



WARNING

The rings and links that attach toys to the cage bars are huge hazards, injuring and killing many parrots each year. The only type of link you should use anywhere on the cage is a *stainless steel quick link*. You can find these at any hardware store. Never use snap hooks, carabiners, or key rings, because these can cause injury and death. Also, make sure that the quick links you choose are not galvanized, or coated with zinc.

HOW TO MAKE A PARROT PIÑATA

Parrot piñatas are so much fun to make (for you) and even more fun for your parrot to destroy. They're super easy, maybe a little messy to create, but it's worth the time. You can also make a bunch in advance. Your parrot may spend an entire afternoon enjoying tearing up a homemade piñata.

Before you begin, lay down a sheet or some newspaper to help with the mess. Follow these steps:

- 1. Buy a bag of balloons that when blown up are roughly two to three times the size of your bird.**

Don't make a huge piñata for a tiny bird unless he's very adventurous and loves to chew. You can make several small piñatas for a big bird. If your bird tends to be wary, start with small balloons and work your way to larger sizes.

- 2. Blow up the balloons and then go to the next step.**

- 3. Cut or tear strips of either paper towels or unprinted, blank newsprint until you have a large pile.**

- 4. Fill a bowl with regular baking flour or cornstarch and add warm water until you make a thick slurry.**

If you want, make a few different bowls and use some natural food coloring (or pureed beets, berries, and pumpkin, or other edibles) to color the slurry mixture.

- 5. Dip the strips of paper into the slurry mix and slide your fingers gently down the strip to remove the excess mixture.**

- 6. Lay the strips over the balloon at different angles, overlapping until you've covered the entire balloon in a few layers except for the tied-off top.**

- 7. Hang the balloons to dry or set them onto glass or ceramic plates and let them dry overnight.**

- 8. After they're dry, hold the tie part of the balloon at the top and use a knife to pop the balloon and then pull the rest of the popped balloon through the hole you've left at the top.**

You should be left with a rigid balloon shape, but with no balloon still attached. That's your piñata!

- 9. Fill the piñata with your parrot's favorite goodies, including edible items and foot toys and pieces of wood to chew — anything that's safe and fun to eat or play with can go into the piñata.**

(continued)

(continued)

- 10. Use an ice pick or small knife to poke holes into the top of the piñata (near the opening) and tie some safe twine onto it.**
- 11. Tie the piñata onto the top of your bird's cage (inside the cage) or on your bird's playpen.**

A wary parrot may need some encouragement to explore the piñata. If so, tie some toys and interesting items near the top of the piñata, anything to lure your parrot to engage with it. You can tear the piñata at the top, showing your parrot how to do it. Remember to always supervise when your parrot plays with homemade toys.

Considering different types of toys

When you walk the aisles of your pet superstore or look online for toys, you'll notice the hundreds of choices. The following sections break down the different types you'll come across and help you figure out which one may be best for your parrot.

Wooden toys

All *hookbills* love to chew on wood, and your parrot is a hookbill, so it naturally follows that you've got to invest in some wooden toys. Wooden toys usually come as chunks of colored wood strung on a thin rope, chain, or metal rod that you hang in the cage. Often, leather, treats, or other materials are strung along with the wood. Make sure that colored wood has been dyed in a natural dye and look for any places in the toy where a toenail could potentially catch and break.



REMEMBER

Replace wooden toys as they become soiled and used. You can dismantle an old wooden toy, clean the components, and then make a new toy from the leftover good pieces.

Preening toys

Some toys come with what looks like a little brush on the end and give a lone parrot the opportunity to *preen* (groom) something other than himself. Toys with intentionally frayed rope and pieces of fleece serve the same purpose, but watch these for loose strings that get too long, because they can become wrapped around a neck or foot or ingested. Preening toys made of raffia or willow are a safe bet. Birds with overpreening or plucking issues can benefit from a variety of preening toys.

Foraging toys

Foraging toys are the most entertaining kind of toy you can offer your parrot, and they give your bird an opportunity to use his natural feeding instincts. These toys are filled with lots of goodies and are made of materials your bird has to tear to get to the center. You can purchase some elaborate foraging toys, or you can make your own (refer to the nearby sidebar). You can also consider little hanging metal cages or acrylic boxes that make your bird work to get at the goodies inside, and you can fill them over and over for every day mental and physical stimulation.

Acrylic toys

Acrylic toys are virtually indestructible. Your parrot may own a single acrylic toy for his entire life. As pretty and fun as they are, acrylic toys don't allow for chewing and destroying, so they can't be the only type of toy you offer. Many acrylic toys are designed for foraging or as puzzles, giving your bird something to work at during the day.

Puzzle toys

Toys with treats hidden or embedded in them are a great way to keep your parrot entertained. Your bird will have to work to get the treat and will expend energy doing so. These kinds of toys are often made for larger birds, so you may have to shop around to find one for a smaller parrot.

Puzzle toys are different from foraging toys in that your parrot has to use his brainpower and skills to solve the puzzle and get the treats. African greys and cockatoos are particularly good at these puzzles. Some birds take to them right away, whereas others couldn't care less about them or find them frustrating. You'll have to try them to find out if they're your bird's jam or not.

Mirror toys

Mirror toys can be hung inside or attached to the side of your bird's cage. They are essentially a hard-to-break reflective surface, typically not really a glass mirror. The theory behind mirror toys is that your lone bird will see his reflection and not feel as lonely because there's another "bird" with him.

I recommend skipping mirrors. I'm not a fan of mirrors for birds. They can become attached to their own reflection, thinking it's another bird, and may become frustrated that this other bird doesn't want to preen, cuddle, or mate. A bird may try to incessantly feed the mirror (the other bird), which isn't healthy in the long run. Your parrot may even want to fight with the other bird by attacking the mirror. He may hurt himself doing this, but more likely he'll just end up upset.

MAKING YOUR OWN TOYS

Making your own toys is an inexpensive way to keep your bird entertained. Many household items can make safe, fun toys for your bird and will give him a chance to use his natural foraging behavior. Be sure, however, to supervise playtime with homemade toys. Here are a few ways to help your parrot entertain himself:

- Tie wooden craft sticks (the ones you'd use to make frozen ice pops) together with sisal twine or raffia ribbon into fun shapes, such as ladders, swings, and so on. These are entertaining, safe to chew, and won't cost you much (though you'll have to eat a lot of ice pops or purchase a bag).
- Fill small, clean, brown paper bags with appropriately sized nuts, air popped popcorn, bird safe cereal, pieces of coconut shell, untreated wooden beads, and other dry goodies, tie the end with a small piece of sisal twine or raffia ribbon, and offer this bagged "lunch" to your parrot. You may have to show him at first that there are fun things to find inside.
- Wrap up goodies and toys in white, undyed tissue paper and tie with a snippet of twine. Never use twist ties. Clean cardboard boxes are fun to chew as well and can be filled with goodies. Make sure the boxes don't have any tape, metal staples, or glue on them.
- Purchase clean raffia mats, grass mats, willow mats, or seagrass mats and roll up goodies inside of them, and then tie each end with sisal twine. Fillings can include nuts, dried apple wood sticks, seagrass or willow balls, knots of twine, plastic balls, marbles (large enough so they aren't ingested), clean lava rocks, popcorn, dried fruit, and anything else your parrot likes. Your bird will know the difference between what he can eat and what he can play with.
- Offer a stack of white, unprinted newsprint paper or crumple it up with treats and toys inside. It's very fun to chew and will keep entertained.

When you remove the mirror, your bird may become upset, wondering where the other bird went. If your bird is attached to its reflection in the mirror and you want to introduce another bird, your bird may reject the new bird because she already has a mate.

Swings, ladders, and nets

Swings are important accessories for your bird's housing (see Figure 6-2). I haven't met a bird yet that didn't like his swing, as long as the swing is appropriately sized. Just be sure to change whatever link the swing came with to a safe quick

link. Some swings come with wood, leather, lava, acrylic, and other fun goodies strung onto the swing's sides. You can also dress up a plain swing by knotting raffia twine around it and adding your own goodies for chewing and playing.



FIGURE 6-2:
This combo swing
and ladder is
made of soft
wood that these
poicephalus
parrots can chew.

Photo by Ashley Lynn

Ladders offer birds a little more exercise in the cage and are great chewing fodder as well. Because most cages don't allow for flying, a ladder is also a way for your bird to climb up and down, especially if you have an acrylic cage. Don't place the ladder underneath a perch, because it will quickly become a poop catcher.

Some people outfit a part of their home or a safe place outside with a climbing net, which looks like a cargo net made of sisal or hemp. A climbing net can also hang from the ceiling down to the cage playpen, or if your bird's housing is large enough, it can go inside the aviary or habitat. Nets are great fun for parrots as long as you get the correct size net for your particular species. A small bird can use any size net, but a large bird should have a large net made from thick rope, and the spaces should be large enough that its head won't become trapped. #parrotparty!

Creating the Right Ambience: Bird Lighting

If you live in a northern climate with a dark winter, if your birds live in a room with few to no windows, or if your bird never ventures outside to get direct sunlight, you should invest in *bird lighting*.

Most parrots have a preen gland (*uropygial gland*) on the back (dorsally) at the base of the tail that secretes an oil that parrots spread through their feathers and onto their feet when preening. When this oil is exposed to ultraviolet light, it turns into useable Vitamin D that your bird ingests while preening. If your parrot doesn't get the right kind of light, this oil doesn't turn into Vitamin D, and your parrot can become deficient if you aren't supplementing his diet. A few parrots, Amazons, for example, lack a preen gland that produces the oil, but regardless, all parrots should have bird lighting or some exposure to the sun.



TIP

Place the lighting fixture about a foot away from the cage or purchase a bird lighting kit that goes on top of the cage. If the parrot plays on the outside of its cage, place the light where the bird can't reach it. Turn off the light every evening or use a timer.

Setting Up the Cage

Because birds have a natural tendency to want to be in the highest space in their cage, you have to consider these few things when placing all the accessories inside:

» **Make sure your parrot can easily access the water and food dishes.** Put them relatively high in the cage, around two-thirds of the way up. Often, cage manufacturers place the cup holders toward the bottom of the cage, which isn't convenient and leads to consistently dirty water.

» **Place perches away from food and water dishes to avoid contamination.** Think: poop soup. You wouldn't want to drink that, and neither does your parrot.

Put perches high in the cage, but not so high that your parrot has to crouch. Don't place perches under other perches, where they'll become natural poop catchers. Make the cage easy to clean by allowing room for your hand to enter it easily.



REMEMBER

Your parrots sleeping perch will likely be the highest perch in his housing, so make sure it's the most comfortable perch. Usually a concrete or textured perch is good for roosting, and you can use a heated perch in the winter.

» **Keep the cage free of clutter.** Don't crowd the cage or aviary with perches and toys, but rather allow for some free space for flying, flapping, or clambering. Blocking the door with perches and toys is a bad idea.



TIP

After you put your bird in the cage, watch to see if he's comfortable. Does he have to navigate too many objects to get to the water dish? Does he constantly bang into his perches and toys? You may have to do some rearranging.

Considering Play Gyms and Stands

The *play gym* or *play stand* is a play station made of wood, metal, or plastic that has perches attached (see Figure 6-3). A play gym allows your bird to play outside of the cage. You can place a play gym on top of your parrot's cage and have another, simpler stand that you can tote around the house. Many play gyms come with ladders, swings, and hanging toys. The more elaborate the play gym, the more your parrot will be able to do there. Some cages come with a built-in play gym on top.

Some parrots naturally learn to stay put on the play gym, whereas others flutter off the second you turn your back. Be sure to supervise all play gym activity.



FIGURE 6-3: This play gym is stocked with lots of toys, giving these parrots something to do with their time out of the cage.

Photo by Carolyn Woodburn

Lining Your Cage: Litter and Bedding

The best lining for the cage tray is newspaper. Printed newspaper has the additional bonus of having antibacterial properties. However, the ink isn't great for your bird if he likes to tear the paper, and most people don't get the newspaper today anyway (and you can't line your parrot's cage with online news, as much as you may want to). Unprinted newspaper is great, as are white paper towels and brown craft paper. Most absorbent paper is fine. Gravel or sandpaper cage liners are more for finches and canaries. I don't recommend them for parrots.



WARNING

Kitty litter, corncob litter, pine and cedar shavings and litter, and other such materials aren't appropriate for your parrot's cage. These cause illness when ingested, and cedar shavings cause respiratory distress. They can also hold too much moisture, allowing bacteria to grow if you don't change the tray enough. Some bird litters are great as long as your bird can't get to them, including pecan and walnut shell litters, recycled paper litter, hemp litter, and coconut litter.



TIP

Because the bottom of the cage must be cleaned daily, cut paper to the size of the cage, and put seven layers in the tray. Remove a layer each day, and at the end of the week, you'll know when it's time to remove the entire tray for a wash-down.

Covering the Cage: Nighttime Covers

Some people house their parrots in one cage or aviary during the day and place them in a smaller cage for the nighttime hours. Your parrot may feel more secure in a smaller cage at night. Birds don't see well in the dark and can become frightened, thinking that a predator is lurking (when the "predator" might just be someone in the kitchen making a midnight snack).

Some parrots, such as cockatiels and ringnecks, tend to have night frights, thrashing around the cage in the darkness. Night frights are dangerous and can lead to broken blood feathers, head injuries, and even broken bones. A smaller cage, along with a nightlight in the room and no cage cover, should help.

Covering your bird's cage keeps out nighttime drafts and can help keep the inside of the cage warm in a chilly home. The cover also enables your parrot to enjoy a certain amount of darkness in a room that may otherwise have a light on all night, such as a computer screen or night light. Additionally, your schedule may allow you to sleep late, and you may want to use the cover as a sleep aid to ensure that your bird doesn't start whistling and chattering at the break of dawn.

SAFEGUARDING YOUR PARROT WITH MITE PROTECTORS: YES OR NO?

Many people buy over-the-counter *mite protectors*, fearing that their parrot may succumb to an infestation of mites. These protectors come in the form of a small metal container with holes poked on one side and a chemical inside that is supposed to ward off mites. In fact, most indoor parrots do not get mites, and in the rare circumstance that they do, you will simply take your bird to the veterinarian. Mite protectors contain a pesticide that may be harmful to your bird. Ask your avian veterinarian if you need a mite protector.

Some birds enjoy having their cages covered. It allows them to settle down and gives them a sense of security. Some birds, however, are scared of the dark. If you want to cover a scaredy-cat bird, leave a flap of the cover open so that some light comes through or only cover half of the cage.



WARNING

A custom, fitted cover is nice, because your bird probably won't be able to get to it and chew holes in it. Holes in a cage cover can cause the material to shred and the strings to get caught around your parrot's feet or neck. I know of someone whose cockatoo died when the bird chomped a hole in the sheet covering the cage and got it wrapped around its neck. Any cage cover that becomes frayed or tattered should be tossed and replaced with a new one immediately.

Preventing Mess

Think about yourself and your home for a moment when you prepare for your bird. Parrots, as wonderful as they are, are messy. Flinging seed and soft food is their second-favorite hobby, right behind getting poop everywhere. There's nothing you can do to completely eliminate mess, but you can work to keep it to a minimum (see Figure 6-4).

Because mess is inevitable, you'll need some accessories to help with your daily birdy chores. Chapter 5 discusses some common household items to use when cleaning your bird's cage.

FIGURE 6-4:
This baby
eclectus's owner
had to get
creative to
prevent mess.



Photo by Roseanna Launstein

Mess accessories

Cage bloomers and other wrap-around devices that keep food inside the cage are great for finches, canaries, parakeets, and other smaller birds but are not for larger parrots. Larger birds may become entangled in the bloomer. Cages these days come with their own metal skirts that are great for containing mess. Of course, you could house your bird in an acrylic or plexiglass cage, which will keep 99 percent of mess off your floor.



TIP

You need something on the floor underneath the cage, especially if you have carpeting. A plastic desk chair mat from an office-supply store works nicely and is easy to clean. A plastic tray made for a refrigerator or washing machine works too and is inexpensive. Of course, newspaper is a great old standby, and you can toss it each day when it gets messy.

Air filters

Because some parrots are dusty birds, particularly cockatoos, cockatiels, and African greys, meaning that they produce more feather dust than other companion birds, you might want to invest in an air filter. I have several HEPA filters running 24 hours a day in my home, and I couldn't do without them. An air filter is especially good for a person living in close quarters with their birds or for someone with allergies. It's also good for the bird to breathe the cleanest air possible. Beware of air filters that have an ozone option. Ozone deodorizes a room, great for a cat litter box room and other smelly areas, but it can be dangerous for your bird to breathe because of a bird's delicate respiratory system.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Getting through the first night
- » Creating a routine
- » Setting ground rules with family members, pets, children, and houseguests
- » Making sure your home is parrot-proofed

Chapter 7

Bringing Home Birdy: Making Introductions and Parrot-Proofing Your Home

The first few days — even the first few weeks — of a bird's life in a new home can be quite disconcerting for him. Give him the time and space to adjust to his new location and his new family, rather than expect him to be a part of everything right away. You'll probably adore your new bird from the first moment you see him, but he might be thinking, "What the heck am I doing *here*?"

Bringing a parrot into your home takes some forethought and preparation. Like puppies, parrots are curious. They are known to get into all kinds of mischief, which can often be deadly for them. Before you bring your new bird home, or very shortly thereafter, you should parrot proof any areas where your bird might roam. This chapter gives you tips for the first night, family introductions, and parrot-proofing.

Making the First Night Stress Free (As Much As Possible)

Some baby parrots will settle in right away and want to be cuddled or at least played with on the first day at home. But others are more cautious and may be afraid of various household residents, such as the family dog, and will need some time to adjust to the new environment.



TIP

Don't force interaction right away. You can easily get disappointed with a new parrot that behaved friendlier when you first met. It's not that the bird doesn't like you. He just doesn't know you yet.

If the parrot is fearful, give him a few days before you try to fish him out of the cage. Have the family talk to him and give him treats. If it seems that he really wants to come out, you can take him out and play. The good news is that most handfed and well-socialized parrots are pretty good about adjusting quickly. Untamed birds will take more time.



REMEMBER

If you're quarantining your bird because you have other birds, make sure the room where you're quarantining is calm, but not boring or scary. Don't relegate him to a closet, bathroom, or garage. See the section, "Quarantining your parrot," later in this chapter for more details about quarantine. If you're bringing your bird into your home without quarantining because he's an only bird or your other birds live in another area, place him in the cage where he'll live and keep the area calm for a couple of days. In either case, play some soft music or talk radio nearby to make your parrot feel comfortable. A dead quiet room in the daytime can be stressful for a parrot.

Naming Your Bird

Give your new parrot a name right away and start using it every time you play with her or pass her cage. Make your voice as soothing as possible, and repeat the same phrases every time you service her cage, such as "Roxy, want some fresh water?" and "Roxy, want to come out and play?"



TIP

The best names for birds are one or two syllables and generally have a hard sound somewhere in them, like k, p, t, x, d, q, and the like. That's only because those sounds are easy for a parrot to pick up and repeat more quickly than other sounds. Of course, no one's going to stop you from naming your parrot Beyoncé or Super-califragilisticexpialidocious, but don't expect her to repeat that back to you.

Thriving on Routine with Your New Parrot

In the wild, a parrot's agenda revolves around the sun and the seasons. Parrots eat at a certain time, roost at a certain time, and nest at a certain time. Your companion parrot is the same bird with the same DNA programming, but his life is far different from the lives of his wild cousins. Your parrot lives in a world where lights go on and off at random times, where the temperature is basically constant, and where the same type of food is plentiful all year long. Cushy life? Actually, the lack of natural cycles can be stressful on your bird, who will want to sleep when the sun goes down and rise when it comes up.

A solid routine is a must for your parrot. Here are some suggestions to help:



TIP

» **Create a regular waking and darkening hour.** Get into the habit of waking him up at a regular hour and covering him or darkening his room at a certain hour, starting with day one.

Using an automatic timer connected to a lamp near your parrot is a great idea.

» **Feed the same things at the same time each day and stick to a cleaning schedule.** This way, your parrot will come to expect certain things and become comfortable with his environment. Remember, in the wild the sun doesn't choose to come up at a radically different time each day.

» **Set up daily rituals.** Maybe you allow your parrot to hang out with you while you get dressed in the morning, or you allow him to eat at the dinner table with you. Including your parrot in your daily rituals make him feel more comfortable and like part of the family.



TIP

To ensure that you and your family stick to a routine, buy a calendar or a dry-erase board, write down everything that needs to be done on a daily basis, and cross off the tasks as you do them. That way, you'll always know that your parrot has been cared for each day.

A lot of individual parrots, especially the smaller birds, are flexible about their schedules and will do just fine if your daily schedule is a little different from one day to the next. Just don't keep your bird up until all hours of the night and expect him to sleep in the next day. He won't.

Welcoming Your Parrot as a Family Member

The parrot is a family companion and, like a person, will develop a different relationship with each household member. Part of the reason for this is because certain parrots are attracted to certain people and are afraid of or don't like others. No one really knows why parrots prefer one person over another. It may have to do with hair color, hair style, height, or other physical characteristics. It may have to do with body language. In some cases, it has to do with who raised the bird or the types of people who were or weren't nice to it in a prior home.

You won't know ahead of time how the bird is going to react to everyone in the household as she becomes comfortable and gets to know the family. That's why it's important to know how to behave around a parrot so that you don't *teach* her unwanted behaviors from the start. The following sections give you just what you need to know.

Being unafraid; being very unafraid

It's important that none of your family members is afraid of the parrot. Parrots don't necessarily sense fear the way dogs can, but they do pick up on body language. Of course, some people can't help being afraid, and that's normal. The beak is formidable on many parrots, and one bite can turn a wary person into someone who never goes near a parrot again. A small bird, like a lovebird, can even deliver a painful nip. Someone who is afraid of the family parrot can have a relationship with it, though the relationship doesn't necessarily have to be hands-on. That family member can feed and talk to the bird and perhaps can develop a mutual trust over time.

There's a problem with the scaredy-cat family member, however. Many parrots like to play psychological games with their humans, and the most fun person to play with is the fearful person. For example, the fearful person tries to give the parrot a nut, and the bird reaches for it, of course. The fearful person becomes afraid, pulls his hand away quickly, and perhaps even makes a noise indicating fear. "Ah," the parrot thinks. "That was kind of fun. Let me try that again." Now, when the fearful person approaches, the parrot lunges a little, getting a reaction from the person. This continues until the parrot is out-and-out diving at the fearful person, often with no intention of biting but merely to get the fearful reaction. Because this is so fun, the bird may start lunging at other family members, scaring them too, until the bird has no friends in the household at all. Meanwhile, he can't understand why he's being left alone. He's just playing, after all. Eventually, because no one handles him, he becomes wild or neurotic, and his life in the

family goes downhill. He gets sent to another home and eventually winds up in a shelter or, worse, in the basement or closet.

Another interpretation is the fearful person transferring the fear to the parrot. The person goes to hand the parrot a nut and then pulls away at the last second. The parrot is confused and begins to mistrust the person. When it happens again, the parrot is even more confused, possibly even scared now. It happens again and the parrot lunges at the person because now there's mistrust and fear on both sides. The parrot is genuinely afraid of the person now. Approaching a parrot with confidence (but not bravado) is important.

Another scenario is the person who holds his hand out to the parrot to have him climb on. Just as the parrot is about to do so or perhaps has already stepped a foot onto the hand, the person becomes afraid and jerks the hand away. The parrot learns that this person isn't to be trusted and views him suspiciously. When the person goes to pick up the bird again, the bird is likely to bite or climb away. Then the person gets insulted. "The parrot doesn't like me! To the basement with that bird!"



REMEMBER

Being afraid is one thing and *behaving* afraid is another. When you behave afraid around a parrot, you may teach him to become fearful or aggressive. Often, the aggression is just an act, but not many people stick around long enough to find out. Imagine that there's someone in your life who's deathly afraid of you and behaves that way when they're with you. Wouldn't you begin to view that person with deep suspicion? It's not exactly the same thing between parrots and people, but it's always a good idea to try to see the world from your parrot's perspective. I discuss unwanted behaviors in Chapter 14.

In the meantime, here are some things to think about. The ideal parrot family

- » Isn't afraid of the bird and sees parrot games for what they are most of the time: just bluffing.
- » Approaches the bird with confidence and respect, and knows when the bird is *buffaloing* (pretending) and when he means business.
- » Doesn't get insulted or have a bruised ego when the parrot bites or behaves coldly. Biting and giving the cold shoulder don't mean the relationship is over and don't mean the parrot has gone bad. There's always a reason.
- » Handles bites with calmness and grace.

Introducing people

Everyone in the family should meet the bird when the household is calm and quiet. If the bird is a baby or very friendly, sit on the floor with him and allow him

to approach whomever he likes. If the bird keeps going back to his housing, try another room. Pass the bird around gently, and talk to him in a soothing tone.



TIP

Most smaller parrots love millet spray, and larger parrots love nuts, such as almonds, so have some on hand. Check out Chapter 8 for more discussion on what to feed your bird.



WARNING

If the bird is from a shelter, he may behave differently in the first week than he will later. Some birds are fearful but calm down as they get to know the household. Others parrots have an aggressive streak that they hide well in those first few days and then begin antagonizing the household after they're comfortable there. Don't let those first few days set the tone for the rest of the relationship. Watch for any changes in behavior, good or bad, and reward good behaviors with verbal praise and treats. Ignore bad behaviors as best you can. I discuss more about this in Chapter 14.

Introducing pets

If you have other pets or want to acquire some in the future, this section is going to be important for you. There are plenty of stories of parrots getting along with other pets, but for every success story, there is another story with a tragic ending. Parrots are delicate and can be injured or killed with the barest scratch of a tooth or nail. Even if Fido is just playing, your parrot can be killed in an instant. Don't let this happen! Here I take a closer look at cats, dogs, and other pets in the household and explain how to protect your parrot.



WARNING

I can't caution you enough to keep your parrot and your other pets far from one another. If you take no other advice from this book, take this: Keep dogs and cats well away from your bird.

Dogs and cats are predators, and parrots are prey. This is fundamental to understanding the relationship between them. Dogs and cats have eyes in the front of their heads (just like humans). Parrots have eyes on the sides, so they can see far more of the world around them, which is one way of telling predator animals apart from prey animals.

Even if you do have other pets in your household, make sure you give your bird your undivided attention rather than having close interactions between your bird and other pets. Figure 7-1 shows a parrot guardian spending quality time with her Quaker parakeet.

FIGURE 7-1:
Spend quality time with your bird by petting him, talking gently to him, and having him sit on your shoulder.



Source: www.shutterstock.com

Keeping kitty away from your bird at all times

Cats are mesmerized by small, moving objects, including small parrots. Cats have a type of bacteria in their mouth called *Pasteurella* bacteria that is deadly to birds. If your cat even grazes your parrot with a tooth and breaks the skin, the bird is doomed unless you get him to the veterinarian's office *right away*, and even that doesn't guarantee that he'll live. Most die within 24 hours. Don't think that just because Feathers and Meowsy are amicable when you're home means that they get along when you're gone. Surely you've seen the cartoons about this hidden drama in the household. Never, ever, *ever* (did I say ever?) allow your cat access to your parrot at any time. Even a blind cat can get to a bird. It happens!

Supervising man's best friend and your bird

Some dogs, such as terriers and sighthounds, are bred to chase small, swift, moving objects. Other dogs — like spaniels, poodles, and retrievers — have been bred to specifically hunt and retrieve *birds*. Other breeds are content to not think of your parrot as a meal, but as more of a toy, which isn't a good circumstance either. However, there's a slight chance that some dogs and some parrots can get along reasonably well — *supervised* only (as in Figure 7-2). I've seen some terrible, awful things, so if you witnessed similar scenes that fueled nightmares, you'd do anything to keep your dogs away from your birds.

FIGURE 7-2:
Supervise your
dog and parrot at
all times.



Photo by Denise Bell

Considering other household pets

Other household pets can also pose a threat to your parrot. Keep the following in mind:



TIP

» **Snakes** are a natural enemy of birds, and a snake is smart enough to figure out how to weasel inside your parrot's cage and eat him whole. Imagine waking up in the morning to find your snake curled up in your parrot's cage with a big lump in his body. Bye, bye birdie. It happens more often than you'd think. Never let your snake loose around your bird.

Birds are so programmed to be fearful of snakes, even a shushing sound that you might make to calm your parrot can frighten him because it sounds like snakes hissing. Instead of shushing, speak in a calm, relaxed voice.

» **Ferrets** and **rats** are quite dangerous to birds as well. Both are predators, and both will be attracted to the movement and smells coming from your bird's cage. Though a well-fed rat may not attack your bird (it will more likely want the fruit at the bottom of the cage), a ferret is a voracious predator and won't hesitate to pounce on your parrot.

» **Fish** also pose a danger to your parrot, believe it or not, or at least their tanks and bowls do. Drowning is a major cause of death in birds, so be sure to keep your fish tank tightly covered, and double your precautions if you keep piranha!

Introducing other birds

People often keep parrots in mixed aviaries. Indeed, some parrots have a docile and amiable nature and can live well in a large enough space with other birds,

such as budgies, cockatiels, and neophemas kept together. But some parrots can be quite fierce and treacherous to other birds. Lovebirds, for example, won't accept any other birds of similar size in their area and will even kill a much larger bird. Unless birds show signs of deep affection for one another, such as feeding and mutual preening, keep them apart.



WARNING

Never house larger birds with much smaller birds, even if they seem to get along. Make sure you always supervise playtime between them. See Chapter 13 for more information on introducing parrots.

Quarantining your parrot

Before you bring another bird home to the birds you already have, you should set up a place where you can quarantine the new bird. This spot should be well away from your other birds, preferably with a separate ventilation system. Care for the new bird *after* you've cared for the established birds and wash thoroughly after each interaction. Quarantine traditionally lasts 40 days, though some people quarantine for only 30 days, whereas others do for 3 to 6 months.



TIP

Take your new bird to an avian veterinarian during this time to run the full gamut of tests to make sure your new addition is healthy and not carrying any diseases that are contagious to your existing feathered pals.

Understanding the Relationship between Parrots and Children

Parrots can teach children about accountability, empathy, and camaraderie, and they can provide a child a valuable, hands-on lesson that will last well into adulthood: how to love, care for, respect, and maintain another being. When a child cares for a bird, the relationship lasts longer than the life of the feathered companion. Becoming guardian to a parrot also teaches an important lesson everyone has to learn: Nothing lives forever.

The following sections offer tips on how to make the introductions between your kids, grandkids, and little nieces and nephews and your new bird go smoothly.

Realizing the commitment to owning a bird

If you buy a parrot for a child, expect that you'll be the one caring for the bird for the long term. Because parrots live for 15 to 80 years or more, your child may grow

out of this companion and move on to other things, such as college and marriage. The bird is often left behind.

Unfortunately, small birds that belong to children are often housed in tiny cages that fit the size and decor of the child's room. These unfortunate birds are subject to the whimsies of the child, whether that means too much stimulation or none. A child's room might be too dark and quiet while the child is at school, and the parrot might sit alone and languish, too sad to even play with his toys.



TIP

Even though the parrot is the child's bird, place the cage in a room where he'll get attention from the whole family. Explain to the child that the bird will be lonely in her bedroom, because she is away most of the day.



REMEMBER

Many parents and relatives with good intentions give birds as gifts to children, but doing so isn't a wonderful idea. What if the child doesn't want the bird? Also, holidays aren't a great time to give any living creature to a child. There's too much commotion during holiday or birthday time, and a new parrot's needs may get forgotten. A better gift is an IOU for a parrot, along with a parrot book (like this one!). Then you can take your child with you to pick out her own bird. You can determine whether or not your child actually wants a parrot. The child may become more entranced with the turtles or guinea pigs. Or maybe the kid just wants a new video game.

Establishing some basic rules

You probably have ground rules for many things in your home when it comes to your children, and your parrot shouldn't be exempt. Younger children can be unintentionally rough, and older children might be absentminded or inattentive. Creating rules from the start can help transition your bird peacefully into the family.



REMEMBER

Make sure you closely supervise all interactions between bird and child as in Figure 7-3. I've heard horror stories that I won't repeat here, but I'll just echo my warning: Supervision is essential.

Some basic ground rules are important for a child/bird relationship. Share these rules with your children when you first bring your parrot into your home, such as:

- » **Move slowly.** Birds are frightened by rapid movements. The child may be afraid of the parrot and may jerk her arm away, flinging the parrot to the floor. Explain to the child that your parrot won't hurt her (not badly, anyway) and that remaining calm around a bird is important, no matter what happens.

FIGURE 7-3:
Kids and birds
can have a great
relationship as
long as there's
adult supervision.



Photo by Deb Bryce

- » **Speak softly.** A screaming child, even if she's screaming with delight, is terrifying to a new parrot. Teach your child to use a soft, soothing voice when talking to the bird.
- » **Don't fear the parrot.** Teach your child not to be afraid of the parrot. Fear of the new companion will lead to an unhappy and neglected bird.
- » **Never shake, hit, or rattle the cage.** Your parrot is just being a bird and is only going to be as amusing as he can be. Your child may not understand that and try to get the bird to do something more exciting. Explain to your child that the bird will become terrified if his whole home is rattled.
- » **Your parrot needs playtime, just like you do.** Parrots need out-of-cage time every day. Children have busy lives and may forget that their bird relies on them for interaction. Perhaps your parrot can sit on the child's shoulder while she does homework, watches television, plays video games, or practices piano.
- » **Your parrot thrives on routine.** Birds like to know what will happen and when it will happen, every day. Create a routine including your bird and your child, and stick with it. Refer to the section, "Thriving on Routine with Your New Parrot," earlier in this chapter for more information.

- » **Birds need a time-out too.** Parrots can get overstimulated and tired if handled by an active child for hours on end. The poor parrot will want nothing more than a drink of water, a snack, and a nap! Make sure that your child knows that the bird needs a break every now and then. After a few minutes of refreshing himself, your parrot may be ready to play again. A tired bird becomes cranky and may get nervous and agitated, which is a good time to put your bird back into his housing and let him recover.
- » **Never take your parrot outside without a carrier.** Your child may want to show off the bird to friends, but there are a lot of dangers lurking outside, including having your bird take off into the wild blue yonder. If your child just *has* to show your bird to her friends, make sure that you supervise the introductions and that your parrot is safely stowed away in a carrying cage. The “chain around the leg” isn’t used anymore as a result of too many broken legs. Today, you can find flight suits and harnesses that go around the bird’s body and are attached to a leash, but not all birds will allow such a contraption (especially the really small parrots), and you’ll only lose your bird’s trust if you force the issue. Your best bet is a safe carrier when the bird goes to show-and-tell.
- » **Don’t squeeze the bird.** Birds aren’t able to breathe if they’re held around the chest, even if held lightly, because they have a different breathing system than humans do. Tell the child not to carry the bird around, but instead let the bird perch on a hand or shoulder and be carried that way. It’s best that your child not try to *hold* the parrot. Your child should never be in the position of restraining the bird. That’s reserved for wing clipping, toenail clipping, and veterinary examinations.



TIP

Place a long strip of masking or painter’s tape a few feet in front of or around your parrot’s cage. The space between the masking tape and the cage is considered the Quiet Zone, where everyone moves slowly and speaks softly. Creating this zone will help your children remember some of the rules.

IT DEPENDS ON THE KID

Gauge the maturity level of your child. Is she able to be responsible, at least partially, for a companion as fragile and complicated as a parrot? A child older than 8 can probably take care of a parrot with supervision. A younger child may become panicked if the parrot bites or scratches, and in doing so, the child could possibly injure or kill the bird.

Familiarizing Houseguests to Your Parrot

Strangers often find birds fascinating, especially if they don't have one themselves, and they may ask to hold or interact with your parrot. Sometimes they don't ask at all but just approach the cage. If you're certain that your parrot won't mind the attention from a stranger, you can allow the interaction. Take the bird out of the cage yourself, and place him on the guest's hand. Always supervise interaction between your guest and the bird. Your guest may not be used to handling birds and may become alarmed by something the bird does, which can result in an injury to either party.



WARNING



WARNING

Make sure that guests wash their hands before handling your parrot, especially if they have birds themselves. Don't take the chance of possible disease transmission.

Don't ever let your guests smoke around your parrot. Your bird's respiratory system is very sensitive, and he can become quite ill from smoke. Also, nicotine residue from a smoker's hands will get onto your bird and can cause plucking behaviors. If your guest insists, suggest that she smoke outside and wash her hands before touching the parrot.

Houseguests should follow the same ground rules with your parrot that the rest of the family does. Don't be afraid to enforce these rules. Your parrot can become distressed by a stranger. Often, it's not even the stranger that's the problem, but the stranger's watch, jewelry, hairstyle, hat, glasses, or anything else the bird isn't used to seeing. Have the guest remove anything obtrusive that you feel might scare the bird.

You may want to have some excuses on hand for not allowing a houseguest to play with your bird:

- » The bird bites and will draw blood. He goes for the jugular.
- » The parrot doesn't like (color of guest's shirt) and will attack it.
- » Okay, you can hold the bird, but he'll poop all over you. Is that okay?
- » The parrot is afraid of people with (guest eye color, hair color, fingernail color, and so on).

POLLY DOESN'T WANT A CRACKER, ESPECIALLY FROM YOU

When people come over to my home, they inevitably start talking to my parrots in “parrot speak” — that obnoxious, whiny, shrill, “Polly wanna cracker? Rrraaawk!” cliché parrot voice. I cringe every time I hear it. I tell my guests that they should speak to the parrots in a normal voice so that the parrots learn to speak that way, too. The main problem, really, is my African grey, who is likely to pick up the “Rrraaawk!” part of the phrase and repeat it over and over until I have no hair left to pull out. See Chapter 14 for advice on extinguishing unwanted words and sounds.

Parrot-Proofing Your Home

Yes, you have to parrot-proof your home, just like you’d toddler-proof it, only twice as much. Usually, it’s enough to lock doors and put things out of a toddler’s reach. With parrots, everything from the ground up is fair game.

Here’s a parrot-proofing protocol designed to keep your bird safe:

- » **Give away all toxic houseplants or put them outside away from your parrot’s reach.** See Chapter 10 for tips on plants.
- » **Get rid of all cookware that has polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE).** That’s nonstick cookware, a coating that comes on anything from pans to cookie sheets. I know, scrubbing pots is a pain. But it’s worse to have to rush a dying bird to the veterinarian. When PTFE is heated, it emits an odorless fume that’s deadly for birds. I use stainless steel, glass, and ceramic, and I love it all.
- » **Get rid of everything else that has PTFE in it.** That can include space heaters, some hair dryers and hair straightener irons, bread makers, clothing irons, rice cookers, waffle makers, and many other items with a heating element. If you do use these things, make sure the room is extremely well ventilated when you do and that your bird isn’t nearby (blow dry your hair in the bathroom when your bird isn’t there with you and make waffles when your bird is in another room). By the way, the fumes that PTFE emits aren’t good for you, either, and can cause you to feel fluish. Studies in humans show an increased risk for cancer with regular PTFE exposure.
- » **Cover all standing water.** This includes the dog’s bowl, a fish tank or bowl, the toilet (put the lid down), fountains, pools, sinks, bathtubs, and even glasses of water.

- » **Sticker all mirrors and glass, and/or leave them dirty.** Birds often fly right into glass, thinking it's open space, which is a good way to break a neck.
- » **Screen all windows.** Make sure all windows in the house have intact screens so the bird can't fly away.
- » **Remove or cover *all* lamps, especially those with halogen bulbs.** Those lamps are very hot, and if a bird lands on one, especially a small bird, injury will definitely result, perhaps even death. Hot radiators and fireplaces in winter are also a hazard.
- » **Remove all lead objects from where the parrot can reach them.** I'm talking about stained glass, fishing weights, curtain weights, pottery, and anything else containing lead. It has to go. Some jewelry also contains lead. Get rid of all old lead paint on your walls — you should do this for your own health as well.
- » **Hide or remove all exposed electric wires.** These are irresistible for chewing. Dangerous!
- » **Remove anything scented from the room.** That includes plug-in scent warmers, scented candles (all candles, really), and anything else that emits an odor that's supposed to cover up another odor, because they'll harm your bird's respiratory system. Also, those wax pellets that burn like candles are especially problematic, because they seem like a treat. The same goes for any aerosol sprays or scented sprays. Even if you spray something on an item, don't bring the item into the bird's area until it's completely dry, and ventilate the area anyway, just in case.
- » **Put away all household sprays, medicines, and chemicals.** Stow everything away in cabinets or in the garage. If you use hairspray, perfume, glue, markers, nail polish remover, furniture polish, and even glass cleaner, do it while your bird is in another, well-ventilated room.
- » **Get rid of sticky fly traps or any kind of mousetrap.** If your bird does get stuck in the sticky stuff, dust a generous amount of flour on the bird and sticky item, and work the item off gently. See Chapter 10 for more advice on how to get sticky stuff and oil off a bird's feathers.
- » **Make the laundry room off limits.** Curious birds can get into the dirty clothes pile and suffocate or get washed accidentally.
- » **Remove ceiling fans.** If that's too drastic, at least put a warning sign on the wall switch: *If fan is ON, make sure bird is IN.* A ceiling fan is an effective birdie blender. Ouch.
- » **Scrape all chipping paint and repaint.** Curious parrots might find the chips tasty, and many old paints contain lead. Ventilate well if you paint while your bird is in the house or remove him for a few days until the paint stops off-gassing.

- » **Make all beds all the time.** This is a great way to get your kids to make the bed. Curious birds can wriggle under the covers while you're not watching and either suffocate or be crushed when you lie down.
- » **Change your flooring.** Okay, this is pretty extreme, but it's fairly dangerous to have a parrot that's the same basic color as your carpet or floor. Many a camouflaged parrot has been the victim of a misplaced shoe. Green carpeting and a green parrot aren't a good mix.
- » **Get rid of fake fruit.** A lovely fruit bowl is irresistible to a parrot. Wax or any kind of decorative fruit can be dangerous if he decides to dig in. Speaking of fruit bowls, I used to have a macaw that would get into the real fruit bowl and take exactly one bite out of every single piece of fruit in it. Save your apples and bananas bowl from this terrible fate.
- » **Cover air ducts.** Air ducts or any other holes large enough for your parrot to fit should be covered, unless you really like tearing up your walls and ventilation system.
- » **Put away irresistible shiny objects.** These include knives on a magnetic holder and other dangerous kitchen items.

3

Caring for Your Parrot

IN THIS PART . . .

Feed your parrot nutritious and healthful foods because plain seed and water aren't going to cut it.

Groom your parrot from head to wings to feathers to toes.

Take care of your parrot's health and identify what signs to look for if your parrot is ill and whether he needs veterinary attention.

Determine the best ways to choose a good avian veterinarian who will treat your feather friend.

- » Examining parrot dietary requirements
- » Debating seeds versus pellets
- » Getting a parrot to eat good stuff
- » Whipping up some birdy recipes

Chapter 8

Eating Like a Bird: Proper Parrot Nutrition

A good, balanced diet is one of the most important factors in keeping your parrot healthy. A lifetime of poor nutrition can mean a life cut in half, or worse — a very short life filled with illness and pain. A parrot that can survive on an inadequate diet is prone to many nutritional disorders, liver problems, feather disorders, and respiratory diseases, among other issues.

Many people believe that seed and water is a proper diet for a parrot. Seed has been considered the standard parrot diet for so long that many people still believe that seed and water are enough to sustain a companion parrot. That's hardly the case. Research in recent years shows that birds need far more than just seeds to thrive. Sure, your parrot may survive for a while on seed and water, but it would be like a human consuming only white bread and water. Imagine the health problems! This chapter helps you discover the best diet for your parrot and shows how easy it is to ensure that your bird is getting what he needs.

Starting with the Basics: Water

Any discussion of diet has to begin with water, which is essential to all life. Clean, fresh water is crucial to your parrot's health. Many parrots live in very wet regions where water is plentiful, and others live in places where there is drought for a few

months of every year. But don't think that just because a wild parrot deals with drought that your companion bird should. A small parrot drinks approximately two to three teaspoons of water a day, barely a sip for an adult person, but it's that sip that keeps your bird alive.



WARNING

Tap water isn't great for your birds because it contains all kinds of contaminants, depending on where you live. At the very least, most tap water contains chlorine, which isn't good for your bird either. Offer only bottled or filtered tap water as much as you can. I wouldn't ever give my birds unfiltered tap water (or drink it myself). The filtered water from a refrigerator door is just fine. Don't use distilled water, because it can leach nutrients from your parrot's body (the same for yourself).

These sections take a deeper dive into what you need to know about your bird's water, including keeping everything clean and deciding whether to add supplements or not to the water.

Keeping everything clean

Clean and refresh your parrot's water dish at least twice a day, once in the morning and once in the late afternoon. Clean it any time you notice that the water is becoming murky or soiled. Parrots tend to toss things in their water, and there's always the potential for the dish to be spoiled by droppings. This charming mixture is often affectionately called *poop soup*. Pretty gross, huh? You wouldn't want to drink it, and your parrot shouldn't have to either. Soiled water breeds bacteria that can be very harmful for your bird if ingested. Keep water dishes out from under the perches, and try to hang them higher in the cage rather than on the cage floor. If you notice that your bird's water dish becomes soiled often, consider moving it to another part of the cage.



TIP

Your bird's water dishes should be clean enough that you would drink out of them. That means a daily disinfecting of the dishes. A 10-percent bleach solution does the trick, but you must make sure to physically wipe out the dish and not leave a residue, and to rinse the dish very well (only use bleach with stainless steel bowls). Chapter 6 discusses some cleaning solutions and options. You can clean dishes with Grapefruit Seed Extract (GSE), which you can buy from any health food store or online. GSE has a lot of other uses, too, which I discuss throughout this book. GSE has been found 100-percent effective as an external disinfectant, as opposed to alcohol, which has only 72-percent effectiveness. Add 20 to 30 drops of GSE to a sink full of water, and let the dishes soak for 30 minutes. The GSE is nontoxic even in large doses and can be used for a variety of external and internal purposes. Having two sets of dishes is essential for with keeping water dishes clean, one can soak while you refill the other. You can also rinse all of your produce in GSE to remove or kill any germs or debris.



WARNING

Some people like to give their birds water from a bottle or tube, but I'm not a fan of this practice. The bottle can get clogged, and the water in the tube can become stale and filled with bacteria if it's not changed often enough. When people use these types of waterers, they tend to change the water less frequently, leading to yucky water that's not fit to drink. Better to change the water more often than deal with a bird that's getting ill from his water. Also, your bird will want to bathe in his water, and a water bottle doesn't offer that opportunity.



TIP

For my money, stainless steel is the best material for water dishes. It doesn't scratch, and it's easy to clean. Plastic tends to scratch with scrubbing, and bacteria will make nice little homes in the small grooves in the dish. As the months go by, a plastic dish becomes impossible to disinfect. Ceramic is a good material as well, but the glaze can crack, and bacteria will set up shop in the fissures. Better to begin with stainless steel, a dish that will likely even outlast your bird.

Adding supplements to your water: Yay or nay?

When you go to the pet store or shop for your bird online, you'll notice various water-soluble-vitamin supplements available. These supplements are supposed to give your parrot the extra vitamins she needs to stay healthy. The supplements that you can buy in the pet shop aren't regulated or set to any standards the way human vitamins are, so you can't really be sure what you're buying. I know many bird guardians (myself included) who use human-grade multivitamins and minerals in their birds' water. Also, some bird companies are now manufacturing avian supplements to human-grade standards. Some birds, such as African grey parrots, seem to need extra calcium, as do breeding birds, so a mineral supplement on the food or in the water can be a good idea.



TIP

If you do choose to supplement your parrot's water, put two or three drops of GSE and two or three drops of organic apple cider vinegar in the water as well. Both of these items slow the growth of bacteria. Just don't think more is better with either of these products. The GSE is very bitter, and the apple cider vinegar is stinky, though both are very healthful for your bird, inside and out.

Anything else that you add to your bird's water should be cleared first through your avian veterinarian or an avian expert that you trust. Birds that have nutritional disorders, illnesses, behavior problems, and other issues may need other types of supplements in their water (and food), which I discuss in the section, "Identifying Nutrition-Related Disorders," later in this chapter.

Recognizing a Parrot's Dietary Requirements

Much of what veterinarians know about bird nutrition comes from research on poultry. The fact is, because so many varieties of parrot species live all over the world, discovering all their individual needs would take many decades of research. The parrot has been the subject of dietary research for a fraction of the time that poultry has.

You'll probably see bird foods labeled *Finch* or *Parakeet* or *Parrot*. Think about this: Some birds come from Australia and some from Africa. So is one food right for both kinds of birds? Well, yes and no. Because little research has been done on parrot nutrition relative to the research done on poultry, no *perfect* diet is formulated for any parrot-type bird. The best you can hope for is an *approximation* of the correct diet for any given species. The good news is that many breeders, hobbyists, and parrot guardians have had wonderful success with an approximated diet. Success here is defined as raising and keeping healthy, productive, long-lived parrots.

To understand what your parrot needs to eat to thrive in a captive environment, you need to understand how the food and nutrients affect your bird and his health.

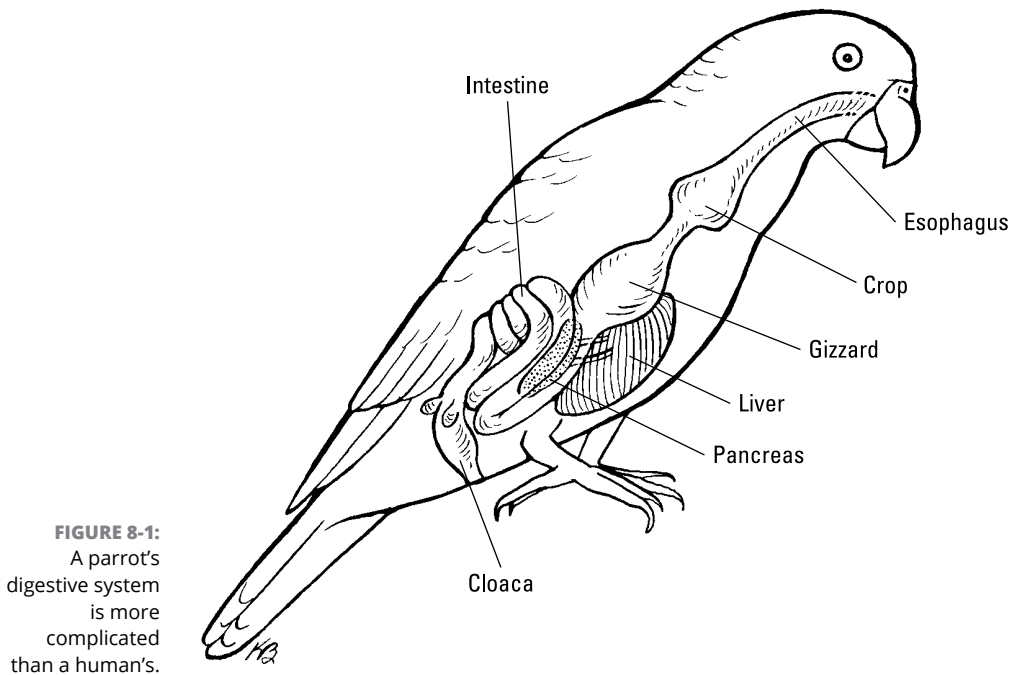
The digestive system

Before I launch into what to feed your parrot, I want to take a look at how the food works after it's inside the bird. Your bird's digestive system is far different from your own (see Figure 8-1). First of all, your parrot's digestive system is equipped to handle far more food on a food-to-body-weight ratio than yours can. You'd have to eat 20 to 40 pounds of food a day, depending on your weight, to equal the dietary needs of a parrot, who will eat 20 percent or more of his body weight daily. Imagine if you had to eat ten pounds of chocolate cake a day just to stay at your current weight (a person can dream!). The next time someone accuses you of stuffing yourself, say you're eating like a bird. Birds have to eat a lot more than we do because their body temperature is higher and their metabolism is faster. Lucky ducks!

Unlike your moist mouth, your parrot's mouth is relatively dry. It crushes food with its hard beak and swallows it down the esophagus, where the food is moistened before entering an organ called the *crop*, a sac located at the breast where the food is softened before moving on to the stomach. The crop is an interesting organ because it expands a great deal to allow a bird to pig out on something and still allows the bird to make a swift getaway to a safer place to digest the food. Many of a wild parrot's favorite foods are at ground level, which isn't a safe place.

The stomach is divided into two parts: the *proventriculus* and the *gizzard*. From the stomach, the food is broken down and nourishes the body before being carted off to the intestines and then the *cloaca*, which is kind of like the large intestine. After that . . . well, you know what happens. You have probably cleaned up enough of it not to need a more detailed explanation.

Parrot Digestive System



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Birds poop more frequently than humans do for an important reason: A heavy bird expends more energy during flight than a light bird, and poop has weight. That's why there's so little space in a bird's cloaca. Okay, enough on poop — next topic!

Eating in the wild

A wild parrot eats the foods that are available during a particular season. For example, at some times of the year young grass seeds are available, and a wild cockatiel will feast on them. At other times that species will eat grasses, fruits,

and berries. The wild parrot has no choice but to vary its diet according to the time of year. Seeds do occur in the wild, but only for part of the year. Parrots are programmed to view seeds as food to be eaten in large quantities, as quickly as possible. This is because fresh, young, living seed is nutritious and high in calories that a flying, nesting, breeding parrot needs to survive. However, your companion parrot doesn't know the difference between the seed you feed him and seasonal seed. She thinks, "Look at this bounty! I'd better eat all I can before it goes away." The problem is, in most situations with a companion bird, the seed never goes away, which can lead to nutritional disorders.



WARNING

Because parrots are programmed to eat a lot of seed when it's available, your parrot may ignore any other nutritious foods you give her and choose the seeds as her favorite. This is nature at work. It follows that a healthy parrot needs a variety of foods, because that's what she would get in the wild, even though seeds are part of the wild parrot's diet. Offering a parrot a wide variety of healthy foods, with seeds as only about 20 percent of her weekly intake, will help keep her fit. Yes, feeding seeds is very easy, but feeding a nutritious diet isn't all that difficult.



REMEMBER

Another thing to consider is that many wild parrots eat approximately twice a day: once just after dawn and once a few hours before the sun goes down. These are the times when the temperature affords foraging and when the bird is hungriest. Now, think about your companion parrot. She has a cushy life, doesn't she? The food dish is always full, and so is she. If you feed healthier foods at the times that she's programmed to eat and supplement with a couple of tablespoons of the base diet in the middle of the day, then she'll eat more of the better stuff. Well, that's the idea, in any case.

Identifying Nutrition-Related Disorders

I could mention literally hundreds of vitamins and minerals here that your parrot needs to remain healthy. But you don't need to know all the names of all the nutrients. What is important is that you take the advice of this chapter and feed the widest variety of healthy foods possible, and that a lot of those fresh foods be *green* or brightly colored. Keep reading to get to the nitty-gritty of proper parrot nutrition.

Vitamin A deficiency

The most prominent nutritional problem with companion parrots is Vitamin A deficiency. Neither seed nor pellets have enough vitamin A for your bird. Leafy

greens, dark green veggies, spirulina, and most orange fruits and veggies are high in vitamin A and other nutrients, and can help solve this problem if you can get your bird to eat them. Egg yolk is another good source of vitamin A. Egg whites are a good source of protein, which is needed for vitamin A to be properly used in the body.



WARNING

A bird with vitamin A deficiency has skin, foot, and feather problems, and is susceptible to fungi, bacteria, and viruses. Basically, lack of enough vitamin A compromises the immune system, which opens the bird to illness. In most cases, the respiratory system is severely affected, causing labored breathing, ulcers, and infection. Unless you take drastic measures, it's tough to bring a bird back from such a degraded state.

Fortunately, putting your bird on a good diet *today* can help reverse the deficiency, but that doesn't mean buy vitamins. Vitamin A in supplement form can be overdosed and cause toxicity. Unless your parrot is suffering from severe malnutrition, it's better to feed the bird greens, orange veggies, and fruits, because the form of vitamin A in these foods isn't toxic.

Calcium deficiency

Calcium deficiency is next on the list. Low calcium levels can cause seizures and feather picking as well as lowered immunity. Seed and pellets don't have enough calcium. Feed your parrot calcium-rich foods, such as broccoli, squash, cantaloupe, almonds, carrots, kale, and watercress. You can also use a liquid calcium supplement in the water a few times a week for a deficient bird, but don't use it unless the bird's blood calcium levels have been tested by an avian veterinarian and are low. Also, a cuttlebone and/or mineral block will offer some usable calcium and give your parrot something to chew on and play with as well.

FEEDING AN AILING PARROT

An ill or convalescing parrot may not have the appetite that she had when she was healthy. Feed this parrot the foods that she's most likely to eat, and don't worry about excessive calories unless your avian veterinarian warns you about that. An ill and recovering bird needs more calories than a healthy bird to keep up her energy level. Sprouted seeds and beans are particularly good for ill birds because they're easy to digest and have a high nutritive value.

Comparing Seeds versus Pellets:

The Big Debate

Your parrot needs a wide variety of nutrients to survive, and you won't find all of them in seeds. Seeds — especially dry seeds that you'd buy in the pet shop — are high in fat and low in calcium; vitamins A, D, and B-12; iron; and selenium, among many other nutrients your bird needs to remain healthy. So where is your bird going to get these important dietary components? From other things that you feed him, naturally.

In recent years the *pelleted diet* has come into fashion in avian nutrition. The pelleted diet consists of a variety of nutrients cooked and mashed together and then extruded through a machine to form various shapes or crumbles. Pellets come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Such as globe shapes, chip shapes, and small, pretty shapes like stars and fruit.

Pellets became all the rage very quickly. For starters, many avian experts and veterinarians began to tout them and manufacture them. The primary argument the experts used for touting these pellets is that there was complete nutrition in each and every bite. So, the pellet made for the Australian cockatiel can be fed, in a larger pellet, to the African grey, and both birds would supposedly get the same, perfect nutrition for their species in every bite. But that doesn't entirely add up. Sure, their dietary requirements are similar, but they're not exactly the same. Some pellet manufacturers do make pellets for certain species, so you can purchase them accordingly.

Furthermore, some evidence suggests long-term use of pellets as a singular diet can cause liver and kidney problems, feather disorders, and many other ailments. A great deal of these complete diets include artificial coloring and fragrances. If the bag of pellets smells fruity enough that you'd want to eat it, it probably has fragrance added. Dyes are easy to see, and the unnatural blues and reds and other vivid colors are generally synthetic. Parrots can develop allergies to these additives and begin to have behavior issues and pluck their feathers. Fortunately, some pellets are available that don't use any additives and use only organic ingredients.

Imagine someone claiming to have developed a pellet for humans that had every nutrient you ever needed in it and that this pellet was all you would eat for the rest of your life. You'd be skeptical, and with good reason. You'd also get bored out of your mind eating nothing but a few of these pellets a day. Imagine how a parrot feels.

Pellets are designed to give your bird all the nutrients she's *known to need*. But nutritional research is still inconclusive in the realm of avian nutrition, so a claim

for a pellet with *all the nutrients your bird needs* and in the *correct quantities* is quite premature.

I'm not a veterinarian or an avian-nutrition expert. What I am is a passionate bird hobbyist with many years of experience successfully raising and feeding many types of birds. I happen to know scores of breeders, numerous bird-rescue-league organizers, and a great number of bird guardians, and not one of them feeds their birds solely pellets or solely seeds. As for my birds, I do feed both pellets and seeds as a small part of their weekly diet. I regularly use high-quality pellets in my birdy cooking, the bread, pasta, and egg dishes that I make for my birds. Some seed blends actually come with pellets included, and my birds happen to like them.

As a disclaimer, I advise you to feed your parrot as your avian veterinarian or trusted avian expert advises. Your avian veterinarian knows your individual bird, and I don't. If you take the time to give your parrot a balanced diet, including *some* pellets and *some* seeds and lots of *other* much more nutritious foods, you'll do much better than if you choose one thing to the exclusion of everything else.

SWITCHING YOUR PARROT TO A PELLETTED DIET

If you're going to feed your birds pellets on the advice of your avian veterinarian or another avian expert, buy organic pellets that are dye- and fragrance-free. If your parrot isn't already eating pellets, you'll have to make the switch, which isn't always easy. You can't let your bird go cold turkey (pardon the pun) from what she was eating, because she won't immediately recognize the pellets as food and might starve or become ill before she does.

Your best bet is to make the switch a month-long task. Begin by mixing the regular seed mix with pellets, at about a 60-40 ratio. Gradually increase the pellets until, by the end of the month, the parrot is eating the pellets. Any faster than this, and you risk harming your bird. Of course, some birds take to pellets easily, so keep an eye out for what your bird is eating.

The safest way to make the switch is to buy a gram scale and weigh your bird every day to make sure that she's not losing weight during the switch. Changing a bird's diet can be stressful, and you don't want to risk making your bird ill. Of course, you'll also be feeding many other foods at this time, so your bird won't get too hungry during the switch and may even fill up on healthier foods. Don't let your bird exist on pellets or seed alone.

Eyeing What the Cooked Base Diet Is

The cooked base diet consists of a cooked mixture of beans (black, lima, kidney, black-eyed, garbanzo, and so on), brown or whole-grain rice, quinoa, amaranth, couscous, and other grains, along with whole-grain pasta, some seeds and nuts, and some pellets. Mix in some dried veggies, fruit, supplements, and herbs, and it's a pretty good base diet. You can find some good commercially prepared cooked base diets online that you can make similar to preparing hot cereal by just adding hot water (ask your avian veterinarian for suggestions), but I prefer to make my own when I have the time, though the commercially prepared cooked diets are good too.

If it sounds like a task to create this diet, that's because it is, but if you make it in batches and freeze some in ice cube trays for later feeding, it becomes much less time consuming (make sure to warm the diet to room temperature before feeding). Though the cooked base diet is much better than seed, it's still not complete and should be supplemented with fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as any other supplements that your avian veterinarian or avian expert recommends.



WARNING

The only real problem with the cooked base diet is that it spoils in warm weather. This diet should be left in the cage for only a few hours at a time, especially if you live in a warm climate. Use your best judgment in terms of how much you feed and how long you leave it in the bowl.

Purchasing and Storing

The fresher the seed, pellets, and cooked diet, the more nutrients they contain. You can test the freshness of seeds by sprouting a teaspoon of them between two damp paper towels. If most of the seeds in your mixture sprout within a couple of days, you know you've got a pretty good batch. If only some of them sprout, consider replacing them. If none of them sprouts, begin buying seeds from another retailer.



WARNING

Some stores sell seeds and pellets in large, open bins as an option to the more expensive bagged food items. However, buying from these bins isn't a great idea. Other bird owners and store employees may have run their hands through the seed and contaminated it, or rodents may have picked through it. Seed stored and sold in an airtight plastic container or bag is a better choice.



TIP

You'll notice that the more expensive seed mixes are fortified with vitamins in the form of various-colored seed hulls. The fact is, these vitamins are spread over the *outside* of the seed, but your bird eats the *inside*. Parrots peel and discard every single husk and eat *only* the inside of the seeds. A lot of work, right? Your bird's mouth isn't moist enough to remove enough of the vitamins on the husk to make it worth your money. Buy the plain seed, a bag of organic pellets, and some finely chopped dried fruit — voila, a fancy seed blend!

Keep your parrot's base diet (seeds or pellets) in the refrigerator in an airtight plastic container. Doing so will prevent it from growing mold and attracting pests and vermin, such as seed flies and mice. If you notice *seed moths* or webby stuff in the seed, freeze the package. You can still feed webby seed to your bird, but never feed moldy or foul-smelling seed. If you do get an infestation of seed moths (also called *flour moths*), you can purchase special sticky traps online or at your local feed store that attract the moths. Put all seed, flour, cereal, rice, and other grains into airtight plastic containers or seal-tight bags. Seed moths are very normal and can be eliminated easily, so don't panic.



WARNING

Never scoop the food from the container or bag with your parrot's food dish, which can be contaminated with feces or other material. Instead, use a clean scoop. A measuring cup with a handle does nicely. I use a plain disposable plastic cup that works just fine.

SPROUTING SEEDS AND BEANS ARE BETTER THAN DRY

Sprouted seeds and beans are wonderfully nutritious and have far more vitamins and minerals in them than their dry counterparts. You may be able to find a health food store near you that sells already-sprouted beans and broccoli. If not, you can buy a seed sprouter and sprout your own.

Mold and bacteria are extremely harmful to your parrot, so don't take any chances feeding even slightly old sprouts. Even the sprouted beans from the market last only about three days. If you notice a funky smell or the sprouts become slimy, toss them out. Use a few drops of GSE in the water you use to sprout the seeds, and wash any sprouts (or veggies, for that matter) in a GSE wash — one drop per ounce of water makes a great disinfectant.

Knowing Which Vegetables to Feed Your Parrot

The wild parrot eats a wide variety of vegetation. Your companion parrot should likewise consume a variety of fruits and vegetables. If she doesn't eat veggies, keep offering them in various forms until she does. The more variety of foods you can get your bird to eat, the more vitamins and minerals she'll be getting into his system. Table 8-1 lists some vegetables that are healthy for your parrot.

TABLE 8-1: **Vegetables to Feed Your Parrot**

Here's Just a Partial List of Veggies You Can Offer				
Yams	Spinach	Broccoli Leaves	Kale	Collard greens
Broccoli	Winter squash	Artichoke	Cauliflower	Brussels sprouts
Cucumber	Tomato	Hot pepper	Asparagus	Peas
Celery	Jalapeños	Green pepper	Red pepper	Yellow pepper
Beet tops	Pumpkin	Zucchini	Corn	Green beans
Endive	Dandelion	Carrots	Yellow squash	
Watercress	Greens	Chard		



TIP

Dark green or orange veggies (and fruits) are full of Vitamin A, an important nutrient for your parrot's respiratory system and overall health, and a nutrient that's sorely lacking in seed. Feed as many and as much of the veggies listed in Table 8-1 as you can on a daily basis. Don't worry about your parrot overeating this kind of produce. The more you can get into your bird, the better.



TIP

If you're running late or have run out of fresh veggies when you need them, keep a stock of frozen mixed veggies on hand, just in case. My birds like the defrosted veggies, though they tend to go straight for the fatty lima beans. Frozen veggies aren't super nutritious, but will do in a pinch. Just don't use frozen veggies in the place of fresh produce on a regular basis.



WARNING

Spinach, chard, parsley, and some other veggies contain a substance called *oxalic acid* that makes your parrot unable to use the calcium that the greens contain (it does the same to your body, too). I feed greens almost every day, but I make sure to also feed other calcium-rich foods, such as almonds and carrots. Regardless of the calcium-binding oxalic acid, greens offer a ton of other good nutrients like vitamin A.

Focusing on Fruit to Feed Your Feathered Friend

Fruit is also a rich source of vitamins, minerals, and fiber. If your veterinarian has told you that your bird is on the heavier side, feed more of the tarter fruits that contain less natural sugar. If you can, always feed organic produce to prevent a build-up of toxins in your bird's body. See Table 8-2 for a list of good fruits.

TABLE 8-2: Fruit to Feed Your Parrot

Here's a Partial List of Nutritious Fruit				
Figs	Apples	Apricots	Watermelon	Grapes
Cantaloupe	Bananas	Cherries	Oranges	Peaches
Plums	Papaya	Mango	Kiwi	Honeydew
Berries (various)	Grapefruit	Pineapple	Persimmon	Cranberries



TIP

Fruit can attract little pests called *fruit flies*. These little guys buzz dizzily around your bird's cage, and though they aren't particularly harmful, they're quite annoying. You can avoid them by removing fruit from your parrot's cage after a few hours and by keeping the cage clean — remove all dropped fruit and soft foods from the tray. If you have a fruit-fly infestation, don't serve fruit for a week (nonsweet veggies are okay) and keep the cage very clean and dry, and they should go away. You can also fill a long-necked bottle with a few ounces of wine or orange juice mixed with sugar, and the flies will be able to get into the bottle but not out again.



WARNING

If your bird has been diagnosed with *candida*, or yeast, hold back on feeding sweet fruits for a while until the condition gets better. Instead, feed lots of green veggies.

Being Aware of Pesticides

Unless you purchase organic produce, the produce can have a lot of pesticides, fungicides, and other chemicals on it, and some of them can be deadly if ingested often.

Each year, the Environmental Working Group (EWG) analyzes USDA data to come up with what they call the "Dirty Dozen" produce list — those items that contain the most pesticides and cancer-causing and endocrine-disrupting chemicals. Stay

away from these 12 items and always buy organic whenever possible. Here's the EWG's list for 2020 in order of contamination:

- » Strawberries
- » Spinach
- » Kale
- » Nectarines (don't allow your parrots to have the nectarine pit)
- » Apple
- » Grapes
- » Peaches
- » Cherries (don't allow your parrots to have the cherry pit)
- » Pears
- » Tomatoes (feed only sparingly, if at all)
- » Celery (feed only sparingly, if at all)
- » Potatoes (feed only cooked and sparingly, if at all)

The EWG also creates a list of the “Clean Fifteen,” which includes 15 produce items that tested with the lowest amount of pesticides and chemical residue. You can feel safer purchasing the nonorganic versions of these items:

- » Avocados (don't feed avocados to your parrots)
- » Sweet corn
- » Pineapple
- » Onions (don't feed raw onions to your parrots)
- » Papaya
- » Frozen sweet peas
- » Eggplants (feed only cooked and sparingly, if at all)
- » Asparagus
- » Cauliflower
- » Cantaloupes
- » Broccoli
- » Mushrooms (don't feed mushrooms to your parrots)
- » Cabbage

- » Honeydew melon
- » Kiwi



WARNING

Three of the cleanest foods are unacceptable for parrots (though good for you): avocado, onion, and green onion. Don't ever feed these items to your parrot. Refer to the section, "Avoiding Toxic and Irritating Foods," later in this chapter for more details.

Parrots, like people, can become sensitive (or allergic) to properties in foods or pesticides and additives. Rotate a wide variety of foods in and out of your bird's diet to help prevent sensitivity from building up. Food sensitivities can lead to feather plucking, agitation, behavioral issues, or worse.

Giving Your Bird Snacks

Snacks are additions to your parrot's diet. Store-bought snacks are often high in calories for little nutritional reward, though you can find healthy alternatives. Here are some common parrot snacks:

- » **Millet spray:** This snack looks like a little branch filled with tiny golden jewels, and it's a favorite of many smaller hookbills, such as budgies, cockatiels, lovebirds, and parrotlets. Offer millet spray twice a week in the late afternoon once your bird has eaten other, more nutritious foods. Millet is a fun food because it comes in its natural form. Thread millet through the cage bars so that the bird can work at eating it. Don't buy a spiral millet holder, because items like this have been involved in bird injuries and deaths.
- » **Popcorn:** Air-popped popcorn is a fun, low-calorie snack. Offer it once or twice a week late in the day. You can drizzle olive oil over it and then sprinkle on some nutritional yeast, spirulina (greenfood), probiotics, and no-salt herb mix to make Parrot Popcorn. It's delicious! I make a big batch and share it with my birds whenever I make it (I eat most of it, I'll admit). Nutritional yeast sounds gross, but it actually tastes very cheesy and it's packed with B vitamins and iron. The popcorn itself isn't very nutritive, but all the stuff on it is.
- » **Seed sticks:** Store-bought seed sticks are like candy for a parrot. You can offer one a month if your bird likes them. Beware, however, of how the stick is hung in the cage; some birds have been injured by sharp metal hangers. You can also make your own (see the nearby sidebar).
- » **Crackers and almond or cashew butter:** A healthy, no-salt, whole-wheat cracker or whole-wheat bread thinly spread with a natural (no sugar, no salt) almond or cashew butter makes a nutritious treat. Remember, nut butter is

high in calories, so stay away from it for a while if your veterinarian has suggested that your parrot is porky.

- » **Nuts:** Nuts contain essential fatty acids and lots of protein. Raw almonds contain lots of calcium, and raw walnuts and pistachios are healthy too. Stay away from peanuts in general. Improperly stored peanuts can contain *aflatoxins* from fungus growing inside the shell, making your bird ill when exposed to it. You're better off with raw tree nuts. You can feed nuts roasted if you're eating them that way, but they lose some of their nutritive properties in the roasting process. Feed a few nuts as a snack every day if your parrots like them. Peanut butter in a food or snack recipe is fine when used sparingly, but read the ingredients to make sure that the peanut butter doesn't contain xylitol, which is a common substitute for sugar.
- » **Other snacks:** There are a ton of fun and nutritious commercially prepared snacks for birds, including popcorn snacks, berry snacks, round pellet-berries, and seed-based pressed snacks.

EASY BIRDY TREAT STICK RECIPE

You can purchase birdy seed sticks, but it's more fun and nutritious to make your own. Here's how:

- 1. Mix a cup of bird seed, a cup of small pellets, a cup of oats, a half cup of dried fruits (chopped for a small bird, larger pieces for a large bird), a half cup of millet or brown rice flour, a quarter cup of honey, and two egg whites in a large mixing bowl.**

You can also add a tablespoon of calcium powder or a crushed-up cuttlebone to the mix.

- 2. Wet the ingredients slowly by pouring in small amounts of apple juice until the mixture is moist enough to form into balls.**

Make sure it's not too moist, or it won't hold up. If you've added too much juice, add more oats until it's dry enough.

- 3. Using your hands, pack the mixture around a safe stick you've chosen.**

My preference is cholla wood, or you can use wooden chopsticks for smaller birds and even unsalted pretzel rods.

- 4. Place on a cookie sheet and bake at 200 degrees for 40 to 60 minutes.**

- 5. Store in the refrigerator if you're going to use them within a week, or freeze some portions for later.**

Adding Table Foods to Your Bird's Diet

Table foods, the foods you eat every day, can be a great addition to your parrot's daily diet. She can eat *just* about everything that you eat, but not *quite* everything. Keep in mind that some foods that humans like to eat are toxic for birds, and that salty and sugary foods are unhealthy for them (for you too, for that matter). Don't feed your parrot junk food.



TIP

Feel free to share your meals with your parrot, but make sure to cool the food you offer first, and remove it about an hour after you offer it. Some foods spoil quickly.

Protein is essential for the processing of other nutrients. Yes, your birds can eat meat, even that of other birds. It may sound like a horror movie, but parrots do enjoy chicken and chicken bones, along with beef (sparingly) and eggs. Try to feed only organic and hormone-free animal meats and eggs. When you're feeding any kind of animal meat or eggs, especially fowl, *overcook* it. No ten-minute eggs for your parrot. Eggs should be boiled for at least half an hour, and scrambled eggs should be very dry. Egg shells are a particularly good source of calcium for parrots, so offer your bird a crushed hard-boiled egg, shell and all.



WARNING

Parrots aren't built to process dairy well, but you can feed it in very small amounts. Some lowfat or nonfat organic yogurt and a small bit of cheese are nutritious. Don't feed milk, and don't overdo dairy in general. Remember that dairy isn't part of a wild parrot's natural diet. Parrots aren't biologically predisposed to digest it the way most humans are.

Avoiding Toxic and Irritating Foods

There are a few foods that you may eat that you shouldn't share with your birds. These foods are toxic or deadly, or they can simply make your bird ill. These include

- » Alcohol
- » Avocado
- » Chocolate
- » Coffee
- » Raw garlic (cooked well okay, not toxic, but can be irritating)
- » Raw onion (cooked well okay, not toxic, but can be irritating)

- » Rhubarb
- » Salty and sugary foods (chips, pretzels, and so on)



WARNING

Avoid feeding your parrot fatty or sugary snacks. Watching your parrot eat a cheese doodle may be funny, but think of all the other, more nutritious things she could be eating instead. Also, parrots tend to become porky if they eat too many fatty calories and don't get enough exercise. Better to stick with the healthier stuff. In addition, too much salt can actually be deadly for a parrot, so no chips and pretzels. Also, when parrots eat something greasy, they may transfer some of that grease to their feathers, causing them to overpreen, which can result in plucking.

Considering Grit and Clay

Parrot-type birds *don't need* grit in their diet, despite the myth, so don't feed your parrot grit. It can cause crop impaction, and she'll be unable to digest her food properly. Excess grit in the gut can also lead to death. You'll see bags of it in the pet store, often called ground oyster shell, mineral grit, or calcium grit. Skip it.

On the other hand, many parrots in the rainforest spend some time nibbling on clay cliffs, often called *clay licks*. This is called *geophagia*. Clay is a good detoxifier, and it's thought that the parrots eat the clay because some of the fruits or seeds that they eat have toxins in them. Smart, huh? You can find clay products and clay blocks for purchase. I'm a fan of these because they contain a lot of minerals that your parrot needs and also because your bird can choose whether or not to consume the clay. Sometimes birds know more about what they need than you do!

Contemplating Nutritional Supplements

Some people think that feeding their parrot a nutritional supplement along with a bowl of seeds will take care of nutritional deficiencies. Nothing could be further from the truth. Imagine living on a diet of white bread, water, and vitamin pills. Eventually, you'd become ill. Some vitamins and minerals need the presence of other vitamins and minerals to absorb into your body, and the same goes for your parrot.

Not only do nutritional supplements not make up for a poor diet, but they can actually cause other problems. Some nutrients, such as vitamin A, are toxic at high doses. If you're not consulting your avian veterinarian or avian expert on supplements, it's best to leave them alone and opt for a better diet. Yes, offering a balanced diet takes more time and expense, but it's worth it.

However, your avian vet may recommend any one of these supplements to round out the diet or help heal ailments:

- » **Aloe vera:** Mix a little aloe juice into the water to help digestion and improve health in general. One product on the market also contains other herbs and has been known to have healing effects on ill birds. Aloe products that you get from the health food store are nontoxic, so you can't really overdose. You can also put aloe gel on cuts and scrapes.
- » **Cayenne:** Parrots love hot and spicy foods, and cayenne is great for the digestion and helps with arthritis. Sprinkle on food or cook with it. Birds don't feel the heat in their mouths the way humans do.
- » **Cinnamon:** Great for digestion and blood sugar. Sprinkle over soft foods or cook with it.
- » **Cuttlebone and mineral block:** Both of these items can be found in a pet shop or online and add valuable calcium to your parrot's diet. Be sure to include one or the other (or both), especially for breeding pairs or female parrots laying eggs.
- » **Essential fatty acids (EFAs):** Birds need EFAs for skin health and feather production. Nuts are a good source of EFA. Or you can sprinkle flax seed oil on whole wheat bread, whole wheat crackers, or cooked food. Don't put oil on seeds and don't heat the flax oil in the cooked food.
- » **Grapefruit seed extract (GSE):** This item has incredible antibiotic, antiviral, and antifungal properties. Put one drop per ounce in water to disinfect countertops, water dishes, and fruit and veggies. It's nontoxic, so you can't really overdose it. Put a couple of drops into your bird's water, but not too much, because it's very bitter.
- » **Greenfood:** Spirulina and other "super" greenfoods are wonderful for any parrot (and for you). Sprinkle on moist foods.
- » **MSM (methylsulfonylmethane):** Birds that pluck tend to do better with some MSM mixed into the water. Birds with poor feather production in general could benefit from MSM, as can most captive parrots. MSM is nontoxic, so you can't overdose it.
- » **Nutritional yeast:** Contains lots of B vitamins. Sprinkle on soft foods.
- » **Probiotics:** This product is great for the digestion and health in general. It's a live microbial culture, the same stuff found in yogurt, including lactobacillus and bifidophilus. Sprinkle on cool, soft foods. Heat will kill it.
- » **Vitamin C:** Birds synthesize their own Vitamin C, but when they're ill or stressed, a pinch of powdered Vitamin C in the water is a good idea. Otherwise, your best bet is to serve citrus fruits, berries, and other items high in Vitamin C.

Even though the preceding supplements, and a great many others, are healthful and can have healing effects on ill birds, there has been little research done on parrots and supplements. All the benefits recorded on these products are anecdotal; however, this amateur research has shown very positive results.

Your best bet with all of these items, and others you may find, is to rotate them in and out of your bird's diet. For example, if you put vitamin C into your bird's water for seven days, don't put it in for the next seven. The same goes for all of these supplements. Unless you're trying to boost your bird's immune system because she has had an illness, don't overdo it.

Feeding Nectar Eaters

Some parrots, like lorikeets (also called lories), hanging parrots, and fig parrots, eat primarily flower nectar, blossoms, pollen, soft fruits, and insects. These birds need a specialized diet to survive. You can purchase commercially produced powdered nectar (lory diet) and add juice, and also offer soft fruits, soft veggies, soaked pellets, and a rice/bean/veggie mash. Feeding these parrots pellets, seeds, nuts, or other hard foods can harm their delicate, specialized tongue.



WARNING

Nectar eaters are extremely messy because they eat mostly wet foods. Also, of utmost importance, is that wet food and nectar *can't* be left out all day, especially in warmer weather. I can't stress this enough. Lories also foul their water often and will need water changes throughout the day.

BREEDING MEALWORMS

I used to keep red lories, and I bred mealworms for them to eat. Lories love a bowl of mealworms. If you keep softbills or finches, they'll like mealworms too. You can purchase them at any pet store, but I was always concerned about contamination, so I bred the mealworms myself. You can follow these easy steps:

- 1. Place three to four inches of wheat bran and oat bran into the container (you can also purchase meal worm bedding).**

Use a container, such as a high-sided plastic bin with generous holes poked into the top or an aquarium with a mesh lid. (Don't use anything smaller than 12 x 12 x 18; larger is better so they don't get too crowded or moist.)

Don't worry, the worms (and the darkling beetles they eventually turn into) can't climb up glass or plastic or fly, but you still want a top on your worm farm. It's very important that they get enough ventilation, so the top should be wire or mesh or have a lot of holes in it.

2. Cut a potato, yam, apple, or carrot into large chunks and place those in skin side down (or use some combination of those, they like them all).

Mealworms also like bananas (including the peel, but peel it first!), kiwi (with the peel side down), and berries, but only offer these in small amounts because they're too moist and can cause rot or mold. Greens, such as kale, chard, or cabbage, add nutrition to the worms. Don't use citrus, onions, garlic, dairy, meats, anything spicy, or anything too wet and mushy. You can sprinkle some cornmeal on the top of the bedding every week for an extra boost.

3. Purchase a few small containers of live mealworms and place those in.

4. Keep feeding them fruits and veggie chunks as the older chunks lose moisture.

The mealworms die if they don't get enough moisture, which is critical. You can't overfeed. The more food, the more mealworms you'll get.

5. Keep the container in a warm, dark place, ideally a spot with higher humidity.

Mealworms prefer the darkness and are often called *darkling beetles* for that reason. If your home gets cold and dry in the winter, use a heating pad on low beneath half of the container and affix a moist sponge to the side of the habitat (not in or on the bedding). Keep the sponge moist, but not sopping.

6. Add additional wheat bran and oat bran as needed.

In a few weeks, your starter mealworms turn into black beetles, which then lay eggs, which provide you with more mealworms.

Tip: If the container starts to smell bad (it shouldn't, but might if the food you offer starts to rot), sift out all the mealworms and beetles, clean the container, and add fresh bedding and food. You'll have to do this three to four times a year anyway as exoskeletons and dead beetles start piling up. It sounds gross, but it's not that bad.

Getting a Parrot to Eat

First and foremost, begin offering the foods I recommend in this chapter at a young age and on the first day you bring your bird home. A parrot is often wary of things that are different than what she's used to and may not even recognize some of these items as food, so it's important that you start offering them early.



REMEMBER

Patience is the key to getting your bird to eat new things. Many owners offer a food for a few days and then discontinue it, claiming that their parrot doesn't like it. In fact, it may take two weeks or longer for a bird to nibble at something new. Keep offering the foods, and eventually your bird will take a taste.

Use separate dishes for each type of food, but if you're having a difficult time getting your bird to eat, say, bananas, put a chunk of banana in the dish of the food she likes best (usually the seed dish). This way, she'll have no choice but to go near the offending food item. Note that mixing the wet and dry foods isn't a good idea in the long term, because the wet foods will cause the dry foods to spoil. This is a short-term option only. For veggies like broccoli, zucchini, and carrots, spread a thin layer of almond butter on them, and then dunk them into some seeds and offer in a separate bowl. Your parrot will go for the seeds and then eventually dig into the veggie. Don't give up!



TIP

Many healthful veggies and fruits can be prepared in various ways that may be appealing for your parrot. For example, yams and carrots can be offered whole, shredded, cut into chunks, cooked in chunks, mashed, baked into bread, or mixed into a grain-and-bean concoction. If your bird doesn't like eating something in one form, try to find another form that's more palatable.



TIP

Try a wide variety of greens to see which your parrot likes best. Weave them in and out of the cage bars to get her interested. A dish of very wet greens at the bottom of the cage is a fun treat, and some birds will even bathe in it.

Making Some Easy Recipes

Cooking for your bird? You may think I've gone off the deep end here, but you'd be surprised how many people actually cook nutritious foods for their birds. Remember, it's hard enough to get a parrot to eat healthy, so the more healthy items you can offer, the better. Here are some fun, flexible recipes to get you started.

Parrot muffins and bread

One easy recipe uses a corn-muffin-mix base with lots of goodies added. Simply buy a box of corn-muffin mix, and follow the directions for the batter. If you can find a mix from a health food store, use it instead of the supermarket brand.



WARNING

If your bird has candida (yeast), skip this recipe until she gets over it, or make sure that the bread mix you use doesn't include sugar.



TIP

Prepare the batter, using the directions on the box (if it calls for an egg, smash the shell in there with the rest of it), and then add several different healthy items: fruits, veggies, dried fruits, pellets, bits of cuttlebone, whatever you think your bird will love. Then bake according to the directions on the box, except double the baking time, or check a few times to make sure it's done. The added water in the fruits and veggies will add minutes to the baking time. Once cooled, cut into squares and freeze. Each day, thaw a chunk and offer it to your parrot. This bread is fun because you can vary it each time you make it.

Parrot mac and cheese

This recipe is also easy and can be varied. Begin with a high-quality whole-wheat pasta prepared as suggested on the box (parrots need the whole wheat for the added nutrition). Then add shredded nondairy cheese (because parrots don't digest dairy very well) over the hot pasta.

Once the cheese is melted, add dried fruit, chopped veggies, pellets, or whatever else you want. When it cools a bit, add two or three egg whites and mix well. Spread the concoction into a shallow pan, bake for 45 to 60 minutes until it sets and is well done, and cut into squares when it cools. Freeze for daily use.

Parrot omelet

Chicken eggs are a good source of protein, vitamins, and minerals. Make scrambled eggs just as you would for yourself, but scramble the shell with them (for calcium), and add pellets, veggies, and whatever else you think your bird will like. Cook eggs well until dry. You can make a batch of this and freeze it in small portions for later use.



WARNING

Whenever you use chicken eggs, make sure they're cooked very well. Chicken eggs can potentially carry diseases that can pass to your bird. Scrambled eggs should be very dry, and boiled eggs should be cooked for over half an hour.

Parrot juice and smoothies

Fresh-pressed juice is full of a lot of vitamins and minerals that are essential for your bird's good health. If you have a juicer, press carrots, beets, apples, melon, kale, chard, mint, parsley (sparingly), spinach, broccoli, Brussel sprouts, and any other fruits and veggies your parrot likes. You can make the recipes as simple or complex as you like. Don't place the juice in her cage, but rather offer it to her during playtime. Juice can spoil easily.



TIP

Most juicers are centrifugal juicers, which allow the juice you're making to be exposed to oxygen even before it hits the collection container, which can degrade some vitamins in the juice. Instead, invest in a masticating juicer. The juice from a masticating juicer hasn't been as oxidized and tastes so much better.

If you don't have a juicer, you probably do have a blender. Rather than juice fruits and veggies, you can blend them into a parrot smoothie. A smoothie has some benefits over juicing:

- » Your parrot gets all the fiber that's lost with juicing.
- » You can also add powders and harder foods, like coconut or nuts, vegan yogurt, and other healthy stuff. Other good additions to a parrot smoothie are flax seeds, chia seeds, powdered vitamin C, calcium, powdered or liquid minerals, and anything else you're having a tough time getting your bird to eat.



TIP

To make the smoothie even more nutritious, juice first and use that liquid as a base for the smoothie.

Parrot pancakes

This recipe is like the parrot cornbread but uses whole-wheat or buckwheat pancake mix instead. Make the batter as directed on the box, and then add dried fruit, veggies, well-cooked egg, pellets, and anything healthful you have in the house (remember that wet ingredients will make the pancake mix too moist). Cook well and cool before offering. Freeze and offer one thawed pancake a day along with other foods. If you have a small bird, make the pancakes smaller.

Parrot grain

You can offer a commercial grain mix, but if you're a cook and you want to get inventive, you can make a batch of this every week and have a nutritious, warm meal for your feathered pal waiting in the freezer each day. Just follow along:

1. **Using the directions on the boxes, make a serving each of quinoa, amaranth, brown rice, whole oats, and whole-wheat couscous; mix them all together once they're cooked separately.**

You can add cooked whole wheat pasta as well if you like.

2. **Soak and cook a few types of beans, such as lentils, red beans, black beans, garbanzo beans, and so on.**

Or, if you're in a hurry most of the time, you can open a few cans of beans, rinse them, and then add them to the grain mixture. For a really nutritious treat, sprout the beans before you cook them.

- 3. Fold in shredded carrots, yams, chopped jalapeno peppers, peas, broccoli, kale, frozen soybeans, frozen peas, and anything else you have in the house that's healthy and safe to feed your parrot.**

Toss in a handful of almonds, walnuts, organic pellets, and anything else that seems like it belongs in the mix. Add a sprinkle of cinnamon, calcium powder, and any other dry supplements that you have on hand. Freeze in small baggies or ice cube trays. Heat on a plate in the microwave to slightly above room temperature and offer one serving a day.

Creating a Healthy Diet Routine

If you make your parrot's diet part of your weekly routine, you'll find feeding your parrot a lot easier. Here's one plan you can use to keep your parrot eating like a champ:

- 1. Once a week, cook up a big batch of the grain diet that I discuss in the section, "Parrot grain," earlier in this chapter.**
- 2. Separate the batch into little baggies and freeze them.**

Every day, heat up one of the baggies and put that in your bird's dish. Make sure the mixture is warm, but not hot, when you serve it.
- 3. Once a week or so, make a version of parrot bread (see the section, "Parrot muffins and bread," earlier in this chapter) or something similar and freeze it in portions.**

Defrost some of it and put it in the dish with the cooked diet.

- 4. Defrost a handful of frozen soybeans and toss those into the dish, too.**
- 5. Toss a bunch of veggies in the electric chopper or chop by hand: carrots, broccoli, kale, other greens, watercress, yams, cucumber, fennel, whatever you have in the house and put the chopped veggies in the dish with the other stuff.**
- 6. Add a few chunks of fruit into the dish, whatever you have in the house, such as melon, grapes, berries, cranberries (in season), oranges (cut in half or quartered), persimmon, pears, kiwi, and so on.**

Generally, serve three types of fruits a day.

- 7. Sprinkle some nutritional yeast, spirulina (greenfood), and probiotics over everything in the dish and then serve.**

- 8. For larger birds, you can offer whole carrots, a small apple, and a well-washed bunch of some sort of greens (dandelion, chard, parsley, kale, and so on) hung all around the cage and at the bottom.**

It's fun for parrots to play around with a bunch of greens.

- 9. Two or three times a week, make parrot scrambled eggs or hard-boiled eggs; smash them up, shell and all; and offer them along with the cooked diet.**

You can also make the vegan parrot mac and cheese once every couple of weeks (refer to the section, "Making Some Easy Recipes," earlier in this chapter).

- 10. When you can find them very fresh in your local market, buy sprouted mung beans, lentils, garbanzo beans, and broccoli sprouts, and offer those, or sprout them yourself.**

I used to spout my own beans and seeds, but it's a good deal of work, and it's easier to buy them. Offer these a couple of days a week in the first part of the day, with nothing else. This way, the hungry birds eat them early (and they *love* these sprouts), and then later you can offer all of the other goodies.

- 11. You can offer healthy table food nearly every day, whatever you're having for a meal or a snack, as long as it doesn't contain any taboo ingredients.**

Remember, if you're feeding your bird all fresh, healthy stuff, it's impossible to overfeed.

- 12. About three times a week, fill a different dish with a seed mix or pellet blend.**

Remember, if your birds were flying around all the time (like they would be in the wild or in a large habitat), you could probably offer a seed mix every day, but because most companion birds only get to fly only short distances, they don't need the extra calories.

- 13. A couple of times a week, offer human-grade nuts in or out of the shell, for example, almonds, walnuts, and cashews.**

Always offer clean, fresh water. You may have to change your bird's water dish two or three times a day if it becomes soiled. In the water:

- 1. Put a couple of drops of GSE and a couple of drops of organic apple cider vinegar for larger water dishes or one drop each for smaller water dishes.**
- 2. A couple of times a week, put an aloe-and-herb product into the water.**
- 3. At the same time as the aloe product, add a powdered vitamin supplement and a liquid calcium supplement.**
- 4. Occasionally, you can also mix in some herbal tea, such as chamomile, pau d'arco, and echinacea for immune-system health.**
- 5. Two or three days a week, just offer plain, filtered water with nothing in it.**

I'm not recommending that you follow this plan like gospel, just sharing what I've done for years with my own birds. Here and there, as I discover new things, I'll add a human-grade supplement to the food and water for a while, and then try something else, rotating different healthy supplements in and out of the diet. With any supplementation, give the body a rest, so if you offer a supplement for ten days, for example, don't offer it for the next 10 to 14 days. You can overdo supplements, so use your own judgment, and always err on the side of caution.

Even with this much effort making food and bumping up the nutrition in water, it probably falls short of everything a parrot needs. A total diet can only be found in the wild. Just do your best and feed as wide a variety of healthy foods as possible.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding what you need to know about feathers
- » Deciding whether or not to clip your bird's wing feathers
- » Bathing your parrot
- » Grooming those sharp toenails

Chapter 9

Pretty Bird! Grooming Your Companion

You may have thought grooming was only for poodles and Himalayan cats, but believe it or not, your parrot needs some attentive grooming as well. The grooming of a bird doesn't involve brushing and combing, nor does it require shampoo. Grooming your parrot is far simpler than that, but no less important.

This chapter gives you the lowdown on how to keep your parrot's feathers, beak, and feet in tip-top shape.

Examining What Your Bird Fusses All about: Feathers

A healthy parrot has a keen sense of cleanliness. She'll preen her feathers to make sure there's no debris on them. *Preening* is when a bird moves her beak through its feathers, making them neat, clean, and tight. A filthy bird has far more trouble flying than a clean bird does, which is just one of the reasons why birds are so fastidious. Preening may look to you like your parrot is bothering her feathers, but this is a normal behavior for a healthy bird and should be encouraged with regular bathing.



REMEMBER

Feathers are a bird's source of protection from water, cold, and heat. Finely preened and groomed feathers are better able to resist moisture and extreme temperatures. Birds have a normally high body temperature, and the feathers help keep them warm. Feathers are also used to attract a mate and to indicate sexual maturity. No wonder your parrot spends so much time preening. Feathers are crucial.

Feathers are akin to hair in mammals. Feathers began millions of years ago (possibly at least 199 million years according to some researchers, give or take a few million) on non-avian dinosaurs. They had very fine, dense filaments as proto-feathers, and some were suspected to be closely related to the *Velociraptor* (the savvy, carnivorous dinosaur in the movie *Jurassic Park*). One study out of Siberia claims that almost all dinosaurs were feathered, including the T-Rex. Imagine that! Today, birds are the only creatures on earth with feathers, making them truly unique.

This section details how important your bird's feathers truly are and helps you understand how to help your bird look and feel her best.

Fluffing up: Your bird's feather types

Feathers are made of *keratin*, the same material that comprises their beaks (as well as our fingernails and other animals' horns), and are more than 90 percent protein. Several types of feathers are found on your parrot. Here's a quick rundown:

- » **Contour feathers:** These feathers cover your parrot's body; they include the flight feathers and the tail feathers.
- » **Flight feathers:** The wing is composed of 20 flight feathers: ten primary flight feathers (the long feathers at the end of the wing) and ten secondary flight feathers (closer to the body). Also called *remiges*.
- » **Tail feathers:** Also called *retrices*.
- » **Semiplume:** The *semiplume feathers* occur underneath the contour feathers and help with insulation.
- » **Filoplume:** These hairlike feathers have a long shaft with a few barbs at the end (see the next section for a definition of *barb*). They're sensory feathers used to help the bird feel the positions of its other feathers.
- » **Bristles:** The stiff, tiny feathers around your parrot's beak, nares (nostrils), and eyes.
- » **Down:** The undercoat of fluffy feathers beneath the contour feathers are called the *down feathers*. These help a great deal with insulation.

- » **Powder down:** The *powder down feather* is closest to the skin and crumbles during preening, resulting in a white, powdery substance that spreads throughout the feathers and helps with insulation, waterproofing, and keeping the feathers clean. This powder is why many people with allergies may choose not to have a parrot (or at least choose to buy a HEPA air filter, or several).

Looking closer at feather anatomy

The feather itself is fascinating. It's made up of five basic components:

- » **Quill:** The hollow end of the feather (where it enters the skin follicle). Also called the *calamus*.
- » **Shaft:** What looks like the feather's long stem. Also called the *rachis*.
- » **Barb:** The thin strands emanating from the shaft.
- » **Barbules:** Very tiny structures emanating from the barbs. Down feathers don't have barbules and therefore aren't neatly "zipped" like the contour feathers.
- » **Barbicels:** Miniscule hooks attached to the barbules that keep the barbs together to form the feather. One feather has about 30 million barbicels!

See Chapter 10 for more on feather anatomy.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

You may be surprised to find out that parrots aren't really green, blue, or many of the striking colors that they seem to wear. The only pigments that parrots really have are red and yellow. Parrots also have melanin in their feathers, which creates what people perceive as *light* and *dark*. The combination of the yellow, red, and the amount of melanin in the feathers creates patterns on the feather, which are then refracted by light, much like a prism.

When light hits the feathers, some of the pigments absorb it, and some reflect it. Humans see the reflected light as different colors, depending on the wavelengths of light. So like the ocean and the sky, the colors of birds have everything to do with how light reacts to the human eye. Birds see each other's feathers far differently than humans do. For example, a bird may look black to you, but to another bird, that black bird is a rainbow of iridescent colors. *Diurnal* (daytime-active) birds can see ultraviolet light spectrum colors that humans can't.

Recognizing what you can do

When your bird sheds a contour feather, pick it up from the floor or bottom of the cage and pull the little strands (barbs) gently apart with your fingers; then try to push them together again by sliding your thumb and index finger along their length. If you do it right, the barbs will zip together again. This is part of what your parrot does when she's preening.

The barbicels that keep the feather zipped aren't incredibly strong, but because there are so many of them, the feather manages to stay together and is remarkably strong. The overall, combined effect of the feathers creates a very powerful structure, the wing, which creates enough force to defy gravity.



REMEMBER

Healthy feathers are generally shiny, except in cockatoos, cockatiels, African greys, and some Amazon parrots, like the Mealy Amazon. One thing to look out for are *stress bars* in feathers: dark or discolored lines that grow into new feathers when a bird is ill or going through a period of stress, malnutrition, or a round of antibiotics. If you see these lines, it's time for a trip to your avian veterinarian, a boost in nutrition, and possibly a larger habitat. Another sign of illness or malnutrition is a significant change in feather color that's not due to maturing.

Clipping Your Parrot's Wings

Clipping is when the primary wing feathers (only the *first half* of each feather) on both of a bird's wings are cut off so that she's unable to fly very high or very far.

Clipping feathers is kind of like getting a haircut, except you don't rely on your hair for mobility. It doesn't hurt the parrot, and the feathers grow back. Parrots are extremely skilled flyers, and many a parrot guardian has been surprised by a clipped parrot's taking off into the wild blue yonder, never to be seen again. Most parrots are light, streamlined, and designed to fly for long distances with little effort. That's why some people advocate clipping not only the primary flight feathers, but most or all of the secondary flight feathers in the lighter birds (such as budgies and cockatiels) as well.

This next section gives you the pros and cons of clipping your bird's wing feathers and helps you understand why flight is so important.

To clip or not to clip

A parrot can live its whole life with its wing feathers clipped. There's little or no effect on insulation. A clipped parrot gets less exercise than a flighted one, but beyond that, there's not much that clipping does to adversely affect a bird's physiological health, though it may affect her psychological health. Nevertheless, and predictably, there is a controversy about wing clipping, both for and against. Both sides have valid points. Ultimately, whether to clip your bird's wing feathers is your personal decision. Table 9-1 examines some of the pros and cons to this argument.

TABLE 9-1 **Pros and Cons of Clipping**

Pros to Clipping	Cons to Clipping
A clipped parrot is less likely to get away from you, whereas a flighted parrot may soar through an open window or door one day.	A bird is meant to fly. That's why it has wings and feathers, hollow bones, and a muscular frame.
A home is a very dangerous place for a flighted parrot, who may fly into glass, a mirror, or wall.	A bird's respiratory system is designed for flight, making flight an integral way to maintain healthy lungs and air sacs.
A flighted parrot will be able to get to dangerous items in the home, such as toxic metals, the toilet bowl, or a hot stove (though a clipped parrot can often get to these things as well).	A clipped bird has its best defense taken away from her; she's no longer able to get away from the family dog or cat or other danger.
A clipped parrot is easier to handle because she can't fly away from you (though she shouldn't want to do that a lot if she's bonded to you).	Bad wing-clips can lead to plucking, and extreme wing-clips can lead to injuries due to falling.
A bird in the process of being tamed has less self-determination and takes less effort to remove from the cage, pick up from the floor, and so on.	Birds that are allowed to fly have stronger psychological wellbeing and are healthier due to the exercise they receive from flight. A flighted parrot is more autonomous and is happier in general.

Examining how flight effects parrot behavior

The practice of clipping a parrots wings in the United States is common, but bird-keepers in Europe would consider wing clipping animal abuse. This attitude is also reaching American birdkeepers. European bird keepers have long believed that clipping a bird's wings greatly affects her behavior.



REMEMBER

Flighted birds allowed to fly are highly self-directed creatures, able to make their own decisions about where they're going and what they're doing (see Figure 9-1). They can defend themselves by flying away from something they fear. They expend a lot of energy while flying, energy that will then *not* be spent plucking, screaming, and trying to figure out a way out of a cage. A clipped bird doesn't have the benefit of any of these aspects of *birdness* and so must change its personality to compensate for what it lacks.



FIGURE 9-1:
This poicephalus
parrot enjoys
supervised flight.

Photo by Ashley Lynn

Clipping a bird's wings takes away a large part of what she's meant to be as an individual. A clipped bird can become abnormally fearful, aggressive, neurotic, or depressed. This same bird, unclipped, may be more confident. Most responsible bird breeders advocate that all baby birds be allowed to fly at least until they're ready for their new homes.

Considering options in between

Wing clipping is a touchy subject among bird fanciers, bird rescue organizations, avian veterinarians, breeders, and guardians, each of whom has a different opinion. Each side's argument is solid. Personally, I'm in the flight camp for most birds, so I can't tell you which option to choose because I have a definite bias. I know that it's dangerous for some birds to live in a home without clipped wings, but I'm an advocate of flight if a home can be made safe and be bird proofed. Fortunately, there are options between clipping and flight, which I discuss here:

» **Some people keep their birds clipped for only part of the year.** Because the wings grow out only during a molt, which happens once, maybe twice a year, some parrot guardians allow their birds to have a couple of months of

flight and then clip the wings a bit when the weather becomes nice enough for windows and doors to be open.

- » **Some people clip only a few of the flight feathers — the first two to four — to allow the bird some flight.** Most parrots won't be able to get too high with this modified clip but will still be able to fly.

Situations exist where a parrot can fly in a safe place, such as in an aviary or habitat. This type of housing is popular and I encourage you to consider this option. You can even build an aviary or habitat in an apartment, albeit it a smaller one.



TIP

If you're unable to house your parrot in an aviary or habitat, you may want to clip her flight feathers. Many people lose their birds to an open window or deadly accident that happens when the bird is able to fly freely in the home. Even the best birdkeepers can't predict an accident, and all it takes is turning your back on the bird for one moment.

Dealing with clipped and unclipped parrots

If you do decide to keep your birds flighted, here are some important tips to follow:

- » Know where your birds are at all times. Supervise, supervise, supervise!
- » Never take your flighted bird outside without a carrier.
- » As you walk around with a flighted bird, keep your thumb lightly over her toes as she perches on your hand. If she tries to fly in a room where it's unsafe, you can gently direct her toward the floor.
- » Teach your bird to come to you when you call, either when you use a certain whistle or say a certain phrase, along with encouragement to fly to you. Doing so will train a bird to come when you request.

If you decide to clip your bird's wing feathers (for all or part of the time), here are some tips to keep her happy and safe (the next section gives you tips for doing it correctly):

- » Make sure that your groomer does a proper clip (or that you do). A rough clip can lead to plucking, because the ends of the feathers can irritate the skin on the body.
- » Don't clip too many flight feathers. Best to be conservative at first and clip more if necessary.
- » Remember to allow enough feathers to remain so that the bird doesn't have a hard landing if she falls or tries to fly.

- » You only have to clip your bird's feathers when they come in after a molt, generally once or twice a year.
- » Make sure your clipped bird is getting enough exercise.
- » Move your clipped bird around from room to room as you move around. This way, she can be with you and have a change of scenery. Clipped birds tend to get bored.

Clipping Your Bird's Wings Properly: The How-To

If you opt to clip your bird's wing feathers, your best bet is to find a professional who will clip them initially and then show you how to do it yourself. Many owners are squeamish about clipping their own bird's wings, though, and opt to have someone else do it each time. Some bird owners may fear the bird may become afraid of you if you clip its wings. I haven't experienced that personally, but it's possible.

The best person to regularly schedule wing clipping with is a local avian veterinarian, if you have one nearby. That way, you have the added bonus of the veterinarian seeing and handling your bird, and developing a relationship with it.

This section helps you properly clip your bird's wings or at least help you understand what your avian groomer or veterinarian is doing to your parrot.

Holding the parrot properly — Toweling

The first thing to do when clipping wings (or toenails) is discover how to hold your parrot properly and safely.



WARNING

You can't simply grab a bird any which way, stretch out a wing, and clip. Doing so can be very dangerous. A parrot has fragile bones that can break if you're too rough or don't hold her properly. Also, a bird breathes differently than you do, and it's possible to prevent a bird from breathing by holding her around the chest area, even lightly. Holding a bird gently around the neck allows her to breathe freely, unlike with mammals.



TIP

Grasp the bird around the neck and the back, leaving the chest free. You can use a thin towel if you don't want to do it barehanded. This is called *toweling*. Your thumb should be on one side of the bird's neck, bracing the bottom of her jaw, with your index finger on the other side doing the same (see Figure 9-2). The

parrot should look like she's resting with her back in your palm. Of course, she'll be struggling, so you can place a washcloth over her feet so she can grasp onto something.



FIGURE 9-2:
Proper toweling
technique used
for clipping and
examination.

Photo by Vicki Johnson

Clipping the flight feathers

Have someone else gently extend her wing and clip the first six to seven feathers (the long ones at the end of the wing), beginning at the point where the primary feather coverts end — those are the feathers on the upper side of the wing that end at the midpoint of the primary flight feathers (see Figure 9-3).

You can extend the wing yourself in a small parrot, like a lovebird or budgie. With a sharp scissors, clip each feather, one by one, making a clean clip so that the clipped end of the feather falls just under the primary covert. Clip both wings. If you don't, your parrot may become distraught, not to mention clumsy. Make sure that the ends of the clipped feathers are blunt. If they're sharp, they can cause irritation under the wing, which can lead to itching and plucking.

Wing clipping

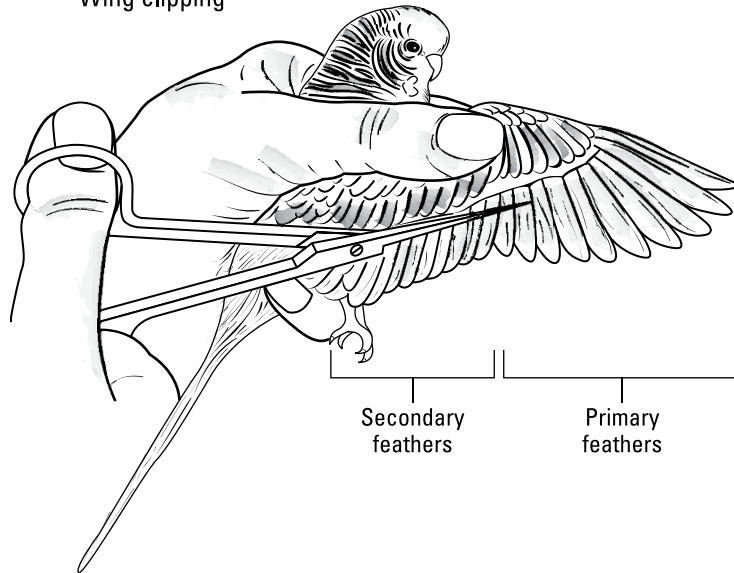


FIGURE 9-3:
Proper
wing-clipping
technique.

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WARNING

Don't ever clip your parrot's wings until you've watched someone do it in person (or watched a load of videos on YouTube) and understand how to hold your bird properly and which feathers to clip. Don't take a pair of sharp scissors to *any* part of your bird until you know what you're doing. And remember: Never clip *any* feathers other than the wing feathers, because your bird needs those for insulation and balance.

Some people like to leave the first two or three primary flight feathers intact so that when the wing is pulled into the body, it looks like there's no clip. This may be good for aesthetics, but it's not great for those feathers, which are then vulnerable to breaking. The strength of the wing isn't in the individual feathers, but in how those feathers work together to form a larger unit. The feathers themselves are fairly fragile.

Check regularly for new feather growth on the wings. Individual feathers that grow back are prone to breaking because they're not protected by the strength of the other feathers. Never clip a brand-new feather, however, because it still has a blood supply (called a *blood feather*). Let the feather mature for a few weeks before trimming.

Considering special circumstances

African grey parrots need a far more conservative clip than most other birds. They're quite heavy and tend to get injured from falls more easily than other birds when too many wing feathers are clipped. Four to five primaries will do. Very light birds, such as cockatiels and budgies, will need a more copious clip to keep them from flying high (they can still fly *distance*, even when clipped, but not fly too far *up*).

FREE FLYING: A DANGEROUS PRACTICE

Some people free fly their parrots outdoors. Free flight advocates take their unclipped birds to a park, beach, or large open area and let the bird fly free. They usually train their birds to react to a whistle or word, which in theory should coax the birds back to them. The free flight community grows every year, and you can find a lot of information about it online.

Although free flight sounds like a beautiful concept, in practice, I'd never, ever, *ever*, in a hundred million years do it. Did I mention *never*? Even though you can find tons of videos online of people free flying their parrots, if you dig enough, you'll find videos and stories of people losing their parrots, parrots chased mercilessly by other birds, parrots flying dangerously over water (where you can't retrieve your bird if another bird chases her or she becomes afraid), and parrots falling into water.

That's not all that can happen. Predatory birds can snatch your parrot right out of the air. Smaller birds protecting their nests can scare her out of the area. If she lands in the wrong place, a dog, cat, racoon, or other predator can kill her. She can get hit by a car. A kid flying a drone might follow her and frighten her. A thunderstorm or windstorm can kick up, and she may panic and fly far away. She can land on another person, who may harm her or take her home. She can become stubborn in a high tree branch and not want to come down to you. Remember, you can't fly after her in any of these circumstances.

The failure rate is too high for my liking. If you free fly your bird successfully 99 times and lose her on the 100th, you've still lost your precious companion. You may feel that you have a great bond with your bird and that she'll always come back to you. You may even feel confident that you're in an area with no predators. But you could be wrong about those things. I recommend not free flying unless you feel that your bird is expendable and easily replaced (and I hope you don't feel that way).

Clipping Your Parrot's Toenails

If you provide your parrot with a variety of perches, especially a rough concrete perch wide enough so that your bird's feet have to open significantly for her to stand on it, you won't need to clip your bird's toenails all that often. However, if you have sensitive skin or if a child regularly plays with your parrot, you may want to keep those toenails blunt.

Clipping a bird's toenails is an easy procedure. A bird's toenails are much like yours. Part of the human nail is without blood supply and is easily clipped off, whereas the other part has a blood supply and is very painful when broken. In a parrot with light or pink nails, you can easily see the part that's dead and the part that's living. The sensitive part, called the *quick*, looks like a pinkish vein following the curve of the nail. Seeing the quick in a bird with dark or black nails is more difficult.



WARNING

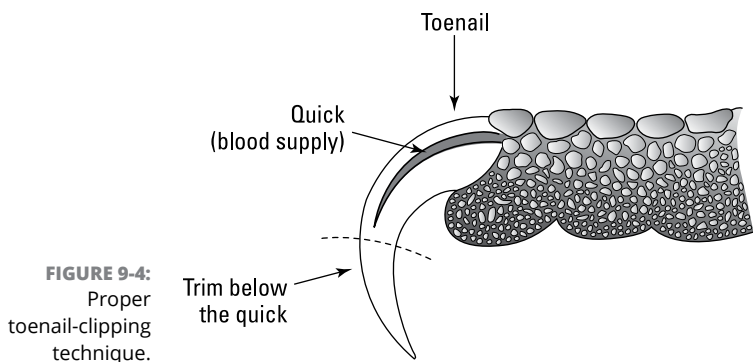
Only cut off the dead part of the nail. Never, if you can help it, cut into the quick, the part of the nail that has the blood supply. Whenever you trim nails, you should always have a styptic powder on hand in case of bleeding. You can use regular styptic powder from the drugstore or get some from your pet shop or online. Styptic powder should only be used for bleeding from the nails. It burns if you put it on skin. Baking flour that you probably have in the kitchen also acts as a coagulant and will stop bleeding from small wounds. Simply pack some of the styptic powder or flour into the bleeding nail. Nails can bleed a lot, more than you'd imagine, but most birds will stop bleeding well before it becomes a true health hazard. However, for smaller birds that don't have a lot of blood, like parakeets, one drop represents a significant amount. Always take bleeding seriously.

To trim a parrot's nails, follow these steps:

- 1. Hold her the same way you would if you were trimming the wings, and have someone else grasp the foot firmly.**
Don't let the foot wiggle.
- 2. With a regular human nail clipper (a clipper for a baby works well, as does one for cat claws), snip the very tip of the nail off, making sure not to cut into the quick — the living part of the nail (see Figure 9-4).**

Be conservative when you clip so that you never cut into the quick.

If the nail is dark and you're unsure where the blood supply is, cut off only the very tip, and repeat the procedure in a week. Better to leave more on the nail than risk bleeding.



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If you're squeamish about cutting your bird's nails, you can file them down with either a Dremel tool (an electric filer that you can get at a hardware store, craft store, or online) or an emery-board nail file. Don't file too much or too hard, however, or you can file right into the quick. Of course, your avian veterinarian will be happy to trim your bird's nails if you're not up to it. You can have them trimmed when you take your parrot for grooming or a checkup. Using the Dremel tool takes skill and practice, so you're better off letting an experienced groomer do it.



TIP

Because toweling a bird can be traumatic, I like to use the sneak-up method on my birds for a quick toenail clip. I hold the bird on one hand while we're interacting, and with the other hand, I sneak up on one toenail with regular fingernail clippers. I quickly snip off the very tip of one nail, and before the parrot knows what happened, I palm the clipper and pretend like I didn't do anything at all. I clip one nail a day like this, so it takes a few days to get them all done, but it's easier and far less traumatic this way.

Grooming the Beak

If your parrot has crunchy things to eat, plays heartily with her toys, and is healthy and in good condition, she shouldn't need to have her beak trimmed. The beak, made of the same material as the nails (keratin), should wear down as your parrot engages in eating and playing.



WARNING

A parrot with an overgrown or flaky beak (refer to Chapter 10 for more information) may have a medical condition that is going untreated or may be suffering from malnutrition. If you notice that your bird's beak is growing too long or that it's misaligned, make an appointment with your avian veterinarian. Don't ever attempt to trim, file, or correct your bird's beak yourself, because you can

seriously injure her. An avian veterinarian or someone with this kind of experience should be the *only* person to ever trim a beak.

The beak naturally flakes as it grows, so your groomer or avian veterinarian will file the beak, generally with an electric filing tool and/or metal filers on larger birds, to remove this growth and then will oil the beak, making it nice and shiny. Smaller birds' beaks are done only with the handheld filers.

Though you probably won't have to do much with your bird's beak, the following information helps you in case you do have to address a beak issue.

Beak breaks

Sometimes, a beak breaks due to an injury. Often, the part of the beak that broke just grows back. In other cases, the avian veterinarian has to bond the beak with special material until it grows back. This bonding also helps the beak grow in the proper position.

I once rescued an Amazon parrot whose bottom mandible was completely split in two. When he ate, much of the food would fall through the crack. I took him to the avian veterinarian to fix the beak, but we both decided that the bird didn't need it. Despite the food falling through the crack, the bird was quite porky and definitely didn't look like he'd ever missed a meal.

The misaligned beak

Occasionally, due to trauma, poor handfeeding technique, or illness, a beak will become misaligned. Usually, this comes in the form of *scissors beak*, where the upper and lower parts of the beak are off to the side. In other cases, the bird could have an underbite.

In cases of misalignment, the avian veterinarian can train the beak back into alignment by filing it a little bit each week or two over a few months and allowing it to begin to grow properly. This generally takes about six months in a healthy parrot.

Bathing Your Parrot

Most parrots love to bathe (see Figure 9-5), so giving your parrot a bath isn't usually stressful to your bird. Bathing softens dirt on the feathers and skin and encourages preening. If you bathe your parrot regularly, you'll notice that her

feathers will begin to become waterproof due to her preening duties. Bathing is important for parrots because their skin can become dry and itchy, leading to plucking. It's also important that any pollutants be removed from the bird's feathers so that it doesn't ingest any toxic stuff while preening.



FIGURE 9-5: Most parrots, like this caique, don't need much more encouragement to bathe than a container filled with clean water.

Photo by Tanya Johnson



REMEMBER

Never bathe your bird the way you'd bathe a dog, cat, or kid! Don't dunk your bird in water, especially in soapy water. A bath in bird terms is really a shower with clean, room temperature or lukewarm water.



TIP

Here are some bathing tips:

- » **Mist your parrot with a handheld spray bottle that you can buy in any drugstore or supermarket in warm weather or when you can provide enough warmth after a bath.** If she's interested in the bath, she'll spread her wings, put her head down, shake around, and delight in every drop. If she flies off the perch or seems distraught, try another time.
- » **Try misting above the bird so that the water simulates a rain shower.** You can do this outside (in a safe place) with a hose for larger, ardent bathers.

- » **You can completely soak your parrot to the skin with a spray bottle or hose a couple of times a week in the summer.** Don't dunk her in a bath.
- » **Keep bathing to a minimum unless you can offer heat after the bath in very cool weather.** A ceramic bird lamp will do. Refer to Chapter 6 where I discuss more about lighting.
- » **Bathe only in the daytime hours.** A bird that goes to bed wet can catch a chill and will be uncomfortable.
- » **Add a shower perch so your parrot can shower with you.** Some companies make a suction-cup shower perch that you can use to shower with your parrot. Many birds love this, and it allows you more time to spend together. Make sure, though, that the water isn't too hot and that the bathroom is parrot-proofed. If the parrot doesn't like to bathe in the shower, merely being in a steamy room will add moisture to the skin. Always supervise your parrot when the water is running. See Figure 9-6 for an amusing alternative showering method.
- » **Put your parrot on your shoulder when you're washing dishes.** She may hop into the sink for a bath under the faucet. Make sure the temperature of the water is mildly cool to lukewarm, never very cold or hot.
- » **Never spray a bird that's freaked out by the whole affair.** This bird will need to come to bathing on her own. Allow her to be near a stream of water (in the shower on a shower perch or near a sink) and enter the water by herself.
- » **Don't blow-dry your parrot.** Some blow-dryers contain nonstick coating on the heating coils, which can be deadly to your bird.
- » **Offer a flat, shallow dish of water for bathing.** If you offer the dish for bathing inside the cage, be aware that you may have to change the substrate or papers in the bottom and wipe down the cage afterward. Some parrots will like to bathe in a shallow dish in the sink. Many birds will bathe in their water dish, so be sure to keep it clean.
- » **Consider using a flat plastic or ceramic dish filled with wet spinach, watercress, curly kale, or other greens for the reluctant bather to encourage bathing.** The greens are also fun to play with and are good to eat.



WARNING

Don't ever use soap on your bird unless it's for a very good reason — for example, if she gets oil on her feathers. Make sure to use very mild glycerin soap, and rinse your bird thoroughly. Wash only her body (not the face), and don't scrub. Your best bet is to fill a plastic tub with warm soapy water about chest-deep to your bird and set her in it, if she'll tolerate that. Remember, when doing anything unnatural, such as a genuine bath (not a mist or shower), be gentle and compassionate, and realize that your bird may become frightened. When in doubt, call your avian veterinarian.

FIGURE 9-6:
There's more
than one way to
bathe a parrot.



Photo by Ashley Lynn

You can buy bathing products in your local pet shop or online that contain ingredients such as aloe that are good for the skin. Personally, I'm a fan of clean, tepid water for bathing. Many of these purchased products can irritate the eyes and contain unnecessary fragrances. You don't need them.



A parrot's chest muscles contract rapidly and repeatedly after a bath. This looks like shivering, but it's not. It's actually the way the parrot creates body heat after getting wet, and it's nothing to be concerned about.

Caring for Molting Parrots

When birds *molt*, they shed their feathers, making way for new ones. A molt can happen once or twice a year, depending on the amount of seasonal light and warmth where you live. In general, a parrot goes through one major molt a year, losing about a third of its feathers. In the lesser molts, which happen once or twice a year, it only loses a few feathers.

Molting is very stressful for a bird. Your parrot may become cranky and not want to be touched. The newly growing feathers can be itchy or painful. You'll notice

that little pins begin to stick out from between your parrot's other feathers (see Figure 9-7). These are called *pin feathers*. The pin is a sheath of keratin that grows over the new feather until it's ready to fully emerge. Your parrot will spend time removing these sheaths but won't be able to remove the ones on her head. If she'll allow some head scratching, you can gently remove them for her with your fingernails. Bathing also helps soften these sheaths and allow the new feathers to emerge.



FIGURE 9-7:
Note the
pin-feather
sheaths peeking
out from under
the feathers in
this molting bird.

Photo by Rikki Paulsen

Molting parrots won't lose all their feathers at once. Most molts are many weeks or months long, with feathers being replaced gradually. If you notice bald patches on your bird's body or if her feathering is becoming so thin that you can see her skin beneath, take her to your avian veterinarian right away. Some illnesses involve feather loss.



TIP

A molting bird needs some special care to make this time easier. Frequent misting with warm water is often helpful in softening the pin feathers. Offer your parrot an extra-nutritious diet at this time, including a protein source, such as hard-boiled eggs, egg food, and even pieces of boiled chicken. This will help fortify her and keep her energy level high. A molting parrot uses 30 percent more energy than when she's not molting, so she'll need some extra resources. In general, you shouldn't notice a difference in the way your parrot behaves, eats, plays, or reacts

to things during a molt. Just realize that there is the *potential* for her to be a little off while new feathers are coming in. Don't force playtime. Adding the stress of forcing her to play isn't going to be good for her overall health.

Dealing With Blood Feathers

The pin feathers and very new feathers that have just emerged from the sheath of protective keratin still have a blood supply and will bleed if injured or broken. This often happens with a wing feather, especially in a clipped bird. If the bird was fully flighted, the other wing feathers would protect a new feather, but a clipped bird does not have that protection. Some parrots, such as cockatiels, are also prone to cage thrashing, especially at night, and can break wing and tail feathers that way.

In a thick feather like the wing or tail, you can actually see the blood supply clearly, a dark red strip going down the vein of the feather. If this feather breaks or is cut, it will bleed copiously.



TIP

If you notice a bleeding feather, don't panic. Simply hold the wing firmly and pull the feather straight out from the root with one slow, methodical tug. This will stop the bleeding immediately. A pair of needle-nosed pliers is good for this use and should be kept in your birdy first-aid kit. If you're squeamish about pulling out feathers, which is painful for your bird, put some regular baking flour on the wound, and get your bird to the avian veterinarian as soon as possible. I've only had to pull blood feathers myself a couple of times, and only because the break happened in the middle of the night due to thrashing. Otherwise, I'm off to the veterinarian for it.

- » Examining the anatomy of a parrot
- » Choosing an avian veterinarian
- » Pinpointing the most common ailments and accidents
- » Creating a hospital cage

Chapter **10**

Taking Care of Your Parrot: In Sickness and in Health

There's an old myth that a parrot will hide its illness until one day you find it belly up in the cage before you even knew anything was wrong. Why does this happen? If a parrot in the wild shows that he's ill, a predator will take notice. Often, very ill birds will eat until their dying day. So, the myth isn't entirely false. Parrots are very good at hiding illnesses. But if you're attuned to your parrot and know what his healthy state is like, you'll more easily be able to tell when he's ailing.

This chapter shows you how to recognize illness, discusses common avian illnesses, and suggests how to prevent and identify them. You also find out about the most common accidents for companion parrots, as well as how to help an ailing or injured bird.



REMEMBER

I have to offer a disclaimer. This chapter is by no means meant to help you diagnose your parrot. Only a qualified avian veterinarian can do that. The info here is only meant to give you an idea of what kinds of ailments are possible. Parrots can have similar symptoms for a variety of diseases, and you can't diagnose illness without thorough testing.

Taking a Closer Look at a Parrot's Anatomy

To understand how to keep a parrot healthy and how to recognize if he's ill, you have to know something about your bird's bodily systems. Parrots are complex and have a lot of intricate organs and systems, too many to detail for this discussion. Here are some of the important aspects of a bird's body that you should know.

Eyes

A parrot has one eye on either side of its head, allowing him to see nearly 360 degrees. This helps him notice predators and avoid other dangers. Parrots don't see better than humans, but they do notice things faster. They have worse depth perception than humans, which is why they're always cocking their heads to get a better angle. A parrot's eyes are very large in proportion to its head. If humans had eyes that large, they'd be like tea saucers. Parrots also have a third eyelid called a *nictitating membrane* that acts as a kind of squeegee for the eye, keeping it moist and uncontaminated. Interestingly, reptiles and cats also have this membrane.

Parrots have different eye colors, depending on the species. Some eye colors indicate gender, as in the Goffin's cockatoo, where the female's eyes are brown and the male's black (though eye color isn't always a reliable method to determine gender). Also, in many species, eye color changes as an immature bird becomes an adult. A healthy eye is clean, moist, and free of discharge. A parrot with an eye problem may squint, scratch the eye with his foot, or rub the eye on the perch or bars of the cage. Look for swollen eyelids, cloudy eyes, excessive blinking, discharge, and excessive tearing. Any eye condition must be treated immediately.

Ears

Your parrot's ears are located just behind the eyes; they look like a small opening in the head. They're covered by a small flap of skin and generally by feathers, unless the feathers have been lost due to illness. You may see the ears after your parrot bathes, when the feathers around the head are wet.

In many parrots, the feathers over the ears are a different color, either vastly different or just a slight shade darker or lighter than the other cheek feathers. Parrots can't hear in the same range of sound that humans do, but they do hear sound in greater detail.

Feathers

Feathers are a remarkable evolutionary construct, unique to birds and quite complex (see Figure 10-1). Feathers regulate a bird's body temperature, help it remain

waterproof, and allow it to fly (in most cases). The colors and patterns of feathers also facilitate mating rituals and, in some parrots, distinguish males from females. Parrots have fewer feathers than other orders of birds, but their feathers are stronger. See Chapter 9 for a lot more information about feathers.

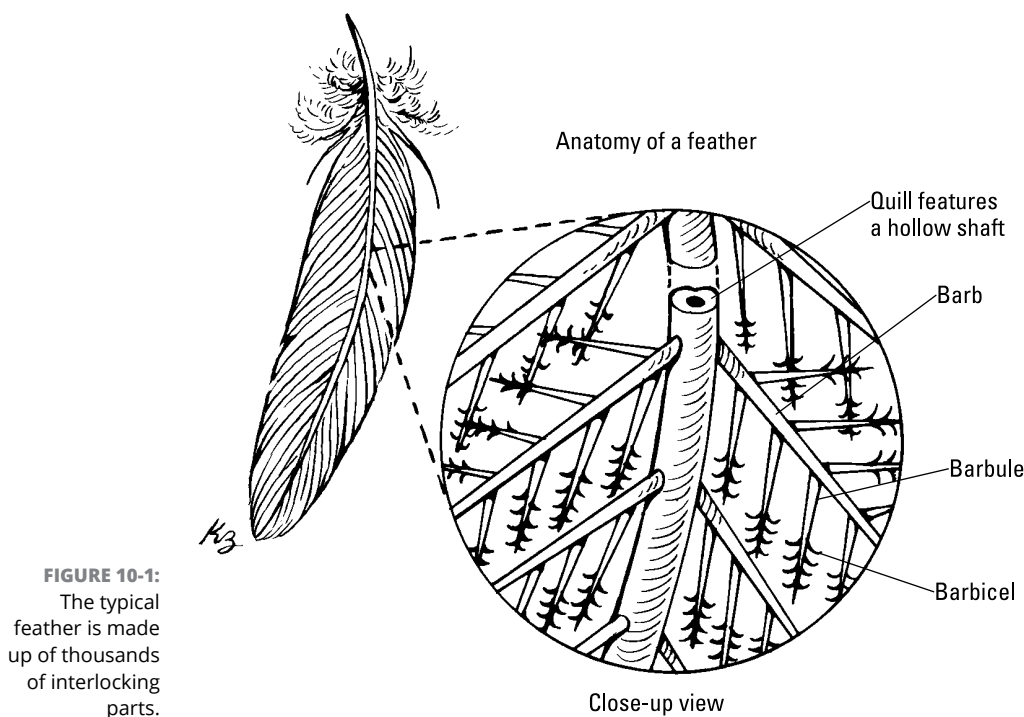


FIGURE 10-1:
The typical feather is made up of thousands of interlocking parts.

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Preen gland

Parrots have a *preen gland* at the base of the tail (on the rump) called the *uropygial gland*, which secretes an oil that the parrot spreads on its feathers during preening. This oil helps keep the feathers supple and waterproof, though it's not necessary for waterproofing in parrots. Amazon parrots don't have this gland, and neither do hyacinth macaws, Lear's macaws, or Spix's macaws. The oil from the gland also contains precursors to Vitamin D. When sunlight hits the oil on the feathers, it turns to Vitamin D, and the bird ingests some of the oil during preening. Most problems and infections associated with this gland occur as a result of malnutrition and vitamin deficiency.

Feet

Parrots' feet are *zygodactyl*, meaning they have two toes pointing forward and two pointing backward (refer to Figure 10-2). This is a first-rate design for grasping and climbing. Parrots also use their feet to regulate body temperature. When it's cold in the bird's environment, a parrot can decrease the amount of blood circulating to his legs and will often draw one leg up into his body and stand on the other. When a parrot is warm, blood flow to his legs increases to cool off.



FIGURE 10-2:
Parrots' zygodactyl feet make for good grasping and climbing.

Photo by Roberta Kendall

Beak

Parrots are called *hookbills* because the beak is curved. This kind of beak is perfect for eating a wide variety of foods. The beak is made of the same material as human fingernails, keratin, which grows over a honeycomblike structure that is basically hollow, a good design for a bird that needs to be light enough to fly (check out Figure 10-3).

The beak acts as a crushing and cracking device but is also delicate enough to peel the skin off a pea. The beak also functions to help your parrot climb and move around, kind of like an additional foot. The beak may not look sensitive, but it is. Your parrot should be able to keep its beak trim through eating and playing. If the

beak is overgrown (see Figure 10-4), your bird may have a nutritional disorder, or other illness or injury; make a trip to your avian veterinarian. *Never* trim your parrot's beak yourself. See Chapter 9 for more about grooming the beak. If the beak is flaky, it could be a sign of underuse or illness.



FIGURE 10-3:
A parrot's beak is made of two parts: the upper and lower mandibles.

Photo by Roberta Kendall



FIGURE 10-4:
An overgrown beak can indicate malnutrition or mites.

© John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Cere

The *cere* is the fleshy spot just above the beak where the nostrils, or *nares*, are located. In some species, like the parakeet, the cere is prominent; in others, the cere is covered by feathers. Both the cere and the nares should be clean and free of debris. If you notice a discharge, a crust, or bubbling around the cere or the nares, contact your avian veterinarian immediately.

Tongue

A parrot's tongue is fleshy and muscular, with a hard plate beneath the tip. It has about 350 taste buds. For contrast, humans have about 10,000 taste buds (interestingly, rabbits have about 17,000, pigeons around 40, chickens roughly 24, and catfish 100,000). This lack of a large number of taste buds is why parrots love sharp-tasting foods, such as jalapeño peppers. A parrot can manipulate its tongue during speech to make different sounds, something that previously was thought to be something only humans could do. Lories and other parrots that feed on nectar have brushlike organs on the tip of the tongue, making it easier to eat pollen and nectar from flowers.

Neck

A parrot's neck is relatively much stronger than a human neck. A parrot's windpipe is fully ringed with bones, allowing for the stress of turning the head so far around. That's why the proper way to hold a parrot is basically around the neck — you won't prevent a bird from breathing this way, but you will prevent it from breathing by holding it around the chest area.

Skin

A parrot's skin is much thinner and more delicate than a human's. All of a healthy parrot's skin is covered in feathers except for the cere (nose), legs, feet, and eye patches.

Syrinx

This organ, located at the back of the throat, is the parrot's voice box, allowing him to sing, make noises, and talk. It can become infected, especially if the bird has a respiratory-tract issue. Prevent this with proper nutrition and medical care.

Skeletal system

Most of a parrot's bones are hollow, making it lighter for flying. A bird's skeleton makes up a small percentage of its body weight. If the bones were solid and heavy, the bird would have to expend more energy. Some of the bones are *pneumatic* and aid in the breathing process, so they're actually part of the respiratory system. That's why it's so dangerous for birds to break certain bones, including the skull, pelvis (hips), upper wing bone (humerus), keel bone (sternum), clavicle, backbones, and shoulder.

Muscles

Parrots are extraordinary athletes and are able to fly for miles a day, resulting in a well-muscled bird. The muscles a parrot uses for flight are red meat, tough and oxygen-rich. (That's why a chicken's breast muscles are white meat — it doesn't need to fly.)

Respiratory system

Your parrot has a sensitive respiratory system, susceptible to airborne irritants such as aerosol sprays, fumes from heated nonstick cookware, and tobacco smoke. Coal miners used to take birds, primarily canaries, into the coal mines, and when the canary keeled over, it was time for the miners to leave.

Parrots are prone to respiratory illness and distress because their system is more complicated than that of humans. They don't have lungs that expand and contract like human lungs. Parrots take two breaths to complete the breathing cycle:

- » The first fills nine air sacs, located in hollow spaces in the body and in some of the bones.
- » The second pushes the air into the lungs.

The same goes for exhalation.



REMEMBER

If you notice your parrot panting or having respiratory distress, call your avian veterinarian right away. You may be able to identify a respiratory infection by a change in your parrot's breathing and, in severe cases, bubbling from the mouth or nostrils. A parrot laboring to breathe may bob its tail as it pants. If you observe these symptoms, take your parrot to the veterinarian right away.

Digestive system

After food is crushed and chewed by the beak, it's swallowed and goes to the *crop*, a saclike organ near your parrot's breast. Parrots do have saliva, but their saliva doesn't have enzymes like a human's saliva. For humans, digestion begins in the mouth, but for parrots, it begins in the crop. After being softened in the crop, the food goes to the stomach (*proventriculus*); then it goes to the gizzard (*ventriculus*), which grinds the food, and moves on to the *cloaca*, where feces and *urates* (urine) collect before being eliminated through the *vent*.

It takes about three hours for food to make it from the beak to the vent, depending on the type of food and the bird's health (in lories, the digestive process is shorter). Many digestive disorders can occur in parrots. If you notice a change in your bird's eating habits or droppings (color, frequency, or odor), contact your avian veterinarian at once. See Chapter 8 for an illustration of the digestive tract.

Circulatory system

Birds have a four-chambered heart, like humans, but it's much larger proportionate. It has to be extremely strong to pump oxygen-rich blood at a rate faster than needed by humans.

Reproductive system

Female parrots have two ovaries, though only the left one is functional. Birds don't get pregnant the way female humans do. They get *eggant*. All parrots reproduce by means of eggs. Females can lay infertile eggs and don't need a male around to be inspired to start a little egg family. The male has similar organs to a human male, but they're hidden internally. You can read more about illnesses of the reproductive tract in the section, "Reproductive disorders," later in this chapter.

Recognizing Indications of Illness

A major part of making sure your parrot remains healthy is being an observant guardian. Make an effort to get to know your bird's regular, healthy behavior so that you'll be better able to tell when something's wrong.

Birds can be sneaky when it comes to their illnesses and injuries. They'd rather no one notice, especially a predator. A sick parrot doesn't want to be picked out from the crowd. That's why figuring out whether a bird is sick until he's very sick is

difficult — sometimes when only a few hours are left of his life. But an observant owner may be able to see early signs of illness, including:

- » **Excessive sleeping:** An ill parrot may sleep too much, especially during the day. Sleeping on the bottom of the cage is a particularly significant symptom. Look for any odd changes in sleeping patterns.
- » **Sleeping on two feet:** A healthy parrot generally sleeps with one foot drawn into his belly.
- » **Fluffed-up appearance:** A fluffed-up parrot may be trying to maintain his high body temperature and fight off an illness. Or the room's temperature may be too cool.
- » **Loss of appetite:** You should know how much food and what types of food your parrot consumes each day. If you notice that your bird isn't eating or is eating far less than usual, an illness could be present.
- » **Change in attitude:** If your parrot seems listless and isn't behaving normally or has become cranky or limp, call your veterinarian.
- » **Lameness:** If your parrot can't use his feet or hold up his head, something is very wrong.
- » **Panting or labored breathing:** These signs may signify respiratory illness or overheating.
- » **Discharge:** If you notice runniness or discharge on the eyes, nares, or vent, the bird may be ill.
- » **Change in droppings:** Your parrot's droppings should consist of a solid green portion, white urates (over the green part), and a clear liquid. If the droppings are discolored (very dark green, black, yellow, or red), and you haven't introduced any change in the diet (such as feeding beets or blueberries), you may have a problem. Also, if the droppings have a pungent odor or they seem far more liquid than usual, call your veterinarian immediately.
- » **Debris around the face or on feathers:** This sign indicates poor grooming or vomiting, potential signs of illness.
- » **Bobbing tail:** A bird sitting on the perch and panting will have a bobbing tail, which is often a sign of respiratory illness.
- » **Messy vent:** If the bird's vent (where waste comes out) is crusty or damp with fecal material, there's a problem.

Choosing an Avian Veterinarian

Your parrot has the potential to live for many years, and in that time more than likely he'll experience an illness or an injury. These things occur to the birds of even the best bird guardians. One of the most important relationships you can foster (beside the one between you and your bird) is the relationship between your parrot and your avian veterinarian. When your parrot becomes ill or injured, you may have little time before the situation becomes critical.



REMEMBER

A bird isn't really supposed to be living in a home where danger lurks around nearly every corner. Having your parrot become a regular patient at your local avian veterinarian's office is the best bet to keep your parrot healthy and alive in case of an emergency.

A regular veterinarian can treat some ailments in birds, but an avian veterinarian sees all kinds of bird illnesses and injuries, and is better able to diagnose and treat these problems. An avian veterinarian's office is equipped with the latest technology for diagnosing and treating birds of all kinds.

The following sections help you locate a qualified avian veterinarian, explain what you can expect on your first visit, and discuss what kind of information you should share with your avian vet.

Finding a qualified avian vet

The moment you suspect that your parrot is ill isn't the ideal time to find an avian veterinarian and begin building a relationship. You should schedule a well-bird checkup within the first three days (or sooner) of bringing your bird home. If you've had your bird for a while and have never taken him to the avian veterinarian, do so immediately.

If you live in or near a large city, you should have no problem finding a doctor specializing in birds. You may have to travel a bit if you live in a rural area.



TIP

Find an avian veterinarian near you by searching online for the Association of Avian Veterinarians.

At the well-bird checkup, the vet will weigh your bird, thoroughly look over his entire body, and may perform some tests. All this information will be recorded in the bird's chart. Then, if you begin to notice an illness later, the doctor will have a reference point for your individual bird — the bird's healthy weight, feather condition, and so on. You can also use this opportunity to talk to the doctor about nutrition, grooming, and anything else that concerns you. Schedule a well-bird checkup every six months. You can combine the visit with a grooming visit if you like.

Knowing what to look for at the first visit

When you first get to the office, make a mental note of the cleanliness of the rooms, and talk to the staff to make sure they're friendly. Ask to see the back rooms, where the animals (specifically the birds) are kept. You'll want to see these in case you have to leave your bird overnight. The staff may not let you see the back rooms because of the potential spread of diseases, but that should be the only reason. If the office is filthy, and the staff is rude or careless, consider changing veterinarians.

Here are some other things to look for:

- » Is the veterinarian a member of the Association of Avian Veterinarians and has she been practicing medicine solely on birds for many years? Ask if the doctor is board certified in avian medicine. Many veterinarians claim to be able treat birds, but they aren't really experienced enough to do so.
- » Does the veterinarian have a good bedside manner? Do you feel comfortable with the doctor?
- » Does she handle your bird with gentleness and confidence?
- » Does she explain procedures being performed on the bird?
- » Does she have companion birds at home, or does she make a note of any birds in the office and inquire about them? If the doctor has birds at home, that's a pretty good sign. If not, ask why not. Sometimes avian vets don't have birds at home because they're wary of bringing diseases back and forth from the office.
- » Is the doctor familiar with treating your species of parrot? Some parrots have specific health issues that should be addressed.
- » Are the doctor's fees reasonable for your budget? Ask about fees when you make your appointment. The vet should consult with you before doing any expensive procedure unless you've given consent for any treatment, no matter how costly.
- » Is the vet available to treat emergencies, even when she isn't in the office? Developing a relationship with your avian veterinarian while your bird is well is important. The doctor will be more likely to see a known patient in the middle of the night than a new one. Many offices have a rule that new patients won't be seen on an emergency basis.
- » Is the doctor willing to send you and your bird to another vet if unable to deal with a medical problem? Not all avian vets are specialists. Your bird may need someone to deal with an eye injury or specialized surgery and will need to go to another doctor for that.
- » Does the office schedule regular, timely appointments? If the office keeps scheduling you weeks in advance for a wing trim, consider another office.

Make a note of the hours your avian veterinarian works and hang the schedule and the office's phone number on your refrigerator or add it to your phone's calendar and contacts for easy reference.



TIP

A great way to begin a relationship with an avian veterinarian is with wing and toenail trimming. Even if you can do both yourself, if you have an avian vet do them, you'll become a patient and the vet will come to know your bird when he's healthy and will better be able to notice when he's ill.

Divulging important information

When you take your parrot to the veterinarian for the first time, be prepared to answer questions and share important information. Here are some you may encounter:

- » How old is your parrot? You may not know, and that's okay.
- » What is your parrot's sex? If you don't know, your avian vet may be able to give you an educated guess or can order a DNA blood test. You can also order a DNA test kit online using your bird's blood feathers, blood, or eggshells, if you have them.
- » Where did you obtain the parrot?
- » Do you have other birds at home at the moment? This is important, because domestic fowl can give diseases to companion parrots.
- » How is your parrot housed? Share a few photos of your bird's housing.
- » What does his diet consist of?
- » How much time does your parrot spend out of the cage?
- » Is he active and in what manner?
- » Have there been signs of illness or unusual behavior?
- » Has your parrot been exposed to any household dangers?
- » Is your parrot in a breeding situation?
- » Has this parrot seen another avian veterinarian?
- » What did that veterinarian say about the bird?
- » Were there tests taken?
- » What's the phone number of the other clinic (to get previous medical records)? Coming in with any previous medical records is a good idea.

HOLISTIC AND NATURAL CARE: YAY OR NAY?

Holistic and homeopathic care has become extremely popular for humans and is becoming popular in the bird community as well. Many veterinarians use holistic and natural remedies along with western medicine in their practices. I encourage you to do some research and read about holistic and natural care for birds, but don't abandon western medicine in the treatment of your ill bird. A combo of both is generally pretty effective in treating most medical conditions.

Here are a few questions you should ask about your parrot and her treatment:

- » What do you think is wrong with my parrot, if anything?
- » What kinds of tests are you going to do to/for my parrot?
- » When do the test results come back?
- » How do I help my bird get healthy again at home?
- » What can I do to make my bird more comfortable?
- » What are the costs of the procedures and tests you're going to perform?

Identifying Common Health Disorders

Many health issues can plague parrots, but some are more common than others. Many parrot illnesses stem from a basic lack of nutrition and vitamins, which can break down the immune system and leave the parrot open to all kinds of diseases and ailments. I encourage you to heed the advice in Chapter 8 and do some nutritional research on your own. After poor nutrition, filthy and damp housing conditions are next on the list of why birds become ill. Keeping your bird's area clean goes a long way toward preventing illness.

The following sections illustrate some of the more common parrot ailments and maladies.

Nutritional disorders

Wild parrots are very active and don't have a tendency to put on extra weight, whereas your house parrot has nothing to do but eat all day, which can lead to a porky bird. A parrot that's sitting around all day eating seed may become obese, which can lead to tumors and to liver and kidney disease. This is one of the many reasons why a complete, balanced diet is so important.

Other symptoms of nutritional disorders can include overgrown beak, poor feather quality/color change, feather plucking (see Figure 10-5), weak bones, trouble laying eggs, and yeast infections, among other symptoms. If your bird shows any of these signs, make sure you visit an avian veterinarian.



FIGURE 10-5: Plucking can indicate illness rather than frustration as with this cockatoo.

Photo by Maryann Jaschick

Parasites

Parasites aren't a huge problem with parrots, but they do occur. Here are the ones that may:

- » **Feather mite:** This minuscule mite isn't common in parrots but can infest birds that live outdoors in filthy conditions.

- » **Red mite:** This mite eats blood and is highly communicable, though not frequent in parrots. Red mites, as well as feather lice, can cause itching and discomfort, may cause your parrot to pick at his feathers, and may even make the feathers bleed. If you suspect mites, don't try to treat them yourself — see the avian veterinarian. The mite protectors sold in stores are ineffective and can harm your parrot rather than help him.
- » **Roundworms:** Ask for your avian vet to test for them during your well-bird checkup. If they're discovered, regular testing and treatment is essential; eliminating them is difficult because of their complex life cycle.
- » **Giardia:** This one-celled protozoan parasite can affect your parrot, other animals in the house, and even you. Giardia is contacted through contaminated food or water, and it causes distress in the digestive tract. You may notice diarrhea, itching, failure to digest foods, weight loss, and other symptoms. Your veterinarian can test for giardia and treat it effectively.

Bacterial infections

Be aware of these two common bacterial infections:

- » **Mycobacterium avium:** It's accountable for the tuberculosis infection and is transmitted through food, water, or filthy housing. Avian tuberculosis *can* be transmitted to a human infant or someone with a compromised immune system. Transmission is via airborne particles shed from infected birds. Although this type of infection in humans is a respiratory disease, it's chiefly a digestive disorder in parrots. Symptoms include weight loss and digestive distress. Good nutrition, clean surroundings, and minimized stress levels can help manage this disease in birds.
- » **Psittacosis:** Also called *chlamydiosis* and *parrot fever*, it's also transmittable to infant humans and those with suppressed immune systems. It causes respiratory distress symptoms in both human and parrot. It's a strange organism, because it's treatable like a bacteria, but it behaves like a virus. Psittacosis is transmitted through droppings and infected secretions. Some birds can be carriers of psittacosis without displaying symptoms. If it's caught early, this infection is highly treatable. Ask your avian veterinarian to test for this disease, especially if a person with a weakened immune system is going to be in contact with your parrot. Symptoms include limey or yellowy droppings, listlessness, labored breathing, and nasal discharge.

Viral infections

A virus is treatable, though incurable. Some viruses are self-resolving whereas some are deadly no matter what treatment is offered. Several viruses regularly affect parrots:

- » **Psitticine Beak and Feather disease:** This disease is incurable and communicable (to other birds) and involves feather loss and beak lesions. Diagnosis is through a blood test, and euthanasia is normally suggested when there's a positive result. Symptoms include feather loss, abnormal feather growth, and a generally ill condition. It's mainly seen in parrots, such as Australian, Asian, and African species, but it can be transmitted to parrots from the Americas as well.
- » **Polyomavirus:** It affects young parrots, though adult birds are carriers and transmit the disease to their young, which perish around the time that they should be fledging from the nest. This disease occurs in breeding birds, though households with many birds are susceptible. As of today, there is no treatment for polyomavirus other than supportive care, so prevention is key. A vaccine is available, so ask your veterinarian about it.
- » **Pacheco's disease:** This viral hepatitis affects the liver. It's usually terminal and is primarily diagnosed upon death, which happens quickly. This is a highly communicable disease for parrots and can be transmitted easily when bringing a new bird into your home. Enforce strict quarantine at all times. You can find out more about quarantine in Chapter 7.

Fungal infections

Fungal infections are more apt to affect undernourished birds than they are to affect birds with healthy immune systems. Be sure to feed your birds lots of fresh fruits and veggies rich in Vitamins A and C. Fungal infections aren't contagious from bird to bird or bird to human.

Here are two to look out for:

- » **Yeast infection:** Also known as *candidiasis*, this infection generally affects the mouth and digestive tract, and can even involve the respiratory system. Your parrot has the yeast in its body normally (as you do), but when the bodily systems become unbalanced, for example, when a parrot is undernourished or after a treatment of antibiotics, the yeast can grow to a surplus, causing illness. Symptoms include a sticky substance in the mouth and white mouth lesions. Regurgitation and digestive problems may occur as well. Treatment by a vet is essential, as is a diet rich in Vitamin A. A yeast infection isn't

immediately fatal, but if left untreated, it can cause the bird to perish. Keeping your parrot's housing and water clean and feeding a diet rich in veggies can help to prevent candida.

- » **Aspergillosis:** This fungal infection causes respiratory distress and is often deadly. Changes in your parrot's breathing, changes in vocalization, or gasping or wheezing may indicate this infection. Aspergillosis is difficult to treat and may take months of medication. Prevent it by keeping your parrot's environment sanitary and dry. If you see hairy black mold growing anywhere near your bird's environment, he can get this fungal infection. It's not good for you, either.

Foot disorders

Your parrot is on his feet all the time (if he's not, worry!), and you should watch out for the following foot disorders:

- » **Gout:** It's a painful condition of the joints in the legs and wings, and is common in birds not receiving proper nutrition. Symptoms include visible swellings on the legs and lameness.
- » **Bumblefoot:** It's an infection of the bottom of the feet connected with poor nutrition, injury, obesity. The skin on the bottom of the foot is inflamed and red, and may become scabby, resulting in lameness.
- » **Lameness and weakness:** These conditions in the feet are occasionally linked to hens that become *egg bound* (when an egg becomes stuck or crumpled inside the hen), but there can be multiple reasons, including tumors.

Feather disorders

Several illnesses can affect feather quality. If you notice bald patches on your bird (with the exception of under the crest in cockatoos and cockatiels), feather bleeding, and torn and ragged feathers, see your avian veterinarian right away.

Self-mutilation (feather plucking and chewing) is common in some species of parrots, including African greys, cockatoos, eclectus, and others, generally occurring due to illness, confinement, unhappiness, or fear. Often, a parrot will pick his feathers over an area that is irritated due to an illness or parasite. Sometimes, a bird may become very unhappy with his housing or circumstances and will begin a nervous habit of plucking at his own feathers, either removing them from the skin or chewing them off. This habit is dangerous and difficult to correct.



TIP

The first step is to run the gamut of veterinary tests on the bird to determine whether something is awry health-wise. If all is well, take a look at the bird's circumstances. Has something changed recently? Is the housing situation too small or dark? Perhaps another bird is chewing the feathers off of this bird. Is there enough stimulation in the cage, toys, and so on? Has anything new moved into the environment, even for a short time, like party favors, balloons, or a Christmas tree? All of these things are potential causes for feather plucking and chewing. See Chapter 14 for more details on the causes and treatment of feather plucking.

Reproductive disorders

Hens (females) of any species may have difficulty laying eggs if they're undernourished or have laid too many eggs in a row, leading to calcium depletion in the bones. *Egg binding* is when an egg becomes stuck inside a hen and she is unable to lay it. She may be weak, the egg could be misshapen, or she may have a tumor or other disorder of the reproductive system. Symptoms of egg binding include panting, squatting, and lameness.



TIP

Keeping your laying hens healthy and nourished, and resting them between clutches (bunch o' babies) will help prevent egg binding. Consult your veterinarian immediately if you suspect egg binding. If it's late in the night or you can't get to the veterinarian's office immediately, place your hen in a warm hospital cage (see toward the end of this chapter for how to create this) or incubator at around 90 degrees Fahrenheit, and put a few drops of mineral oil (or olive oil) in her vent (where the eggs come out) and one drop of olive oil in her mouth (I've done this to positive results). Be gentle! You can easily asphyxiate a smaller bird by putting oil in the mouth, so if you can get her to take it willingly, that would be better. The oil in the vent and/or mouth may help her pass the egg. Even if she does, take her to the veterinarian as soon as you can. She may need a shot of calcium, Vitamin A, or other veterinary intervention.

Older male parrots can develop tumors on their testicles. Regular veterinary check-ups should help find and treat any developing problems of the male reproductive system.

Being Aware of and Preventing Common Dangers to Companion Parrots

The home is a dangerous place for any bird, especially for a curious, agile bird like the parrot. I can't begin to tell you how many horrible, tragic situations I've heard about and even witnessed involving parrots, from flying away to being mauled by

the family dogs or wild predators. Knowing how to avoid dangerous situations is the first step toward keeping your parrot safe. The second step is knowing how to deal with certain situations when they occur.

This section outlines the most common parrot injuries and accidents, shows you how to prevent them (or at least how to try to prevent them), and gives valuable emergency tips in case all your forward thinking isn't enough to keep your parrot safe. Accidents happen to the best of guardians, but it's how you react to accidents that can make all the difference in the world.

Predators and animal bites

Parrots are prey animals, meaning they're hunted by other animals for the purpose of eating them. Your parrot instinctively knows this, which is why he's always on the lookout for the family cat or dog. Even if your other animals are very well fed, they'll prey on your bird out of the instinct to do so.



WARNING

Even a brief encounter with a cat or dog can be deadly. If contact occurs, take your bird to your avian veterinarian *immediately*. *Don't* wait until the next day to see how the bird is doing. He could be dead by morning. Dogs and cats both have bacteria in their mouths that can kill a bird quickly, and cats have the *Pasteurella* bacteria in their mouths and on their claws, and it's deadly to birds. Even a small scratch can kill.

Snakes also pose a danger to your parrot. Snakes are a bird's natural predator. Birds are so fearful of snakes that it's not even a good idea to make a shushing sound when trying to calm your parrot. Snakes are notorious for sneaking into cages, swallowing a bird, and being stuck inside because of the lump of the bird in its body — not fun to wake up to on Sunday morning.



WARNING

Other pets, such as ferrets and rats, won't think twice about eating or injuring your parrot. If you keep your bird outside, take precautions so outdoor predators — such as opossums, raccoons, and hawks — can't get to your parrot. You can do this by keeping the cage only in a wired-off space and double-wiring the cage with two layers instead of one, keeping the outer layer about one inch from the inner layer — a cage within a cage. This keeps predators from pulling your parrot's feet and legs off through the bars. Your immediate response to an animal bite should be to call your avian veterinarian or *any* available veterinarian immediately. You can flush a small wound with a weak solution of hydrogen peroxide and water before you leave the house for the veterinarian's office. If the wound is large, leave it alone, and rush the bird to the veterinarian.

While I'm on the topic of other household animals, bird-on-bird aggression can cause severe injury, even death. Keep large or aggressive birds clear of other birds, especially smaller birds, that they can harm. Even birds of the same species will kill each other, for example, two female lovebirds in too small a space together.

Standing water

Parrots are attracted to water and can drown easily by falling into deep water while trying to take a bath or drink. A clipped parrot isn't quite as balanced or agile as a flighted one, and it can slip easily into water and be unable to remove itself. Here are some dangerous bodies of water:

- » **Toilet bowls:** Close all toilet lids, even if you think your bird can't get to the bathroom, and especially if he can. If you shower with your bird, this is especially important.
- » **Pools and hot tubs:** If your bird has access to these recreational items, keep a close eye on him when he's out of the cage. I once had a parrot fly into the center of my pool, and I had to go in fully clothed to retrieve him! Fountains and ponds hold the same danger.
- » **Dog bowls:** If you have a large dog with a large dog dish, your small parrot might find its way into the center of it and not be able to get out.
- » **Fish tanks and fish bowls:** These can be mesmerizing for a parrot, who might want to bathe in it. Keep all tanks and bowls securely covered.
- » **Drinking glasses:** A half-empty drinking glass may entice a parrot to drink, and he may fall in and be unable to remove himself. This is an absolutely tragic circumstance. Imagine turning your back for a moment and finding your bird drowned in your glass! Awful.
- » **Standing water in the kitchen:** Full sinks and pots boiling on the stove pose grave dangers for your birds. Keep an eye on the sink when you're soaking dishes, and keep all cooking pots tightly covered. The same goes for your large appliances, such as the dishwasher and washing machine. Your parrot could fly in unnoticed, and you might turn on the machine.

Nonstick cookware

Nonstick cookware, when heated, emits a colorless, odorless fume that kills birds immediately. There used to be a thought that only nonstick cookware that was burned or overheated emitted the fume, but there have been cases where birds have died from normal cooking temperatures. Why take the chance? A bird dying of this kind of poisoning dies a horrible, agonizing death, and there's no antidote.



WARNING

Birds have also died from self-cleaning ovens during the cleaning process. Make sure you remove your parrot from the house during your oven's self-cleaning, and ventilate the house well before bringing him back inside.

Nonstick surfaces can be found in the items in the following list:

- » Heat lamps
- » Portable heaters
- » Plates on irons
- » Ironing-board covers
- » Stove-top burners
- » Drip pans for burners
- » Broiler pans
- » Griddles
- » Cooking utensils
- » Woks
- » Waffle makers
- » Electric skillet
- » Deep fryers
- » Slow cookers
- » Popcorn poppers
- » Coffeemakers
- » Bread makers
- » Nonstick rolling pins
- » Lollipop and other candy molds
- » Stock pots
- » Roasters
- » Pizza pans
- » Curling irons
- » Anything else considered nonstick

Household products

Products that you regularly use in your home can be deadly to your parrot. These products include cleansers and candles, items you wouldn't think of as poisonous. When cleaning your bird's cage, rinse it thoroughly before placing the bird back

inside. Opt for safer cleansers, such as baking soda as an abrasive cleanser and vinegar or grapefruit seed extract as a disinfectant. These things will not harm your bird.

Here's a partial list of common household products that you should keep far away from your parrot:

- » Barbecue items, charcoal, and lighter fluid
- » Cleansers, soaps, and detergents
- » Scented candles, candle beads, air fresheners, and potpourri
- » Gasoline, kerosene, and other fuels
- » Liquid drain cleaners
- » Insecticides, rodent poisons, and roach and rodent traps
- » Paint, paint thinners, and turpentine
- » Crayons, markers, pens, and pencils
- » Fertilizers

Symptoms of poisoning include vomiting; paralysis; bleeding from the eyes, nares, mouth, or vent; seizures; and shock. Parrot-proofing your home should help eliminate the danger of poisoning; however, accidents can occur even in the best of circumstances. Refer to Chapter 6 for ways to parrot-proof your house.



WARNING

If you believe your parrot has come into contact with poison, call your avian veterinarian immediately and then call one of several animal poison control hotlines. You can find them with a quick search online. Rushing to your avian veterinarian is key to saving your bird's life, though rapid first-aid from you with the help of an expert on the phone can be critical to saving your bird.

Poisonous houseplants

Most people have houseplants, and most parrots are curious, which isn't a good combination. Your parrot won't hesitate to nibble (or even feast) on your houseplants, and some of them can be deadly. The same goes for cut flowers you may bring home on special occasions, as well as mistletoe, holly, and your Christmas tree and wreathes, which may have been sprayed with poisons.



WARNING

Never, ever let your parrot have full run of your houseplants, and be careful about the tree limbs that you use as perches if you're inclined to make your own. Fresh tree branches are a wonderful addition to a parrot's environment, but only if they're from a safe tree and are free of pesticides and fertilizers. Wash all plants and tree parts thoroughly before placing them near your bird.

Some common plants and trees that could harm your bird include amaryllis, caladium, holly, hyacinth, iris, juniper, larkspur, oleander, philodendron, poinsettia, rhododendron, and wisteria.

Ceiling fans

Birds instinctually fly to the highest point they can reach, and this is often the ceiling fan. A whirling ceiling fan and a bird flying around the room are a deadly combination. In a tangle, the fan will win every time.



WARNING

If you have a ceiling fan, make sure it's off when your bird is out of the cage.

Toxic foods

Most foods are fine to share with your parrot, but some can be deadly or at the very least make him sick. Here's a list of foods never to share:

- » **Alcohol:** Alcohol is toxic for birds (for humans too in large quantities, actually). Some people think it's funny to give their bird a sip of an alcoholic beverage. Not only is it not funny, it's also deadly.
- » **Chocolate:** Chocolate is toxic to birds. I've seen a particular macaw in a pet shop offered chocolate candies with no immediate ill effect, but I don't know what happened to that bird in the long run.
- » **Caffeine:** Caffeine is toxic for birds. No coffee or tea for Polly.
- » **Avocado:** There's a substance in avocado called *persin* that's toxic for birds. Don't share your guacamole!
- » **Pits:** Some seeds and pits are toxic for birds, such as those in peaches, nectarines, and plums. Remove them from fruits before serving.
- » **Rhubarb:** Evidence suggests rhubarb is toxic for parrots. I've never needed to offer it to my birds, so I don't really know for sure about this one, but better safe than sorry. I've heard that it's the skin of rhubarb that's particularly toxic.
- » **Raw onions:** There's no evidence that raw onions will kill a bird, but they might make him ill. Well-cooked onions are okay in moderation if they're in something that you're eating and want to offer your bird. Same for garlic. Many sources say never to feed onions or garlic, but in my experience they are okay in very small amounts.

Electrocution

Most parrots are curious and love to chew. They might think that what they think is a rope and a new toy, but it's really an electrical cord. A determined parrot can chew right through an electrical cord and electrocute himself. Keep all cords wound up and tucked neatly away, out of the reach of your bird.



TIP

If there are some cords that you can't put away, buy a length of plastic tubing from any hardware store, slice it open lengthwise, and fit it around the length of the cord.

Feet and doors

Allowing your parrot free-roaming privileges on the floor is a good way to get him crunched. Someone might not know he's there, or you may lose sight of him, and the next thing you know, he's under your shoe. Many birds have been killed this way. It's worse when your bird is similar to the color of your floor, for example, if you have an albino cockatiel and white carpeting, (though I don't know any bird guardian that would have white carpeting!), or green carpeting and a green parrot.

A parrot roaming the floor also has the potential to be crunched in a closing door (or be eaten by another pet). The floor is an unnatural place for a bird, who feels safest in a high spot. You can play with your bird on the floor, but please supervise.

Lead and other heavy metals

Stained glass and chipping paint can both contain lead, and your curious parrot may want to see what those things taste like. The same holds true for jewelry parts, lead weights, and fishing lures. Metal poisoning is difficult to treat and causes an agonizing death. Keep all metals away from your bird.



WARNING

Many people make bird cages from galvanized wire because it's rust resistant. This wire is dipped in zinc, which is deadly to birds, who are likely to hang on to the bars of their cage and ingest the zinc particles. Scrub any new caging material vigorously with a wire brush and vinegar, rinse thoroughly, and leave the wire out in the weather for several weeks before housing birds inside a cage made from galvanized wire. It's best to find nongalvanized wire, though it can be hard to find and is pricier than galvanized wire.

Mirrors and clean glass

A squeaky-clean windowpane may be invisible to a parrot, who might think that it's his chance to go winging to the great outdoors, only to find himself with a broken neck. A clean mirror also looks like a clear flight path. The good news here

is that you may now officially keep your windows and mirrors dirty. Yes, that's right, having a bird gives you a great excuse never to do windows again. You can also purchase stickers and place them on your windows or hang an attractive *plastic* window decoration (not stained glass).

A young bird that's not a skilled flyer yet might even bump painfully into walls and furniture. Don't let your young bird have full flight in the house until he understands his flying abilities.

Night thrashing

Some parrots, cockatiels and ringnecks somewhat more than other species, have *night thrashing* or *night frights*. That's when a parrot, for no reason clearly apparent to its human friends, throws itself violently against the cage bars at night, often resulting in broken feathers and injured eyes and feet. The reason for night thrashing is unknown, but it may be caused by a scare in the night. Even something as minor as a car door slamming in the neighbor's driveway can cause a thrashing episode.



TIP

To prevent or stop night thrashing, add a nightlight to the room where your parrot sleeps. This will enable him to see in the darkness and feel a little more secure. If you cover your parrot's cage, leave one side of the cage uncovered so that there's some light getting through. If your parrot still has night frights, consider a sleeping cage that's free of toys and a lot of perches.

Temperature changes

Parrots can stand a wide temperature range, say, between 55 and 99 degrees Fahrenheit, but are prone to chill, frostbite, or overheating when the temperature goes to an extreme beyond the comfort range. Avoid this by making sure that your parrot lives in a controlled environment where the temperature is constant — 70–85 degrees Fahrenheit is comfortable for a parrot. Fluctuations in temperature, like the kind that happen in a kitchen or bathroom, should be avoided on a long-term basis.

Frostbite

Frostbite may cause the loss of toes or feet, or even cause death. If you keep your parrots outdoors during the cold time of year, consider bringing them inside on the coldest nights. Your parrot will carry the painful frostbitten foot as though it were broken. The frostbitten area will eventually die, and the flesh will change to a dark color. If you discover this condition, place your bird in a warm hospital cage and call the veterinarian immediately (refer to the section, “Creating a Hospital Cage,” later in this chapter).

Overheating

Overheating is a little simpler to deal with, especially if you catch it early enough. If you notice your parrot panting, standing with his wings open, or lying on the floor of the cage or carrier, he may be overcome with heat. If you know it's going to be hot where your parrot is kept, keep a spray bottle handy and lightly mist him with cool water, repeating the misting until he's soaked to the skin. Watch him closely until his manner seems normal. In warm weather or when traveling in the summer, make sure that your bird *always* has cool water to drink. Parrots should by no means be kept in full sunlight unless they have a shaded spot where they can get out of the sun.

If your parrot doesn't respond to the cool misting, remove him from the warm spot immediately, and place him in a cooler location. If you have a fan, place the flow of air on the cage, and mist him again. As he recovers, move the flow of air so that it's not directly on him. Put small drops of cool water into his beak if he's unable to drink, but be careful not to aspirate him. Call your avian veterinarian right away.

Oil on feathers

Oil on the feathers makes it impossible for a bird to regulate its body temperature and is a serious condition that must be treated by an avian veterinarian. According to Murphy's Law, if there's one place where your parrot will land, it's in a pot of oil, and ideally, that oil won't be hot!

If your bird gets soaked in oil, dust him with flour or cornstarch, blot him with paper towels, and then give him a warm bath in a tub filled with warm water and some very mild, grease-fighting dish soap. Don't scrub the bird or dunk its head. Simply allow him to soak, and repeat the bath several times. Place him in a warm hospital cage, and take him to the avian veterinarian as soon as you can.

Broken blood feathers and bleeding nails

A broken feather and a bleeding nail are small wounds and can often be treated successfully at home. Styptic powder or a styptic pen used to be the way most birdkeepers dealt with the situation, but that stuff can be quite stinging on skin. Instead, use regular baking flour or cornstarch. Apply a small mound of the flour directly to the wound, and that should stop the bleeding immediately. Use styptic powder for nails only.

Physical injuries and seizures

Fractures, beak, eye, and foot injuries and seizures are all cause for calling your avian veterinarian right away and rushing to the office for treatment. In the meantime, place your parrot in a warm hospital cage and make him feel

comfortable. Transport him in the hospital cage if you can. Leaving him in his regular cage can cause more injury if he thrashes against the bars or toys.



TIP

An unconscious bird may be suffering from a toxin in the air. Ventilate the room well and try to revive your bird by taking him to a different area of the home. If he doesn't revive quickly, contact your avian veterinarian right away.

Flying away

I can't tell you how many people I've known who have lost a bird to an open window or door. It has happened to me three times over the years, and I consider myself a very careful guardian (two of the birds actually returned).

If your bird is unclipped or if you suspect that the clip is growing out, be very careful about open windows and doors. Even a clipped parrot can get pretty far if the wind is right. Keep screens on your windows, and make sure your bird is in her cage when you open the door. Never, ever take your parrot outdoors on your shoulder. You'd be surprised at how far she can get, and there's always the danger of a hawk swooping down and grabbing her. Some people use a "flight suit" or a harness, but many parrots won't tolerate such items. Taking your bird outside, including to the vet, means using a carrier (see Figure 10-6).



FIGURE 10-6: When you visit the avian veterinarian, be sure to take your bird there in a safe, sturdy carrier.

Photo by Angela Cancilla Herschel

Watching your parrot fly away is a tragic experience, one of the worst moments in a birdkeeper's life. If you keep your parrot's wings clipped, there will be less of a chance that you'll lose him. But even if your parrot flies away, all hope isn't lost — many people ultimately retrieve their birds. Here are some tips on how to do that:

- » The first thing to do is note which direction your parrot flew and try to keep him in sight as long as you can. Knowing the general direction can help later in trying to get him back. If you can, go to the spot where you think he went. If you can see him, try to tempt him down with a piece of millet or some nuts.
- » A cagemate is also a big temptation to return, so if you have other birds, bring them outside in a safe carrier.
- » Don't yell or throw things at him. Be cheerful and encouraging.
- » Take his cage outside (or a smaller cage that he knows), and fill it with his favorite foods and lots of water. He may come down and enter the cage when he gets hungry.
- » A good thing to have on hand *before* this happens is a tape of your parrot's vocalizations so that you can play the tape back to him. This may get him to come down from the treetops.
- » If your parrot hasn't come down by nightfall and you have an idea of where he is, you can climb up and catch him. A bird net is really helpful at this time. Birds don't see well at night and are easier to catch then.
- » If you don't retrieve your bird by the first evening, it's time to create signs. Post the bird's photo on the sign, or clip out a picture of a similar-looking parrot from a book. Parrots can fly long distances, so you'll want to cover a large area.
- » Call your local bird club and pet shops and tell them about your lost bird in case someone contacts them about a bird they've found. Post the loss and his picture on the Internet as well. There are a lot of local lost pet groups on Facebook. Offering a reward is a good way to get your bird back.

In most cases, a tame parrot will fly to someone when he gets hungry or lonely. He may land on someone's shoulder, and ideally, that person will be conscientious enough to check the local paper for a lost bird.



TIP

Microchipping a parrot is common these days. The veterinarian injects a small microchip about the size of a grain of rice into the bird's chest muscle. The chip is encoded with information that will track back to you. Most shelters and veterinary offices have a scanner that can read the chip. I encourage you to microchip your larger parrots.

Unsafe toys

Toys with unsafe parts that can get caught on your parrot's toes, feet, neck, and beak are a big safety issue. Make sure that all toys are the appropriate size for your parrot and that your bird can't fit its head into any of the rings on the toy. Make sure that all metal parts are stainless steel and that all of the clips close securely with a thread (like a screw), not a spring clip or carabiner. Also, avoid toys with jingle bells, because the slots can catch a small toenail or beak.



WARNING

Toys made of fabric material can be deadly for your bird. Not only can the parrot ingest this material, but it may also chew a hole into it and hang itself. Cotton rope toys are fine, but make sure to trim all strings as they come unraveled or they can pose a choking hazard. If your bird is too into its rope toys, he can ingest the rope and create a deadly intestinal blockage. See Chapter 6 for more information on safe and unsafe toys.

Humans

Humans are by far the most deadly household danger for a parrot. Whether through neglect or abuse or accident, most parrot injuries and deaths are directly attributed to humans. Children, the inebriated, and houseguests who know nothing about birds all pose risks. Keep your bird safe by creating strict rules and sticking to them.



WARNING

Don't leave your parrot unattended with people who may pose a threat to him. If you have a party where alcohol is involved, move your bird to a safe, locked room. Drunk guests may try to do something strange to the bird or try to feed him alcohol or other unsafe foods.



TIP

Children may want to pay your bird a lot of unwanted attention, particularly by sticking their fingers into the cage or even shaking or banging on the cage. Create a birdy safe space on the floor using painter's tape around your bird's cage. Tell children that they aren't allowed inside the taped-off space. This safe space will go a long way toward a child injuring your bird or your bird biting a child.

Caring for an Older Parrot

Some larger parrots can get to be 80 or 100 years old. It's rare, but it happens, usually with birds who live in a careful and thoughtful zoo-type situation and have been allowed to enjoy the sun, live in a safe space where they can fly, and have been fed healthy foods. Smaller birds, like lovebirds and cockatiels, reach their golden years when they're around 10, medium-size birds around the age of 15 to 20, and large birds around 25 to 30.

Your older parrot may need some extra heat on cold days, and his eyesight might go a little bit. He may want to sleep more. He may be quieter than he once was, and he may want to sleep on the bottom of the cage because his feet get sore. Offer him a wide, flat perch or a platform where he can rest his feet and legs.

Keep in mind that most house parrots don't live out their full lifespans. A careful, cautious, and considerate birdkeeper can give a parrot a full, happy life. You're very lucky to have an elderly parrot! Treasure every day with him.

Handling an Emergency

Any time you feel, for one moment, that your bird has been injured, is ill, or is in danger, is an emergency. Parrots are sensitive birds that can go into shock from an event that you may consider minor, such as a bleeding toenail or flying into a wall and seeming to recover. Would you rather lose your bird because you took a cavalier attitude toward a seemingly minor accident?



TIP

Keep important birdy phone numbers close at hand, including your avian veterinarian's number, the number of a 24-hour animal medical service, a neighbor's number (if they're familiar with your bird), the number of your bird sitter if you have one, a family member, and the number of someone who has keys to your home. Your cell phone is an obvious place for these numbers, but I recommend also writing them by hand on index cards. Keep one card with you at all times; place one by each phone in the house if you have land line; hang one on the refrigerator; place one in your parrot first-aid kit; tape one to your parrot's carrier and one to your bird's cage; and give one to your bird sitter, one to your neighbor, one to a concerned family member, and one to the person with your house keys. You can also print some very basic bird-care tips and tape them to the backs of the cards.

Buy "In Case of Fire" stickers (available in most pet shops or online) indicating the types and location of your animals on them, and post the stickers on each door in your home.

Often, when you have to medicate or examine your bird, you'll have to towel him — that is, wrap her safely in a towel so he can't move or bite you. For proper toweling technique and a photo of a properly toweled bird, see Chapter 9. For tips on how to socialize your bird to the towel, check out Chapter 16.

Medicating Your Parrot

If your avian veterinarian has treated your parrot and sent you home with medication, be diligent about giving the proper amount and continuing the medication for the allotted time. Make sure that your veterinarian shows you the proper way to administer the medication and that you are clear on how to do it before you leave the office.

If you're not comfortable giving the medication in a certain manner — injections, for example — make that concern known. Most likely you'll simply be mixing something up into the water or giving a bit of medication orally with a needleless syringe. You'll have to learn to hold your parrot properly to administer oral medication, so be sure to ask your veterinarian to show you how.



WARNING

Never, ever give your parrot human medicine at any time. I can't tell you how many times people have called or emailed me that they've been offering their bird antihistamines, antacids, and leftover human prescriptions. A great many human medicines are toxic and deadly to parrots, so don't treat your bird and without a veterinarian. Also, an inquisitive parrot may be able to break through pill packaging to get to what he thinks are seeds inside. Keep all medicine out of reach of your parrot.

Creating a Hospital Cage

A *hospital cage* is essential for comforting an ill or injured bird. It offers warmth and a safe space to recuperate. Your parrot's regular cage may have items such as toys that he can injure himself on, it might not be warm enough, or his cagemates may pick on him while he's ill.

To make a hospital cage, line a ten-gallon fish tank (or larger for a bigger bird) with a few layers of white paper towels. These are easy to replace, making cleaning the cage easy. Place a screen on top and a dark towel covering $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of the cage top and sides. Don't cover the entire cage with the towel. Place a heating pad on medium heat under half of the cage. Your parrot should have the option of moving away from the heat. Place a cup of seeds and millet spray in the cage. I recommend seeds because they're tempting for any parrot, and you'll want your sick bird to eat something. Think of seeds as a bird's comfort food. Also include a very shallow dish of water. A weak bird can drown in even a half-inch of water.

Don't place toys or perches in the cage, but you can place a rolled-up, regular, cotton hand towel in one corner so that your bird can perch or snuggle up to it if he wants to. Place the hospital cage in a quiet, safe place where your bird can recuperate undisturbed.

Creating a Parrot First-Aid Kit

Always have a parrot first-aid kit on hand for any emergency. Buy a small tackle box or other container to keep all the items in so that you won't have to go rushing around the house in search of something you need. Keep it near or inside your parrot's travel cage, which you should have ready to go at a moment's notice. Don't ever try to treat a serious emergency yourself, though in some cases, the veterinarian might talk you through a procedure on the phone. Here's what a parrot first-aid kit should contain:

- » Antibiotic ointment (for small wounds; non-greasy)
- » Bandages and gauze
- » Bottled water (you may need clean, fresh water to flush out a wound or clean your bird)
- » Baby bird formula (can be used for adult parrots that are having a difficult time eating)
- » Cornstarch and baking flour (to stop bleeding)
- » Cotton balls
- » Cotton tips
- » Dishwashing detergent (mild)
- » Eye wash
- » Electrolyte replacement (great for reviving a weak bird)
- » Nongreasy first-aid lotion
- » Heating pad (always allow a bird the option of moving off of a heating pad)
- » Hydrogen peroxide (always use in a weak solution with water)

- » Nail clippers
- » Nail file
- » Needle-nosed pliers (for broken blood feathers)
- » Penlight
- » Rubbing alcohol (for tools)
- » Saline solution
- » Sanitary wipes
- » Sharp scissors
- » Syringe (without needle)
- » Styptic powder for nails (to stop bleeding)
- » Small, clean towels (for holding or swabbing)
- » Spray bottle (for misting)
- » Tweezers
- » Veterinarian's phone number
- » A sealed bag or can of your bird's base diet (in case of evacuation due to extreme weather or other circumstances)

WHAT TO DO IF A PARROT BREAKS YOUR SKIN

Rarely will a transmittable disease occur from a bird bite, even if the skin is broken. Most diseases passed from bird to human are airborne. A parrot's mouth is basically dry, so the chance of infection from bacteria the bird is harboring in its mouth is slim, though it can happen. If I had a dime for every time I've been nipped by a bird . . . I'd have at least five bucks. I have the scars to prove it. Simply wash your wound, apply some ointment and an adhesive bandage, and learn from the experience.

4

Parrot Behavior Made Simple

IN THIS PART . . .

Get the clear picture about instincts in wild parrots and how they can show up in your parrot.

Examine your parrot's normal behaviors, things you can expect from every bird, such as foraging behaviors and breeding behavior.

Discover how to create harmony in a multiple parrot household.

Figure out how to lessen or eliminate undesirable behaviors.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Discovering what parrots and dinosaurs have in common
- » Following the life of a wild parrot
- » Understanding the plight of wild-caught parrots
- » Recognizing normal bird instincts

Chapter **11**

Understanding Your Wild Child's Instincts

Parrots in the wild and parrots in a human home have a lot in common in terms of natural instincts, though they lead very different lives. Understanding something about how parrots exist in the wild and how their instincts work will help you better care for your bird. If you can get inside that bird brain, you have a better shot at having a mutually fulfilling relationship.

Most scholars agree that birds are modern-day dinosaurs. They're certainly descended from dinosaurs and share some remarkable similarities, such as hollow bones. Species in the *Psittacosaurus* genus had a beaklike mouth 100 million years ago. Remember, parrots are in the *Psittacidae* family. One of the first birds, *archaeopteryx*, was really a dinosaur with featherlike constructions on winglike limbs. Your parrot pal has roots going back a long time.

This chapter takes you on a journey through your parrot's physical and emotional life, including his natural instincts and how to handle them.

Looking At a Daily Life of Parrots in the Wild

Even though a parrot lives in your home, she is still programmed with the behavior she needs to survive in her native habitat. These distinctions may not be completely clear if you're keeping parrots as companions, but people who breed parrots know quite well that not all parrots nest in the same manner. Here are a few interesting examples:

- » Patagonian conures burrow deep into limestone or earth cliffs to nest.
- » Quaker parrots build elaborate, giant, communal stick-nests.
- » Some lovebird species (and Quaker parrots) are the only parrots to actually build nests. All others find or dig holes in trees and other places.
- » Brown-throated, Aztec, and half-moon conures (among several others) excavate termite mounds and make nests in them.

The climate and terrain that parrots live in also contribute to their behavior, nutritional needs, and housing requirements. Here are a few distinct examples:

- » New Zealand's mountain parrot, the Kea, lives in high altitudes in the cold and snow.
- » Lories have brushlike tongues that help them eat pollen and nectar from flowers.
- » Blue-crowned hanging parrots sleep hanging upside down.
- » The night parrot of Australia is nocturnal and feeds and drinks after dark. It's also one of three ground parrots that is mainly terrestrial.
- » Bourke's parakeets become active at twilight and are known to fly around on moonlit nights.
- » Hyacinth macaws eat a fatty diet primarily consisting of nuts. They even eat nuts that have been digested by cattle (yes, they eat them right out of cow patties).
- » Some macaws, Amazons, and conures eat clay at clay lick cliffs in South America (see Figure 11-1). These clay cliffs supposedly contain minerals that the parrots need or that the clay purifies the parrots' systems due to the toxic vegetation that they eat. The act of eating dirt is called *geophagia*.



FIGURE 11-1:
In South America,
wild macaws like
this blue and gold
regularly visit a
mineral clay lick.

Photo by Bonnie Zimmerman

THE SPIX'S MACAW

The Spix's macaw is the most endangered parrot in the world. If you've seen the animated movies, *Rio* or *Rio 2*, you may know something about this very rare bird. The last Spix's macaw (*Cyanopsitta spixii*) disappeared from the wild in 2000 due to poaching and the destruction of their natural habitat, despite measures to help reintroduce the birds to their native habitat. In 2002, a fortunate event occurred when a 25-year-old Spix's male, Presley, was discovered living as a pet in a Colorado home. It was a remarkable find.

After losing its mate of another species, the bird's human family decided to give him up and add him to the sorely lacking Spix's gene pool. He was moved to Brazil, but never mated, and died in 2013. They removed his testicles in hopes that someday they may be able to use them in a breeding program. In 2020, there are said to be fewer than 160 Spix's macaws in captivity and none in the wild. Fortunately, breeding programs have helped the captive population, and in 2020, 52 Spix's were prepared for introduction into the wild in Brazil.

As you can see, some parrots lead very different lives in the wild. Knowing something about the habits of your parrot's species can help you better care for her.

The daily life of a wild parrot is different for every species. Species that live in similar environments generally share similar habits. For example, the budgie, cockatiel, and other Australian grass parakeets forage, drink, and nest in the same areas.

In general, there's a breeding season and an off season. Some parrots have to deal with periods of drought, the end of which usually triggers the breeding season. Some parrots nest, rear, and wean young in a matter of months, for example, the budgie. Others, such as the hyacinth macaw, keep their young around for years, even after they've left the nest.

A wild parrot spends most the day foraging for food. Some species fly for miles to find a fruiting tree. Some parrots eat more than 75 types of plant material in the wild, far more than any guardian can ever hope to offer in captivity. Many fruits are eaten just before they ripen, some are eaten just after, and some fruits are opened only for their seeds. Most parrots feed in the morning, take an afternoon siesta, and then feed again close to dusk. Some forage all day, especially those that live where a wet season brings abundant food. Some parrots feed high in the rain-forest canopy; others feed on the ground.

THE CAROLINA PARAKEET

The only true native parrot to the United States was the Carolina parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*), now extinct. These 12-inch parrots vaguely resembled the jenday conure and could be seen in large flocks from Nebraska to New York to Florida. Because they frequently raided crops, farmers killed them in large numbers because they were pests, and milliners (hat makers) killed them in flocks for their feathers (to put on the hats).

By the mid-1800s, their numbers declined drastically, and they weren't seen outside of Florida. When it was clear they were becoming extinct, the remaining specimens were killed ruthlessly for their skins. The last flock of them was seen in Florida in 1920. In 1918, the last Carolina parakeet in captivity died in the Cincinnati Zoo. The species was declared extinct in 1939. You can see stuffed specimens of Carolina parakeets at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C.

Appreciating the Plight of Wild-Caught Parrots

On October 23, 1992 the United States passed the Wild Bird Conservation Act, which banned the importation of wild-caught parrots into the country. Quarantine stations that served as holding places for these birds were closed. I happened to attend one of the last bird auctions at one of the last quarantine stations in South Florida. Thousands of wild-caught birds were there, all crammed into small cages, numbered, and being sold to the highest bidder. Many of the larger birds were plucked, injured, and in bad shape. These birds had known freedom not long before, but now they were a long way from home, up for bid to anyone who had the money to take them home. It was a very sad scene, but it represented an end to the plight of wild-caught parrots in the United States. That was a huge victory for conservationists. The only parrots that can be caught and brought into the United States now are those that aviculturists petition for because they are endangered or threatened with extinction. The petition can take years. Europe continued importing wild caught parrots, but placed a permanent ban on the practice in 2007.

The closing of the quarantine stations was a bittersweet victory. Capture and exportation of wild-caught parrots continue as other parts of the world still accept them into the pet trade. Also, poachers and smugglers continue to raid nests, steal babies, and capture adult birds. Many of these birds don't survive the first few days in captivity. Many don't know how to eat the food offered and starve to death. The babies are improperly fed and die either from infection or from choking on the food being stuffed down their throats. The parrots that do survive are often improperly packed for the long trip to their final destination, and many die in transit. Of the individuals that make it to their destination, many more die from improper care and handling or from the stress of their ordeal. There are no humane means of capturing a parrot, and it's critical that this trade not be supported. If you suspect a smuggled bird, please contact your local Fish and Game or Fish and Wildlife authorities.



WARNING

It's not only the plight of the captured parrots that's a concern. The remaining parrots in the wild are also compromised. Poachers chop down hollow trees that are irreplaceable nesting sites. With fewer nesting sites, the parrots don't go back to nest. When adult birds are captured, one of a pair may remain, and this lone bird has to find a new mate and begin nesting all over again. These factors add to the declining parrot populations all over the world.

The reason for the success of this industry isn't because parrots are beautiful and intelligent. Business is business, and the bottom line is money. The end user, the consumer, may love parrots, but to the trappers, the parrots represent a job. Unfortunately, their job is deadly.

In some cases, wild-caught birds can make good companions. I've had many myself, but only one really enjoyed my company: a mealy Amazon, tamed long before someone gave him to me. The others, always skittish or ferocious, were rescues I took on after their previous guardians couldn't handle them anymore. If you encounter a wild-caught parrot today, you can be sure that it was hatched prior to October of 1992.

This section shows how similar your parrot is to its wild cousins in the rainforest, in the plains and savannahs, in the marshy swamps, and in the cold, craggy mountains.

Differentiating between wild caught and captive bred

Aviculture has made giant strides in the past decade, and handfed baby birds have flooded the pet trade, especially in the United States. Handfed babies make superior companions to wild-caught birds simply because they're socialized to humans and to human sounds and objects from the time they open their eyes. They're exposed to the microbes on people's hands and in the environment and build immunity to them, giving them an advantage over their wild cousins. Though handfed babies have instincts that are a sort of shadow memory of the jungle, a handfed baby knows only humans and their ways if she has been properly socialized, though many babies aren't.



TIP

How can you tell a wild-caught bird from a captive-bred bird? It's not always easy. For starters, you can look for a closed band on the bird's leg. A *closed band* is one that was slipped over the bird's foot and onto its leg when the bird was a tiny baby. This kind of band isn't possible to slip onto an adult's leg. The band will have numbers and letters on it, indicating where the bird was hatched, the year, and the breeder's initials. An *open band* is one that was clamped onto an adult bird's leg and is often associated with wild-caught birds, though it doesn't offer conclusive proof. Bands are easily cut off, so a bird without a band isn't identifiable as wild caught or captive bred. A wild caught bird would be quite old by now; even though parrots don't get gray hair or wear reading glasses, it's often difficult to tell the age of a bird.

Finding a knowledgeable bird breeder with a good reputation is a great way to find a captive-bred, handfed baby. It's unlikely that any breeder these days is involved in the wild-bird smuggling trade, though not impossible. There are unscrupulous people in any business. Beware very inexpensive birds that should fetch a much higher price.

Getting involved: Conservation organizations

If you want to become involved in parrot conservation, check out what some organizations are doing to help the plight of wild parrots:

- » **The World Parrot Trust:** www.worldparrottrust.org. Restores and protects populations of wild parrots and their native habitats; promotes awareness of the threats to all parrots, captive and wild; opposes the trade in wild-caught parrots, educates the public on high standards for the care and breeding of parrots; and encourages links between conservation and aviculture.
- » **Project Bird Watch:** www.indonesian-parrot-project.org/index.php. An all-volunteer group committed to the conservation of Indonesia's parrots and cockatoos. The nonprofit corporation's mission is to help conserve endangered Indonesian cockatoos and parrots.
- » **Rare Species Conservatory Foundation:** www.rarespecies.org. A nonprofit organization dedicated to developing conservation strategies for saving endangered plants and animals, with the ultimate objective of restoring critical species in the wild.
- » **World Wildlife Federation:** www.wwf.org. Leads international efforts to protect endangered species and their habitats.

FERAL PARROTS IN THE UNITED STATES

You don't have to travel to South America or Australia to see parrots in the wild. Populations of wild feral parrots live and thrive all over the United States. No one really knows where these parrots came from, but the suspicion is that they aren't handfed companion parrots, but wild-caught parrots that escaped once they reached the United States. In most places, the parrots don't displace other species and don't destroy native flora, so they aren't a nuisance (though some feral Quaker parrots build extensive nests on power lines and cause power outages). Maui, Hawaii, which has no native parrots, is monitoring its flock of feral mitted conures and a flock of lovebirds in case the parrots begin to displace native species.

One of the most famous feral parrot populations is the "Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill" in San Francisco, a flock of cherry-headed conures (see Mark Bittner's book on the topic, as well as the film about it released in 2005). San Francisco also has a flock of Brotogeris parrots. In South Florida, you'll find huge flocks of Quaker parrots, as well as in Connecticut, Alabama, Texas, Delaware, Illinois, Virginia, Louisiana, New York, New Jersey, Oregon, and Rhode Island. South Florida also has flocks of nandy conures, Amazon parrots, a variety of other conures, and macaws. Some suburbs of Phoenix, Arizona, have flocks of hundreds of peach-faced lovebirds.

Understanding Your Parrot's Instincts

Instincts are an inborn patterns of behavior or responses to specific stimuli. *Reflexes* are part of instinct as well. For example, when an object flies at your face, your reflexes force you to close your eyes — it's impossible to keep them open. Reflexes are immediate reactions to stimuli. Instincts include more complex automatic behaviors. Humans have an instinct to make a crying child stop — crying is designed to get adult human attention. Parrots have all kinds of reflexes and instincts that rule their behavior, too.

Your parrots' instincts, which I discuss in these sections, are pretty much going to remain intact; you won't be able to modify them much. Parrots do have an incredible capacity to learn and modify their behavior based on their environment, but reflex and instinct nearly always take the front seat. For example, a parrot can become used to the family dog, a predator, but that doesn't extend to every dog. If a strange dog comes over, the parrot may fear it as it would any predator.

Being the prey

All parrots are *prey* animals, meaning that predators, like hawks and snakes, will eat them. That's one reason parrots can see nearly 360 degrees around them. Most parrots are fearful or suspicious of quick movements, which is why children need to be taught to move slowly and talk quietly around parrots. Predators are quick, and parrots instinctively know that they have to be quicker to get out of the way or risk becoming lunch. A parrot's instinct is to be wary of any animal with eyes on the front of its head (as opposed to the sides), and to approach new people and objects with caution.



REMEMBER

Most animals have a *fight or flight* instinct. When cornered by something dangerous, they choose to either flee or physically defend themselves. Your parrot would certainly rather use the *flight* option. However, a parrot with clipped wings can't fly. Sure, it may be able to flutter away or run as fast as its little birdy feet will carry it, but that's not quite good enough. This is why many parrots choose *fight* — or *bite*. Fully flighted parrots that are allowed to have some self-direction are less likely to bite.

Finding a high spot

Parrots like to be in the highest spot they can find. They know instinctually that they can see predators better from there. This is why the curtain rods are such tempting perches. Some parrots do forage and dig on the ground, but these species are particularly attuned to movement and sound, and fly up and away at even the slightest hunch that danger is nearby.

Flocking

For the most part, parrots travel in *flocks*, social groups ranging in number from a handful to many hundreds of individuals. There's no real flock leader, but there are family groups of parents and siblings that live in the vicinity of other family groups. These groups forage together and help one another remain safe from predators. When one bird senses a threat, it sounds an alarm cry. Those parrots that forage on the ground, like grass parakeets and African greys, are particularly sensitive to movement and can become alarmed easily.



REMEMBER

Parrots in a large flock are also safer because the movement of many birds tends to confuse predators, making the birds harder to catch. Parrots that roost in flocks are also safer from nocturnal predators because one bird can warn hundreds with a warning call. Because parrots are so dependent on other members of the flock for survival, they tend to languish in homes where they don't get enough attention. A lone parrot tends to be a lonely parrot unless its human guardians give it an extraordinary amount of hands-on attention.



TIP

Technology has allowed guardians to tune in to their companion animals 24/7. A birdie cam is a fun accessory, especially one where you can see your parrot and he can see you. However, a camera isn't a substitute for hands-on attention. Your bird won't be as comforted or entertained by your image on a screen as he will when you're physically nearby.

Most parrots are incredibly tuned in to their flockmates. Some people even report that their parrots seem to be psychic. I tend to doubt that, but I know from experience that my parrots have an uncanny ability to *read* me, to somehow know what I'm thinking or feeling. The oddest thing I've ever experienced with any parrot continues to happen every day with my African grey. Every morning, the nanosecond that I wake up, my grey begins to vocalize. Now, if he was vocalizing before I woke up, I'd hear him and wake (I'm a light sleeper). I sleep with two walls and an air shaft between me and this bird, as well as with the door closed and a white-noise machine going. How does he do it? I can only assume that his senses are incredibly attuned to his flockmate, me.

Sleeping

Parrots retire to their favorite tree or nesting site just after dusk, settle in for the night, sleep quietly, and arise with the sun. Most parrots nap in the daytime, particularly those in warm climates where it doesn't pay to be flying around in the afternoon heat. Figure 11-2 shows a cockatoo sleeping with one foot drawn up into its belly and its head tucked onto its back. This is normal napping position. However, if your bird is doing this all day, with two feet on the perch instead of one, it could be an indication of illness.



FIGURE 11-2:
A sleeping
cockatoo.

Photo by Sherlynn Hogan

Some parrots, such as lovebirds, actually chatter in their sleep in the daytime. One theory is that if they're chattering, predators will believe that they're awake. I think the theory holds up, especially because they don't chatter like this when they sleep at night. Scientific studies on finches have shown that birds actually dream of their vocalizations while asleep. No one is really sure if parrots do this, but it's an interesting theory.

Vocalizing

Parrots vocalize most at dawn and dusk. In the morning, they tell other flock-mates that they're okay and have made it through the night. In the evening, they're telling flockmates that they've found a safe perch or are in the nest and that everything's okay. I admit that this is a very simplistic explanation of why these two times of day are so chatty for parrots, but because no one really knows what they're saying, it's as good an explanation as any.

Harvard biologist Michael Schindlinger has spent years studying the vocalizations of yellow-headed Amazons and has come to the conclusion that they have a complex and varied vocabulary. Each species has its own "language," as does the same

species of parrots living in different places. The language is passed from generation to generation. Parrots of the same species have the same basic vocalizations, but there are variations from area to area, kind of like a dialect. Schindlinger believes that studying the sounds of these parrots can help determine from where smuggled parrots were illegally poached. See www.freeparrots.net/parrots/ for more information on Schindlinger's Oratrix Project and his video *Stalking the Wild Amazons*.

Making a mess

Well, mess isn't an instinct, but it's worth mentioning here because it's something that wild parrots do. Wild parrots are just as messy as captive ones, but it's okay to be messy in the rainforest or on the plains. In these settings, food and chewed items that fall to the ground below become natural mulch, food for other animals, or grow into trees. But the real benefit for wild parrots is that they never really have to come in contact with their feces, a much cleaner situation than the average home. That's part of why it's important to use a cage with a grate and to clean often.

Blending into the background — Camouflage

Most parrots are colored so that they blend into their environment. Green parrots blend incredibly well into the canopy of the rainforest. Brightly colored birds in reds and blues, like the female eclectus, blend well into the shadows of dense foliage and in their nesting holes. Parrots that live in grasslands, such as budgies, often have stripes or blocky patterns similar to their environs. Those big white cockatoos may seem like they'd stand out on the Australian plains, and indeed they do, but when they're all together in a flock they tend to blend together, confusing a predator that needs to be able to distinguish one individual in order to pursue it. It's hard to believe that these large birds blend anywhere, especially with their antics — see Figure 11-3.

Making eye contact

Intense eye contact can be intimidating for a parrot, especially one that's skittish. Remember, you have eyes on the front of your head, not on the sides, and your parrot is ingrained to view you as a predator. Typically, handfed parrots get over this instinct pretty quickly.

FIGURE 11-3:
Parrots are natural acrobats. Their feet are built for climbing and hanging.



Photo by Patricia Long-Moss

Avoid staring directly at your parrot, or glaring, unless you know that this isn't going to bother him. If you're best buds, stare away! You can certainly look at a skittish parrot, but don't make a point of staring him down.



TIP

Sometimes, a hard squinty glare will stop a parrot in its tracks if it's doing something naughty. Don't overdo it, though, because your aim is just to let the bird know that you're not pleased with it, not to frighten it.

Picking a mate — gender preference in parrots

I'm putting this here because there is some basis in biology for parrots seeming to have a gender preference. Although this is mostly anecdotal, follow me here. Parrots recognize their parents and siblings, just like people do. When they become sexually mature, instinct tells them to leave the nest and go out to search for a mate. Through millions of years of programming, a single-and-ready-to-mingle parrot understands that he needs to go far enough to find a mate with more distant DNA. If he stays too near home, he'll be mingling with close relatives, and he knows it.

When a person handfeeds and weans a parrot, that bird will imprint on the that person as his biological parent. So, it stands to reason that when he becomes sexually mature, he'll be looking for someone who doesn't look like the person who handfed him. If a man handfed this bird, he may prefer female humans and vice versa. This isn't always the case, obviously, but it happens and may explain your parrot's choices.

Another reason for gender bias is that a parrot may have been mistreated by a previous guardian and will then reject that same gender. For example, if a woman hurt or traumatized this parrot, even without malice, he may then prefer men. Because your bird is attracted to a certain gender doesn't mean he was abused in the past and has nothing to do with sexuality. It may just mean that he's trying to find a suitable mate that doesn't remind him of his parent.



TIP

If you've brought home a new parrot and he seems to prefer everyone in the house of a certain gender, you may want to try mimicking that gender by speaking in a different octave, putting your hair up or down, or changing your clothing when dealing with the bird.

- » Addressing flying
- » Explaining preening and overpreening
- » Dancing around
- » Uncovering mating rituals

Chapter **12**

Recognizing Normal Companion Parrot Behaviors

Because the parrot is still essentially a wild animal, he comes into your home with all kinds of wild behaviors. A parrot isn't like a dog or a cat in the sense that he can be trained out of certain behaviors. A dog can be trained not to bark at the mailman or to go potty in the yard, but you're going to be hard pressed to teach your parrot not to vocalize loudly while you're on the phone. Instead of becoming angry at your bird for a natural and instinctual (or inadvertently taught) behavior, it's a good idea to simply accept that he may whistle incessantly while you're on a teleconference or phone call, so leave the room if you want a quieter conversation.

Wild parrots behave in a certain way to maximize their potential for staying alive and nesting successfully. Those are their primary goals. Your parrot has similar goals, even though he's in a way different environment. Your parrot will do some adapting to become a companion bird, but it's more likely that you'll have to adapt to his instinctual behaviors. Don't get mad, frustrated, or emotionally distraught at your parrot's behavior. He's just being a bird, after all. It's not personal.

Many an avian veterinarian has seen a healthy parrot come through the office attached to a frantic guardian. That's not to say that you shouldn't take your bird for medical care if you suspect a problem, but knowing what your parrot's normal behaviors are can be helpful so that you can save yourself a trip. I discuss more about unwanted behaviors in Chapter 14. For now, this chapter gives you the run-down of basic, normal behaviors that can sometimes be puzzling.

Examining Your Parrot's Most Natural Behavior — Flying

Flying is natural for a parrot. However, it's a behavior that many guardians typically take away from their parrots. There's a widely perpetuated myth that a bird whose wing feathers are intact (not clipped) won't remain tame or will be difficult to handle. From a strictly behavioral standpoint, that's absolutely false. Yes, a bird may require clipping during the taming process to keep it from flying out of your hands, but a tame bird that is fully flighted may actually be much friendlier and more at ease than one that's clipped. (Check out Chapter 9 for more about clipping wings.)

Flying has tremendous health and psychological benefits too, as I outline elsewhere in this book. It also has its safety pros and cons. But in terms of behavior, there's no reason why a parrot needs to be clipped. A parrot that is allowed to realize his full potential as an individual is happier, more self-directed, and healthier, as long as he has a safe place to fly.

Even though I do advocate clipping a bird's wings during taming, even doing so isn't necessary if you have the right situation. For example, untamed birds in a free-flight habitat or large aviary (where you can enter and mingle among them) may take cues from the tame birds living with them. If the tame parrots land on you and choose to have physical contact with you, many of the untamed parrots will most likely check you out as well if you seem like a trustworthy creature. This won't happen with every individual parrot, of course, but it does happen.

Heading to the Heavens — Climbing

Parrots naturally want to be in the highest spot they can find, and if they can't fly there, they'll climb. Their instinct tells them that the higher they are, the safer they are, because they can see potential dangers from a lofty perch. Your parrot is no exception. He's most likely going to choose the highest perch in his cage as her sleeping spot.



TIP

Climbing around a cage does offer some exercise for your parrot, but it's not enough. Still, it's more than a lot of companion parrots get. If you can, offer a ladder and safe rope for some climbing fun. You can also buy a hanging gym — some come with great climbing potential. For your parrot's safety, get a *ceiling protector*, a slippery plastic rod that you attach between the gym and the ceiling to prevent your bird from climbing to the ceiling and chewing on the paint or plaster.

Hanging Out on the Ground — Foraging

Some parrots, particularly African grey parrots, cockatiels, cockatoos, and grass parakeets (which comprise a large group), forage on the ground for some of their foods. That's why some of these parrots like to dig in their cage tray; it's a natural instinct. Parrots are in more danger on the ground, certainly, but there are generally sentinel parrots in the group that keep an eye out for danger and give an alarm call if necessary.

People who keep parrots outside in a habitat know that they do spend a lot of time on the ground, foraging, playing, digging, or eating soil. Wild parrots have been observed many times eating soil and sand, though no one really knows why they do this. Presumably there are nutrients in the soil, or perhaps it's used as grit. Some parrot guardians use grit for this reason, but the fact is that the grit sold in stores is generally made of oyster shells or a type of gravel that they wouldn't naturally find in the wild. Many veterinarians have seen parrots die from too much grit, but it's doubtful that anyone has ever seen a parrot die from lack of grit. Best to stay away from it.



WARNING

A lot of veterinarians will tell you not to allow your bird to touch the ground outside for many reasons, including a fear of parasites and transmittable illnesses. It's unfortunate that most places where a parrot could potentially roam, like a backyard, are often sprayed with chemicals that have leached into the soil. The grass, plants, and dirt in the average yard aren't safe. If you had a safe place to allow your parrot to wander around on the natural earth, he would probably really appreciate it. Supervise carefully!

Gnawing to His Heart's Content — Chewing

Parrots love to chew and enjoy whittling away at a wooden toy or branch. This chewing behavior is completely normal and should be encouraged. In the wild, parrots chew bark and other vegetation seemingly to take nutrients out of the sap

(it's not certain why they do this). In your home, your parrot will also chew things to bits, even if there's no nutritious sap to be had, like in a paperback book (well, if it's a romance novel, perhaps it's sappy).

Some owners become frustrated that their parrots destroy household items. This destruction is part of the parrot's *job*. If you want to keep your wicker and wooden furniture intact, keep your parrot away from it. Don't expect that your parrot will know the difference between his playstand and the legs on your antique piano. Electronics aren't safe either. Look online at videos of parrots picking keys off a computer. Savage!

Provide your parrot with plenty of toys and perches to chew. I've heard inexperienced parrot guardians say, "I'm not going to keep buying my parrot these expensive toys/perches, because all he does is destroy them." Well, yeah, that's what he's supposed to do! (I discuss different types of toys in Chapter 6.)



TIP

If you have a real chewer on your hands, you can find some creative ways to help him get all of that energy out:

- » **Buy a coconut with all of the coco fiber still on it.** Chop the whole thing in half, and put it in the cage. (This follows the advice of parents in tropical regions everywhere: If you want to keep a kid quiet and occupied for a few hours, give her a coconut to crack.)
- » **Purchase natural woven baskets, and let your bird chew them up.** Make sure no chemicals were used in making the straw or the baskets and that there's no shellac on them.
- » **Make a parrot piñata.** Check out Chapter 6 for some directions. If you want to get fancy, you can papier-mâché using cornstarch and water to make a real piñata.
- » **Give your parrot a paper chewing toy.** A pad of blank newsprint makes a great chewing toy, as do a roll of calculator paper and a roll of white, unscented toilet paper or paper towels (after the parrot is done with the paper, take away the roll, because some cardboard glues contain lead).

Staying Completely Still — Freezing

I'm not talking about a parrot ice pops. Predators are attracted to movement, so freezing in place is one of the many defense mechanisms that the parrot uses to protect himself. Many predators can't see an animal if it's completely still because

their eyes are more attuned to movement than to color or pattern. The parrot hopes that freezing in place will help him become invisible to predators, but it's a funny behavior to humans, because you can still see the bird.

Chatting Up a Storm — Vocalization

Parrots in the wild vocalize to tell the other parrots that everything's okay, to warn the others of danger, to establish territory, to interest a mate, and to signal that food or water has been located. Your companion parrot vocalizes for many of the same reasons.

At dawn (or when you uncover the cage and let the light in), a companion parrot will begin to call his flock to say that he has made it through the night and that everything's all right with the world. Because your family is your parrot's flock, it's a nice gesture to call back to tell your bird that you're okay, too. You can do this by whistling or by calling out to your bird, using his name and telling him that you're also awake.

At dusk, the wild parrot will vocalize again to indicate that a sleeping location has been found and that all is safe and well with the world. This is a noisy time for a parrot, so be patient with him if he's screaming all throughout dinner. Bring him to the dinner table with you! I discuss more about unwanted and excessive vocalization in Chapter 14.

This section takes you through a variety of sounds you might hear your parrot make, and what they mean.

Contact calling

During the day, wild parrots *contact-call* to one another, which helps locate a mate or offspring among a crowd or in a vast space. Your parrot will contact-call you throughout the day to make sure you're in hearing range and that all is well with you. You should call back to him, letting him know you're fine. This will make him feel safe and may help quiet him down if he's being noisy. If you don't call back to him, he may continue calling until you do, which can lead to frustration on his part, and he may begin a habit of screaming and carrying on all day. Parrots don't like to feel that they're alone.

Screaming

A screaming parrot is cause for concern. There's a difference between insistent vocalization and screaming. Loud, insistent vocalization may be a call for attention or a response to external stimulation (such as a song on the radio or the vacuum cleaner). Genuine screaming is cause for alarm and is usually caused by pain, fright, or loneliness.

If you hear your parrot screaming, rush to his location to see what's wrong. Occasionally, a bird will learn that screaming draws his owner's attention, especially if he has trained you to rush to his location every time he screams. In general, though, a screaming parrot is legitimately calling for help or is so lonely that he has taken to screaming to get some attention, even if that attention is a guardian screaming back. I discuss screaming and how to quell it in Chapter 14.

Hissing

Hissing and spitting is the parrot's way of saying, "Back off." Cockatiels and Amazons often do this. A frightened parrot, or one that perceives a threat, will back away from the offender in a crouched posture, hissing and making little spitting noises. A very tame bird is unlikely to do this, but a semi-tame or untamed bird will use these techniques to ward off intruders to his space.

In general, hissing and spitting are bluffing behaviors, used to threaten the intruder and make her go away. The next response, if the intruder continues the advance, is generally flight. If the parrot is caged and can't get away, it will have no other choice but to thrash and bite. Be kind and gentle with a parrot displaying these aggressive vocalizations. The bird is scared and will do anything to protect himself, or is having a hormonal episode in breeding season and has become temporarily aggressive. See Chapter 18 for more information on this.

Growling

African greys are known for growling, particularly those who were wild caught or parent raised. Rarely does a handfed baby grey growl. Growling is a warning, just as it is in dogs. Quakers growl as well, as do some Amazons. Unless you want a sharp bite, don't get too near a growling bird. He'll likely defend himself.

Begging

Handfed baby parrots and young parrots beg using a kind of sheeplike baying that stops as soon as the parrot is fed or cuddled. Parrots that weren't weaned properly or were handfed for too long also beg like this, and the begging can go on for quite some time. Head bobbing can also accompany the sheep noise.

I had a client once whose eight-month-old African grey parrot consistently and loudly made the sheep noise and bobbed every time she passed the cage. As it turned out, the client was still handfeeding the bird with warm formula every day, even though the bird had been weaned and was eating on its own. I told her to offer the bird the formula mixed with warm oatmeal in a bowl and leave it in the cage, rather than feed it to the bird. Within two days the begging noise stopped, and the bird was eating all on its own.



REMEMBER

In particular, baby Quaker parakeets (also called *monk parrots*) are known for their begging behavior. A baby Quaker will toss his head back, bob up and down, quake (hence the name), and make a sheeplike baa-baa noise. Some Quakers will do this for quite a while after weaning and may also revert to it when ill (other parrots may revert back begging when ill as well).

Differentiating between Beak Clicking and Clucking

Beak clicking is when a parrot makes a sharp click with his beak, similar to the sound of someone clipping their fingernails, but a lot louder. This noise doesn't come from the syrinx, as do most parrot noises, but is instead produced mechanically by the beak to indicate fear or aggression.

Clucking, on the other hand, is a noise that says, "Come here; I like you; pet me!" It's similar to the sound humans can make by sticking the tongue to the roof of the mouth and pulling down sharply — like what you'd do to make a horse giddy-up.

Getting Clean and Looking Pretty — Preening

Preening is the activity of cleaning and ordering the feathers. Your parrot isn't picking lice off of his body or pulling feathers during normal preening activity. He's making sure that everything's in order so that he can regulate his temperature, fly, and look pretty for a mate. You can encourage preening with regular misting with warm water, but make sure your bird is dry before bedtime.

Your bird preens more when he's molting. Molting isn't a behavior, but a physiological event that happens once or twice a year. When a bird molts, he loses feathers all over his body a few at a time and replaces them with new feathers.

During normal molting you won't see bald patches on your bird, just lots of feathers all over the floor and in the cage tray. Your parrot may behave crankily at this time and may sleep more often. Molting takes a lot out of a bird, and he needs more rest and more protein at this time.

Clearing His Ears — Yawning

Birds yawn for much the same reasons that humans do. First, yawning clears the ears. Second, they may yawn to get extra oxygen, though scientists haven't proved yet that this is the real reason why humans yawn. Just reading this paragraph has made me yawn, and I bet you did too! Finally, a parrot may yawn to scratch an itchy throat or ear passage. If you think that your bird is yawning too much, it may be worth a trip to the avian veterinarian.



TIP

You can make a tame bird yawn by gently rubbing in a circular motion over his *ear-ways*, the ear openings on the side of this head, as you pet him. This is a funny reaction and it gets them every time!

Hearing Your Parrot — Beak Grinding

A healthy, sleepy parrot will grind the two parts of his beak together as he's drifting off for a nap. The "gritch-gritch" sound is strange and can seem like an abnormal behavior to humans, because teeth-grinding can be a sign of something awry. However, this behavior isn't like teeth-grinding at all but a sign of a content parrot. Experts aren't really sure why birds do this — it may have something to do with conditioning the beak. It's a sound I really like because it means my birds are sleepy and happy.

Bobbing Up and Down to Say, "I Love You" — Regurgitation

Parrots show their affection for another bird and for a human guardian by regurgitating (see Figure 12-1 — here the birds regurgitate as a sign of affection or a mating ritual or to offer partially digested food). This may seem odd, but it's an indication of a truly exceptional relationship between human and bird.

FIGURE 12-1:
Nesting mated
pairs and parents
feeding chicks
regurgitate for
each other.



Photo by Priscilla Schmidt

Males are more likely to regurgitate to show affection. It's unlikely that anything actually comes up into the mouth during the behavior, which is indicated by a series of up-and-down head bobs and then the bird leaning over to the guardian's face or hand, or even a beloved toy. Sometimes, a small amount of food does come up. Simply thank your bird, but don't encourage this behavior too often.



WARNING

If you notice that your parrot is vomiting when he's alone and debris is sticking to his beak and face, call your avian veterinarian. Rather than bobbing up and down to regurgitate, a vomiting bird shakes his head from side to side to clear the debris out of the beak. This is an indication of illness.

Cleaning His Face — Beak Wiping

Your parrot doesn't have a napkin to wipe his face after a messy meal, so he'll use a perch, the bars of his cage, or a toy. Parrots are fastidious about their cleanliness, and wiping the beak to remove debris is just another way to keep themselves clean. Clean perches weekly to remove debris.



Beak wiping can also be an aggressive or warning behavior meaning, “You’re in my space, buddy!” It’s just one in a series of territorial behaviors that a parrot will do to show another parrot or a human that they’d better back off.

Considering Different Tail Behaviors

Your parrot may exhibit an array of tail behaviors at different times. Here is a quick lowdown:

- » **Bobbing:** A parrot that has just done a bit of exercise may sit on his perch and bob his tail because he’s breathing hard. If you notice that he’s bobbing his tail and hasn’t exercised and/or you see a discharge coming from his nostrils or mouth, he may have a respiratory problem.
- » **Fanning:** Fanning his tail feathers can indicate excitement, the beginning of a preening session, or aggressive posturing. Amazons in particular fan the tail in an effort to seem larger during *display* (see the section, “Training method 2: Display,” later in this chapter for more details).
- » **Wagging:** A wag of the tail indicates a contented bird and is also a behavior that releases tension. Parrots also wag after a preening session, just before or after ruffling and shaking out the feathers.

Exhibiting Breeding Behavior

Parrots in male/female pairs (and sometimes in same-sex pairs) have their own body language and behavior exclusive to a bonded birdy couple. They spend a good deal of time preening each other — called *allopreening* — and sitting close to each other on the perch (see Figure 12-2). Parrots mate for life (though they aren’t always faithful!).

Male parrots often do a sweet little mating dance to impress their mates, including perch hopping, banging on the cage bars with the beak, and lots of vocalizing. It’s heartening to watch a closely bonded pair. See Chapter 18 for a lot more info on mating rituals and pair behavior.

FIGURE 12-2:
This sun conure, nanday conure, and caique are preening each other gently, called allopreening.



Photo by Rikki Paulsen

Often, guardians don't even know that they're encouraging breeding behavior in their parrots, which can lead to behavior problems. Here are some tips for the single bird:

- » Don't offer a nest box, cardboard box (for play), hut, or any other enclosed object that can be considered a nest.
- » If your parrot is exhibiting strange behaviors in the springtime, reduce the amount of light he receives to about 12 hours a day. Often, 11 hours is best to settle a hormonal bird. Parrots are prompted into breeding condition by light, so when there are more hours of light than darkness, the hormones start pumping.
- » Pay attention to her egg laying. Egg laying for the single hen isn't a problem unless the laying is excessive. A few eggs a year is okay, but if she's laying an egg every other day for weeks, she's going to deplete her calcium supply. Cockatiels in particular are known to do this. Let the hen sit on her eggs for a week or two, deal with her protective behavior, and then remove the eggs eventually, or she'll sit on them for weeks with no result. Don't remove them too soon, or she'll just keep laying. Allowing her to finish out the clutch and then start sitting on them should cease egg laying (though not always). If she's laying the eggs in a food dish, remove it, and get something smaller. Reducing her daytime to 11 hours should help control her hormones.

- » If you see your bird rubbing his vent repeatedly on a perch or special toy and the behavior bothers you, remove the toy or perch. Some birds will also want to do this on your hand, which you shouldn't allow. This is mating behavior and can lead to worse behaviors, like territoriality and biting.

Being Annoyed with Their Cage Mate — Bickering

Bickering between parrots housed together is normal. Their relationships are similar to humans. People have good moments and bad moments with friends and partners, and the same is with parrots. However, you must ensure that one parrot isn't bullying or hurting the other. Make sure that parrots you house together are a true pair that really like each other, have enough space to take a time out from each other, or are happy being in a flock environment with several other birds. Some birds that don't like their cage mate may get in a fight to the death, and unfortunately only one bird wins in a cage match.



REMEMBER

Most flocking birds have specific requirements, or disaster may happen. For example, cockatiels and budgies can be housed with multiple birds of the same species (they can even be housed together), but they can't be housed with other, more aggressive species. If you want a flock of lovebirds, you must introduce them to the aviary all at the same time; make sure you have a 1:1 ratio between females and males and you have at least six or more lovebirds housed together. Four won't work, but eight will. If you're breeding lovebirds, you must hang more nest boxes than there are pairs. Before you decide to keep multiple birds together, do as much research as you can on how your chosen species behaves in a flock setting. Breeding parrots is not as easy as just tossing a bunch of birds together and expecting babies.

Identifying Eating Habits

Birds are hungriest in the morning, after a long night of fasting. The parrot's fast metabolism compels him to find food soon after he wakes, which is a great time to offer your parrot healthy foods. Birds also feast again just before dusk so that they can last the night hours without eating. Again, this is a good time to fill your bird's dish with the healthy stuff. Chapter 8 discusses ways to ensure your parrot is eating proper nutrition.

KEEPING AN EYE ON SHINY THINGS

Parrots are drawn naturally to shiny, colorful objects. They may persist in removing your earrings or in pulling at a metal chain around your neck. A larger parrot can easily break a watch or other jewelry. Be careful of leaving your jewelry unattended, especially when you're cleaning him with a toxic cleaning solution.

Rub a Dub Dub — Bathing

Most parrots love to bathe. A parrot will stand on the edge of a bowl of water, dunk his chest and head, and then shake and spray the water everywhere. This is a normal behavior and should be encouraged. A dirty bird may become annoyed at the dirt on his feathers and begin plucking or chewing them. I discuss tips on bathing your parrot in Chapter 9.



REMEMBER

Breast quivering after bathing is normal and is a result of the breast muscles contracting over and over to create heat. This is nothing to worry about.

Taking a Nap — Sleeping

Healthy birds sleep on one foot with the head either tucked into the feathers on the back or simply hunched down into the body. This is normal for nighttime sleep and for daytime naps. However, if you see your parrot sleeping all day like this, especially if he's sleeping on two feet instead of one and is puffed up, the bird might be ill.

Getting Rid of Dirt and Itches — Scratching

Parrots scratch to remove dirt from their feathers and to get rid of itches, of course. If you notice excessive scratching resulting in poor feather condition or feather loss, call your avian veterinarian.

Just like when you gently scratch over your parrot's ear holes, when he scratches them, he'll yawn or open his mouth wide and stick out his tongue. This is normal.

Achoo! Bless You — Sneezing

Birds sneeze for the same reason people do: to clear the nasal passages. Sneezing is normal unless you notice that your bird is sneezing very frequently or you notice a discharge from the nostrils.



WARNING

Most birds have a very shallow nostril, and it may look to you like the nostril is plugged. Don't *ever* attempt to remove anything from your parrot's nose. If you sense something is wrong, seek medical help.

Warning You to Back Off — Nipping

There's a difference between *nipping* and *biting*. Nipping, or *beaking*, is a normal behavior that some baby parrots do to test the things in their world, even your fingers. It hurts, but it's not done out of aggression. Adult parrots also give warning nips to let you know when to back off. A warning nip isn't as hard or as long as a real bite.

Biting actually *isn't* a normal behavior. In the wild, birds do bite at each other, but they're generally warning bites that are aimed at getting the other bird to go away. In captivity, clipped birds can't just go away when frightened, so they bite hard. Biting can be prevented by learning to recognize the signs of aggression in your bird and by socializing your parrot properly. I discuss biting in depth in Chapter 14.

Reading Body Language

Recognizing your parrot's healthy body language will help you know when he's feeling fine or when he's ill, as well as when he wants attention or food. It will also help you avoid receiving a nasty bite.

Most parrots are an open book in terms of body language. After you know the signals, you can tell when your bird is happy, sleepy, terrified, or simply excited. The following behaviors probably mean something, so pay attention.

Flapping wings

Clipped parrots will often hang on to a perch, the side of the cage, or a dowel on a playgym and flap, flap, flap away (see Figure 12-3). Flapping is exercise for your

companion parrot and can indicate that he needs a little more activity or wants your attention.



FIGURE 12-3:
Birds flap their
wings to get
some exercise.

Photo by Pet Profiles

Crest position

Cockatoos, cockatiels, and hawk-headed parrots have a wonderful way of showing you how they feel: a head crest (see Figure 12-4). When the crest is mostly back, with just the tip of it sticking up, the bird is generally going about his business, content and relaxed. When you're playing with him, he may lift his crest, excited by playtime or something new and interesting. If the crest is standing high at attention, it's an indication of excitement or fear. An absolutely terrified cockatoo or cockatiel will slick his crest down flat and may also crouch and hiss.

Fluffing and ruffling

Parrots will perform a quick feather ruffle to release tension, much like when humans take a quick moment to lean back and stretch before they go on to the next task. Parrots also fluff their feathers after a preening session so that all the particles of dirt they have just removed will fall away. You may notice a fine dust of powder emanating from your bird after he does this, especially if you have an African grey, a cockatoo, or a cockatiel. A parrot that stays fluffed for a longer period of time may be chilled or not feeling well.

FIGURE 12-4: Raising the head crest can mean excitement, fear, and joy, among other things for cockatoos, cockatiels, and hawk-headed parrots.



Photo by Pet Profiles

The please dance

A parrot that wants attention will clamber around the cage near the door and may sit right in front of the door, moving his head back and forth. This means he wants out. If he does the please dance while he's out, he wants your attention or something you have.

Head down

If your bird is used to being scratched on the head or neck, he may put his head down and ruffle his feathers, giving you the perfect spot to scratch.

The attack stance

Displays of aggression can be normal at times for a companion parrot, though they can be unpleasant. Many aggressive displays are merely posturing. A bird would much rather fly from a fight than actually engage in one, unless defending his nest or a food source. Unfortunately the companion parrot usually has no place to escape, and the aggression must be acted upon.

Aggressive postures include fanning of the tail; crouching or standing tall and swaying from side to side with the crest held tightly back; hissing and spitting; fluffing the back feathers; and crouching with the beak open, ready to pounce and bite (see Figure 12-5). Don't put your finger in the cage when your bird is in the attack stance.



FIGURE 12-5:
This African grey
is in attack
stance.

Photo by Essi Laavainen

Stretching

Parrots stretch for the same reasons humans do: to lubricate joints, to release tension, and primarily because stretching feels good. You may notice your parrot stretching one wing and one leg on the same side of his body at the same time. This classic birdy stretch that resembles something from yoga is called *mantling*.

Bowing and bobbing

Tame parrots use bowing and bobbing as an attention-getting technique. It can become a neurotic behavior for a constantly caged parrot. Also, ill parrots bow and bob, so you'll have to watch your bird carefully to distinguish an attention-getting strategy from illness.

Head shaking

Some parrots, particularly African greys, shake their heads as if there's water in the ears. No one really knows why they do this, and it seems to be normal. If your bird is doing this a lot, it may be a sign of an ear or nasal infection.

Leaning forward, wings shaking

If the wings are quivering, and the bird is staring at you, he's about to launch himself at you. This is typical "I'm going to fly!" posture.

Quivering wings

A parrot that's shivering or has quivering wings may be frightened, overly excited, or in breeding mode.

Beak language

An open beak, crouched posture, and hissing or yelling is prime biting posture. This is a frightened or displaying parrot.

Potty language

Backing up a step or two or crouching on the perch, lifting tail, and even making a little noise is potty language. You can catch the poop posture before the poop happens and move the parrot to another place if you want him to poop elsewhere.

Chicken scratching

African greys and sometimes other parrots will scratch like a chicken at the bottom of their cage or on the carpet. Greys in particular do this because digging is part of their natural wild behavior. If you don't mind the mess, you can give your grey a sandbox (or litter box) to play in, using clean sand from the toy store.

Eye pinning (dilate/contract pupils)

A parrot whose pupils are pinning in and out is excited and may be in bite mode. Some parrots do this when they're excited about something they like, such as a new toy or good food.

Wing drooping

Wing drooping can be part of a mating dance, but in a listless bird, it can indicate illness.

Wing flipping

A parrot will flip his wings up and down to indicate frustration, get attention, or indicate aggression. It may also happen during molting, when he's trying to align new feathers or get rid of old ones that may be hanging or ready to fall out.

Blushing

Some parrots blush, the blue and gold and the Buffon's macaws, for example. It's not for the same reason that humans blush, however. It's more about excitement and mating ritual.

Back down, feet up

Some parrots play on their backs. Caiques and some conures give their guardians quite a scare with this behavior. If the bird isn't breathing and is stiff . . . I'm sorry for your loss. Get the shoebox ready.

FLOCKING BEHAVIOR

Bob and Liz Johnson of South Florida of the Shyne Foundation ran a free-flight avian sanctuary for many years and had the unique experience of living with more than 100 large, free-flying macaws, as well as a handful of Amazons, lorries, Quakers, greys, and conures. The Johnsons built a free-flight rainforest so that their birds, primarily rescues, can fly and live in as close an approximation of the wild as possible. Here are some of their observations about the behavior of their flock:

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"We have never observed any sign of a flock leader nor organized structure within the large group. There is the occasional aggressive or assertive bird, but none behaves this way in all situations nor to all individuals. These particular birds are avoided by the others. When a bird defers to one of these individuals, it isn't out of acknowledgement of his position, but rather avoidance of bodily harm.

"Within what appears to be a flock are duos and small groups, which are dynamic and periodically changing. For example, one group of four hyacinths, whom we affectionately refer to as 'The Fearsome Foursome,' daily reconfirm their alliance by claspings beaks while nodding their heads in turn, much as we humans shake hands. They defend what they perceive as their territory, and seldom do they accept another member into their group.

"Within such a small group there often can be found a most popular member. These birds are often the most gentle and do not appear to dominate in any way. The others defer to this individual voluntarily out of what appears to be admiration and respect. They did not acquire their status through dominance over the others, nor do they assume the highest physical post. In fact, the birds at the highest areas vary from moment to moment. The shyest birds are more often seen up high, probably because this is where they feel more secure. Birds perched high in the trees or on a human head or shoulder have never in any way shown any inclination to dominate us or any other bird. Since the tendency is to fly up when anything frightens them, such as a hawk flying overhead, height seems to signify security rather than dominance.

"Our observations of these macaws show an astonishing similarity to the 'flock behavior' of humans at a restaurant or rock concert. An alien observer would conclude that humans are flock animals, and therefore, there surely must be a flock leader. But is there? On closer scrutiny, one would see that within this mass of humans there are small groups, probably most containing an assertive, shy, popular, or even nerdy individual, but each group is basically uninvolved with adjacent groups. Should someone yell 'Fire!' they would all run out as a 'flock,' and our observer would now feel certain that his assumptions were correct, that these are definitely flock animals. What he wouldn't see is that each unit would proceed to its own territory, in this case a house or apartment. We see this same behavior in our macaws.

"This entire controversy is merely a matter of rationale. In actuality, birds living in captivity do need to have limits and boundaries set, and must be taught certain behavior modifications, much as would a child, in order to function harmoniously in our environment. The rationale for training a child, however, is not that he would otherwise think he was the group leader and thus attempt to dominate us. Instead, we attempt to enhance a child's self-image and encourage self-direction while still setting limits on his behavior. Companion birds need direction as well, but perhaps the reasons why they behave as they do needs to be reexamined in order to more fully understand them and better direct their behavior."

Recognizing When Your Parrot Is Training You

How much of parrot behavior is normal and instinctual and how much is learned and adapted? In the case of the larger, very intelligent parrots, much of their behavior is learned as they have modified themselves to life in a particular home. They're so smart and so interested in getting their needs met, most are very successful in eliciting what they want from their guardians. Sometimes, that training is self-destructive and exasperating and lands them in another home or a shelter.

Depending on the parrot, this training can be distressing to the people he lives with, because no one brings a parrot home wishing for an animal that's going to scream, bite, and pull out his feathers. But those are the extremes. A demanding bird can be more subtle in her training methods and will use several approaches to get his humans to come to the cage or move away, bring food, offer hands-on attention, and perform any number of other tasks.



REMEMBER

When a human is feeling trained by a parrot, there is generally something that the human is doing to allow the training to occur. Parrots learn largely by positive reinforcement, and the only way to have a fulfilling relationship with a parrot, one that is mutually rewarding, is to figure out what parrots want and don't want and to modify your behavior accordingly. It's no fun to have to run to your parrot every time he opens his beak. Every relationship has give-and-take, and that holds true for human/avian relationships, too.



REMEMBER

A parrot's typical condition is noisy, messy, fussy, demanding, and moody, depending on the bird. Some parrots are faithful companions, a joy to be around, and would never dream of biting or screaming. Their humans boast that they have the perfect feathered friend. That's great. But for some parrot people, this isn't the case. Many parrots are given up because they're excessively noisy, bite viciously, or pluck and chew their feathers. These behaviors aren't natural to a parrot but are instead learned from the environment and driven by human interactions.

Most parrot behaviors that produce an action on the part of a human reinforce a bird's behavior. Most annoying parrot behaviors are done simply to get attention. Sometimes a parrot screams as a warning, because his food or water dish is empty, or because it's ill, but a persistent behavior that makes humans respond to the bird in a certain way is the parrot's best "training" technique.

When a parrot learns what makes you tick, he uses that knowledge to his advantage. You and your bird should ideally have a relationship based on mutual understanding, and when one half of the relationship is manipulating the other half, the

relationship can go sour pretty quickly. This isn't to say that you should manipulate your parrot instead. A parrot, above all, should be allowed to be a parrot. He should have license to vocalize loudly at times, mess his surroundings, and flee if he feels threatened. These behaviors are a problem only when he becomes unreasonably demanding. Ask yourself whether your parrot is just being himself, a normal bird, or whether he's truly managing your actions. The following sections are a few examples of how a parrot may train you.

Training method 1: Noise

A parrot's primary human training method is noise. Excessive vocalization is an easy way to get attention. Noisy parrots who get your attention don't distinguish between *positive reinforcement* (something good is added to the environment, such as you praising your bird) and *positive punishment* (something bad is added to the environment, such as you yelling at your bird to stop doing something). For example, telling your parrot that you love him is the same as telling him he's a noisy rat that will go into the soup if he doesn't shut up. Either way, there's attention being directed at him, and he loves being the center of attention.

Here's a scenario: A lonely parrot might scream, which is his response to avoiding the pain of being alone. If you come running because you're trying to avoid the pain of hearing the parrot scream and you know he'll shut up if you're in the room, you've just shown him, in very clear terms, that when he screams, you'll come running. If the bird is truly lonely, it's reasonable for him to scream, but you should only enter the room or give him attention when he has stopped screaming, if only for a moment.

When a parrot screams, and you scream back, go over to his cage, or pick him up and put him in the cage as punishment, he has gotten what he wanted: your sole focus. Parrots are social creatures that don't thrive on being left alone. If screaming works to get your attention one time, the parrot assumes screaming will work the next time. After you've responded to a screaming parrot a few times, the parrot knows how to get you to jump. You're trained.

The best way to avoid this kind of human training is to ignore any unwanted noise. That's called *negative reinforcement*. You're taking your attention away when he screams. Remain calm and don't display irritated behavior. Leaving the room is a good idea. When the parrot is quiet again, immediately come back into the room and praise the bird. That's positive reinforcement for being quiet. Remember, praise the behaviors that you want and ignore the behaviors you don't. Only praise a quiet bird or one that's making noises you like.



REMEMBER

Some birds are known to be persistently loud, and there's not a lot you can do about it. Cockatoos, Amazons, cockatiels, ringnecks, conures, and other birds may seem like their vocalizations are excessive, when in reality they're just doing what comes naturally, especially at sunrise and sunset. I discuss screaming more in Chapter 14.

Training method 2: Display

Parrots *display* when they're excited, territorial, frightened, or in full mating mode. Figure 12-6 shows an Amazon in full display. Note the flared tail, open beak, and raised neck feathers. If you were there at this moment, you'd see this bird's irises pinning in and out as well, a sign of extreme excitement. Don't put your fingers near this bird! A bird in full display puffs himself up; spreads his tail feathers; pins his eyes; and, in the case of cockatoos or cockatiels, raises his crest. He may also make threatening noises and flit his wings up and down. In the case of a parrot training his human, display can deter the human from approaching the cage or from picking up the bird. When a parrot displays and the human walks away, frightened of being bitten, the bird knows that when he behaves in a threatening manner, he gets what he wants. He'll display again, even if he's just bluffing, because the behavior has been reinforced.



FIGURE 12-6:
This Amazon
parrot is in full
display.

Photo by Cyndi Baker

Your bird should allow himself to be picked up when you ask. There may be a time when he's in danger and has to be picked up, but if he has you trained to walk away, you won't be able to help. You should also be able to have access to the bird's cage any time you like. If you're always respectful of your tame parrot and his space, there's no reason why he should refuse you.

If you've asked your bird to step onto your hand and he refuses and begins to threaten you, use a dowel or a perch to pick up the bird, even if you're just going to pick up the bird for a moment. A sharp "Hey!" or "Ep-ep!" followed by saying "Step up" will often work to get the bird's attention, and he may step up for you then. But if you walk away, you show the bird that you're not really serious about anything and that he doesn't have to mind you.

A parrot should be allowed a great deal of freedom and self-direction, but every relationship has its boundaries. What if you had to pick up your bird because there was something dangerous around, but you have taught him that he can ignore you whenever he wants? Remember, however, that some parrots, such as certain Amazons, go into full display mode a lot during breeding season. Give these birds a wider berth and try to understand the hormonal surge that they're experiencing.

Training method 3: Biting

Biting is a great training method for a bird, because not only does a bite get a person to move away quickly, but it also creates a huge reaction, usually screaming and jumping around, which the bird loves. How fun! Biting doesn't happen often in a natural setting when wild birds can just fly away from one another, but a bird in a home might get many opportunities to bite, and he'll learn quickly that running you off is quite effective to get an exciting reaction from you.



TIP

If you do get bitten, your first instinct is to pull your hand away quickly, which can actually cause the bite to be even more painful. Instead, if you can manage it in the moment, push your hand toward the bird instead. Doing so will throw the bird off balance, and he'll usually let go. Remember to do this gently. Your aim is to get your finger back, not to hurt your bird.



TIP

The best way to avoid reinforcing biting behavior is to avoid the bite in the first place. Figure out your bird's body language and biting patterns so that you can tell when a bite is coming. Teach your parrot to step onto a stick or handheld perch to move him from an area where he feels comfortable (like the cage), because he's more likely to bite you near his cage or playstand. If you do get bitten, walk away calmly and curse up a storm in another room where the parrot can't see or hear you. If biting doesn't work for the bird, he'll be less likely to habitually do it. I discuss biting more in Chapter 14.

Training method 4: Plucking

Plucking can be an attention-getting device, but that's not always the case. Birds that pluck or chew their feathers may be ill, may not be getting enough attention, have a poor wing clip, be improperly housed, or have other problems. If you've ruled out those issues, the bird might be plucking because the behavior gets your attention. When someone sees a bird pluck a feather out, it's natural to say, "Don't do that!" Eventually, the parrot realizes that every time he plucks a feather, he gets a reaction. That may be what he wants, so plucking becomes a habit that's difficult to break.

Don't ever reinforce a plucking bird. Ignore the behavior, and praise when he isn't plucking. Offer him a better diet, more attention, larger housing, and something to do other than pluck. Get him to a qualified avian veterinarian right away as well, because plucking is often a sign of illness. I discuss plucking more in Chapter 14.

After a behavior is entrenched in a bird's routine, it's hard to break, but not impossible. Simply retrain yourself not to give in to his every whim, but do take his real needs seriously, whatever you do. Figure out how to be calm when he's driving you crazy. A bird that's praised for being good will be good more often than a bird that gets more attention when he's behaving badly.

- » Catching the parrot bug
- » Having more than one parrot: The pros and cons
- » Dealing with a jealous parrot
- » Watching parrots in love

Chapter **13**

Handling More Than One Bird: Multiple Parrot Households

Despite the education I've gained from many years working with the bird community, despite the hard-earned, hands-on knowledge and careful tutoring from mentors in the top of their fields in aviculture, rescue, and behavior, people still don't take my best advice: *Only get one or two parrots* — for starters, at least. People sometimes spend hundreds of dollars to remedy their unwanted avian issues, breaking the bank for new housing, toys, supplements, lighting, and anything else that may solve the problem, but won't listen to the fewer-is-better recommendation.

I admit that lot of homes can support several parrots happily. Some can support dozens, and the one big exception to the parrot-limit suggestion, of course, is pairs that get along (true pairs) and smaller birds that live in an aviary or flight cage. But those examples aren't what I'm referring to here. I'm talking about parrots that are part of the family — birds that want to have a human companion and require a lot of attention, a complex diet, and lots of out-of-cage time. These

parrots are so much fun, so affectionate, so part of the family, it's natural to want another one. So another one arrives. Then another, and another. Pretty soon the first one isn't getting much attention, the second one injures the fourth one, and the third one starts biting and plucking. What went wrong?

Parrots are social animals that crave attention from a mate/family. Parrots are programmed to spend most of every single day with a mate. With each new parrot you bring into your home, you cut the attention the first parrot gets by half. If you were able to spend three hours a day interacting with your first parrot, a second parrot will cut that down to one-and-a-half hours. A third parrot cuts the first and second parrots' time down to one hour each. No wonder behavior problems result.

This chapter illustrates the depth of parrot guardianship, from juggling a multiple parrot household to dealing with birds who love (or hate) each other.

Keeping More Than One Parrot: The Pros and Cons

After you're a parrot person, it's tough to keep your parrot quota to one, or even two or three. There's always that pretty feathered face in the bird shop, local rescue, or online, and of course, the more research you do on parrots, the more parrots you'll want. There are so many beautiful, spunky parrots out there, all with unique qualities. This one talks up a storm; that one is super affectionate; this other one is bouncy and cute. Parrots can live 15 to 80 years with proper care. That's a lot of responsibility.

Although it may seem like I'm putting the kibosh on having multiple parrots, I'm not. I'm just trying to illustrate that it's better to have one or two parrots that receive truly exceptional care rather than ten parrots that each need to vie for your attention, not because you're a bad parrot parent, but because giving these sensitive creatures everything they need is tough. This advice mainly applies to the parrots that you're keeping as sole companions for yourself, not to any parrots you're keeping in true pairs who have each other to socialize with or to parrots of different species who have become friends.

The following sections spell out in greater detail the advantages and disadvantages of having more than one parrot in your household.

MORE THAN JUST ARMY KNIVES AND CHOCOLATE: SWITZERLAND AND PARROT PAIRS

Owning just one parrot of any species in Switzerland has been illegal since 2008. That's because Switzerland recognizes that parrots are social animals and can suffer when left alone without a friend. According to the law, keeping a parrot alone is considered animal abuse. The Swiss have a detailed document called the Animal Protection Ordinance that outlines how companion animals must be kept. If you want a parrot of any given species in Switzerland, you must get two. Seems like they're onto something, doesn't it?

The pros

The big pro to having more than one parrot (or a bunch of them) is that each parrot doubles the birdy love in your life. True bird people understand what that means. There's something magical about parrots. It's incredibly flattering when a parrot chooses you as a friend.

Multiple parrots do keep one another company. There's always someone to squawk with, especially if they're of the same species (though even if they aren't, they still respond to each other). There's no guarantee that they're going to get along, but when they do, it's wonderful for them.

Even if the birds don't get along enough to have physical contact, some parrots thrive in a flock-like setting, enjoying the sounds and movements of other parrots. Sometimes, a problem bird will calm down when there are other parrots around.

The cons

Unfortunately, there are many cons to having multiple parrots (or parrots in general, really). Here's a list to consider:

- » **Longevity:** Parrots live a long time. Even the smaller ones can live upwards of 15 years. What happens when your lifestyle changes? Your human child grows up and goes off to college; an aging parent moves in and needs care; finances get a little wobbly, and you have to take a second job — these are all reasons why parrots are typically neglected or given up. Having not enough time to spend with one parrot is actually a good reason to have a true pair (male and female bonded parrots of the same species, or sometimes same gender

pairs), or two parrots that get along very well and can keep each other company, instead of one. True pairs can share the same housing and require only each other for company, so having two isn't that much more work.

- » **Vet expenses:** Having more parrots increases veterinary bills. Not only does each bird need a well-bird check-up each year, but you also have to deal with increased accidents and injuries, illnesses, and fighting when you have a flock. Prepare to have your checkbook handy.
- » **Other expenses:** More parrots means shelling out more money for supplies, housing, food, supplements, and everything else they need.
- » **Mess:** More parrots equals more cleaning. You'll have double the work with two parrots, triple with three, and so on. If one pair lives in one housing area, great. But if they're spread all over the house, the cleaning duties become quite time consuming.
- » **Time, time, time:** This resource is at a premium in a multiple-parrot household. There never seems to be enough time to give as much attention to each parrot as it would like (this is true of a one-parrot home as well!). Again, this is a good reason to have a pair that get along and that don't need you as their only company.

Interpreting Different Parrot Interactions

One of the reasons why people get another parrot (or multiple parrots) is to have a friend for their current parrot. Most of the time, the first parrot has entered sexual maturity and has copped an attitude. Perhaps this first parrot is biting, screaming, plucking, and being downright hostile. Because of this change in attitude, the parrot isn't getting a whole lot of attention, which makes the problem worse. The guardian feels sorry for the bird and makes the only logical decision to remedy the parrot's loneliness: Get another parrot.

Imagine: parrot utopia. You get another parrot and they love each other. It happens. But it's not as easy as bringing another parrot home and sticking it into the cage with the established parrot. That's a recipe for a trip to the veterinarian, or worse.

This next section shows you how to introduce two (or more) parrots and what to do if the relationship between you and your parrot changes.

Parrot pals

Sometimes the scenario of getting a friend works, especially if you know the gender of your bird and can find the opposite gender of the same species. This doesn't always guarantee a match, but it's your best way of getting close. Figure 13-1 shows an eclectus and caique who are buddies, but their guardian is sure to supervise all interaction. This may look like a battle, but it's really all in fun.



FIGURE 13-1:
Two buddies.

Photo by Carol Frank

Some parrots start out as close pals, but then the relationship devolves for some reason. Sometimes they don't like each other from the start and develop a close relationship over time. Sometimes it's love at first sight. Sometimes parrots will become acquaintances but not bosom buddies. Some parrots won't acknowledge that you have brought another parrot into the home, even if you place the cages right next to each other. You never know what you're going to get.



WARNING

You can't ensure that your established parrot and a new parrot will like one another. There are, however, some really bad combinations. Some parrots tend to be very aggressive toward other parrots, even toward birds of their species, including lovebirds, cockatoos, Amazons, and lories. Though not always the case, birds of the same basic size and from the same basic area have a better shot at getting along than do birds that originate from very disparate places. However, if birds are raised together as babies, they'll nearly always get along, no matter the species, at least until sexual maturity. Then all bets are off. Figure 13-2 shows two species (a cockatiel and a sun conure) that originate from extremely disparate places, South America and Australia, but because they met when they were young, they get along well.



FIGURE 13-2:
Unlikely buddies.

Photo by Sherry Killen



REMEMBER

A break in routine can cause tenuous relationships to break. For example, moving residences, boarding the birds elsewhere, or removing one bird from the residence for a while, for whatever reason, can create tension between the duo. This break in routine is enough to make one (or both) of the parrots rethink the relationship. Always have an extra cage on hand in case you need to separate them.

Parrot enemies

Some individual parrots will never get along (as in Figure 13-3). They don't like each other, for whatever reason (competition, jealousy, and so on), and they'll fight if they're placed in the vicinity of each other. Some parrots are bullies and will take every opportunity to attack the individual that they don't like. Keeping these birds in separate housing and supervising their interaction carefully is crucial. Parrots are known to kill each other, and it doesn't take much of a chomp of that strong beak to cause a lot of damage. Sometimes it's possible for warring parrots to come to a stalemate. They may coexist peacefully, but not closely.

FIGURE 13-3:
Even though these ringnecks are the same species, their interaction can be charged and territorial.



Photo by Gail Olsen

Romeo and . . . Romeo

Often, parrot guardians want to find the opposite gender parrot as a friend for their established parrot. This isn't absolutely necessary. Females will bond with females, and males will bond with males. In some cases, though, these same-sex combos are deadly, so you have to supervise carefully and always give each bird its own housing.

One-sided love

Sometimes one parrot will absolutely adore another one who can't stand the sight of the adoring one or who will attack the "stalker." Sometimes the object of the affection will tolerate the lovesick bird but not return its advances. The Romeo will often become bored with the unresponsive bird and turn its affections elsewhere — to another bird, you, a toy, or another object.

Keeping the peace

The best way to keep the peace is to give each bird its own housing unless the birds are a *true pair*. With some species, such as cockatoos and macaws, even pairs that have been together for years have been known to break up, usually with violence that can lead to injury or death. This extreme usually happens during breeding season, so keeping your parrots out of breeding condition will help avoid this (you can find more information on this in Chapter 14).



WARNING

Always supervise birds that are friends when they're out of the cage and interacting, especially if they're of vastly different species or sizes. Never force birds to be friends, and never, ever force them to live together. Allow them to come to the idea by themselves.

Falling in love

Most parrot love happens at first sight. The birds see each other, and in a moment — boom! — fireworks. The eyes start pinning with excitement; the tails flare or wag; vocalization begins. These parrots want to be together.

There's a common myth that parrots mate for life. Most do, but there are dalliances and even divorces. Even a parrot in the tightest of pairs may have a roving eye when a newcomer arrives on the scene. This may cause a rift in the initial relationship, which may or may not survive the dalliance.

If two parrots are bonded and deeply in love, don't break them up! Splitting up two parrots is cruel. These birds can bond for life. Some breeders split up parrot pairs to get different results in the babies. Most parrots will pair up with the next pretty face. They're social animals and would rather choose a new mate than be alone.

Introducing a New Parrot

The first thing you *must* do when you bring any new bird into your home is *quarantine* it. *Quarantine* is a period of at least 40 days during which you keep the new bird isolated from your established birds to ensure that there are no diseases being passed from new to old. You can find more information on quarantine in Chapter 7.



REMEMBER

After quarantine and a clean bill of health from your avian veterinarian, you can begin introductions. Some birds will love each other from the start, taking just a few moments to begin preening and sitting close on the perch. Others take a more cautious tack, watching the newcomer for a while, sizing everything up. Others go in for the attack right away. Here's an introduction protocol to follow. Remember to always err on the side of caution:

- » Allow the birds to see each other for the first time while both are in their separate cages. Try to read their body language. Do they seem excited? Are they talking to each other? Is one ignoring the other?

- » When you sense that they're ready, allow them to come out of their cages and see what they do. Watch the interaction carefully.
- » Allow them to play on a playgym together in *neutral territory*. Never, ever put the new bird inside or on top of the established bird's cage. You can put the established bird on the new bird's cage, but it's best to find a neutral place that isn't being territorially guarded by either bird.
- » If there's any indication of aggression, separate them immediately. Have a stick and a towel on hand in case you have to break up a fight. Use the stick to try to pry them apart (gently!) and the towel to scare them enough to let go of each other.
- » Some parrots, like caiques and some macaws, play roughly with each other, beak-wrestling and rolling each other around. This behavior is normal; don't confuse it with real aggression. You'll know when one of the birds is being hurt — there'll be plenty of screaming.
- » The best time of year to introduce parrots is the fall or winter. Breeding season is over, and the introduction won't be as charged as it would be in the spring or summer.
- » The best time of day to introduce parrots is just after the morning vocalizations are over. The birds will be calmer.



TIP

Introduce birds *only* on a weekday after your avian veterinarian has opened for the day.

Wondering Why Everyone Just Can't Get Along

There are some basic factors to whether certain birds will get along. Again, it's really up to the individual birds, but here are some very basic guidelines:

- » **Age:** Most young parrots that haven't reached sexual maturity will accept a newcomer, if not as a close preening friend, at least as a playgym pal. Parrots that are hand-raised together do very well as pals. Remember that any birdy relationship can go south at any time, but the majority of pairs remain together peaceably for life, especially if they're not breeding. Introducing mature individuals can be a little trickier. In most cases, it's love at first sight, or else there will be little or no relationship at all. This can, of course, change as breeding season approaches or exits.

- » **Same species:** Introducing the same species removes a lot of the factors that cause parrots to not get along. Still, there's no guarantee, and some species (and particular individuals) are pretty picky about whom they're going to like and whom they'd like to remove the eyes from. Gender has a lot to do with it, but not everything. A bird may choose not to accept a bird of the opposite sex of the same species for reasons locked inside its feathered head.
- » **Different species:** Vastly different species can become and remain close friends. However, never, ever allow different species to breed. Some dissimilar species can't produce young together anyway, but some can produce a *hybrid*, a mutt bird that is often infertile, often called a *mule*. Hybridizing parrots isn't a great idea, because there's a limited gene pool for most parrots, and this practice dilutes it further. Some hybrids, particularly in the macaws and conures, are standard in the parrot trade, and though they make good companions, they should not be bred.
- » **Different sizes:** It's cute to see a budgie and a macaw preening, or a conure and a cockatoo — these odd couples do exist. But it's not a great idea to pair up (as friends) birds of such dissimilar sizes. The little bird is always at risk for injury. All it takes is a car backfiring outside during a preening session for the little bird to lose its head. Even close supervision can't prevent a serious injury or death.

Changing Your Relationship

Introducing a new parrot (or parrots) into your home may irrevocably change the relationship you have with your established parrot. You may not receive as much affection as before, or your bird may try to bite you, preferring the avian friend. For example, cockatiels may remain friendly no matter how many you have, whereas lovebirds can get snappish and cranky with a human guardian when they're part of an avian pair.

However, many thousands of avian/human relationships survive a multiple-bird household. After a parrot is bonded to you, it may never give up the bond, allowing the other parrots in the house to be pals, but giving its heart to you. This very much depends on the species, the time you've put into the bird, the trust you've built, and the bond you have.

- » Looking at common behavior problems
- » Dealing with screaming
- » Putting a pause to plucking
- » Considering rescue and adoption

Chapter **14**

Addressing Behavior: When Good Birds Go Bad

Parrots aren't always easy companions. They can develop neurotic or annoying behaviors that baffle guardians. The top three offending behaviors are screaming (excessive vocalization), biting, and plucking. Beyond those behaviors are the one-person possessive parrots, the potty mouths, and the scaredy cats. This chapter helps you recognize problem behaviors, tries to fix them, and helps show you how to prevent them in the first place.

One word of caution, however: This chapter can't diagnose your bird's problems, nor can it prevent all issues that may arise. Each situation is different and can have hundreds of different causes and a variety of solutions. The examples that I give here can't possibly apply to every bird. This chapter is designed to give you a basic understanding of what can, and does, go wrong with parrot/human relationships and helps set you on your way toward solving it.

Figuring Out the Problem

When a parrot is exhibiting unwanted behaviors, the very first thing to look at is the bird's overall health. Has the bird been to the veterinarian for a complete battery of tests? If not, your next phone call should be to the bird doc. Ill parrots are bound to be cranky and may pluck their feathers. These behaviors are normal for

ill birds. Most ill birds are quieter than usual, but don't rule out illness or injury as a cause of screaming. Most people want to treat biting, plucking, and screaming as behavior issues, when much of the time, these behaviors are due to illness.

I saw a case once where someone's loving macaw had become severely hand aggressive overnight, lunging and screaming when the guardian tried to give affection or remove the bird from its housing. The guardian was so depressed that her best friend bird had turned on her so fiercely. A veterinary check-up and some X-rays showed the bird had suffered a hip injury and was simply protecting itself from further pain. After surgery and recuperation, the macaw went back to being a warm and loving companion again.

After ruling out illness or injury, look at the bird's nutrition and exercise levels. Is the bird suffering from a vitamin or mineral deficiency? Inadequate nutrition is definitely a reason for crankiness or plucking. Parrots that don't get adequate exercise are also at risk for behavioral issues. It's important to take care of your parrot's basic needs before you begin looking at your relationship as the cause of the unwanted behavior.



REMEMBER

Understand that some annoying behaviors are normal and that you're not going to change them. Conures and cockatoos are noisy. Caiques are beaky (non-aggressively nippy). Lovebirds are feisty. African greys learn to mimic annoying household noises. There's not much you're going to be able to do about it. These aren't behavioral problems, they're facts of life when living with a parrot.

Understanding Dominance

Before I get too far in this chapter, it's important to mention *dominance*. Dominance is a trait seen often in pack behavior, like that of wolves. Every pack has a dominant male and a dominant female (the *alphas*), and the parrots assert their dominance over the other members of the pack using body language, aggression, and occasionally physical force. Typically, the lower members of the pack accept the alphas and peace is kept. When the dominant male and/or female become aged or weak, either may be challenged by another member of the pack for the dominant role. This pack behavior has nothing whatsoever to do with how parrots behave and interact in the wild or in your home. Your dogs may behave this way (I know mine do), but your parrots won't. A flock is different from a pack.

When your parrot isn't doing what you ask, he's not trying to rule the roost or be your *alpha*. He's not trying to usurp your position as flock leader, because he doesn't know there's even such a thing. When a parrot seems to be pulling rank on a human, it's generally because the human is misreading the scenario. For

example, if every time you pick your parrot up off his playstand, you go straight to the cage and lock him up, eventually he's going to get wise to the routine, and if he's a feisty individual, he may start either refusing to get onto your hand or biting to drive you away. Some guardians think the parrot is trying to be the boss. No way. The parrot is just smart and he doesn't want to go back to the cage. Now, if you mix up your routine a bit, the parrot won't be so sure that you're going to lock him up the minute you approach the playstand. Perhaps you're on your way to the kitchen for a treat.

You can indeed be the alpha pack leader in a house full of dogs (or even with one dog). After you learn dog body language and positive-reinforcement training techniques, you can become the leader and elicit certain behaviors on cue. The dog should absolutely do what you ask, each time you ask it (as long as the request is reasonable for the age and training level of the dog, and it doesn't cause the dog pain or discomfort). This will likely never be the case with a parrot. You may get what you want part of the time, but the parrot will also get its way some of the time, too.



TIP

The key is to make what you want and what the parrot wants *the exact same thing*. You do this by using *positive reinforcement*, which you can find out more about in Chapter 16.



REMEMBER

In the wild, parrots don't show dominant behavior. They show *territorial* behavior, *resource-guarding* (protecting food and nesting areas), and sometimes aggression, but there's not a flock leader among a parrot group, nor are there power struggles to be top bird. In captivity, however, a *pecking order* may ensue among parrots in close confines. This has less to do with dominance than it does with resource-guarding: The toughest parrot inevitably wins the best perch, first rights to the food dish, and the superior nesting area. This is one of the reasons why it's so important to give captive parrots as much space as possible if they're going to interact. Fights to the death rarely (if ever) occur in the wild, but they certainly do in captivity.

The following section helps you understand your bird's unwanted behavior and how to address it.

Height dominance

There has been a lot of discussion about so-called *height dominance* in parrot behavior circles. People have thought for a long time that parrots should never be kept in any type of housing that allows them to physically perch above the guardians. It's true that parrots do like to be in a high spot, because that's where it's safest — where they can get the best bird's-eye view of their surroundings and potential dangers. But this has nothing to do with any kind of dominance.

The fact is, however, that it's more difficult to get a stubborn parrot off a tall cage or perch, especially if the parrot knows (or thinks) that he's going back into the cage or if he's afraid of you. He may stand on a high perch and lunge downward at your hand, or he may climb to the back of the cage where he's impossible to reach. This isn't about the parrot wanting to be superior to you. This is about not wanting to be locked up. Parrots kept in free-flight housing don't display any of this behavior. They're far less apt to bite as well.

Don't worry about how high your cage and perches are. Instead, work on the relationship between yourself and your parrot by using positive reinforcement. For example, when I want my African grey to get back into his cage so that I can leave the house, I simply add a handful of seeds to his dish. I may even lure him with an almond and then give it to him when he climbs inside. Because he doesn't get seeds that often, he makes a beeline for them. Now the cage is an okay place to be for a while, not a place where I've stuck him after picking him up. I always want him to associate my picking him up with something positive. This way, he very rarely refuses to get onto my hand. When he does refuse sometimes, I either insist in a firmer and clearer voice, "Up!", and he complies (I think because I've gotten his full attention, not because I was firm), or I ask something else that I know he'll do, like put his head down for a scratch. When I've got him doing that, I ask him to step up, and he always does. If he and I were working at cross purposes, neither of us would get what we need. When we're working toward similar goals (I want him in the cage; he wants the seeds that are in the cage) both of us win, and the relationship is safe.



REMEMBER

Note that I don't shut the bird in the cage every time he gets seeds so that he *does not* associate seeds with being shut in the cage. I just know that he'll climb inside for seeds at any time, so it's an easy and painless way to get him there. Know thy parrot! If I closed the door every time he got seeds, he'd eventually learn that the presence of seeds meant being locked up, and that would defeat the purpose of this kind of training. Fortunately, I don't need the seed trick in the evening. When it's bedtime, he naturally goes inside to the swing where he sleeps. This is common for parrots that are kept out of their cages most of the time and allowed to roam in and out at will. Parrots that are confined a lot may find another place to roost, like the cage's top back corner where you'd need a ladder to reach.



WARNING

There's a common suggestion that you not keep any parrot on your shoulder because of perceived height dominance. This is more a safety issue than it is about dominance. I don't recommend that you keep a potentially aggressive bird anywhere near your face. I wouldn't keep *any* bird with a very powerful beak near my face, based on a couple of nasty experiences with a particular Amazon parrot! But some smaller parrots are okay to ride along on your shoulder, especially if they're known to be gentle. If you get bitten once, you'll just know not to let that little parrot hang out on your shoulder again. But remember that one bite from a Moluccan cockatoo is far different and more damaging than a bite from a

parrotlet. Large cockatoos have been known to send guardians to the emergency room with torn-off lips, ears, and fingers. Use your best judgment and always err on the side of caution.

Aggression

An aggressive parrot is having issues that are far simpler than dominance. Frankly, the bird isn't thinking that hard about her status in your household. She's just trying to get her needs met. An aggressive parrot is most likely having hormonal issues, has been frightened by something, is ill or injured, is being territorial or guarding resources, or doesn't want to go where you want to go (like back to the cage) or to the room you groom her in. Before you solve an aggression issue, you have to figure out what the aggression is about. See the section, "Figuring Out What's Bugging Your Bird," later in this chapter for more details.

Socializing One-Person Parrots

The word isn't out yet on whether or not certain species become one-person birds or whether their socialization (or lack of it) makes them that way. However, some species are more prone to it than others. Some Amazons, cockatoos, lovebirds, and African grey parrots in particular are most blamed for having this trait.

Imagine that your bird loves you to death but becomes enraged, even hostile, when another person is in the room. Perhaps your bird was once sweet to you but has now bonded with another family member and threatens to remove your eyeballs when you approach. Even a stranger to the home can become the object of infatuation, making the favored person the one on the outs. For example, someone with another hair color may tickle the parrot's fancy, as can someone who is the opposite gender of the favored human. Often, these little infatuations are short-lived and will fade once the new crush has left the scene, but imagine how confusing it is in the moment.

Often, the person who has fallen out of favor with the parrot, or people who were never on its friend-list to begin with, are insulted, baffled, and hurt by the parrot's behavior. It's not personal. The parrot is an animal with animal instincts, and no one really knows why a parrot chooses one person over another. There are best guesses, like the bird's preferring its opposite gender or preferring the gender of the person who handfed it, but those explanations don't always bear scrutiny. Obviously, if someone from one gender harmed the bird at one point, it may not trust that gender, but the bird simply may not trust people with brown hair and glasses, either, if that's what the former abuser looked like.

One-person birds can also be a nuisance. In the wild, most parrots mate for life. When danger comes near, perhaps another parrot or a predator, one parrot may snap at its mate to make her fly away to avoid the potential threat to her life or their relationship. This isn't *always* the reaction to a threat, but it's one of many possibilities. So, if you're the adored person and the parrot perceives that another person is a threat to you or your feathered relationship, you may get a nasty bite when the other person enters the room. "Fly away!" your parrot is saying. Your misguided one-person parrot isn't being aggressive, she's trying to protect you. Understanding your parrot's motivations can help predict and quash unwanted behaviors.

Keep reading for ways to help prevent possessiveness and how to reverse one person-ness.

Preventing possessiveness

Before your parrot has the chance to exhibit one-person behavior, have someone else in the family (the bird's least-liked person) take over feeding duties, and ask everyone in the house to talk to the bird, make soothing sounds, and give her treats. This may not make the bird love everyone, but it will get the bird very used to everyone. Ideally, no parrot should be out-and-out hostile to anyone in the house. Everyone in the family should be on at least speaking terms with the parrot. If you've already got a hostile, one-person bird on your hands, see the next section, "Reversing one person-ness."

Here's the kink in the plan for those people who insist that their parrot love everyone: It may not happen, and you can't push the issue if it doesn't. Why should the parrot have to have a close relationship with everyone in the house? Do you have a close relationship with everyone at work? Do you trust everyone there enough to pick you up and carry you around to unknown places? Try to see the world from your parrot's point of view. If she doesn't like someone, even if she doesn't like *you* and prefers someone else in the family, that doesn't mean you can't have any kind of relationship with her. It just means you might not have the relationship *you* wanted and expected. Expectations work against the principles of a real relationship anyway, the rules of which should be mutually decided upon. Just because you have the opposable thumbs in the relationship doesn't make you the boss.



TIP

How you introduce people to your parrot is crucial. Supervise all guests, and make sure they take off hats or any scary jewelry. Show them how to approach the cage, and instruct them not to pick the parrot up or stare it down, but just to talk to it and offer a nut. Then you can pick the parrot up and place it on the visitor's hand if it seems like the bird will tolerate that. Don't push it! If the bird seems scared or doesn't want to go, don't force the matter.



REMEMBER

If family members are afraid of the parrot and unsure when they handle her, of course she's going to turn into a one-person bird. You're the only one she can trust. Imagine that you have the option of sitting in two chairs, one that's always sturdy and comfortable, and another that's rickety and always seems to be ready to fall apart. Where would you sit? Your bird can tell which person is the chair who's going to fall apart. The person's hand is unsteady when holding the bird or the person moves too quickly. Either way, the parrot is going to have little faith in this person and may even bite when that person comes near. Often, the biting behavior comes out of the parrot simply wanting to hold on and steady itself with her beak. The person feels the beak for a second (not even pain) and then makes a fuss or even drops the parrot on the floor, thinking that this adjustment is a bite. Confidence is key.

Another scenario for one person-ness becoming a problem is the behavior's being inadvertently positively reinforced. Here's an example from my own avian consulting practice: A husband and wife have a little Amazon that they love. The bird is loving and sweet for the first two years they have him. He is fully flighted and has free run of the house pretty much all the time. The problem begins when the bird starts favoring the husband and biting the wife. Every time happens, the wife gets upset, and the husband comes running to rescue her from the bird. He picks up the bird and pets it, cuddling it to his chest. After a while, the bird starts dive-bombing the wife, giving her terrible bites on the face and hands. Again, the husband rescues the wife and then pets the bird.

Well, isn't this case clear? The bird learned that biting the wife was a great way to get the husband's attention and affection. I recommended to this couple that they clip the bird's wings for the time being (and let them grow out when the problem was under control) and that the wife take over caring for the bird. I instructed them to *stick-train* the parrot (have it step onto a stick — see Chapter 16 for directions on stick training). Also, the husband wasn't to come running if there was an altercation. Instead, the wife would unceremoniously put the bird into the cage and shut the door for a few minutes. Then she would go back and open the cage, being the one now to rescue it from its prison and give it a treat for coming nicely out of the cage.

Reversing one person-ness

Reversing one person-ness isn't impossible, but it takes planning and the cooperation of all family members. Here are some tips:

- » **Don't reward the parrot for bad behavior.** No rescuing, no laughing, no rushing away when bitten.
- » **Avoid bites.** Stick-train the bird.

- » **Have the least-favored people take over feeding and treating the bird.** Give your family a chance to interact positively with your parrot.
- » **Take the bird and the least-favored person into a room the bird is unfamiliar with and see if the bird will tolerate the person there.** Try it with the most favored person both in and out of the room.
- » **Offer lots of verbal praise for any friendly contact between the less-favored person and the bird.** Give some “atta-boys!” and “good girls!” for birds who are behaving nicely with the less-favored person.

Here’s something to think about: If you’re the favored person, are you subconsciously encouraging your bird to be unfriendly with other people? Humans send subtle (and not so subtle) clues to the animals in their lives, and there may be something that you’re doing when the bird lunges that’s encouraging her to do so. Having a one-person bird can be flattering. There’s nothing like that kind of loyalty. But it’s awful for the bird who will live a very restrictive life and who will have a difficult time being boarded or re-homed. Make sure that you’re not inadvertently encouraging this behavior.

MANGO THE FIERCE

One of my funniest birdy stories happened years ago with Mango, one of my yellow Fischer’s lovebirds. My friend Mark was visiting one day and wanted to hold Mango, who is feisty but also very sweet. Mark was sitting on the couch, holding Mango at face level and talking to her. It was such a sweet scene, and somehow, I wanted it to be even more adorable. I told Mark to kiss Mango on the top of the beak. I kissed Mango all the time, and she loved it, of course. He asked me if it was okay to do that. I encouraged him again to do it. Again, he asked me if I was sure that a little kiss was okay. Yes, I told him, “Just do it, it’s fine! Do it! Do it!”

So, he brought Mango to his puckered lips, and CHOMP! She bit his bottom lip so hard, it bled both inside and out. Well, I should have been horrified, but I just about died laughing instead! Mark wasn’t amused, but we laugh about the incident to this day. It wasn’t Mango’s fault — it was mine, and the laughing didn’t help. I certainly don’t encourage anyone to kiss my birds today.

Dealing With a Screaming Parrot

Screaming is one of the most normal parrot offenses. Parrots vocalize, sometimes loudly, in the morning and in the evening, and there's nothing you can do about it. Sorry. Get a fish if you can't stand bird noise. If you love your parrot, you'll allow her to be a parrot and do what parrots do.

Okay, I'll step down from my soap box now. I know how annoying parrot screaming can be, as did my former neighbors in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, who got together and signed a letter saying that they were going to report me to the police for bird abuse because of the sounds emanating from my house. At that time, I was actively rescuing birds and had two mealy Amazons, three red-lored Amazons, one double yellow-headed Amazon, three large macaws, four mini macaws, a bunch of conures, a couple lorries, a few Meyer's (who didn't really contribute to the din), some parrotlets, and *dozens* of lovebirds and cockatiels. Well, an animal-control police officer showed up one day and, after taking a tour of my birds, told me he'd arrest the letter-writing neighbors if they bothered me again. Vindication! But it's not fun to be at odds with your neighbors.

The following sections discuss some strategies you can use with a screaming bird and some remedies to avoid when dealing with a screamer.

Trying these strategies for a screaming bird

Even though some screaming is normal, screaming all day isn't normal. If a too-noisy bird is otherwise healthy, well nourished, and getting enough exercise, it's probably screaming for attention. If your bird is screaming, keep these tactics in mind:

» **Avoid inadvertently positively reinforcing the behavior.** Offering an attention-seeking bird any form of attention for screaming only makes the screaming worse, because it *worked*. Don't look at the bird; don't yell; don't say *no*; don't talk to it — just ignore the noise.

But the total solution isn't about just ignoring the bird. *Why* is the bird screaming for attention? Is it not getting enough attention or enough of the right kind of attention? If a bird that's lavished with attention screams the second you walk away after playing with him for an hour, you've got an unwanted learned behavior on your hands. If the bird is locked in a cage 23 hours a day and is screaming for someone, anyone, to acknowledge it, you've got to address that. Give the bird more attention or find it a mate or a friend and the constant screaming may stop.

» **Attempt noise replacement.** When the bird makes a particularly awful noise or a very loud call, wait a moment, and then respond with a pleasant sound, like a whistle or a nonsense phrase in a high-pitched tone, like *whoot whoot*. You can even try a whisper. If your bird already knows some words or sounds, you can use one of those. It's possible that your parrot will replace the awful noise with the preferred noise that you're making instead.

A bird that's screaming because you're out of the room or one that's really trying to communicate with you (not screaming out of fear or habit) will pick up the new sound and may substitute it for the loud screaming. However, you have to stop rewarding the screaming with the new sound as quickly as possible by responding only to the new sound as soon as the parrot nails it. Then ignore the screaming and respond to the new sound or any other sound you consider acceptable. If not, you'll have a parrot that thinks her screaming is the way to get you to respond with that lovely new sound.

Staying away from these remedies for a screamer

Here are some common anti-screaming remedies that *don't* work:

- » **Yelling back:** This only encourages the bird to yell more. *Wheeeee, a yelling fest! Let's all yell as loud as we can! SQUAWKKKKKKKK!*
- » **Squirting water:** The water-torture punishment is a terrible idea. Water is supposed to be fun, not shocking.
- » **Darkness:** Yes, a parrot will shut up in the darkness or with the cage covered, but that doesn't teach it anything and it's also cruel.
- » **Tapping the beak:** Some people use this punishment for various offenses, and it *doesn't* work! In fact, the beak is very sensitive, and tapping it can hurt. Also, in some species, this can be interpreted as part of a mating ritual and may just cause the bird to become louder.
- » **Picking up the bird:** Sure, it does stop the screaming, but it also reinforces the screaming, which will begin the minute you put the bird down again. Only pick up a quiet bird, even if that bird has only been quiet for a few seconds.
- » **Wearing earplugs:** Okay, I'll give you this one. Earplugs work. Buy them for your neighbors, too. When I'm writing, I wear earmuffs that people use on a gun range to protect their ears from gunfire. Can't hear a thing!

MAKING PEACE WITH THE NEIGHBORS

If you're going to get a parrot or you're moving into a new place, let your neighbors know about your companion and offer to make introductions. You can even have a new-neighbor potluck party so they can come over and get to know your bird. Explain that they might hear the bird from time to time, but they shouldn't be concerned. Tell them to let you know if the noise ever bothers them.

If you're really creative, you can write a letter from your bird, staple it to photocopied information about the species, and give it to the people living around you. In my New York City apartment, the only parrot complaint I had was to put new batteries in my smoke detector, which was beeping so loudly that the neighbors could hear it. Unfortunately, the beeping was coming from my African grey, and I still haven't figured out where the batteries go.

Handling Bad Words and Sounds

If you don't want your bird to learn to curse, don't curse around her. Sometimes curses happen, and a quick-witted bird may pick one up and repeat it over and over in front of your in-laws. But that's not the only reason why you shouldn't teach your bird to curse. What if the bird has to be re-homed someday? Not many families can deal with a cursing parrot, especially if they have kids. The same goes for unacceptable sounds.



TIP

Both cursing and funny noises often get a big laugh, or at least a gasp, and the parrot loves that kind of attention. The first step toward eliminating unwanted sounds is to absolutely ignore them and to *praise or respond to sounds you like*. Often, bad noises go away on their own once they stop getting attention and the bird doesn't hear them anymore.

Not long ago, a London zoo had to separate five African grey parrots and take them out of public viewing because they were swearing up a storm. Zookeepers were amused with the birds' naughty language at first and laughed every time they swore. The parrots then learned to laugh after swearing. Parents surely had to earmuff their kids at this zoo!



TIP

You can also use the sound-replacement method detailed in the preceding section, but you can fine-tune it to work with words. For example, find a sound or word that resembles the offending word; then repeat it clearly and with lots of excitement in your voice whenever the parrot says the offending word. I changed *b*****d* to *mustard* this way. It seems that I *may* have been calling my incessantly barking dogs *b*****s* out loud in front of my African grey. Not proud of it. I had

to start calling them *mustards*. It only took a couple of weeks to change the word, and the bird doesn't even say it anymore. Watch your language in front of your parrot!

Bad language isn't the only problem. African grays in particular pick up very annoying sounds. Mine learned to do a very loud version of my door buzzer, and I had to install an off switch (to the buzzer, not the bird). Also, I had a boyfriend once that bird-sat my grey for two weeks and I came home to find that the bird had learned some embarrassing human sounds . . . in particular, loud flatulence. After the boyfriend became an ex-boyfriend, the bird fortunately stopped making that noise.



WARNING

Training a behavior into a bird is much easier than extinguishing one. This goes for most animals, even humans. Unwanted behaviors can often be seen simply as bad habits. After an unwanted behavior is entrenched into a bird's daily routine, whether it's screaming for attention, cursing, or biting, which are learned behaviors, turning back the clock on them isn't easy. Avoiding the unwanted behaviors from the beginning if you can is much easier.

Any words you say a lot in front of parrots known for talking ability will be picked up and used as frequently, perhaps more frequently, than you use them. You may have read or heard a smattering of news stories about parrots ordering stuff from Amazon using Alexa. One parrot even learned to use Alexa to turn on all the lights in the house. Either unplug your smart device, put it into another room, or be ready to accept some strange packages that you didn't order.

Taking a Chunk out of You: Biting

Biting isn't a natural behavior for wild parrots when they're together. It's more likely that they'll take flight for self-defense rather than engage in real biting matches with other birds of the same species. They'll snap at each other to wrangle for a better spot in the tree, but they don't chomp down or shed blood. Even physical violence over nesting sites is rare. The following sections discuss why birds bite, what you can do if and when they do, and how you can read your bird's biting body language to avoid being bitten.

Considering why birds bite

Birds bite for a few reasons, which I discuss here. The biting impulses come from the following:

» **Fear:** Fear is the primary biting impulse. The bird perceives immediate danger (fear of harm, fear of pain, and so on). Think about the times when a parrot has bitten you. Did the parrot perceive danger? Were you doing something the parrot didn't like or want to do? Did the parrot have any other choice? Could it have flown away?

» **Learned response:** The secondary biting impulse comes from a learned response. Because parrots are intelligent, and because biting works to get the parrot what it wants, a biting parrot will continue to bite unless you work to try to correct that behavior. This happens in two ways:

- You do something the parrot doesn't want, like pick it up to put it back into the cage, so the parrot bites. You pitch a fit, screaming and carrying on. *Wow*, the parrot thinks, *how fun! A song and a dance — I think I'll do that again!* By making a scene and freaking out, you've just reinforced the biting behavior by giving the parrot a big reward: drama.
- When a parrot bites, the bite-ee generally moves away from the parrot, usually quickly. That's what the parrot wanted. Again, the biting worked. Now, put those two reactions together, and you've the perfect recipe for parrot training: The parrot does something to elicit a reaction and gets what it wants. So, if biting works for one thing (not getting put back into the cage), it may work for another (not getting taken off a shower perch). The parrot experiments with biting in different situations. Now you have a biting parrot.

» **Territoriality and possessiveness:** Lovebirds, for example, are known for their biting skills. They get very protective over their housing and can become quite wild if not interacted with for even a few days. In this case, it's not real fear that's motivating the bird; it's instinct. You have to gauge why your parrot is biting to be able to prevent it and correct it. In any case, don't reinforce biting behavior.

» **Hormonal surges:** Parrots that are having a hormonal surge, usually in the spring when the daylight gets longer than the darkness, can become quite aggressive and bite.

» **The faker:** A *buffaloing* parrot is one that snaps and lunges, with little intention of really giving you a bite. He's a faker. But this faking works because it's scary. The parrot knows it works, too, because every time she snaps and lunges, the humans move away. This bird is a good candidate for stick training. More likely, a buffalo bird doesn't bite at all — she's just a very good actor.

Responding after your bird bites you

The natural reaction to being bitten — or to any pain — is to pull back and move away from it. The natural basic reaction to wanting something away from you is to push, hit, or force it to move away. You know it; your parrot knows it. It's instinctual. But, if you have the opposite reaction, you'll throw your parrot off guard, and you'll cause the biting not to work anymore. If the biting doesn't work, the parrot won't do it (unless she's terrified, then all bets are off). Instead of pulling away when the bird bites, respond by doing the following:

- » **Push back.** Push the bird right off the perch if you have to (very gently, *don't* hurt your bird!). You bird will be genuinely bewildered. Of course, don't go asking for bites — don't corner a scared bird, and don't force a bird to do anything she doesn't want to do unless you absolutely have to (medical exam, being put into a carrier, and so on).
- » **Wiggle your hand or turn your wrist a few degrees to unbalance the bird.** This technique works if the parrot bites while on your hand. She'll let go of your hand. If you can anticipate the bite, you can wiggle just before she lunges. Be consistent with this, and the biting should cease. Don't drop the bird to the floor unless you absolutely have to in the case of a huge bird and extreme pain. You can really hurt a bird by dropping it, and dropping her only teaches that if she bites you, she can immediately get away from you, which is the opposite of what you're trying to teach. If you're going to try this method, do it as gently and safely as possible. Don't toss a bird with clipped wings onto a hard floor.
- » **Say “No!” or “Ep-ep” sharply to stop a bite.** In the case of a snappish or *beaky* bird, one that's testing the biting waters or is perhaps in the “teething” stage of babyhood, you can use this technique. Not too much drama — just a firm word to get the bird's attention and let her know that you don't appreciate her actions. A short moment of silent glaring at the bird with squinted eyes and a mean face works, too. Again, you're not trying to hurt or scare your bird. You're simply trying to train out biting.

Paying attention to your bird's biting body language

Of course, the best way to not reinforce biting is to avoid getting bitten in the first place. Read your bird's biting body language:

- » **Eyes pinning:** When the pupils are contracting and expanding, the bird is in an agitated or excited state and can bite.
- » **Glaring:** There's a difference between a bird's merely looking at you with anticipation or curiosity and *glaring*. It's hard to put this difference into words, but you'll know it when you see it.
- » **Erect posture, leaning back, glaring:** This bird feels pressured or fearful and has nowhere else to go. Biting time!
- » **Tightened feathers, neck stretched upward, nervous looking around:** Here's a bird that's looking for an escape route. If she can't get one, she'll bite.
- » **Stooped posture:** Along with other biting indicators, stooped posture and glaring can indicate aggression.
- » **Feather puffing:** Along with stooping, glaring, and eye pinning may come feather puffing — kind of like when a dog's hackles stand on end.
- » **Beak clicking, wonking, growling, or hissing:** Little clicks, odd explosive repetitive noises, growling, and hissing (along with other body language) all mean that you shouldn't get your hand near this bird's beak.
- » **Tail flaring:** In some species, a fanned tail, along with strutting, eye pinning, wonking, stooping, and feather puffing, means *stay back!*

Addressing Fears and Phobias

Parrots are naturally fearful animals. They have to be, or else they wouldn't survive in the wild. They're instinctually programmed to be fearful of things flying overhead (predatory birds), wires and coils (snakes), and anything bigger than they are that with eyes on the front of the face (predatory animals). In captivity, there's even more reason to be fearful. There are things in a captive environment that a parrot isn't hard-wired to even comprehend.

When you first bring a bird home, you have to introduce her to everything in her immediate environment. Then, after time, introduce her to things in other rooms where she may spend some time. Musical instruments, artwork, large, unwieldy appliances, and other odd items may frighten your parrot. Don't push the introductions to these items. You can take the bird into a room for a moment, talk soothingly and reassuringly, offer her a treat, and then leave again. Do this every day until you can come closer and closer to a strange object. Baby steps.

These sections look at what can cause phobias in birds and what strategies you can use if your bird is afraid of people.

Considering the causes

A phobic bird has been conditioned to be terrified of something, usually inadvertently, by its human guardians. In many cases, that something is a person (or people) or hands. This phobia can happen from any number of causes, including the following:

- » Abuse
- » Improper handling
- » Fearful guardians
- » Shuffled from home to home
- » Weaned too early
- » Not enough socialization
- » Untreated injury, perhaps a broken bone that was never set, foot disorders, chronic pain, and illness

A terrified bird always warrants a trip to the vet, first and foremost.

DON'T FREAK OUT A SCAREDY BIRD

I once took in an older blue-crowned Amazon that was terrified of hands but would step onto a stick or onto my arm if he was covered in a towel. If I came at this bird with a hand, he would shriek and fly off the playstand. After he was on the floor, he'd scramble around until I got a stick and picked him up. Then he was fine. His previous guardians were older people and always used a towel to hold him. He *never* bit me — he was just very scared.

I slowly fed this bird treats from my open hand every day until I got him to touch my hand with his beak. I also used the whittle down stick-training method from Chapter 16. After a few months, this bird started stepping onto my hand with no hesitation. Had I forced him to step on my hand or tried to break him of his fear, I have no doubt that I would have ended up with a miserable, biting bird.

Trying these tactics with a fearful bird

If you have a phobic bird that's terrified of people or of one particular person, try the following strategies:

- » **Start getting him used to people (or the person).** To do so, place a chair across the room opposite the cage and sit in it facing adjacent to the bird (not facing her), singing or humming, but not looking at the bird. Do something with your hands if you can — something you can focus on, such as looking at your phone or reading a magazine. As the bird tolerates it, bring the chair a few inches closer. Your focus shouldn't be on the bird. At this point, you're just getting the bird used to your presence without getting in her space (as you must do with feeding and cleaning).

When she seems very comfortable with your presence or has at least improved, move the chair back across the room again, this time facing the cage. Don't look directly at the bird, because doing so may be perceived as a sign of aggression. Again, read, check out your social media, whatever, and move the chair gradually closer. The idea is to get the bird very comfortable with your presence and then get her comfortable with some indirect attention.

If she's responding well to the indirect attention — preening, eating, vocalizing normally, and stretching in your presence — then you can start giving her some direct attention. Talk to her and glance at her, but don't stare. If it seems that she'll tolerate it, feed her treats (nuts and sunflower seeds work well), say her name, and tell her she's a good bird. Then go away quickly. You always want the interaction to be short and end on a good note.

Increase the duration you're spending at the cage, offering treats and talking to the bird. Eventually, using this same, slow, incremental method, you'll open the cage, stick-train, hand-train, and so on. The key is to get the bird used to you on her own time. This can take *months*, perhaps even well over a year, and that's fine. Don't expect a fearful bird to come around instantly.

- » **Clip the bird's wings.** Use this tactic only if you're having trouble taming a phobic bird. Realize though that a clipped bird is bound to be even more fearful. When you clip the wings, you remove a primary source of safety, which can make the bird feel even more insecure. If there's a safe way to keep the phobic bird fully flighted, do it.
- » **Consider the phobic bird's housing and make it as comfortable and unscary as possible.** Place the cage against a wall, and cover another side or two, but make sure the bird can still see what's going on in the home, or she'll be even more frightened. Offer simple toys and perches — nothing too elaborate. Keep the room's environment uncluttered and as static as possible; now's not the time to get new carpeting or a giant fish tank.

Identifying and Handling Hormonal Issues

All parrots mature eventually, some at less than a year of age, some at a few years. But whatever the case, sexual maturity can cause a change in attitude, preferences, and behavior. This can be startling for guardians, who are often insulted by these changes. As I've said before in this book, it's not personal.

You will generally notice the onset of maturity one spring around the time that the clocks change and the natural light gets longer than the darkness (or if you leave artificial lights on near the parrot for more than 12 hours a day as the parrot matures). Parrots are photosensitive and react instinctively to this change. The lengthening daylight of the springtime tells a parrot to get into breeding mode, and its hormones start surging.

Behavior problems during breeding season include the following:

- » Increased duration of vocalization (screaming)
- » Biting
- » Possessiveness
- » Territoriality
- » Plucking
- » One person-ness



WARNING

Breeding season can cause a male parrot to begin courting someone in the house and biting others. He may change his alliances entirely. It can cause a female parrot to become highly territorial of her cage, and she may even lay eggs. If a single hen does lay eggs, allow her to keep the eggs for a couple of weeks and then take them away. If you take them away immediately, she'll just keep having more eggs. If no male is with her, the eggs will never hatch. Obvious, but I thought I'd mention it. You can discourage a hen from laying eggs by taking away anything that resembles a nest or nesting material, even newspaper (make sure there's a grating at the bottom of the cage). Remove all round feed dishes, and replace them with smaller covered dishes. Even this doesn't stop some birds, but it's a start. See Chapter 12 for more information on discouraging breeding behavior. Your bird may also want to start feeding you by regurgitating on your hand or near your face. This is very flattering, but don't encourage this behavior.



TIP

You have two choices when your bird has hormonal issues:

- » Deal with this hormonal behavior and realize that this, too, shall pass, usually in the fall. Just try not to encourage or positively reinforce any behaviors that may flow over into the rest of the year.

- » Try decreasing the amount of light that the parrot receives. Generally, if the light hours are slightly fewer than the darkness hours, the hormones should decrease. Giving the bird 11 hours of light and 13 of darkness may work (often, 12 and 12 works, too).

Pulling Out Her Plumes — Feather Plucking

Perhaps the most heartbreaking and mystifying unwanted behavior of all is feather plucking. The parrot begins to chew her feathers, pull them out, and even self-mutilate, causing wounds that the bird won't allow to heal. For a long time, people really didn't understand why parrots did this, but as the years have passed and people have started viewing parrots as more than just pretty faces, the reasons have become clearer. Also, avian medicine and nutrition have advanced exponentially in the last couple of decades, uncovering more reasons for this sad behavior.

The following sections identify why parrots may pluck and what you can do to nip the plucking in the bud.

Figuring out why parrots pluck

Parrots pluck for a variety of reasons, some medical, some emotional. Here are the primary culprits:

- » **Boredom:** A bored parrot can become a plucking parrot. Every parrot needs things to do, toys to shred, television or podcasts to listen to, and a guardian to interact with. Parrots aren't content with 30 minutes out of a cage a day. They need lots of stimulation.
- » **Improper housing:** A cramped parrot may become so frustrated that she begins to chew or pull her feathers.
- » **Fear:** A phobic parrot may take out her extreme fear and frustration on herself.
- » **Poor diet:** A diet lacking in essential oils, vitamins, and minerals in the proper amounts can lead to dry skin, which can lead to plucking.

- » **Illness:** Illnesses that cause pain, itching, or discomfort can cause plucking, especially in the area of discomfort. For example, a parrot with a respiratory infection may pluck over the chest area.
- » **Lice or mites:** Any pest plaguing the feathers and skin can cause plucking.
- » **Metal poisoning:** Have your vet check for metal toxicity, which can cause plucking.
- » **Improper lighting:** All parrots need natural sunlight or artificial full-spectrum lighting.
- » **Bathing:** Grease or dirt on the feathers can cause plucking, as can dry skin from lack of bathing.
- » **Sexual frustration:** Breeding season's hormone surges can cause a non-breeding parrot to become frustrated and take out the pent-up energy on its feathers.
- » **Environmental stimuli:** Something new and scary in the environment can cause immediate plucking behavior, like shiny balloons after a birthday party or a blinky Christmas tree.
- » **Environmental changes:** Moving the furniture around or moving the cage can also cause a problem. Parrots like consistency.
- » **Nicotine:** Parrots living with and handled by smokers have a tendency to pluck because of the nicotine residue on the bird's feathers.
- » **Guardian changes:** Sudden changes in appearance — shaving a full beard, changing hair color, starting to wear glasses, and so on — can cause plucking in a sensitive bird. Also, the primary guardian's going away for a while can cause plucking.
- » **Boarding/bird sitter:** A trip to the bird sitter or a boarding kennel can cause stress-related plucking.
- » **Improper wing clip:** If the ends of the wing feathers are left too sharp or ragged, they can grate against the skin, causing itching, which causes plucking.
- » **Change in household:** Someone leaving the household or someone who is new and might seem scary moving in. A new baby or pet can prompt plucking too.
- » **The brood patch:** Nesting parrots will pluck a bald patch into the breast feathers to keep the eggs warm. This is normal.
- » **Baby plucking:** Sometimes parents will pluck baby birds. This is normal to an extent, but if the parents are doing some real damage to the babies and making them bleed, you'll have to remove them and handfeed.

- » **Mate plucking:** Paired birds will sometimes pluck their mates. Both male and female birds do it. If you notice that a paired bird is getting a bald or fluffy spot on the top of the head where it can't reach, you can be sure that the mate is the culprit. If it gets really bad, such as bleeding or pulling out wing and tail feathers, separate the birds.

Plucking can start for various reasons, but like screaming and biting, it can also be positively reinforced. For example, say your parrot starts plucking because of a medical issue. Every time she plucks, you yell at her or run to the cage. At the very least, tensions are high when the plucking happens. The bird goes to the vet and the physical problem is cleared up with medicine. But the plucking continues. Why? Because every time the parrot plucked, she got attention. Some parrots *do* need more attention, but they shouldn't get it the second after they've chewed or pulled a feather.

Cockatoos, African grey parrots, Amazons, and eclectus are most prone to plucking their feathers and self-mutilation, though no species is immune to this behavior. Because a bird has the capacity to suffer, it has the capacity to pluck.

Helping your feathered friend stop plucking

The very first thing to do for a plucker is to take it to a good avian veterinarian for a battery of tests and to clear up any health issues. Infections, viruses, fungi, and parasites can all cause plucking. Here are some other possible solutions:

- » **Boost nutrition.** You *have* to bolster a plucking bird's nutrition. Supplements are essential for a plucker. Ask your veterinarian about supplements or do some research online. But supplements aren't enough. See Chapter 8 for a lot more detail on nutrition. Some evidence shows that plucking birds need more protein.
- » **Give more direct attention.** Interact with the plucker. As long as you're interacting with her, she's not plucking.
- » **Give the bird a job to do.** Give a plucking bird a lot of stuff to chew and shred. Paper, preening floss toys, puzzle toys, coco fiber, anything that will keep the bird occupied and off her feathers.
- » **Add branches in the cage.** Place an abundance of clean, pesticide-free, nontoxic tree branches in the cage. The bird has little choice but to work at those branches until they're whittled away.

» **Consider an e-collar (Elizabethan collar).** As a last resort, you'll have to e-collar your bird, which prevents the bird from plucking. The best e-collar for a bird is clear, so that the bird can see through it. This should be done only if the bird is causing real damage to her skin, such as bleeding and wounds. Have an avian veterinarian put it on. Don't try to e-collar your bird yourself. I've heard horror stories of birds dying this way. Only use an e-collar in extreme circumstances. It's a bandage for the problem, not a cure.



WARNING

What about getting the bird a mate? I tossed this one in here because it's a common myth, and it *won't* stop plucking. Some parrots will appreciate a birdy friend, though others will see it as a rival or won't pay attention to it at all. If the plucking is due to a medical issue and you get the bird a mate, how can that help?

Figuring Out What's Bugging Your Bird

The first place to look when something's bugging your bird is at its health and nutrition. I can't express this strongly enough: Take your parrot to the avian veterinarian for a well-bird checkup twice a year, and take him there immediately if there's any kind of problem. Here are some issues your bird may be facing.

Maturity

Simple hormones might be what's bugging your bird and causing behavior issues. But beyond that, there may be an issue in how you're treating your mature bird. Puppies and kittens grow bigger and change as they grow, but most parrots are going to have the same basic appearance from 2 to 20. You may be able to turn a baby bird on its back and give it tummy kisses, but an adult parrot may not be interested in that kind of attention. Give your parrot the dignity of growing up and don't try to treat him like a baby forever.

Other birds

Sometimes, the addition of another bird into the household can cause behavior problems with the established bird (see Figure 14-1). Now she has a reason to be louder and nippier, and perhaps even to pluck her feathers. She's competing for your affection. In this case, always tend to the established bird first, and give her the same amount of attention that you did before the new bird arrived.

FIGURE 14-1:
These parrots are
displaying
aggression and/
or territoriality
toward each
other.



Photo by Mary Jo Yarberry

Environmental changes

If there's something in your bird's environment that it likes or is used to, and you move it, the bird is going to have an unpleasant reaction. Unfortunately, you're not going to be able to immediately tell which object in your bird's environment is important to him. I've had this kind of thing happen to me only once. I keep a television on for my birds and one day I decided to move the TV to another room where they could still hear it, but they couldn't see it. My grey started making a sound I can only describe as plaintive and mournful. It was terrible. It took me about a week to figure out the connection, and when I moved the TV back into the room, the sound stopped.

Additions to the room can also cause problems. I've heard of a bird that started plucking when a computer and monitor were moved into its room. Art and party decorations are often culprits as well, causing fear, screaming, and plucking.

Cage placement

A cage in the middle of a room or up against a window puts the bird in a vulnerable spot, with no protection or safe corner to hide in. This is quite unnatural for a parrot (as is being in a cage in the first place, but that's for another chapter). If

something's suddenly bugging your bird and you've just moved the cage, put it back into the original spot, or try to mirror the original spot by placing towels or sheets over the sides of the cage where the walls were in the other location, but be careful that she doesn't start chewing the fabric.

Temperature

A bird that's too cold or too hot, or one that lives with extreme temperature fluctuations, isn't comfortable and can become stressed or ill. Make sure that the room remains a comfortable temperature. If it's chilly for you, it's probably chilly for your parrot. If you're sweating, chances are your parrot is enjoying the weather — but it shouldn't get overheated, and there should always be fresh, clean water available. A heated perch is usually a welcome addition to your bird's habitat.

Noise

A very quiet house can be stressful for a parrot. The wild is never quiet, not even at night. When the jungle suddenly falls quiet in the daytime, it means that there's a predator nearby. Birds stop chattering so they can listen for danger and remain invisible. You'll notice that a bird can catnap in the middle of the day with the television blaring. Of course, loud, sudden noises will startle and stress a parrot, but background noise is actually quite welcome. Some parrots, lovebirds, for example, even sing and chatter in their daytime naps as a defense mechanism; a chattering, twittering bird doesn't look asleep.



TIP

Keep the television or radio on low throughout the day.

Realize, however, that if you have a bird who picks up words and sounds easily, you'll have to choose your programming wisely. My grey used to mimic the buzzer from the TV show *Family Feud* and would announce all day: *Here's Richard Karn!* He was the host of the program at the time. I found it cute, but some people may find vocalizations like that annoying.

Sleep

A tired bird is a cranky bird that can develop all kinds of behavioral issues. Keeping a white-noise machine on in the evening, or even a fan or HEPA filter, drowns out street noises that can keep the bird up all night. It also gives the bird a sense of security, because the environment won't be totally quiet, which can make the bird aware of even the slightest noise in the house. If you get the sense that the white-noise sound is annoying your parrot, eliminate it or move the white noise machine farther away from the cage.



Total pitch-blackness can be frightening for a parrot. Keep a nightlight on in your bird's room to keep her from becoming startled in the darkness. Night frights can cause a bird to thrash around in the cage and hurt his eyes, beak, and feathers.

Helping or Hurting: Why Your Actions Are Important

Often, human body language or actions can make parrot behavioral problems worse. Here are some of the top offenders:

- » **Come running:** If you come running every time your parrot screams, even if you're looking at her and telling her not to scream, you've just positively reinforced her screaming. Don't be at your parrot's beck and call. Praise a quiet parrot, not a noisy one. It's easy to ignore a parrot that's sitting quietly, playing with toys or munching an almond, but those are the times when you should speak your parrot's name and tell her that she's a good girl.
- » **Sneaking up:** Don't sneak up on your bird. Always whistle, sing, hum, or talk when you come into the room. Your sudden appearance can be startling to a bird, especially one that's phobic or new to the home.
- » **Tone of voice:** Speaking gruffly to a misbehaving parrot doesn't work, and neither does yelling. A simple firm "No!" to get the bird's attention will suffice. Otherwise, talk nicely and calmly to your bird.
- » **Roughhousing:** Never roughhouse with your parrot — doing so can make the bird aggressive or fearful.
- » **Noise in the house:** If you have a noisy bird, try to tone down the general noise in the home. Your bird may be competing with the television, the kids screaming, and the vacuum cleaner. A quieter home begets a quieter parrot.
- » **Staring:** Staring or intensely looking at a parrot can be unsettling, even for the tamest of birds. It means something ominous to them, even if you're just admiring them.
- » **Glaring:** A very short, wicked glare can do wonders for telling a bird you're unhappy with it. You only need to do this for a brief moment for the bird to understand. Then stop! Or, as your mother probably told you, your face might stick that way, and, as I'm telling you, your bird may cease trusting you.
- » **Punishment:** Punishment doesn't work on parrots. Refer to Chapter 16 for a detailed explanation. Praise good behaviors and quiet self-playtime and ignore unwanted behaviors.

» **Ignoring:** I mention ignoring unwanted behaviors a lot in this book, but that doesn't mean ignoring your bird. You ignore a behavior for a period of time long enough for the bird to learn that it doesn't work to get what she wants. For example, when my grey wants my attention, he makes a variety of noises, some of which I like and some of which I don't. When he makes a noise I don't like, I don't respond. I don't look at him or say anything. When he tries another noise, one I do like, I immediately turn to him and say his name or give him other kinds of attention. I have effectively extinguished dozens of noises this way and encouraged dozens of others. I only have to ignore him for a moment for him to realize that one noise doesn't work and that he should try another. You can use this method on any unwanted behavior. Of course, you have to begin with a healthy, well-nourished, and well-adjusted bird.

Hiring a Behavior Consultant

If you feel you can't tackle your parrot's behavioral issues on your own, call in an expert. An avian care and behavior consultant is someone who has extensive knowledge about parrots and their behavior gleaned from years of rescuing, training, and dealing with companion birds, both their own and those belonging to others, in private and professional settings. A good behavior consultant is up on the latest information about parrot health and behavior, consults with other bird experts, listens well, and is intuitive about people and their parrots. Most will talk to you on the phone or do a web conference call for a small fee and give you a plan to follow to help solve your parrot's problem. Some will come to your home if you're in the area. Ask your avian veterinarian if she knows someone who can help you, or search online and make sure to read any reviews.

A good parrot behavior consultant:

- » Will nearly always recommend that you take your bird to an avian veterinarian as the first step toward discovering the problem (though sometimes a problem is so obvious, it doesn't require a trip to the vet).
- » Will discuss nutrition and housing with you.
- » Will ask you a lot of questions about your bird's background, life, and environment.
- » Will never make you feel stupid, blame you for your parrot's issues, or knock you for the type of parrot(s) you have.
- » Won't bash other consultants or avian experts.
- » Will include follow-up calls with the initial fee.

- » Won't make a ton of money. The fee shouldn't be excessive.
- » Will help you solve your problem (anyone can give advice, but it's the quality of the advice that counts).

Considering the Last Resort: Rescue and Adoption

I hope that you'll work hard and exhaust every possible avenue to help your bird overcome a behavioral issue. I understand that some people simply can't keep a bird under certain circumstances. Perhaps there's a new baby in the family, and the bird screams all day. Perhaps there's an illness in the family, and no one can care for the bird anymore. There are a lot of reasons why people give up birds, some quite valid.

Parrot rescue and foster organizations exist all over the country, some well run and ethical, some not so much. Whatever the case, most are overflowing with parrots of all sizes. These places are always short on help and cash, but the parrots continue to arrive daily. If you do place a parrot with one of these organizations, please give a donation. Most of them are thrilled to have volunteers as well. They also need foster homes for parrots.

Here are a few of the larger organizations that can help you find one in your area:

- » Foster Parrots: www.fosterparrots.com/
- » Phoenix Landing: www.phoenixlanding.org
- » The Oasis Sanctuary: www.the-oasis.org/
- » The Gabriel Foundation: www.thegabrielfoundation.org/
- » Midwest Avian Adoption & Rescue Services Inc.: www.maars.org
- » Best Friends: <https://bestfriends.org>
- » Rescue Me: www.rescueme.org/

5 **Taming, Training, and Beyond**

IN THIS PART . . .

Discover what you need to know about your parrot's intelligence, such as learning ability and normal companion behaviors.

Figure out how to tame and train your parrot with some basic training skills. You may be surprised to hear how smart your bird is.

Take your training to the next level and incorporate some more advanced training into your regimen — perfect for a really smart bird.

Get a realistic picture of what breeding birds is all about in case you're considering it; just be warned that breeding isn't for the wary.

Become involved with bird shows, meet new friends, and show your parrot.

- » Analyzing parrot intelligence
- » Comprehending why parrots talk
- » Conversing with your parrot

Chapter **15**

Bird Brains: Understanding Parrot Intelligence

Most people doing any kind of research on acquiring a parrot and those who already live with one or more of them know that parrots are far more intelligent than most people give them credit for. Birds, in general, aren't bird brained. Some birds even learn to use tools, which takes a very advanced brain. Black palm cockatoos use rocks to knock on trees and hyacinth macaws use pieces of wood to crack open nuts. Many parrot species have been observed using twigs or feathers to scratch the tops of their heads.

For example, in 2018, neuroscientists in Canada identified a circuit in the parrot brain similar to one in a primate's brain that plays a big role in intelligence. They also found that this part of the brain is two to five times larger in parrots than in other birds, such as owls and chickens.

In this chapter I show you that parrots are smarter than you ever imagined.

Taking a Closer Look at Mr. Smarty Pants . . . er, Feathers

What is intelligence? Because there's not enough room in this book to get into a long scientific explanation of intelligence, I stick to the basics. Very simply, intelligence can be measured by the following:

- » Consciousness
- » Learning ability
- » Memory
- » Aptitude

For the most part, *consciousness* has been attributed largely to humans. Animals were somehow left out of this notion until recently. Research done on chimpanzees shows high intelligence and consciousness. Also, the revolutionary research done by Dr. Irene Pepperberg on Alex the African grey (see the section, "Introducing Alex the Amazing Grey," later in this chapter for more on her research) has shown that parrots also possess far deeper intelligence and consciousness than anyone previously thought.

Consciousness also includes an aspect of *self-consciousness*. Adult humans tend to know that they are alive and that they are individuals. But do some animals? Do parrots? Some evidence shows that they may. Parrots show some forms of self-consciousness, but they don't really exhibit an ego, which is a very sophisticated form of self-consciousness. So, the question is: Do parrots know that they have a *self* and know that they are alive?

One basic test for showing self-consciousness is the *mirror test*, whereby the subject is shown a mirror to look at himself. Then something on the subject is changed, and the mirror is presented again. For example, if a colored mark is applied to an adult human's face in a spot that she can see only in a mirror (without her knowing that it was placed there), upon seeing her reflection in the mirror, she'll know to touch the part of his body where the colored mark was placed. She's self-conscious and aware that the reflection in the mirror is herself. Chimpanzees behave in the same way. Rhesus and other monkeys don't touch the colored spot when shown the mirror, but instead behave as though there's another monkey present. The problem with doing this test on parrots is that there are very few parts of their own bodies that they can't see because of the placement of their eyes. When they gave Alex the mirror test to see if he was self-aware, he asked,

“What color?” about himself. That’s the first time anyone had documented a parrot coming even remotely close to that kind of cognition.

The bottom line is that no one is sure that parrots are indeed aware of their individual *selves*, but there’s no question that their ability to learn is vast and that their thinking patterns are quite complex and include concepts that not even four-year-old humans have mastered. But young humans have *Sesame Street* and kindergarten, parrots don’t. Their learning curve is stunted unless someone comes along to act as a teacher.

Studying What Parrots Really Understand

Research shows that some parrots can come to understand what you’re saying and what they’re saying in a way that resembles language, but only if you teach them words and phrases in context. For example, a parrot knows inherently that it must drink water to survive, but it doesn’t know that the word for this liquid is *water* (in English) and will learn that only if you teach it to associate the substance water with the word *water*. Every time you serve water, give the bird a bath, or it rains outside, tell the bird that these things are water. After the bird comes to understand that what’s in the cup is called *water*, a talking species may begin to use it in context.

But you could still argue that this is just an associative response and not really language acquisition. When I take my African grey into the shower, he makes a perfect sound of water going down the drain. My shower doesn’t regularly make that noise, but perhaps it made it once, and the parrot began associating the drain noise with the shower. That doesn’t mean that he knows what a shower is. I do know that he associates the shower with that noise.

Parrots that are highly attuned to their households will begin to naturally associate certain sounds with other sounds, objects, or interactions. For example, when the phone rings, my grey says, “Hello?” This is a common behavior for these parrots. He also tells my dogs “Be quiet!” when they start barking. He does these things because I do them, and he has associated one sound with another. Does he really know why he’s saying these things? I doubt that he really understands the true nature of the telephone and why it’s ringing. He just knows that I say “Hello?” after the ring and that the telephone gets attention when it rings, and attention is exactly what he’s after, so he rings too.

THE WHOLE BIRD AND NOTHING BUT THE BIRD

In Michigan in 2015, a wife shot her husband and was tried and convicted of first-degree murder. Who was the witness to this gruesome crime? The couple's 20-year-old African grey parrot. After the murder, the parrot began repeating the words "don't f*****g shoot!" in the murder victim's voice. The judge wouldn't allow the parrot to take the stand, but researchers in parrot intelligence said that it was likely that the parrot remembered those words because they were said in distress.

In 1993, another African grey parrot witnessed his guardian's murder and began repeating, "Richard, no, no, no!" The defense attorney tried to make the case that the bird was similar to a recording device. This bird's testimony also wasn't allowed, but the defendant was convicted.

When something startling happens, he always asks, "Are you okay?" That's because I always say that when something startles him. He's trying to learn the "language of the flock" so that he can communicate with me the way he would use birdy language to communicate with other parrots in the wild. I can't attribute real language acquisition to him. The closest we've come is *come here*. He definitely knows that *come here* means that he should come to me when I say it and that I should come to him when he says it. I spend very little time teaching my birds real language, but animal cognition trainer, Jennifer Cunha, does take that time, and you can read more about her training methods in Chapter 17.

Introducing Alex the Amazing Grey

Alex was an African grey parrot that Irene Pepperberg, PhD, purchased from a Chicago pet store in June 1977. His name, Alex, was an acronym for "Avian Language Experiment." Dr. Pepperberg has a PhD in chemical physics from Harvard University and studies how individuals learn concepts and communicative behavior using African grey parrots as subjects. Before his unexpected passing in 2007, Alex could label seven colors and five shapes, was learning the alphabet, and could count up to six objects. He was also working on identifying objects from photographs. He knew the names of more than 100 objects and could ask clearly for what he wanted and where he wanted to go. In terms of leaning ability and memory, Alex proved that it wasn't just primates that could use and understand and advanced concepts.

If a researcher gave Alex something other than what he had asked for, he said, “Nuh” (his version of “No”), which is a sophisticated concept for any animal. He also knew the difference between “big” and “small,” and “same” and “different,” and was learning “over” and “under.” He also understood the concept of absence (zero). Other grey parrots in the lab have also shown some evidence of *set making*, a complex skill once attributed only to primates. These are only a few of the vast skills of the parrots still in Pepperberg’s research lab. Her parrots, including a grey named Griffin, show a level of intelligence and understanding comparable to a four-year-old human child, maybe even older.

Pepperberg did an experiment with Griffin and children ages three-and-a-half to nearly five. She showed both the kids and the bird a variety of colors, shapes, and materials. Griffin did better than the kids on some tasks and not as well on others. Pepperberg concluded Griffin showed himself to be as intelligent as the three-and-a-half-year-old child. You can find and watch this fascinating experiment on YouTube.

Pepperberg also used computer stations for her subject parrots, and the parrots worked well with surfing their own preprogrammed websites. If this research seems a bit frivolous, think again. It has applications for differently abled and autistic children and for others with learning disabilities.

She has had a lot of success with a teaching method called the *model/rival technique*. This technique requires two people and a parrot. Here’s how it works: Two people sit in front of the parrot and handle objects that the parrot is interested in. One human, the trainer, presents the object and asks the other human (the model/rival), “What color?” or “What shape?” and so on. When the human model/rival answers correctly, the trainer gives the person praise and attention. If the model/rival doesn’t answer correctly or doesn’t say the word clearly (on purpose), the object is removed from sight, and the model/rival is scolded. Then the object and the question are presented again. The person answering the questions is called the model/rival because he/she is modeling the correct behavior for the parrot but also acts as a rival for the trainer’s attention.

In Pepperberg’s work, sometimes the roles of the model/rival and the trainer are reversed, and the parrot becomes the model/rival. This change in the environment shows the parrot that interaction goes both ways. Alex often came up with words and phrases on his own, and researchers always responded to his vocalizations with appropriate actions. If you want to discover more about Pepperberg’s work, check out www.alexfoundation.org.

PARROTS: THE NEW GENERATION OF GAMERS

Researchers at Binghamton University in upstate New York developed computer games for parrots. They discovered pretty quickly that parrots will destroy digital items, such as phones and tablets, so instead they made a sound-based video game that worked using a bird's vocalizations. Parrots could use their vocal sounds to move a cursor and play a variety of simple games. The researchers also developed a robot that birds could use to play games that would also offer rewards, such as treats.

Researchers at the Schubot Exotic Bird Health Center at Texas A&M University's College of Veterinary Medicine and Biological Sciences are also working on video games for parrots that are played on a tablet. If a parrot makes a sound when an object appears on the screen, the object will disappear and a treat will be automatically awarded. These types of computer games may be available to parrot guardians everywhere much sooner than you might expect. These kinds of games will go a long way toward alleviating boredom for these intelligent animals.

Helping Your Bird Understand You

As you can see, helping your bird really understand you takes a lot more than just training him to give you associative responses. For example, when I turn out the lights, my grey says “night-night” or “good night,” because that’s what I’ve said to him many times. But he’ll also say it sometimes when I close the cage door in the daytime. I assume he’s associating both the act of closing the cage door and the lights going out with “good night.” These are associative responses. An adult human wouldn’t say “good night” when you shut the front door in the middle of the day, nor would an adult human say “good night” when you shut off the lights before everyone hides and then jumps out from behind the couch at a surprise party. Those aren’t appropriate responses to either situation.



TIP

Clearly, African grey parrots are capable of real learning and language acquisition. This is called *aptitude*, the natural ability to do something or learn something. All parrots have this ability to some degree, but because not much clinical research has been done on other parrots, there’s only anecdotal evidence to back up any claims that other parrots can “understand” the way greys do. However, I assert that you can do a version of this kind of learning with any parrot.

The cool thing about all parrots is their ability to remember and put two and two together. They might not always come up with four, but it’s interesting to observe, in any case. If you’re not using Pepperberg’s teaching methods, or other methods

devised by behavioral researchers and parrot cognition experts, it's likely that the only things you're going to teach your parrot are associative responses. You might, however, be able get your parrot to label objects and actions and to ask for them appropriately. When you offer your bird anything, such as food, water, petting, or a bath, say the appropriate corresponding word or action. Be consistent, patient, and observant. I show you in Chapter 17 how to discover your parrot's brain power, from the tiny parrotlet to the largest cockatoo. You bird may be able to learn to choose his favorite things, use a tablet, and even read.

Teaching Your Parrot to Converse

Conversing is when two people (or two entities) exchange ideas, thoughts, and opinions. Most talking parrots are mimicking words, but you can actually have a meaningful conversation with your bird by putting some time and effort into helping the bird understand human objects and concepts (more on this in Chapter 17). Here's a typical conversation between me and my grey parrot, Hope (I had named him before I found out his gender):

Me: Hi, Hope!

Hope: (Some beeping and mechanical noises) Are you okay?

Me: Yes, I'm okay, thank you. Are you okay?

Hope: Are you okay?

Me: Yes, I just told you I was okay. Thank you for asking. Are you okay?

Hope: Are you okay?

Me: Yes, I'm okay.

Hope: Hi, Hope!

Me: Hi, Hope!

Hope: Hi, Hope!

Me: Hi, Hope!

Hope: Come here! Come come!

Me: Okay, I'm coming. (I walk over and give Hope a scratch on the head.)

Hope: I love you.

Me: Awww, I love you too, Hopey. (Absolutely melting, this bird can do no wrong.)

Hope: (Makes sound of garbage truck backing up, cell phone, loud mechanical noise.)

All right, it's not the Algonquin Round Table, but it's what I do pretty much all day with this particular parrot. He likes talking to me and likes when I talk back. If you really put time into teaching your bird to communicate with you, you can elicit *real* conversations from your parrot. Even birds with little to no talking ability can learn to communicate by choosing objects or flash cards.

Comprehending Why Parrots Talk

Many people want a parrot for its talking ability. It's the only animal companion you can have in your home that can actually talk to you in your language. *Remember:* Talking ability isn't a measure of intelligence. The theoretical physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking couldn't speak for many years due to the degenerative disease, ALS, and he was arguably one of the most intelligent humans on the planet. Conversely, you probably know a bubble-headed person who babbles on constantly about nonsense and never seems to shut up. Even if your bird doesn't speak, don't count out his intelligence. Every animal has its own kind of intelligence, and it's not fair to measure their intelligence against our human concept of intelligence.

The way parrots talk is much different from the way humans talk, so it's amazing that they're able to create the same sounds that humans and other animals make. Birds don't use the same physiological organs that humans do to produce sounds. Humans use vocal cords to begin the sound and then use the lips, teeth, and tongue to form it into words. Parrots don't have vocal cords in the same sense, but they do have a *syrinx* at the base of the trachea through which air flows, and when the parrot manipulates the syrinx, along with its trachea, glottis, tongue, and beak, certain sounds are formed. Not all parrots use the same organs to produce sound, and some use a combination of different organs. Nevertheless, the result is the same: talking.

Why parrots talk might be of more interest than how they do it. Wild parrots have an intricate communication system that comes close to what humans think of as *language*. Most parrots don't really flock in the way that flocking has often been portrayed, with one leader, a sentinel, and so on.

Instead, a group of parrots hanging out together is more like a group of people living in the same neighborhood. They know each other and may be friendly, but they don't necessarily help each other acquire food and housing (there are exceptions, however, like Quaker parakeets, which build and share common nesting sites). The birds of the same species in a certain area, probably the birds within hearing distance of one another, share the same language or dialect, meaning that they share common vocalizations so that they can understand one another. If a parrot from one area was captured and released in another area, the parrot wouldn't necessarily be able to communicate with the birds of the same species in the new location (it's not clear that this is in fact the case, and the new bird may learn quickly how to communicate, depending on the situation).

Because parrots are social creatures, they need a form of communication to be able to interact with their human friends. A parrot comes to understand pretty quickly that the humans around it are its social group, its flock, so to speak. Because the humans in the home aren't equipped to learn the parrot's language, the parrot begins to learn the language of its area, of its clan. This is a powerful way for the parrot to become part of the group. In the bird's mind, learning the language of the home is the primary way of getting noticed and getting its needs met. A parrot that talks or mimics other sounds in the home is a parrot that's interested in the humans around it, just as a wild parrot is interested in the other parrots in the area for nesting, finding food, or watching out for danger. I show you how to teach your bird to talk in Chapter 16 and how to converse in Chapter 17.

- » Socializing your parrot
- » Creating a bond with your parrot
- » Teaching the Step-Up command
- » Disciplining your parrot: Yes or no?
- » Teaching simple and fun behaviors

Chapter 16

Taming and Training Your Parrot

Nearly everyone entering parrot guardianship for the first time (or any time) wants a sweet, tame parrot as a companion. Many parrot breeders and those with smaller parrots (like parakeets, lovebirds, or cockatiels) don't mind if their birds aren't *hand tame*, but most parrot guardians want a more hands-on relationship with their bird.

Fortunately for people buying or rescuing parrots today, a lot of breeders hand-feed their babies, making them tame and sweet. That doesn't mean that the birds *stay* tame and sweet if neglected, which can happen after the birds land in the pet shop or sanctuary and aren't sold or adopted for a while. Also, if a breeder doesn't take the time to handle and play with the babies, they won't be as tame. But even a sweet baby bird needs a little guidance. This chapter shows you how to socialize a young parrot and how to tame a bronco bird. You also discover how to teach simple commands and fun behaviors and to teach your bird to talk.

Beginning Training When Your Parrot Is Young

The ideal time to begin training a parrot is when he's a youngster. Handfed parrots don't bite when they're young and take readily to handling by a new owner. The youngster may need only a few days to become accustomed to his new home and family. Some parrots, like caiques, can be beaky when they're young, but there's a difference between *beaking* and *biting*. It's like the difference between a puppy teething on your fingers and a dog biting aggressively. The puppy (or parrot) isn't being aggressive; he's just testing out the world with his mouth, much like human babies do.

When you first bring the young parrot home, give him some time to settle into his new environment. After all, the youngster has just been through a significant change in his life. Everything is new and has the potential to be frightening. Move slowly around your new companion, allowing the bird to explore the new cage and toys. Tell children to speak in hushed voices and to be very kind to the new bird (see Chapter 7 for advice on parrots and kids).

Some parrots are ready to play just a few hours after being introduced to a new home, though others may need a day or two to adjust. Don't push the new bird into playing until he's entirely ready. Remember that young birds are like toddlers, they may tire easily, and some can be a bit clumsy and may fall, which can create a fearful situation.



REMEMBER

If you have acquired an older, semi-tame, untamed, or rescued parrot, give him even more time to adjust to his new home. Don't try to tame or train him immediately. Instead, use the first few weeks to establish a trusting relationship without much hands-on training. The bird will be more likely to accept training if he knows and likes you, and if he begins to realize that you're not out to get him. Keep reading to find out how to start forming a bond with an uneasy parrot.

Understanding the Importance of Socializing Your Parrot

Socialization is about helping your bird to deal with situations, people, and objects in an unfearful manner. For example, a socialized parrot should come to realize that your yellow ball cap, your son's red knit cap, and your mother's floppy green hat are all the same basic object and nothing to fear. You can't train that, but you can help to socialize him. A well-socialized parrot will likely try different foods even if he has never seen a certain food before. You can't train that, either.

Socialization is different from training. Training elicits automatic behaviors performed largely due to repetition, predictability, and consistency on the part of the trainer. With training, the stimulus and reaction are (or should be) always the same. For example, when you ask a parrot to step up, he does so because you always offer your hand in the same way, praise in the same way, and make the experience of stepping up pleasant. Eventually, presenting your hand will elicit the bird to lift a foot automatically.

In these sections I discuss how a parrot develops and why socialization is essential to your parrot. I then give you some tips to help you socialize your bird so he's a welcome member of your family.

Seeing how socialization affects a parrot's quality of life

Parrots are hatched with an entirely disparate set of genetic programming than they'll need in an average home. Most baby parrots stay with their parents for several months, even years, learning what to eat, how to eat it, what to be fearful of, how to avoid danger, where to live, how to bathe, and so on. Your parrot needs to learn all these same things in your home. Parrots *seem* to be pretty self-sufficient after they're weaned. Yes, they can eat from a bowl of food and find the water dish, but that's not much of a life for a parrot. In general, the larger parrots need the most socialization. The smaller parrots, like the parakeets, lovebirds, cockatiels, and parrotlets, seem to do a little better from the get-go in terms of figuring out what to do, possibly because the smaller parrots mature faster than the bigger species.

An undersocialized parrot will spend a lot of time being fearful. He won't like new people, won't know to eat healthy foods, won't bathe, and may be extremely attached to his cage and become panicky when removed from sight of it. This can happen when a young bird is weaned too quickly (as many from large parrot farms are) or when the bird has been abused or neglected. Parrots are social creatures that rely on their elders to pay attention to them and offer them mental and physical stimulation. When this doesn't happen, they become mentally or emotionally stunted, just like a human child would be.

Fortunately, parrots mature faster than humans, and when their instincts kick in, they have a decent shot at surviving a neglectful upbringing. So, the parrot survives, but his quality of life suffers unless someone comes along to try to reverse the negative effects of neglect or outright abuse.

Why socialize a parrot? Someday you may have to board the bird or even give him up, and you'll want the animal to be accepting of different types of people. The parrot should also be comfortable in his own home, even if strangers are present.

Also, an undersocialized parrot is more likely to develop behavioral issues and neurotic tendencies, which can lead to serious health issues.

Socializing your parrot: The how-to

I hope your parrot's breeder will have begun to socialize your baby parrot before you bring him home. If not, or if you have an undersocialized or fearful, rescued parrot, you'll need to use the same socialization methods as you would for a youngster. Here are some ways you can begin to socialize your parrot:

- » **Introduce the parrot to anyone and everyone, especially people who don't look like you and your family.** Let guests offer the bird treats, like millet spray or almonds. Make sure that people who touch the bird wash their hands thoroughly before handling.
- » **Don't allow guests very close to an aggressive bird.** Instead, have them speak to the bird in an encouraging tone from a distance.
- » **Wear different kinds of hats, glasses, jewelry, and clothing around the young bird so that he becomes used to these things.** If the bird is terrified of an item, show the bird the item as you hold it in your hand, explaining what it is, but *don't force the object near the bird too quickly*. My African grey is sometimes fearful of new items that I wear or things I bring into the house (like my big blue inflatable exercise ball, which he didn't appreciate). I just show him that the item isn't harmful by turning it around and around in my hands, and I explain what it is and then let him touch it if he wants.
- » **If your bird is stuck on eating just a couple of different foods, eat your food in front of the bird, showing him that certain foods are delicious.** Lay a whole spread of yummy stuff on a table and have a feast with your bird.
- » **Make sure you know how to towel your bird to give him medicine or examine him.** See Chapter 10 for how-to details on towelng. Get your bird used to the towel by playing towel games. Play "get in the tent" with the towel by making the towel into a tent (pulling it into a triangle and hoping it stays) and putting fun items inside, like nuts or millet, and then showering the bird with praise when he enters. Play "toss the towel" by gently and playfully covering your bird with the towel, and then removing it and praising verbally, or by letting your bird get out on his own (make sure your bird is enjoying this activity). You can begin all these games with a harmless washcloth and then progress to a hand towel and finally to a bath towel if your bird is large. Use a solid-colored towel, preferably something light in color with no stripes or intricate designs.

- » **Socialize the bird to a carrier by placing the carrier near the cage for a few days to get the bird used to its presence.** Then play with the bird in and around the carrier, placing nuts and goodies inside. Close the bird inside the carrier for one second and then let your bird out. Then two seconds, ten seconds, one minute, two minutes . . . you get the idea. Make it a fun game.
- » **If the bird won't bathe, try a shower perch to show that a waterfall can be fun (plus it's nice to have avian company in the shower and someone to sing with).** Don't dunk the bird, but instead simply allow him to watch you shower, and place the perch closer and closer to the water as the weeks go by, eventually bringing it close enough for the bird to step into the water should he want to (see Figure 16-1 that shows one way of you can perpetuate the bond with your bird). Make sure the water isn't too hot. Encourage bathing by misting warm water with a water bottle and talking in an encouraging tone (don't spray water in the bird's face, or the water may go inside the nostrils). Spray into the air over your bird and allow the water to mist down. You can also offer a bowl full of wet greens; some parrots like to bathe in them, and it gives the bird something fun to do. A large, shallow dish filled with room-temperature filtered water, colorful plastic toys, grapes, and cranberries can also grab your parrot's interest.



FIGURE 16-1:
This Goffin's
cockatoo
enjoys a nice
under-wing rub.

Photo by Patricia Long-Moss

Bonding with Your Parrot

Bonding happens when you begin to create a friendship with your parrot — he starts to become interested in what you're doing. He begins to watch his family closely and may even mimic some household sounds and voices. He comes eagerly over to the side of the cage or play stand for petting or treats and may even jump down and follow the humans or try to find them in the home. The parrot will allow you, the bonded human, to hold him and may even regurgitate for you in an attempt to bond further by feeding his best friend. The bird may try to preen your hair, eyebrows, and arm hair. I had one beloved lovebird that liked to try to take the freckles off my arm, which was a nice gesture, albeit a futile one.



WARNING

A bird that's *very* bonded to one human and hasn't been well socialized to others may become a *one-person bird*. This bird may attack other people or birds that come near it or his bonded human. The bird may call or scream constantly for his bonded human and may even bite the bonded human viciously when someone comes near (in the wild, this would be a protective gesture, forcing the mate to fly away so that no other bird could court it). This behavior is flattering, sure, but what if you have to board or re-home your bird? What if a child visits, and the bird viciously bites her? See Chapter 14 for tips on reversing a one-person parrot.

Here you can find out how to start bonding with your bird by first building trust. You can then utilize some of my suggestions to foster that bond with your bird.

Building trust

The first part of bonding is about creating *trust*. Trust lies at the heart of any relationship, even the relationship between parrot and guardian. There are as many ways to create trust as there are to break it, and a parrot's memory is *long*. After a parrot associates you with something negative, reversing that bond is difficult.



TIP

To get a parrot to trust you, move slowly, talk softly, behave gently, and have realistic expectations of your bird. Don't ever tease a bird or treat him with disrespect. These actions will only cause the bird to become frustrated or frightened. Ideally, a companion parrot should be a self-directed bird that *wants* to be with you. This means that the parrot is *choosing* to be your companion. A companion bird should call to his owner and come running over to the side of the cage for a head scratch or a treat. You should never have to *force* a parrot to be your pal. Training and taming with slow, gentle methods instills trust in the bird and creates a *companion*, not a *captive*.



WARNING

You'll lose your parrot's trust by hurting him or neglecting him. Training takes time and may frustrate an impatient guardian who wants a tame bird *now*. If you feel that you can't handle taming and training a bronco parrot, buy or adopt a youngster who will be more than happy to be cuddled on his first night home.



Even though it's tempting, don't use gloves when handling a parrot. Gloves tend to terrify birds. They're like scary puffy human hands. Instead, if you're truly afraid of a bite, begin by stick training your parrot, which I discuss in the section, "Teaching the Step-Up Command," later in this chapter.

Creating the bond: The how-to

To begin creating a bond with a baby parrot, all you need to do is spend time with him, snuggling and holding and playing. For an older, less socialized bird, one that's fearful or one that bites, you'll have to approach the situation with a little more time and caution. Here are some things you can do to begin making friends with a fearful parrot:

- » **Playing peek-a-boo:** Hide around a corner or in a place where the bird can't see you from his cage. Call and whistle sweetly to him from the hidden spot, and see if he responds. Peek out at your bird, and call again. Repeat this until he begins to respond to you, which could take days or weeks.
- » **Talking and singing:** Talk softly and sing to your new parrot. Show him that you're unthreatening and that you like him. Birds *absolutely* know when their guardians love them and when they don't. Behave in a way that shows your bird that you're on his side, that you're a friend. Parrots love to be sung to. Choose a song that may be easy for your bird to learn, something with a clear melody, and he might try to mimic you. If your bird does, it's a great sign. Read to your bird, too — children's books, textbooks, novels, blog posts, whatever.
- » **Giving a food reward:** Find something that the bird really likes to eat and hand the item to him. If he's too fearful to take the food, make sure to avert your gaze and don't stare directly as you offer it. The food is a reward for trusting you enough to take it from your fingers. Try bits of whole-wheat bread, unsweetened, wholegrain cereal in fun shapes, sunflower seeds, grapes, and almonds (the size of the treat depends on the size of the bird).
- » **Playing fetch:** Most parrots *love* playing fetch. You give him something — a soft toy is ideal — and he tosses it on the floor. You praise verbally and give the item back. He tosses it on the floor again. You can come up with a catchphrase for this game or a sound, and if the bird is a talking species, he may learn the sound for the game and ask you to play. For example, when he tosses the toy, you say, "Whoops!" and pick it up.
- » **Shredding:** Sit on the floor with your bird and begin shredding some unprinted newspaper. Unwanted mail works well too; just make sure there aren't any metal staples in any of the paper. Encourage him to shred with you. Packing-and-moving-supply retailers carry unprinted newspaper, as well as brown kraft paper, both of which are great for shredding. Save printed newspaper (if you can even find newspaper these days) for the bottom of the cage

beneath the grate. The main reason why I don't recommend that your parrot be allowed to play with too much newspaper is because the ink rubs off onto the feathers and feet, which can discolor a light-colored bird and may cause overpreening in fastidious individuals.

» **Dancing:** Play an upbeat song, dance in front of the cage or play stand with your parrot on top, and encourage him to dance and or sing along. Whatever happens with this game, at least he'll be amused.

Of course, physical contact is perhaps the most powerful way to bond with your bird. Petting the back of his neck, head, or under the chin are all things that very tame parrots like — people in the parrot community call this kind of petting *scratches* (see Figure 16-2). I don't know where that word came from, but to me, it sounds like a blend of *scratches* and *itches*. Some birds also like to be stroked under the wings or along the back. Most parrots really like their beaks rubbed gently with your fingernails. This mimics an action that parrots do in the wild with one another. Be careful, however, with some of this kind of hands-on attention, especially with stroking the back and wings, because some mature birds may confuse it with mating practices in mating season, typically in the spring.



FIGURE 16-2:
A scratch under the chin is a great way to bond with your bird.

Photo by Priscilla Schmidt



WARNING

Some people like to kiss their birds or allow the birds to eat from their mouth or clean their teeth as a form of bonding. Yes, I used to be one of these people. I allowed all my parrots to kiss me on the mouth, and I even had one little lovebird that would pick at my teeth, even the molars. Gross, I know. Well, I haven't done that in years. Since then, I've learned that the human mouth is full of bacteria that can be harmful for a parrot, even deadly. Please resist the urge to make out with your parrot! It can be entertaining for friends and neighbors and personally flattering, but it's not worth infecting your bird. Closed mouth kisses only, please!

Praising Your Bird: Positive Reinforcement Goes a Long Way

Parrots learn best from positive reinforcement. When a bird does something you like, praise him. When your bird does something you don't like, don't praise and don't offer attention. Parrots don't learn well from punishment or negative attention. Direct and loving attention, acting the fool, speaking in a high voice, and singing are all great praise for a job well done. Sometimes, a job well done is simply a parrot playing on his own with a toy for five minutes. That's a praiseworthy moment.

Unfortunately, quiet parrots don't get as much attention as noisy and misbehaving parrots do. It's also unfortunate that most attention, even if it's you yelling at a parrot to shut up in a mean voice, is also seen as praise to your bird. Yelling so doesn't work to shut a parrot up! The key to praising is to find out what your parrot likes and do just that when the bird is good and to ignore the bird when he's exhibiting unwanted behaviors, such as screaming, biting, and the like. Remember, if a parrot is screaming, it could mean that the bird is in trouble or very lonely, so simply wait for a couple seconds after the screaming stops before you engage your bird. I don't recommend ignoring screaming all together. Your parrot is yelling for a reason. I discuss this kind of thing in depth in Chapter 14.

Because a bonded parrot has a huge interest in getting and keeping your attention, he applies learned behaviors to its everyday routine to keep you coming back. If a behavior or vocalization works to get your attention, the parrot will do it again. The bird knows something doesn't work when what it's doing doesn't get you to come over, talk to it, or respond at all. The bird won't keep repeating that behavior, because there's no point in it (unless the bird is truly unhappy, injured or ill, or has become neurotic — see Chapter 14).



TIP

The key to praise is to offer it the *second* the bird does something you like. For example, he says something you've been trying to teach him, and the second after he says the word, you laugh and say "good bird!" or respond similarly. *Wow*, the bird thinks, *that got her attention!* So the bird says it again. If you wait too long, even three or four seconds, to praise after a wanted behavior, you've lost the window of opportunity. You'll be praising for whatever he's doing just then, which could be nothing more than just standing there (which is fine, but it's not going to reinforce the behavior you want).



REMEMBER

This kind of praise-based training is called *operant conditioning*. What that means is the bird forms an association between a behavior and a consequence of that behavior. If he likes the consequence, he keeps performing the action as long as that consequence happens most of the time when the behavior is performed. This type of training uses *positive reinforcement*, meaning that something is added to his immediate environment (your praise or a treat) that reinforces (makes stronger) the behavior.

The key to any kind of training is finding the right type of motivation or reinforcer (praise or treat) to add to his environment when he does something you like. Something as simple as turning to him, moving closer, and saying, "good bird, Coco!" in a high-pitched voice is often enough praise to elicit the response again. Other positive reinforcers include opening the cage, giving physical contact, and feeding treats. But whatever you choose as praise, you have to be consistent. It's easy to confuse a bird using this method if you don't praise quickly enough or if you praise only some of the time for the same behavior. Eventually, the behavior will become learned, and you won't need to praise as often as you must in the beginning, before the behavior has become more automatic.



REMEMBER

The most important thing to remember when using operant conditioning is to not praise behaviors that you don't want. For example, if a bird somehow learns a curse word (but not from you — surely a foulmouthed guest in your home must have taught the parrot that word), and you laugh or yell at the bird for saying it, you have just praised for the word (given your bird attention), and he'll say it again.



TIP

If you're trying to teach something that involves two or more steps, for example, teaching a parrot to put a wiffleball through a basketball hoop, you have to use praise for each step, not just for completing the whole chain of events that make up the task. This is called *shaping* the behavior. In this case, you'd praise for simply touching the wiffleball with the beak. Then you'd praise him for picking up the wiffleball. Then you'd praise for moving toward the basket with it. Then you'd praise only for moving close to the basket but not for picking up the ball. You'd eventually offer praise only as he completes more and more of the complex task. Where you once praised for merely touching the ball, you'll eventually only praise for touching the ball and moving it toward the basket. This works very well with

dogs (and people), partially because rewarding them is easy. You'll have to discover what your bird considers a reward in order to be an effective trainer. For some birds it may be a pine nut or sunflower seed, and for others it might be verbal praise and a head scratch.

Considering Different Training Strategies

Keep training sessions short, anywhere from 2 to 15 minutes. The key to training any animal is that the animal should *always* be successful at the task. Animals don't learn from failures the way humans can. So, if your 2-minute session involves picking up the bird and having him climb up a ladder once, praise the bird and then ending the session. You've just taught more than if you repeated it over and over until the bird didn't want to do it again. Then what have you taught? That hanging out with you is a bore.



REMEMBER

Start when he's ready to pay attention and is fresh and full of energy. Don't try to train after you've woken the bird up or he's eating. Always end training sessions on an up note when he has completed the task with ease. If your bird isn't performing the task you're asking for, end the training session by asking for an action that you know the bird can perform with ease. A couple of successful repetitions in a training session are better than a dozen. Stop before your bird poops, gets frustrated, or becomes bored. Definitely stop before you get frustrated. Do multiple training sessions a day rather than one or two longer ones.

The best learning comes from inadvertent training. For example, if you want a relatively quiet bird, praise when the bird is quiet and playing happily alone. If you want a bird to repeat a phrase, praise lavishly when he does. If you like it when your bird snuggles under your chin, make that a pleasant experience all the time.

This section helps you find your bird's training motivation and guide you in finding a training style that your bird will enjoy.

Finding your bird's motivation

Before you begin even the simplest of training, you have to discover your parrot's greatest motivation. Here are the most common motivators:

- » **Some kind of treat:** In most cases, it's some kind of treat — ideally a snack that you don't offer freely on a daily basis and isn't something that is already in your bird's food. Typically, a small piece of nut, such as almond, walnut, or pine nut, or a sunflower seed does the trick. The treat should be small so that



TIP

he can eat it quickly and be ready for the next bit of training. Chapter 17 gives you an introduction to preference training where you can have your bird help you discover his favorite things.

If you use sunflower seeds, make sure they're peeled or else your bird will take up a lot of your training session breaking seeds.

- » **Praise:** An enthusiastic "Yay! Good birdie!" can make a parrot very happy and ready to please.
- » **Physical contact:** Scratching the back of the neck, head, or under the chin are all things that may work.



WARNING

I knew someone a long time ago who was famous for putting on a parrot show. This person's parrots did amazing things! I came to find out that this person didn't feed the parrots for 24 hours before a show so that they were so hungry, they'd do anything. It made my heart hurt for those birds. Under any circumstance, don't starve your parrot or put any other kind of extreme stress on your bird for training purposes. Starving them will harm your bond and will make your bird mistrustful of you.

Considering clicker training

Clicker training is a form of operant conditioning that uses a clicker or another sound to mark a desired behavior, which is then followed by a positive reinforcer, like praise or a treat. The marker sound bridges between the action and the treat. It tells the parrot that he has done something right and encourages muscle memory.

The clicker is useful for training very specific behaviors, such as

- » Waving or lifting the wings on cue
- » Touching a target
- » Twirling around on a perch

To use clicker training, follow these general steps:

1. Click the clicker and then offer a treat (or say your chosen word in same tone every time).

Doing so gets the bird to associate the clicker sound (or whatever sound you're using, even a word, like "good!" or "yay!") with being offered something he wants, like a treat.

2. Click and treat.

3. Repeat.

Eventually, he'll come to realize that the click of the clicker means something good is going to happen. That's the associative response that you want.

With the following steps use the clicker and teach a behavior. For example, say you want your bird to do a 360-degree turn on the perch. You may name this behavior "twirl."

1. Help your bird turn on the perch by touching his tail gently with your finger or using a chopstick and moving it in the opposite direction you want your bird to go, or you can a treat.

2. When your bird turns on the perch, you click the clicker and then offer a treat.

After you do this a few times and your bird seems to be catching on, add the prompt "twirl" as you're helping or luring him to turn around on the perch. Use the clicker to mark the twirl behavior.

3. Click just after your bird twirls, not before, not after, not in the middle.

Being a successful clicker trainer takes good timing. After he reliably does the behavior after you ask for it, you can phase out the clicker.

Say your parrot isn't getting the twirl right away. Break the behavior down into two steps:

1. Click and treat for simply turning around on the perch; click and treat for turning away, then click and treat for turning back toward you.

2. Eventually, phase the clicker out for a half turn.

Your bird will wonder why you're not giving him a treat for a half turn so your bird will do the full turn. Then you click and treat. If you're doing this correctly, he'll come to understand what you want.



REMEMBER

Though clicker training does work well with birds, you run the risk of your bird learning the clicker sound (or any behavior marking sound) and vocalizing it over and over to try to elicit a treat. Your bird may just clicker train you! Look online to find websites, videos, and books about clicker training that are worth some further research.

Teaching the Step-Up Command

Step up is when your parrot steps eagerly onto your hand or finger when you ask, either by saying, “Step up,” or by offering your hand, usually both. This trick is the most important thing your parrot will ever learn and it can save his life. Imagine that he’s in a dangerous situation, about to be pounced on by a cat or about to fly away — if he knows step-up well, you can simply ask your bird to step onto your hand and then remove him from danger. Step up also makes handling your parrot much easier and more enjoyable.

These sections break down training your bird the Step-Up command, depending on how tame your bird is.

Training a tame or semi-tame parrot: The how-to

If you’re training a very tame or semi-tame parrot the Step-Up command, follow these easy steps:

1. **Allow your bird to come out of his cage on his own by either opening the door and waiting or lifting off the entire top of the cage (if the cage is smallish).**



REMEMBER

Make sure your parrot is standing on a perch or play stand, not a flat surface. Also make sure he has good footing and won’t slide around when you place pressure on his chest with your finger.



TIP

If your parrot is a tame youngster, you can gently lift him out of his cage, but because he doesn’t know how to step up yet, don’t pull too hard, because he’ll grip the perch or the cage bars.

2. **After he’s out of the cage, give him a treat or a head scratch, some positive reinforcement just for coming out of the cage.**
3. **Rub his chest and belly softly and gently with the length of your index finger, talking to him in a gentle tone and slowly increasing the pressure.**
The gentle pressure on the belly should cause him to step up onto your hand.
4. **Repeat the rubbing for several sessions if it doesn’t cause him to step up automatically.**
5. **As the training sessions go on or when you feel that your bird is relaxed and responding to you, increase the pressure you place on his belly.**

Pushing slightly on his chest throws him a little off balance, and he’ll lift a foot to regain stability.

6. Place your finger or hand under the foot and lift him, if he allows you to do so.

If not, simply let his foot remain on your hand until he removes it.

7. When his foot grasps your finger, ask clearly to “Step up.”

He'll come to correlate the action of stepping on your hand with the phrase. Incorporating this training into playtime is ideal.

After the bird is fairly good at stepping up, you can have him step from finger to finger, repeating the phrase “Step up,” praising all the while. He may hesitate at first, but he'll quickly come to realize exactly what you want and have no problem with it. Most youngsters learn the Step-Up command easily, in one or two short sessions, whereas a wild-bronco parrot may take longer. Just be gentle and patient, and continue to praise or treat (or both) for desired behaviors.



TIP

Alternate hands when teaching this command. I learned this the hard way. My African grey parrot is reluctant to step onto my left hand and sometimes hesitates when I offer it. I handle this by offering my right hand because I'm right-handed anyway. Best to start socializing your bird to both hands from the beginning.



REMEMBER

If you remember nothing else about holding any parrot on your hand, remember this: Your hand must always be a firm, reliable place to stand. If you get jiggly and nervous or drop the bird, you're reinforcing that your hand isn't a safe place to perch. Your bird will be much less likely to want to step onto your hand if he feels any danger there.

Using stick training for this command

Stick training is the same as teaching the Step-Up command, but instead of using a finger or hand, you use a stick. Stick training is very important and can save your parrot's life someday. Birds tend to find high places to perch when they're flighted or can climb, far higher than you can reach with your arm. If your parrot flies away and is sitting just out of reach on a tree limb, what would you do? Waving a stick or a broom at a bird sitting in a high spot only terrifies him unless he has been trained to perch eagerly on a stick.

A stick or perch is less complicated-looking and less intimidating than a hand, and it doesn't hurt when a parrot bites it, so there's no big reaction to reinforce that unwanted behavior. Repeat the Step-Up command from the preceding section, only use a stick instead of your finger or hand. Using a stick is great for bronco birds to learn the Step-Up command before you start taming using your hand. Make sure that the stick has a grip and isn't slick, so using a concrete perch, cholla wood, or other textured perch is a good idea.



TIP

You can use an ingenious product on the market that combines a step-up perch with an acrylic bite guard. Numerous brands are available. This perch is shaped like a “T” so that the parrot can’t scooch his way along a straight perch and over to bite your hand. The piece of acrylic attached near the “T” guards your hand against being bitten. Only use it if your bird is a notorious biter.

Whittling down to teach this command

The whittle-down method of stick training is easy and great for bronco and semi-tame birds. Teach the Step-Up command using a three-foot wooden dowel of appropriate thickness, and make sure the dowel has some texture to it. Using a knife to score (cut shallow notches into) the wood usually works, or you can use grippy tape or textured bathtub stickers along the dowel. As the weeks go by, cut the length of the dowel shorter a couple of inches at a time. Eventually, the dowel will be so short that the bird should be used to your hand being close. This gradually removes the fear of your hand and the bird should learn to step up onto your finger or hand over time. This method is also a good way to avoid being bitten.

Taming a Bronco Parrot

An untamed parrot is far different in personality from a newly weaned youngster. The youngster takes to handling very well, whereas the bronco bird may flap wildly around the cage, squeeze himself into a corner and hiss, and make every attempt to either get away from or bite you. This can be disconcerting, but take heart: The bronco parrot is tamable.



REMEMBER

To tame an untamed parrot, make sure you first clip his wings. Even if you later let his wings grow out, which I advocate, a bird being tamed shouldn’t have the ability to fly away from you. Training sessions would only last half a second if your bronco bird wasn’t clipped. He’d simply fly away! For this first wing clipping, definitely have an avian veterinarian or other professional do the clip. You want to be associated with good things; toweling and wing clipping aren’t fun for your parrot.

Each taming session can last 15 to 20 minutes, and you can try up to three sessions a day. More time can stress the bird and make taming more difficult. When you’re ready to start training him, follow these steps:

- 1. Take the bronco bird into a small room, such as a bathroom or small den, but make sure all toxic materials are put away and the toilet lid is down.**

If he’s small, take his entire cage into the bathroom or small room, and open the top of the cage so that he can climb out. It’s not a good idea to begin the

training session by grabbing your bird out of its cage, but you may have to if the cage is too large. Use a small towel to remove the bird as gently as possible.



TIP

Because a bathroom floor tends to be slick, cover it with bathmats and towels so that your bird doesn't hurt itself and so he has something to grab onto on the floor. Take a small play stand into the room so that your bird has a place to hang out.

2. After the parrot is out of the cage or in the room with you, talk gently and whistle to it.



TIP

You're just trying to create a rapport with him and make him comfortable. Sit on the floor of the bathroom or other small room and just simply *be*. Scatter some treats onto a clean towel and let him find them. Make it fun.

As the sessions progress, get as close to the bird as you can without startling him. Move slowly.

3. As soon as he gives signs of being comfortable, such as yawning, preening, or stretching, you can begin to approach him with your hand and offer a sunflower seed or other treat you know he likes.

4. Repeat.

5. After a few more sessions, try to scoop him up in a towel and place him on your knee in what I call the *mountain method*.

Sit on the floor with your knees bent up into mountains so that he has a place to sit, right on the peak. If he flaps off your knee, gently put him back. Offer a treat, and talk soothingly.

After a few sessions and after you suspect that the parrot feels comfortable on your knee, place your palm flat on your leg and move your hand upward until it's near his feet. Eventually, after a few more sessions of your hand getting closer, you can move your finger toward him so that you can touch his belly or head and give a little scratch. If he moves to bite you, *don't* whip your hand away. Just move slowly and pretend like the bite attempt never happened.

This method of *gentling* a parrot will make him a friend, not a hostage. You may need to work on this for three or four weeks, perhaps even months, though some parrots respond much sooner. Just don't rush it.



TIP

If you have a really freaked-out parrot on your hands, try lowering the lighting in the room where you're doing the taming. Some birds respond better when it's twilight. Also, you can play soothing music or podcasts on low while you're taming. Background noise puts parrots at ease.

Disciplining a Parrot

What do you do when your parrot isn't behaving the way you want, say, screaming or plucking? Let me be clear: *You can't discipline or punish a parrot.* The chances that your parrot will misinterpret your idea of punishment, whether that's yelling at him or giving a time out, is very high.

The proper disciplining (helping the parrot understand what you don't want) of a parrot is *passive*, meaning you don't really *do* anything. It's what you *don't* do that counts. If your bird bites you, just put him back into the cage with no fanfare and walk away. If your bird is screaming, wait until he has stopped screaming for even two seconds before you interact with him. If he's too high on his cage and won't come down, lure him with a nut. Whatever you do, never show him any anger or frustration. Parrots don't react well to your negative, heightened emotions, no matter how normal they are for you.

Here are some "methods" of discipline that don't work:

- » **Hitting:** Never, ever, ever hit, slap, punch, throw, or otherwise hurt your bird in any way. Animal abuse is *not* an effective training tool.
- » **Screaming:** Screaming at your bird only teaches him to be louder and isn't discipline; if your bird were a soldier in the army, he'd scream back at the drill sergeant and get tossed out pretty quickly.
- » **Pulling away:** A bird that bites knows biting is effective because you get mad, pull away, and cause a scene. The bird wants you to have a big reaction and go away. Pulling away gives him what he wants, and he'll keep doing the behavior. Instead, try to field the bite like it never happened and walk away calmly. Try the interaction again later.
- » **Beak holding:** Holding a bird's beak because he's biting or chewing is akin to holding someone's hands behind their back. The minute the handcuffs are off, the criminal is going to rob another bank. Holding the beak doesn't teach anything and is cruel.
- » **Time-out:** Giving the bird a time-out for bad behavior works only if you put the bird back into the cage and close the door the second the unwanted behavior happens, and then turn and walk away. A time-out only needs to be five or ten minutes long, maybe less, to be effective. However, the problem with the time-out is that you have to pick him up in order to enforce it. Picking up is praise! By the time you get to the cage, the bird's mind is in a totally different space. He doesn't even remember what he did wrong. A time-out teaches very little. However, a time-out does give you an opportunity to leave the room and cool down.

- » **Spraying:** Some people spritz the parrot with a stream of water when it's being noisy or doing another unwanted behavior. This is a really, *really* bad idea. Water is supposed to be a fun thing for parrots. If you use it as punishment, you'll just make your parrot not want to bathe.
- » **Ignoring:** Ignoring unwanted behavior is a pretty good method of getting a parrot to stop something, *but only if you're also using positive reinforcement training* (I discuss it in the section, "Praising Your Bird: Positive Reinforcement Goes a Long Way," earlier in this chapter). Your parrot has to understand that good behavior brings good things, just as unwanted behaviors brings a negative response (walking away). Also, a screaming, biting, plucking bird may have a health or emotional problem, so ignoring him doesn't do anything but make the behavior worse.
- » **No:** Giving the bird a sharp "No!" is effective in getting the bird to stop doing what he's doing at the moment — say, chewing the drapes — but then he'll go back to the behavior a second later. The "No!" is startling and gets his attention, but it really doesn't teach "don't do that anymore" unless you do yes-and-no training, which I discuss more in Chapter 17. A sharp "No!" just means, "Hey, you, bird, look over here!" After you have your parrot's attention, pick up your bird, which is a nice reward for stopping the offending behavior. However, don't make the "No!" too dramatic; you might reward the unwanted behavior instead.

Considering Some Simple Fun Behaviors You Can Teach

Training your parrot to do simple tricks is easy if you have a lot of patience, ample time, and a clear sense of how to use positive reinforcement (see Figure 16-3). Teach only one behavior at a time, and train using several short training sessions per day rather than tiring out your bird and becoming frustrated with its inability to focus for long periods. A simple search on YouTube offers hundreds of videos with step-by-step instructions on how to teach behaviors. Try some of them to keep you and your parrot busy for a long time.



WARNING

Never, ever starve your bird so that he'll respond to food. Don't ever punish your bird or get frustrated if he won't learn something. Be realistic about your parrot's abilities. You might have a really gifted parrot or one that's content to just learn to step on your finger.



FIGURE 16-3:
Trick training can
be good bonding
time for you and
your bird.

Photo by Mary Jo Yarberry

Here are a few easy tricks to get you started:

- » **Pretty wings:** Parrots stretch their wings frequently, and you can capitalize on this natural behavior. Every time your parrot stretches his wings high, come up with a phrase that you want to associate with that gesture, like “Pretty wings!” or “Show me your wings!” Eventually, your parrot will associate this stretching with the phrase and will do it for you when you ask. You can use this method with other, similar behaviors as well.

You may have to use the *modeling* technique, where you gently place your fingers under your bird's wings and lift them slightly, and then use your phrase and praise. Praise for even a slight movement of the wings and progress from there.

- » **Laying on back:** If you begin while he's young, you may be able to train him to lie upside down in your hand or lap. Laying on his back is a very unnatural position for most parrots, so your bird really has to trust you. Begin by holding him to your chest with your hand cupped over his back. Make sure your bird is happy and comfortable with this. Next, lean forward so that he's on his back in your hand but still pressed to your chest. Praise your bird highly and scratch his head if he likes that. Repeat this many times over the period of a few weeks, gradually loosening your hand from your chest. Your parrot may

eventually allow you to cradle him in your palm. After your bird good at this, you can teach “play dead,” which takes several more steps. Check out YouTube for some good tutorials.

- » **Waving:** After your parrot is good at the Step-Up command, you can teach him to wave. Begin by placing your finger near your bird’s feet as if you’re going to tell him to step up. When he lifts a foot, say, “Wave!” in an excited voice, and pull your hand slowly away, leaving his foot in midair. Praise and give a treat. Keep repeating this until he associates “Wave!” with his little foot waving. Be careful, however, not to make your parrot confused between this and the Step-Up task.
- » **Roller skating and other tricks:** You can buy roller skates for larger parrots, little basketball hoops, little phones, and ring tosses, among other props. Each of these should have training directions with it. Remember to capitalize on your bird’s natural behaviors with these props and to praise highly for even the slightest interest or improvement.

Potty Training Your Parrot: Is It Even Possible?

Can a parrot be potty trained? Some parrots take very well to this training, whereas others won’t ever learn it. Even a very well-trained bird will have potty accidents, and that’s okay. But you can certainly figure out how to recognize when the bomb is on its way and get some mileage out of praising your bird when he poops where and when you want it to.

When a parrot is just about to go, he’ll ruffle up slightly, scoot back, lift his tail slightly, and sometimes make a little noise. If you can come to recognize the moment exactly before the poop arrives, you can pick up your bird (who will call off the mission for the moment); move him to a chosen spot, such as over a trash-can or a paper plate; and give him a cue, a word, or phrase of your choosing. I like “go poop!” It’s simple and does the trick. A couple of other suggestions are “bombs away!” or “kaka!” Just make it one or two syllables.

After the bird does his business, praise him wildly, making a huge scene about how great everything was. Offer treats if you have them on hand. If you do this enough, he’ll come to associate the gestures and words you use with going potty. Don’t punish for accidents! Simply ignore them and continue praising the behavior that you desire. Some people use a small paper plate or napkin beneath the bird to catch the results. In this case, the appearance of the plate or napkin will inspire the bird to go.



TIP

If you can catch your bird's first poop of the day, that's a good time to do this training. Usually the first poop of the day is quite large and predictable.



WARNING

Though a lot of people like parrot potty training, you should be aware of some medical dangers. Your smart parrot may start to hold in his poop because he knows that you'll praise and/or give a treat when your bird goes in a specific place at a specific time. Your bird may also begin to think that the only time it's allowed to poop is when you give the command, especially if you're doing potty training outside of the cage, where the bird spends most of the day. It's not normal or healthy for a bird to hold in its feces. Also, your bird may want to please you so much that it'll try to poop on command when your bird doesn't have to go. As a result, your bird strains, which can cause a cloacal prolapse. Training a parrot to poop in a designated area of its cage, such as a specific corner, is a better idea.

Teaching Your Parrot to Talk

To teach your parrot to talk, you're going to have to repeat yourself a lot. Birds repeat the words and noises they hear most often. Repeat the words and phrases you want your bird to learn clearly and with regularity. Parrots tend to pick up words and sounds that are said with oomph, like curse words, names, and imperatives (like telling someone else in the house to "come here!"). The easiest words for a parrot to say contain the letters (or sounds) b, t, p, d, n, and k. This is why so many parrots learn to say *pretty bird* and *wanna cracker*? so easily.



WARNING

If you want your parrot to talk well, try not to whistle around your him when he's a youngster. Parrots take to whistling over talking. Apparently, whistling is easier to do. A parrot can definitely learn words after he learns to whistle, but it's more likely that he'll want to learn more whistles. Some parrots do both very well. Talking and mimicking are very much up to the individual bird.

These sections address what you need to do when teaching your bird to talk, what birds are known to be talkers, how to deal with a bird that won't stop talking, and what to do with a bird that doesn't stop.

Recognizing what you need to get your bird to talk

Some parrots will talk and mimic without you having to do much training, or anything at all. Other parrots will need a lot of repetition and positive reinforcement in order to learn.

You can find some speech training MP3s as well as DVDs and CDs available online or at your local bird shop, or you can make one of your own. The problem with these is that he may become bored or frustrated with listening to this audio over and over. If you do choose this method, make sure that training sessions are no more than 20 minutes twice a day. Making your own may be better. I used to play a store-bought CD for my flock of more than 100 parrots and one of the phrases was a sexy female voice saying, “Hey there, big boy.” When my neighbors started renovating their home, the construction workers were confused hearing dozens of female voices trying to flirt with them. It was embarrassing!

Have a good relationship with your bird

A frightened or abused bird is more likely to stay very quiet so that he isn’t noticed, or perhaps to scream all day because it’s lonely. A happy, content bird is one that makes noise to say, “Hey, I’m here; look at me; play with me!” A young bird will make vocalizations that sound similar to sounds in the world in an attempt to communicate with his humans, get attention, or at least fit in. If the bird’s human praises the bird for these attempts, the bird will continue to learn.

Parrots talk and mimic sounds in the household because they’re interested in being a member of the family. In the wild, parrots learn the language of the other parrots in their area. In a home, parrots learn the language of the home, which includes the voices of the family members as well as household sounds. They do this largely to get attention and as an attempt at communication, though they sometimes misunderstand the meanings of the sounds. For example, parrot species that are known to be adept at talking will mimic the sound of the phone, microwave, and alarm clock because those are the sounds that make you come running. The parrot thinks, “Hey, if I make that sound, my human will come to me, too!” Clearly that logic doesn’t work, because a parrot isn’t a phone and doesn’t need to be answered. But if you reinforce those sounds by responding to them, you have effectively “answered” the parrot, and the sounds will continue. Some anecdotal evidence suggests that a bird who learns and is praised for sounds will be less likely to speak words.

Praise your bird

Praise can be as simple as turning to the bird, making eye contact, and saying, “Good bird!” Birds love attention from their humans, and you can use that to your advantage. However, you don’t want to praise unclear words too highly. Save your highest praise for clearly stated words that you want to remain in your parrot’s vocabulary.

After a bird is talking freely, you can begin teaching select words and phrases simply by repeating them over and over, but the trick is to use *emphasis*. Make the words sound exciting. Many parrots learn to curse in this way — when you stub

your toe, you may spit out a string of curses that will sound exciting to the parrot, because they have so much energy behind them.

Focusing on breeds that are known for talking

To teach your parrot to talk, you need to start with a known talking species. However, even one of these parrots isn't guaranteed to talk, though most will at least mimic sounds. They include

- »» Budgies
- »» African greys (both species)
- »» Yellow-naped Amazons (and their subspecies)
- »» Quaker parrots (also called Monk parrots or parakeets)
- »» Indian ringnecks
- »» Blue and gold macaws
- »» Scarlet macaws

Though these are the top talkers, most parrots will learn a word or two and mimic other sounds. From the cockatiel to the parrotlet, from the little Hahn's macaw to the giant hyacinth, you'll find talkers in the bunch. Lovebirds aren't known to talk, though I had one that learned his name and a few other garbled words. I had another lovebird that did the "wolf whistle" and the "charge!" whistle.

Do some parrots understand what they're saying? A lot of evidence shows some do, though you have to actually teach the bird human language because it usually doesn't happen on its own. You can find a lot more on parrot intelligence in Chapter 15 and about how to teach your bird to understand and use words in context in Chapter 17.

Most parrots that have the ability to talk will learn without you really teaching. Just talk and they'll pick up the words they feel are important. The television and the radio can teach your parrot to talk as well, though the bird may not always pick up what you want to hear over and over. For example, my African grey parrot knows many of the commercials on the television and persistently tells me to "call now!" and to "have your credit card ready to order!" A few times, he even said, "Poland Spring water is the best water on earth. Now we never run out. Call now!" I swear. I should have recorded it. It floored me.



TIP

If you're starting out with a species known as a great talker, like a budgie, an African grey, or an Amazon parrot, simply talk to the bird during your daily interactions with it. When you approach him in the morning, say, "Good morning," and when you put him to bed at night, say, "Good night." The same goes for feeding. Name all the things you give the bird, such as pellets, water, apple, grape, carrot, and so on. When you move your bird from place to place, tell him where you both are going: "We're going to the kitchen." Talk to your bird the way you would talk to an intelligent child, but don't use baby talk, or that's what the bird will learn.



REMEMBER

A bird's first attempts at talking may sound like babble. Eventually, the babble will become clearer and will form into words and sounds. In a budgie, talking may come as early as six months of age; in an African grey, real talking may take nine months to more than a year, depending on the individual. Amazon parrots should be talked to a lot for the first couple of years — an older Amazon may never learn to talk well if he didn't learn when he was a youngster. Remember, some individuals won't learn to talk (mimic) at all.

Getting your bird to stop talking

Most people that acquire a talking species are delighted when their bird begins mimicking the sounds of the world around it, but some owners aren't prepared for the bird to talk *as much* as it does. Some even wonder how to get the bird to stop talking.



REMEMBER

After a bird starts talking, shutting him up may be impossible, so be careful what you wish for and what you say around your bird. Your bird doesn't have an off button, so a choice curse word is going to stick, though you can extinguish an unwanted noise or phrase over time.

If you have a species of bird that is known to mimic well — such as a grey, an Amazon, a budgie, or a ringneck — be careful what you teach it, or you may be sorry later. Some birds will learn a sound that may not annoy you, but then amplify it, and you may have to buy earplugs. My grey learned to mimic my ringtone and does the ring about 20 times louder than the actual phone's tone. You may have to keep your phone on vibrate.



TIP

Don't worry if your parrot has taken a not-so-nice word or noise and turned it into a booming roar that the whole neighborhood can hear or if he has begun to curse like a sailor. Some noises can be extinguished simply by ignoring them and praising other noises instead. Ignoring the unwanted noises and words from the first utterance is important. When a parrot repeats a curse, the owner is likely to give him some attention for the curse, such as saying, "Bad bird!" or laughing. These behaviors positively reinforce the noise. The cell phone that my grey learned

to mimic was easily extinguished from his daily repertoire by changing the ring tone on the phone and by ignoring the sound when he did it. But you can't just ignore the noise; you also have to praise noises and words you like.

Dealing with a bird that doesn't talk

A bird that doesn't learn to talk isn't a disappointment. Many birds won't learn to talk but will be cuddly, affectionate companions that are a joy to be around. If your bird gets to be two or three years old without having uttered a word, he may never learn to speak, but that doesn't mean that you should stop trying. Keep talking to your bird. Even if your bird doesn't talk, he can learn to communicate with you in other ways. See Chapter 17 for more details on nonverbal communication.



TIP

Some birds are closet talkers, talking only when no one is in the room. Buy a camera with a live feed that you can access with your phone and that has a recording function. You may find that your bird is more of a chatterbox than you think. That's because a bird that's lonely will speak in his family's language either to entertain himself or to try to get the family to come back into the room. Many birds do contact-calling, which is when they whistle, scream, or talk to try to make contact with a mate who is out of sight. Don't be surprised when you hear a lot of talking from your bird when you're out of the room, but very little when you're holding or interacting with him.



TIP

If your bird is contact-calling, you can get him to stop by simply calling back with a whistle or a catchphrase, such as "I'm here." Your bird is calling to make sure that you're all right, so calling back will put him at ease.

- » Discovering your parrot's favorite things
- » Teaching your parrot to recognize colors
- » Training "yes" and "no"
- » Teaching your parrot to read

Chapter **17**

Taking Your Training to the Next Level: Advanced Techniques

Imagine being able to teach your parrot to read. What if your parrot could tell you what her favorite treats are, or what people she likes the best, or how she would like her cage set up? Although you and your bird speak two different languages, imagine the possibilities if you can teach your bird to speak and understand your language.

You've probably seen some amazing birds on TV and online, parrots that can communicate on a human level, and those who are great at taking cues from their human trainers. What parrots can do is mind blowing. This kind of training may seem out of reach for your parrot, but you *can* teach your parrot a higher level of communication and potentially deepen your relationship.

This chapter examines different advanced training techniques you can try with your bird. This chapter is based on the work of Jennifer Cunha, an attorney and an animal cognition trainer from Florida who is doing amazing work with parrot cognition. She works with all species, from tiny parrotlets to large cockatoos, and she teaches other bird guardians to help their birds learn some pretty advanced cognitive skills, from concepts such as "yes" and "no" and "more" and "less," to colors and counting and even reading.

HOW JENNIFER BEGAN TRAINING HER BIRDS

Jennifer started teaching her many birds these advanced skills after she adopted a cockatoo named Ellie, the first cockatoo in her growing flock. As it turned out, Ellie didn't like Jennifer! Not at all. Ellie screamed, chewed up the house, and didn't want Jennifer to hold her. Imagine Jennifer's heartbreak. She loved Ellie, but Ellie didn't love her back.

Jennifer thought that perhaps the only way to reach Ellie was to try to communicate with her on a more advanced level, and the way to do that was through training. Jennifer had heard that cockatoos were like toddlers, so she decided to try to teach Ellie colors, shapes, and counting using foam color alphabet letters made for toddlers that she purchased from the drug store.

One night, after one of Ellie's particularly bad temper tantrums, Jennifer pulled out the foam alphabet letters and set out to teach Ellie what they meant. Ellie instantly relaxed and took to the training like she was hatched for it. Jennifer then included all her other birds in the training and developed her unique and successful gentle, force-free learning methods.

The most important aspect to Jennifer's training methods is that they're based on respect, empathy, and understanding. She tries to imagine how she would feel in her parrots' position and avoids situations that cause them to be upset or frustrated, and she centers learning around their favorite activities and interests.

If you're skeptical, watch Jennifer's videos online and you'll be convinced. She's currently working on single subject case studies in animal cognition research. The birds in her studies have learned to count (quantities) up to ten, have learned numerals up to ten, use yes and no to communicate, and have learned phonics, but her own birds and those of her training clients have learned far more.

This chapter only touches the surface of Jennifer's amazing techniques. You can find out more about her on her and her training methods at www.myreadingpets.com/, on Facebook at www.facebook.com/groups/readingparrots, and on Instagram at @myreadingpets. She offers seminars and webinars, too.

These training methods are much more than parlor tricks to impress your friends and neighbors. You can actually teach your bird to communicate with you on a level that you'll understand, and if you understand your parrot, she'll be far happier and more self-directed. This kind of training offers your parrot an opportunity to make her own choices and express her opinions. How cool is that? Using these training methods can help your bird to be calmer and help reduce plucking,

screaming, and other unwanted behaviors. It makes sense; everyone, including your parrot, just wants to be understood.

Determining Whether Your Bird Learn Advanced Skills

You don't need a genius bird or one who can speak in order to teach these advanced skills that I introduce in this chapter. Any parrot, large and small, young and older, can learn some form of these skills. The most important aspects to this training are

- » **Train correctly.** This kind of training has a method that works, and you can't take shortcuts. This training isn't difficult to master, so don't get discouraged!
- » **Make a commitment.** Committing about five minutes, three to five days a week, is the minimum amount you can train to expect any result.
- » **Keep training sessions short.** Some birds have a short attention span, so you don't want your training sessions to go so long that your bird loses interest. You can follow your parrot's lead on training length and stop your sessions when she's ready.
- » **Use lots of treats.** Treats are the key to this kind of training. The section, "Discovering your parrot's favorite treats," later in this chapter explains how to use treats to find out your parrot's favorites.
- » **Stop at any sign of frustration.** Training should always be a fun game for your bird. Stop at the first sign that your bird is getting frustrated or becomes wholly disinterested. Definitely stop if *you* become frustrated! Remember, this kind of training works best in baby steps; make sure it's fun for you *both*.
- » **Praise up a storm.** Most birds love praise and will work hard to please you. Enthusiastic praise is a great tool for many birds. You can read more about praise in the section, "Giving treats," later in this chapter.
- » **End all training sessions on a high note.** End every training session with one successful completed task.
- » **Temper your expectations.** Keep your expectations low and your hopes high. Every training session is an opportunity to build trust, have fun, and connect with your bird.

Getting Started on the Right Foot

When you first begin to try some of the advanced training techniques in this chapter, you first need to choose a training location. Select a place free of distraction where your bird is comfortable. In other words, find a place where your parrot doesn't constantly have to analyze the location for danger. A T-shaped perch in an uncluttered location is great. This becomes the *learning spot*, and your parrot will come to expect the training sessions there. Because you offer a lot of treats during this training, your bird may actually go to the training spot each day and wait for you. In addition, you need the following items when you start training these techniques.

Discovering your parrot's favorite treats

Your parrot likes to eat a variety of foods, but which are her favorite? You can only find out through this kind of preference training. When you discover what her absolute favorite treat is, you have the motivation for the rest of this kind of advanced training.



TIP

Make sure you have a lot of treats that you believe your parrot likes. Cut them into bite-size morsels. If your parrot likes almonds, cut the almond in little pieces. If you're offering a whole almond as a treat, each time your bird performs the required task she's going to spend the entire training session eating and will become full (and less motivated) more quickly.

A bird that will take food treats from your hand (or when you toss them into a coop cup) is a bird that will be much easier to train than one who won't. After you discover what your parrot's favorite treat is (refer to the section, "Implementing Preference Training," later in this chapter for how to do this), you'll use that particular food *only* during training sessions rather than offering it with your bird's daily food. Be sure this isn't your bird's only food, though. I don't want her to go hungry.



REMEMBER

You can either offer the treat by hand or keep an empty coop cup on the perch where you're doing your training so you can toss the treat into it. Always train before a meal. *Never* starve a bird or withhold food for the sake of training. However, if your bird is a little hungry and really wants the treats that you're offering, then she may be more motivated.

Giving praise

Praise is also helpful in successful training. Use the word “good” when a bird successfully completes a task and then offers a treat. The word “good” acts as a bridge between performing an asked-for behavior and the offering of a treat. This word marks the behavior and creates muscle-memory for the parrots. You can also use a clicker (often used for dog training) or click with your mouth (see Jennifer’s training videos, she does this often). However, some parrots will learn to mimic the sound of the click and try to train you! For the purposes of this chapter, I’ll be using “good” as your praise word. Refer to Chapter 16 for details on clicker training.

Recognizing other items you need to begin

Training needs to be done in a safe, friendly, distraction free environment. Here’s what you need to get started:

- » **A sturdy perch:** You’ll need a sturdy perch for your training sessions. If it’s wobbly or has too many distractions on it (toys, other birds, and so on), you’ll have a more difficult time training.
- » **A target:** A *target* is simply something that you’ll ask your bird to look at or touch, usually a ball at the end of a stick. You can purchase a target online, but be sure it’s made for birds or it may be too large or intimidating for your parrot. Jennifer uses a chopstick. You can also wrap colorful tape at the end of the chopstick to make it easier for your bird to see. Refer to the section, “Incorporating a Target into Your Training,” later in this chapter.
- » **Foam letters and numbers in various colors:** You can use foam letters and numbers from your favorite discount department store, online, or your local grocery store. She also has them available on <https://myreadingpets.com/shop/>. You can also use colored toy wheels, colored cards, or nontoxic colored wood blocks. Check out Figure 17-1.
- » **Blank note cards:** You’ll be writing and drawing on blank note cards to train certain skills.

FIGURE 17-1:
You can use foam
letters to help
your birds learn
the alphabet and
colors.



Photo used with permission from Jennifer Cunha

Implementing Preference Training

Preference training opens up a world of communication for your bird — one where you and your bird don't need any prior training experience. The objective of this training is to get your bird to be able to tell you what she prefers between two offered items. In preference training, you'll get your bird to touch or look at the item she prefers. Even a parrot who won't progress beyond preference training can usually do this.

Stick to these easy steps to incorporate preference training in your overall training plan:

- 1. Take two of your bird's regular treats and hold one in each hand.**
For example, Jennifer starts with a pine nut and a sunflower seed.
- 2. Show your bird the two items, name them, and then ask her, "Which is favorite?"**
She'll reach for one of the treats, which you then give to her.
- 3. Swap the treats in your hands to make sure that your parrot isn't just choosing the same side rather than choosing the treat she likes the best and ask again, "Which is favorite?" and wait for your bird to choose.**

4. Again swap the treats from hand to hand and repeat.

Sometimes, keep the treats in the same hand. Your parrot will most likely continue to choose her favorite out of the two items. Consistency is the best signal to knowing whether your bird is actually choosing a favorite item or just reaching for whatever is closest. Three out of three, or at least two out of three is ideal, and it may take a few sessions for your bird to learn this communication skill. Patience is key!



TIP

If your bird bites or is frightened of hands, you can teach preference training by letting your bird look at both options, and whichever one she looks at longer — for at least a period of two to three seconds — is the one you drop into her bowl.

After birds understand that the option they touch (or look at) is what is given to them, you can expand the communication system to discover all your bird's favorite things, such as toys, activities, people, and food and beverages.

Incorporating a Target into Your Training

Target training is essential as the basis for most of the advanced training techniques in this chapter and beyond. First start with preference training that I discuss in the previous section. You can move onto *target training*, which teaches your bird to touch things (or look at things) and is great for birds that are comfortable with objects. A nervous bird will require using only objects that she feels comfortable with and the objects should be farther away.

Target training is used widely with dogs and marine mammals and works great with parrots as well. Essentially, you'll be teaching your parrot to touch an object, the target, with her beak. That's all you need to do at first.

Follow these steps to implement target training:

1. Show your bird the target, say, "Touch," and when your bird touches the target with her beak, say, "Food," and then offer a treat.

For example, Jennifer uses a simple wooden chopstick. Select a type of target until you find something that your parrot will accept. If your bird is nervous around the target and leans backward or moves away from it, hide all the target object with your hand except the tip and offer treats for coming closer to the target.

2. Repeat.

When your bird is reliable at touching the target, move it a little farther away and say "Touch" again. If your bird won't do it, you've moved too far.

TRYING LOOK TRAINING FOR NERVOUS NELLIES

Look training is similar to target training and is good for nervous or aggressive parrots. Instead of touching something, your bird will receive praise and a treat for simply looking at the target.

Try these steps:

1. **Hold the target up at a distance where your parrot feels safe and isn't showing any fear or discomfort.**
2. **Say, "Look!"**
3. **When your bird looks at it, say, "Good" and drop a treat in the bowl.**
4. **Move the target a bit to the right or left, prompt your bird to look and give her a treat when she looks at the target.**

Adding Colors to Your Training Regimen

Teaching colors is an easy way to help your bird learn how to learn. Colors are a natural progression after target training, whether you've taught your bird to touch the target or simply to look at it. You can use foam letters as your color training targets. Or if you choose, you can use plastic toy discs, colored cards, or parrot-safe wood blocks. Whatever you decided on, just keep your material consistent when training colors (for example, using all discs or wood blocks).

Stick to these steps when teaching colors:

1. **Start with red and blue.**
 1. Hold up your red item and ask your bird to "touch red." When she touches the red item, say, "Good," and offer a small morsel of her favorite treat. Repeat this several times.
 2. Remove the red item and move to the blue item. Ask your bird to "touch blue." Repeat the same procedure you did with the red item. When the bird touches the blue item after you've asked, say, "Good," and then treat.

For some birds, simply playing with the target is enough for a reward, but many birds will train better with a treat given to them or dropped in their food bowl.

2. Hold up both the red and blue items and say, “Touch red.”

1. When your parrot touches the red item, say, “Good,” and treat.
2. Do the same for blue. Repeat red and blue touch training again with the objects in the same hands.

3. Swap hands and ask your bird to touch the red, and then ask her to touch the blue.



TIP

If your bird gets it wrong when you’re holding up both the red and the blue items twice in a row, remove one and go back to asking just for the touch (or look) for one color. Give your bird the chance to succeed. Try not to allow your bird to get more than two questions wrong in a row before going back to the initial teaching phase of this concept.

Aim for three out of four correct questions in a row, or 75 percent, accuracy in a session. Your bird doesn’t need to be perfect. After your bird is showing some consistency with the correct answer, teach new colors so she don’t get bored. However, parrots are still parrots (as Figure 17–2 shows).



FIGURE 17-2:
Even highly
trained birds can
be naughty
sometimes.

Photo used with permission from Jennifer Cunha

Differentiating between Yes and No

Yes and *no* are actually fairly advanced concepts for any organism. Teaching your parrot to understand and use *yes* and *no* opens up a whole world of possibilities for her. She can tell you what she wants and doesn't want. Learning *yes* and *no* for a parrot breaks a huge communication barrier. Here's how to get started. Figure 17-3 shows an example.



FIGURE 17-3: Jennifer uses note cards to help her birds learn the concepts of *yes* and *no*.

Photo used with permission from Jennifer Cunha

To implement *yes/no* training, stick to these steps:

- 1. Choose a red and green foam toy object or the same objects such as wood blocks or plastic toy discs in those two different colors.**

Red is typically associated with *no* and green with *yes*, so assign those values to the colored objects. You can also write the words “*yes*” and “*no*” on a card if that’s easier for you, however, many birds can learn that the same items have different properties.

- 2. Starting with the green object, show your parrot the object and ask your bird to “touch *yes*.”**

When she does, say, “Good,” and offer a treat. Repeat four times. Do the same for the red *no* object.

3. Hold both objects up and say, “Touch yes.”

Ideally, your bird will choose the object you’ve assigned as yes. If not, ask again. If she fails a third time, go back to Step 1. After your bird selects the yes object on cue while holding both objects, ask her to touch no and repeat the training. She’ll eventually choose the correctly named object.

4. Swap hands to ensure that your bird truly understands what you’re teaching.

Your parrot won’t understand what yes and no mean at this point. She’ll simply associate the two different words with the objects.

5. Build on this skill by teaching some vocabulary, in this case, the word “treat” by holding up a treat and say, “Touch treat.”

Of course, your bird will reach for the treat. Say, “Good,” give her the treat, hold up another treat, and say again, “Touch treat.” Repeat four to seven times until your bird is successful every time.

6. Hold up a bowl of water and say, “Touch water.”

You bird may or may not want the water. If she touches the water, say, “Good,” and offer a treat. If she doesn’t touch the water, but gets close enough to it, that’s fine. You can still praise and treat. Typically, birds will want the treats much more than they want the water.

7. Hold up your yes and no objects and ask, “Would you like a treat?”

If she touches the yes target, say yes and offer a treat. If she touches the no target, say, “Okay, no treat,” and ask again. If your bird chooses no twice in a row, only offer the yes object and repeat this step several times. Then offer the yes and no objects again, and ask, “Do you want a treat?”

Suddenly, the green yes target means the bird gets a treat when asked if she wants a treat and the red no target means no treat. When your bird chooses yes, she learns that she gets the item offered.

8. Show the yes and no targets and ask, “Do you want some water?”

If yes, offer water. Typically, the bird won’t want it if she isn’t thirsty. Put the water down and ask again. If she chooses yes for the water again, offer water again. Eventually, she’ll learn to say no to the water if she wants the treat more. When she chooses the no target when offered water, don’t offer the water but do offer a treat, because that answer was correct. Now switch the targets to the opposite hands and repeat the process to ensure that your bird truly understands what the targets mean.

Developing Your Bird's Vocabulary

Vocabulary development is another important phase to advanced training. Imagine that your bird can actually ask (or tell) you what she wants at any given time. Being able to do so can enhance your parrot's life. Adhere to these steps to develop your bird's vocab:

- 1. Start with the names of foods by showing your bird a food item and asking her to touch it.**

Choose a food that your bird likes, such as a piece of apple. Say the name of the food, for example, "Apple." When she touches the piece of apple, say, "Good" and offer a treat (whatever treat you've been using for training). Repeat this process by saying the name of the apple and giving a treat when your bird touches it several times.

- 2. Choose another favorite food, such as a piece of banana; ask her to touch the banana, and when she does, say, "Good," and offer a treat.**

Repeat.

- 3. Hold up both the apple and the banana and say, "Touch apple."**

If she chooses correctly, say, "Good," and offer a treat. If she touches the wrong item, pull the items back, say nothing, wait a moment, and then offer them again and say, "Touch apple." Your bird will touch the apple. If she's having trouble, go back to just one fruit and start over.

- 4. When your parrot is reliably touching both the apple and banana when you ask (two or three out of three tries), hold both up and say, "Touch favorite."**

Note that you'll have to complete the favorite training first. When she touches her favorite, say, "Good," and offer her the piece of fruit that she touched.

This kind of training is the basis for teaching counting, locations, people, and activities. Imagine being able to know exactly the what, who, and where of your bird's favorite things.

Playing Games with Your Parrot

You can play a lot of games, which are actually teaching methods, with your bird. Start with a basic game called "war," one you may remember playing during your childhood. In this game, you're dealt a card and the dealer has a card. Whichever card is larger wins the round and the one with the most cards in the end wins the game.

In the parrot version of this game, make your own cards. Cut white cardstock to roughly the size of a deck of cards, or you can use blank white index cards. Using a black permanent marker, color dots on the cards in different quantities, one to twelve. Start with teaching “more” or “less” and then play war.

Focusing on “more” or “less”

You’re going to teach your bird to discriminate which is more and which is less. This game helps the bird learn about quantities and the concept of larger and smaller. Start out easy to give your parrot the opportunity to learn and succeed. You’ll be using the words “more” and “less.” Just follow these steps:

- 1. While showing your bird a card that has five dots drawn on it, say, “Touch more,” and treat for your bird touching the card.**
- 2. Repeat by showing a card with one dot drawn on it, say, “Touch less,” and treat each time your bird touches the card.**

Repeat this several times.

- 3. Show your bird the two cards and say, “Touch more.”**

If your bird touches the card with the five dots, praise and treat. If not, pull the cards back and ask again. If successful, then say, “Touch less.”

If your bird has caught on, change the cards to different numerical values. Show a six card against a two card and ask for more or less. If she gets it wrong, simply ask again, and if it becomes clear she’s not understanding the concept, go back to showing one card and teaching “more” and “less” again.

Playing war

To play an actual game of war with your parrot, do the following:

- 1. Assign one hand as your card (say, your right hand) and one hand as the parrot’s card (your left hand) and tell your bird which hand is your card and which is her card.**
- 2. Hold up two cards and ask which is more.**

When she touches the more card and it’s in her winning hand, you offer two treats: a treat for getting it right and a treat for the bird winning the game. If you ask which is more and she chooses your card, the bird gets one treat for choosing the correct card, but not a second treat because the bird lost that game. You can play this game with your bird during rainy days or before bed. This skill is the building block to counting, learning numbers, and learning basic math.

Training How to Count

Learning how to count is another layer of communication that opens up the world for your parrot. She can ask for a certain number of things she wants after she learns to count. This skill is also very impressive! Stick to these steps to train your parrot how to count and how to recognize numerals (refer to Figure 17-4):



FIGURE 17-4: Teaching math is a highly advanced skill, but doable for most birds with some time and patience.

Photo used with permission from Jennifer Cunha

- 1. Find three identical items in your home, two of which fit into your hand at one time.**
For example, buttons, bottle caps, small oranges, and beads work, basically anything that has some substance to it, just no pieces of paper. These are your counting items. You'll also need foam numerals one and two.
- 2. Hold up the 1 foam numeral and say, "Touch one;" when she does, praise and treat.**
Repeat a few times.
- 3. Take whatever you've chosen as your counting items, say, buttons, and hold one in your hand and say, "Touch one button;" repeat until your bird is successful.**
- 4. Hold up both the foam 1 and the single button and say, "Which is one button?"**

Ideally, your parrot will choose the button. If not, go back to the previous steps. If she touches the button, praise and treat.

5. Repeat the same steps with two buttons and the foam numeral 2.

When she seems confident and has been successful touching both items when you ask, you can hold up the foam 1 and the foam 2 and ask, “Which is one?” Ideally, your parrot will choose the numeral 1. Eventually, you may be able to teach higher numbers and numerals.

READING AND MORE

Jennifer has dozens of cognitive skills that she uses with her birds and teaches to other bird guardians. Some are more complex than what I outline in this chapter and take a lot of building blocks before you can begin to train them. Fortunately, most parrot are long-lived and love to learn, so you have plenty of time!

Her birds know the alphabet, so she's able to read simple kids' books with them and have them touch the words or images on the page as they read along together, just like with little children. Teaching parrots to read is a bit more complicated and takes phonics skills (for you to learn first!), but her research is showing that it's possible. Refer to the following figure for an example.



Photo used with permission from Jennifer Cunha

(continued)

(continued)

She has also taught her parrots to ask her to play their favorite classical songs. Her parrots can also tell her how they want their cages set up, what they want to eat, and what they want to do. Jennifer is designing other advanced training objectives, including using a tablet-based communication board, developing motor control for coloring and writing, and teaching birds to play gaming apps.

Handling Wrong Answers

If your bird seemed to know a task and then suddenly won't give any correct answers, consider that she might be giving you internationally wrong answers. This happens when the task is too easy and the bird is bored. That's how a parrot lets you know that she wants to learn something new. You'll know this is happening when the parrot is giving you *only* wrong answers. When that happens, find new learning topics to explore and learn together. You can also find lots of ideas in Jennifer's lesson books on her parrot kindergarten website.



REMEMBER

This kind of advanced training takes time and patience. You may have a genius, motivated bird who is eager to learn, or you may have more reluctant parrot. Just keep trying and be sure to make lessons short and fun and always end on a high note. If you're having a hard time with a lesson and your parrot isn't successful at the task, go back to a task that she knows well and end the lesson with that.

- » Having realistic expectations
- » Recognizing mating rituals
- » Identifying essential breeding equipment
- » Weaning baby parrots

Chapter 18

Breeding Parrots

Many people want to breed parrots once they begin keeping them, but breeding isn't as easy as boy meets girl. Sure, many parrots are eager to breed. Some single hens will even lay infertile eggs on their own with no male around. Some parrots are easygoing about the breeding process and generally don't mind a meddlesome guardian or noise around the breeding area. Other parrots, however, can be very difficult and cause you more problems than breeding them is worth. Also, if you have a hands-on companion, your parrot *may* go back to being friendly after having a clutch of chicks, but others may never want to hang out with you again and can even become ferocious.

The raising, keeping, and care of birds is called *aviculture*, and a bird breeder is called an *aviculturist*. Most people who breed parrots are hobbyists. They have a backyard, bird room, or basement full of their favorite species, and they often breed to show their birds in competition or simply for the satisfaction of creating or recreating specific mutations. These people are often called *fanciers*.

Other people have made a business of breeding parrots, having entire farms dedicated to the endeavor. The backyard bird breeder and the parrot farmer are both valid parts of how birds enter the companion animal trade, but what *really* matters is how the parent and baby birds are treated. Some large operations are nothing more than parrot mills, and some backyard breeders are simply presiding over torture chambers. Some breeders coddle and spoil their birds, giving each baby a lot of individual attention, offering the parents good nutrition and adequate space, and then finding just the right home for the young birds. If you're reading this book and you want to breed birds, I assume you're going to take after the latter.

Taking Heed: A Warning Before You Begin

I'd be completely remiss if I didn't issue a warning and a plea. The parrot overpopulation problem has reached an all-time high in the United States. There already aren't enough homes for multitudes of unwanted and neglected parrots, and rescue agencies have reached their spatial and financial limits. It's mostly the larger, noisy, potentially aggressive parrots that get dumped, including cockatoos, macaws, and Amazons, but the smaller parrots find themselves out of homes, too. Though this hasn't been officially documented, it's anecdotal that most larger parrots stay in an average home for 2 or 3 years before being shuffled along to another home or a rescue. Anecdotal evidence also shows that most parrots have a minimum of three owners in their lifetimes. Smaller parrots fare a little better, but not by much. Some shelters are overrun with smaller parrots, like cockatiels and budgies, because people think of them as disposable pets, which they certainly aren't.

A common myth abounds that parrots *have* to be bred or else some species may become extinct. Although a great many of the parrots that people commonly keep in captivity are extremely endangered in the wild, breeding parrots in your home isn't going to help *any* species become less endangered. Most critically endangered parrot species will be impossible for you to bring into your home anyway. They're generally being safeguarded in the wild or bred in captivity by trained conservationists and zoos. Some aviculturists are licensed to import very rare birds from the wild to try to breed them for the sake of conservation, but doing this involves a slew of bureaucratic red tape, proof of qualification, and intense dedication.

Another pro-breeding argument is that breeding captive birds will eliminate the smuggling of wild-caught birds. Unfortunately little evidence proves that because there are captive-raised parrots, poachers will stop capturing parrots in the wild. The wild-caught bird trade continues to thrive, killing and torturing hundreds of thousands of wild parrots every year (see Chapter 11 for more on the wild-parrot trade). Even shutting down the quarantine stations in the United States and making importation of parrots illegal hasn't done a lot to stop parrot poachers.

I include this chapter not because I'm encouraging you to start breeding parrots, but because I'm realistic about people experimenting with breeding birds, and I want you to have the best guidance possible. I also know that some people reading this chapter are going to become involved with breeding and showing birds as a hobby. The only parrots that any average person should even consider breeding are the smaller ones: budgies, lovebirds, cockatiels, parrotlets, and possibly Quakers, ringnecks, and some of the smaller conures. Even so, realize that there's an overpopulation problem with these birds, too, and that you should be prepared to keep any babies your birds produce. In any case, this chapter can help you understand all the work that went into producing your parrot, so keep reading.

One of the reasons that I cite these particular smaller birds as the only species you should consider breeding is because there's a lively *fancy* dedicated to their color mutations and to showing them. When someone shows birds or becomes involved in the hobby, there's a better chance that they're going to do a lot of research on proper care and that they're going to consult birdy mentors who will help them through breeding difficulties. Also, fanciers tend to care for their birds better than the average bird guardian because their birds have to be in prime shape for breeding and showing. It's in the fancier's best interest to keep the birds healthy and happy. Finally, the smaller birds are a little easier to care for, especially if someone keeps them in pairs or in a flock.



WARNING

If you take nothing else from this book, please heed this warning: Don't breed birds on a whim. Do your homework and know the risks. Whatever you do, *don't breed the larger birds*. Instead, rescue one from a shelter.

Having Realistic Expectations When Breeding

Most novice breeders begin with one or two pairs of smaller birds and learn by trial and error. That's fine for the novice fancier but not so great for the parent birds or the chicks. But doing something hands-on is really the only way of discovering all the nuances of a hobby. Unfortunately, this hobby happens to involve living creatures.



TIP

Aside from reading all you can on the subject, find a few people already involved in the hobby and use them as mentors. Check out some of the many parrot forums online where you can meet other people who love your species of parrot as much as you do. Join the numerous social media groups to discover as much as you can about the hobby. These people in the groups are often glad to help with your questions or problems. You can also join a parrot society or your local bird club. This chapter only details the very basics of the breeding process. Asking breeders that you know and experiencing the process yourself will fill in the gaps.

The following sections shows the pros and cons to breeding and help get you on your way if you choose to try to produce parrot babies.

Realizing how much time and expense is required

Breeding parrots takes more time and expense than simply keeping them as companions. You have to consider nutritional concerns, medical concerns, and

equipment that you have to purchase. Handfeeding baby parrots also takes a great deal of time and patience and often results in multiple trips to the veterinarian and even death for the baby bird or parents. You may have to rush to your veterinarian or stay up all night with newly hatched babies. Are you ready? Are you a patient person? You can't rush breeding birds or weaning babies.



WARNING

You'll always spend more on this endeavor than you'll make on selling the babies. People often go into breeding thinking that they'll make a buck or that selling the babies will pay for the upkeep of the parents. Nothing could be further from the truth. Ask any hobby breeder how much she spends at the veterinarian's office or how much it costs to wean and house babies. You may spend ten times what you paid for the parents on one trip to the vet with a single chick.

Considering the associated risks with breeding

The endeavor of breeding parrots can be precarious. I want you to think very carefully before you make this choice. Most of you aren't up to all the challenges, expenses, and risks that come with breeding. Breeding has a lot of heartache and disappointment, and you have to be prepared for things to go wrong. Finding a clutch of healthy, cheeping babies in the nest is wonderful and miraculous, but it doesn't cancel out the tragedies that happen in the process. Here are just a few of the situations that you should be prepared to handle:

- » **Egg binding:** A hen that's not in fit condition, is living in too small a cage, is too old, or has an untreated medical problem can become *egg bound*. That means that an egg is stuck inside of her, unable to come out. That's a serious condition that can lead to paralysis, infection, and death. You can tell that a hen is "eggnant" when her abdomen becomes distended and her droppings are large and watery, like cow patties. If she doesn't pass the egg in a couple of days, you can put her in a warm (98 to 99 degrees), moist brooder or hospital cage (see Chapter 10 for directions on how to set one up), and see if doing so helps her pass the egg. You can also gently put a drop of mineral oil or olive oil in her beak and a few drops in her vent (where the egg will come out, also where waste comes out). If you notice that she has become unable to perch or if you can't handle the situation, take her to your avian veterinarian immediately. Your avian vet should be able to remove the egg safely.
- » **Calcium deficiency:** A hen that's calcium deficient can have eggs collapse inside her, leading to a serious medical condition. It can also cause her bones to become brittle or cause her to lay fertile eggs that collapse on the babies, causing them to die. To prevent calcium deficiency, provide your pair plenty of calcium-rich foods and calcium supplements. Your avian veterinarian can also inject calcium into a hen after a few clutches to ensure that's she's not becoming calcium deficient.

- » **Too many babies:** Sometimes a hen is so fertile that she lays too many *viable* (fertile and able to hatch) eggs and tries to raise all the babies. Too many babies, more than five or six, will exhaust the parent birds, and the older babies are apt to crush the younger babies to death. You'll have to remove the first half of the babies and handfeed them yourself, allowing the pair to raise the other half of the clutch themselves. Many times I've had lovebirds lay up to ten viable eggs in one clutch. I had to remove the first five babies that hatched and leave the last five for the parents to raise.
- » **Mate killing:** Some species, like cockatoos, the larger macaws, and eclectus, are notorious for killing their mates, often the male killing the female. This can happen in any species, and it's heartbreaking.
- » **Mate death:** If one of the parent birds dies for any reason, you'll probably have to take over chick-rearing duties. Sometimes the remaining parent will finish rearing the young, but not always.
- » **Egg or baby eating:** Some parrots aren't good parents at all, eating or mutilating their eggs and even the babies. Sometimes they're good to the eggs but then kill the babies upon hatching.
- » **Scrambled eggs:** Nervous parents can inadvertently scramble the eggs inside the nest during feeding time or when you peek inside. Trim the parents' nails before setting them up to breed. Small cracks in eggs can be painted over with clear nail polish and replaced with the parents or put into an incubator.
- » **Abandoned chicks:** Some parrots are doting parents, but sometimes they abandon their eggs or their babies. This may happen with new parents, especially if they were handfed as youngsters. In this case, you'll have to take over the parenting duties. If a pair isn't great in their first clutch, give them another chance, because they may get the hang of it in the second or third. If they're still bad parents beyond that, you know that you'll have to remove their eggs and incubate them yourself or keep them as a nonbreeding pair. You can also foster the eggs underneath another pair of birds that have proved themselves to be good parents, but only if they're in the same stage of nesting. You can't put a random egg or baby into another nest if those birds don't also have eggs or babies.
- » **Prolific hen:** Some hens, particularly cockatiels and lovebirds, aren't deterred from breeding by removal of the nest. They just set up shop in the food dish or at the bottom of the cage and consistently lay eggs. These hens are in dire jeopardy of calcium deficiency. Remove anything from the cage that could be considered nesting material, remove the mate and the nest, and put in smaller feeding dishes.
- » **Dead-in-shell eggs:** Too little moisture and fluctuations in temperature can cause dead-in-shell babies. Offer your parrots a water dish that they can bathe in so that the hen can wet her breast feathers to take moisture into the nest. Illness, as well as pesticides in the parent's food can also be a cause.

- » **Dead toe:** If there's not enough humidity in the nest box or in your brooder, a baby's feet will become dry, and some of the skin on the toes may tighten, causing the blood to stop flowing to one or more toes. If you notice a club toe on a baby bird, take it to the veterinarian to have the skin removed, which will save the toe. If not, the toe will gangrene and fall off.
- » **Splay-legged babies:** If a baby parrot doesn't have much to grasp on in the bottom of the nest box, it can develop a condition known as *splay leg*, where its legs flare out to the side, causing it to be crippled. This bird won't be able to perch well, if at all, and is considered handicapped, though it can get along quite well in an aviary setting if it's allowed to fly and has flat surfaces to land on. To prevent splay legs in your babies, make sure the babies have something to grasp with their feet, such as pine shavings. Your veterinarian will be able to help you fix splay leg if you catch it before the baby is two weeks old. In any case, a splay-legged baby needs to see a doctor.

Finding homes for the babies

Your final consideration in breeding your parrots is what you're going to do with the babies after they're weaned. You can keep them if you have the room, but how many can you keep? If you want to sell them, do you have a place that will take all the babies your parrots produce? Are you sure that you can let your precious babies go to homes where you won't know how they're being treated?

Consider the numbers of unwanted and neglected birds already waiting to be placed in good homes. This hobby produces sensitive living creatures, and it's your responsibility as the breeder to make sure that your babies are cared for after they leave your nest.

Getting Started: Breeding with Paired Parrots

The first thing you need to begin breeding is a mature pair of birds. Some parrots are *dimorphic*, like budgies and cockatiels, meaning that there's a visual difference between mature males and females, which makes pairing up very convenient. If you have more than one pair of small birds, it's a good idea to allow your parrots to choose their own mates, unless you're pairing up your birds according to color and want a specific result from the pairing. If the birds are *monomorphic*, which means you can't tell the gender just by looking, you'll have to get a DNA test done on your birds to determine sex.



You have to wait until the female is truly mature before you set her up for breeding. Males are generally able to breed at a younger age, but that doesn't mean that they'll be great parents. A young pair might have trouble mating and will often tend clutches of infertile eggs. In budgies, for example, the female is ready to breed at 1 year to 18 months, and the male is ready at about 9 months (though it's best to wait till these birds are about 2 years old). In the hyacinth macaw, breeding doesn't begin until the bird is 6 to 10 years old.

Ensure that your breeding birds are young and in prime condition. They should be eating a highly nutritious diet for many months before breeding and should be healthy and fit. Trying to breed birds that are old or sickly or that have a medical condition is a recipe for disaster.

Recognizing What Breeding Equipment You Need

Begin with a large breeding area, preferably an aviary. The hen needs a good deal of exercise in order not to become egg bound. Flying room is ideal. Next, you need a wooden nest box (some people prefer metal, but wood is best for smaller birds), the size and shape of which is different for different species, as is the nesting material you'll use. For example:

- » **Cockatiels:** They like a square nest box 12W×12L×12H (inches) or a rectangular one that's a little higher than it is long. Fill the box with clean pine shavings (from the pet shop or online) to about two inches below the entry hole.
- » **Peach-faced lovebirds:** They like a square box 8W×8L×8H (inches). Fill about halfway with pine shavings.
- » **Masked and Fischer's lovebirds:** They prefer an L-shaped or rectangular nest box that's longer than it is high. Put a handful of pine shavings in the bottom and lots of nesting material in the cage — hay, dried grasses, unprinted newspaper, coco fiber, and palm fronds. These birds build elaborate nests, often consisting of a living room and a nesting chamber.
- » **Budgies:** They use a box that's approximately 6W×7L×8H (inches), or smaller, with no substrate (pine shavings) in the bottom — instead, the budgie box has a concave area in the bottom where the eggs sit. When the babies hatch, you add a few handfuls of pine shavings so that they have something to grab onto with their feet.

- » **Parrotlets:** They use a large budgie box and need a couple of inches of pine shavings in the bottom. If you do have parrotlet eggs, you'll be shocked when you see that they're nearly as large as the parrotlets themselves! They don't look like they could have come from such a small bird.

Keep the following in mind when getting around the breeding equipment:

- » Hang the nest box on the outside of the cage, which makes it easy to check on the progress of the eggs and babies. You can hang the box inside the cage, too. Hang the box as high as possible. Make sure that the back door to the nesting box is secured shut, because some birds learn how to slide it open. If your birds are nesting outdoors, rub a few drops of eucalyptus oil onto all sides of the *outside* of the nest box every couple of weeks, which helps to keep away mites and pests (never put the oil inside the box where the birds can get to it, and don't use too much, because it can be toxic).
- » Offer a shallow pan of water every day so that the parents can bathe and take moisture back to the eggs, especially if you live in a warm or dry climate. In very dry weather, you can lightly mist the outside of the nest box with water, but don't overdo it.
- » Have an incubator and a brooder on hand in case you have to pull the eggs or the babies from the nest (refer to the section, "Incubating Eggs When the Parent Parrots Aren't Interested," later in the chapter for how to create your own brooder). You'll also need handfeeding equipment and baby-bird formula.

Some parrots, such as lovebirds, cockatiels, budgies, and Quakers, can be *colony bred*, meaning that a group breeds all together in a large aviary. If you're going to attempt this, you have to make sure that all birds are healthy and flighted, that they're all paired properly (male/female), and that you include at least two extra nest boxes to prevent fighting. Also, put all the pairs into the colony at the same time if you can, especially with lovebirds (cockatiels and budgies are a little more forgiving). People say that birds mate for life, but I can tell you for certain that they have dalliances. When I used to colony-breed lovebirds, I'd get babies in the nest that were genetically impossible to have come from certain pairs.

Meeting Nutritional Requirements When Breeding

Parent birds need a very healthy, balanced, and varied diet that's rich in protein, calcium, and vitamin A. Feed well-done hard-boiled eggs, kale, yams, yellow squash, carrots, apricots, cantaloupe, and other dark green and orange vegetables

and fruit. Feed spinach and kale sparingly at this time, because the oxalic acid in it can bind calcium and make it unusable by the body (see Chapter 8 for a lot more on parrot nutrition). Try to feed only organic produce if you can.



TIP

When the babies are first hatching, feed an abundance of soft foods, such as egg food, hardboiled eggs, cooked foods, and fruit. Remember that the parent birds will regurgitate what you feed them into the babies' mouths. Soft food is easier for the babies to digest than plain seeds or pellets. As the babies grow, continue feeding a variety of healthy foods.

Understanding the Breeding Process: A Timeline

After you hang up your nest box, your parrots will probably become curious about it. They may peek in and talk to the inside of the box. After a few hours or days, they'll pop in and out of it, becoming quite excited that the box is there. Depending on the species, the male parrot may begin courting the female loudly and perform a *perch strut*, with lots of whistling or chatter. Eventually, when the time is right, they'll mate. During this time, the female or the pair may begin to pull the feathers out in a patch on their chests, a *brood patch* that will allow more heat to reach the eggs.

The hen will begin spending long periods of time inside the box about a week to ten days after mating and will begin laying eggs. She will lay an egg about every two days or so, but this varies. Most species of small to medium birds will lay four to six eggs, though more is definitely possible. Larger birds will lay two or three eggs.

After the first two or three eggs have been laid, the pair will begin incubating them by sitting on them (depending on the species, in some, only one of the pair incubates). If you like, date the eggs by gently writing numbers on them with a soft felt-tip pen and recording the numbers and the corresponding dates. This is a good way to maintain records, especially if you have more than one pair. Doing this also helps you to know if you have to *pull* and handfeed any of the babies in the clutch. For example, if the first egg is more than 14 days older than the last egg in a large clutch, know that you'll have to handfeed the older chicks in the clutch to allow the younger chicks to thrive.



TIP

You can tell if the eggs are fertile by *candling* them (shining a bright light through them). You can buy a commercial *candler*, a flashlight with a wand and a very bright tip, or you can place the eggs on the face of a flashlight (be careful!). Fertile eggs have veins and a dark spot; unfertile eggs are yellow and clear, and eventually turn gray. Later, you can even see the chick kicking inside the egg! You'll also see an air sac (hollow space) in the blunt end of the egg. When the chick is ready to hatch, the air sac will become bigger as the membrane around the chick draws down.



TIP

If you're using an incubator or have very forgiving parrot parents, another way to tell if your eggs are just about ready to hatch is to place them *very gently* in a plastic bowl filled with slightly warm water. If the egg bobs up and down and moves around, the chick is active and getting ready to hatch. Don't do this unless you're really concerned about the chick's being alive and use your common sense concerning the temperature of the water. Remove the egg from the water and dry it off after less than a minute, then put it back into the incubator or nest.

Infertility in a young pair is normal. Let them take care of the eggs until a few days after you're sure they're not going to hatch; then remove the eggs and let the couple try again. After one or two dud clutches, your pair should be ready for the real thing. Also, it's typical for not all of the eggs in a clutch to hatch. Remove these dud eggs (make sure they're duds first!). If they break, the goo can stick to the parents' feathers and then stick to a small baby, which may then get crushed beneath the parent or dragged out of the nest.

During the incubation period, the parent birds gently turn the eggs over during the day, moving them so that the babies inside can develop properly. If your birds allow, and most parrots will, you can check inside the nest box once a day for a brief moment. Resist checking too often.

At about 18 to 27 days (give or take, depending on the species, temperature, and time of year), the first egg will begin to hatch, followed by the others in the order in which they were laid. The chick hatches using its *egg tooth*, a sharp piece of its beak (see Figure 18-1). The tooth helps the bird remove itself from the shell and then falls off not long after hatching. A newly hatched chick is wet at first and has a yolk sac (where its belly button would be) that will absorb into its body before the parent feeds it. Some babies have long puffs of down all over their bodies. In some species, the color of the down indicates the mutation color (when it comes

to birds, a *mutation* is a naturally occurring variation in appearance). For example, in lovebirds, orange down indicates a green-based mutation, and white down indicates a blue-based mutation.



FIGURE 18-1:
A hatchling's
egg tooth.

Photo by Essi Laavainen

The parents feed their chicks by regurgitating partially digested food to them. If you check inside the nest box daily, you'll see that the chicks grow with alarming speed. Keep an eye on the chicks to make sure they remain healthy. Eager pairs may lay eggs while they're fledging their chicks and may force them to leave the nest by beating them and tossing them out. If they do, you may have to finish the weaning process yourself, which will be tricky if the babies aren't used to handling. Many breeders begin handling young babies in the nest when they are about two to three weeks old, holding and petting them a few times a day if the parents allow (especially in cockatiels and budgies — trying this with lovebirds is a good way to lose a fingertip). This makes the babies very tame and trustful of humans and is a great alternative to handfeeding them (refer to Figure 18-2).

FIGURE 18-2:
This parent budgie is very protective of its fluffy babies.



Photo by Jodi Hillen

INCUBATION PERIODS FOR DIFFERENT SPECIES

Different species of parrots have different incubation periods, or the amount of time before an egg hatches. Here are a few incubation periods for parrots you need to know if you're considering breeding:

- **Budgies:** 18 days
- **Cockatiels:** 23 days
- **Lovebirds:** 23 days
- **Pionus:** 28 days
- **Yellow-naped Amazons:** 26-28 days
- **Umbrella cockatoos:** 27-29 days
- **Blue and gold macaws:** 25-27 days
- **Hyacinth macaws:** 28-29 days

Incubating Eggs When the Parent Parrots Aren't Interested

Occasionally, a pair of parrots aren't the ideal parents, and you'll have to incubate the eggs yourself. Incubating eggs is a tiring and all-consuming task, but the reward is enormous, especially if the babies would have died if you didn't intervene.



TIP

Invest in a reliable incubator, one that keeps a constant temperature, though even the best incubators can get too hot or too cool. The temperature should be between 98 to 99 degrees, or you risk losing the eggs. This can keep you up all night making minor adjustments, peering in through the little window at the thermometer at 4 a.m., hoping that the temperature reading is correct.

Moisture is critical! Most incubators have a place in the bottom where you can add water, and you *must* keep it filled. The environment inside the incubator has to be moist, or the babies will dry up in the shell.



REMEMBER

You must turn the eggs one-quarter rotation four times a day or more. Gently draw an X on one side of the egg and an O on the other with a soft, felt tip pen or a pencil (not a Sharpie!), so that you know where you are in the rotation process. Turning the eggs is important, not only because the eggs need to be turned, but because it forces you to view and handle the eggs several times a day, which keeps you involved in the process.



WARNING

Don't use an automatic egg rotator (turner), because the slight vibration from it can cause the babies to die inside the shell. A rotator may be good for chicken or duck eggs, but not for delicate parrot eggs.

Although many fancy and expensive incubators are available on the market, choose an incubator recommended by your avian veterinarian. I recommend a simple, Styrofoam incubator without an egg turner. You can put a couple of digital thermometers in it to make sure it's maintaining the correct temperature and peek through the little window on top several times a day to make sure everything is as it should be. If it's too warm, air it out and make adjustments. Too cool, raise the temperature.

After you have your eggs all nice and cozy, these sections explain how to care for hatching eggs and tiny new babies.

Hatching — Time to welcome the new peeper

After the specified number of days for your species, a baby parrot will begin hatching out of an egg. If you're sleeping when the baby hatches, don't worry; it will

wake you up if the incubator is in your bedroom. Parrot babies are loud! They'll even peep loudly from inside the shell. Imagine holding an egg that is loudly peeping!



WARNING

Never try to help a baby hatch unless you feel that it's having a lot of trouble. If the hatching process is taking more than 24 hours, you can chip gently away at the shell with a toothpick, but be very, *very* careful. Babies need to strengthen their neck muscles, and hatching is great exercise, so you don't want to open the egg prematurely.

Most incubators have air holes that you can open and close, and you'll now need to open them. Raise the temperature to 99 degrees and place the baby in a container with something soft in the bottom, like white paper towels. Or, if you have other unhatched eggs in the incubator, invest in a brooder, or create one yourself.

Making your own brooder

Constructing your own brooder is easier than you may think. Just stick to these simple steps to make yours:



REMEMBER

1. **Line a small fish tank or a hard plastic pet carrier with a lid with paper towels, place an inch or so of pine shavings over that, and set the tank halfway on a heating pad that's set on low or medium.**
2. **Place newly hatched babies on paper towels inside small tubs (clean plasticware containers are useful) inside the tank until they get big enough to be placed inside the tank itself.**
3. **As the baby begins to feather out, lower the temperature until it's about 85 degrees.**
4. **Place a grate on top of the tank (or use the plastic carrier top) and a dark towel most of the way over the top, making sure fresh air can still enter.**

Babies less than a week old tend to dry up quickly, so create a source of moisture by placing a clean washcloth in a tall glass of warm water and covering it tightly with hole-poked tinfoil, and place it in your makeshift brooder, making *absolutely sure it can't tip over*. Use tape to secure it if you have to.

5. **Remove the moisture source as soon as the babies are more than a week old, a little later if you live in a dry climate.**



TIP

Invest in a coffee grinder and a good coffeepot for you (not the babies) so you can keep awake. The babies will need to be fed every two hours around the clock, with the first four or five feedings being a single drop of something easily digestible, like an electrolyte replacement, and later, very thin baby-bird formula. Feed only after the yolk sac on the baby's belly has dried up.

Just like with human babies, you must be *obsessive* about the formula's temperature and about not choking (aspirating) the baby, which can happen if you feed too fast (see the "Handfeeding Baby Parrots" section later in this chapter). I always feed with an eyedropper, because it's easier to control than a syringe. A very tiny baby needs only one or two drops of food (depending on the species). Some species, like lovebirds, like to be fed on their backs (cradled in your hand, bird's back to your palm, head angled up), and others in their regular sitting position, like cockatiels.

As the baby gets older, the time between feedings gets longer, but don't expect to leave the house for at least ten days when the babies are very young, or plan on taking the babies with you if you do, including a heating pad and a way to keep it plugged in. I've taken older unweaned babies to parties, out to dinner, to college classes, and to my job. They don't care if you have plans. They need to be fed.

Using Leg Bands — A Bird's ID Tag

Many states regulate that all birds being sold must have a closed band on their leg. The bands are also helpful for recordkeeping and are a necessity for showing birds if you want your birds to receive points. The band on a bird's leg is like an identification collar on a dog. The metal band is engraved with the year of hatching, the breeder's initials, the abbreviation of the state where the bird was hatched, and a number that is unique to the band, which allows the breeder to distinguish one baby from another. You can order bands from a variety of companies or through a parrot society or bird club.

Band your chicks well before they're two weeks old. The banding process is simple. Lubricate the band with vegetable oil, and slip the two front toes in first, with the two back toes following. Some breeders slip three toes in first, with one following. Whatever way you do it, just don't hurt the baby, and don't force the band onto the foot. The earlier you band, the easier it will be, but don't do it too early, or the band will fall off. Use a toothpick to help the toes through.



WARNING

If you put the babies back into the nest with the parents, watch the parent birds *very* carefully after you band, because sometimes they'll chew the babies' feet off to remove the bands.

Handfeeding Baby Parrots

Many breeders handfeed their baby parrots. Doing so isn't difficult after you know what you're doing, but it's time consuming and can create many problems that are deadly for the babies. Most breeders pull their babies out of the nest box at between two and three weeks of age, or just after their eyes have opened. If you pull them earlier, you'll have to feed very often and risk losing a baby if you aren't very experienced with handfeeding. If you pull later than three weeks, the chicks might be fussy and you may have a difficult time getting them to eat. These sections show you how to best feed your new babies and how to wean them.

Recognizing the equipment you need

You need a variety of equipment, which I list here:

- » **Brooder:** Refer to the section, "Making your own brooder," earlier in this chapter.
- » **Feeding utensil:** I like to use an eyedropper at first because it's easy and there's less of a chance that the food will aspirate the baby to death. When the babies are a little older, you can use a small syringe without the needle attached. Some breeders use pipettes or bent spoons, but I'm still partial to the eyedropper because it's easy to clean and doesn't cause as much of a mess as the other tools, though it does take longer to feed the babies.



WARNING

Some breeders tube-feed their babies, which means that they stick a tube directly into the bird's crop and push the food into it all at once. I don't recommend this method *at all*. Please don't even try it. Not only is it dangerous, but it also doesn't socialize the babies at all. They need to be handled and fed slowly and patiently.

Choosing a formula

You have to select a handfeeding formula to feed your babies. Several are available on the market that are as easy to make as instant hot cereal. After you begin with a certain brand of formula, stick with it through the entire handfeeding and weaning process. You can add a probiotic and greenfood (spirulina) to the formula to make it more nutritious. When the babies are older, you can add peanut butter or almond butter, and a variety of human baby food, such as mango, green beans, and apple. Make sure that any nut butter you use doesn't contain xylitol and that

it's as natural as possible, ideally with just nuts as the only ingredient. Best to use commercially prepared nut butters, because these are pasteurized to kill off any fungus.



TIP

Before you feed, make sure that the baby is completely empty. You'll be able to tell by the size and shape of the *crop*, which is located at the bird's breast. When the crop is full, it's like a saggy bubble. When it's empty, the crop is flat. Don't feed a bird that still has food in its crop (a tiny bit is fine, but aim for empty), especially in the morning. When you feed, you'll be able to tell when to stop as you see the crop fill. *Don't* overfill the crop! Doing so can cause it to become distended and bacteria may grow in the stretched areas. A full crop should retain its shape and *not* resemble a shiny, hard bubble. Feed more frequently rather than stuffing the babies at every meal.

How many daily feedings your baby needs depends on its age. At about two weeks, four or five feedings per day is appropriate. You can let the bird go six to seven hours at night, but make sure to wake up for an early feeding. As the bird gets older and begins to eat a little bit on its own, you can scale back the feedings. More isn't better when it comes to babies. The amount that you feed has to be just right. The bird's life depends on it.



WARNING

To begin feeding, make a batch of formula according to the directions on the package. Make sure it's not too hot. Stir it with your finger and test it on your bottom lip as you would food for an infant. It should be warm, not hot, not cold. *If you don't take the time to do this, especially if you microwave the food, you can kill your babies!* Microwaving isn't recommended because it makes the food less nutritious and creates hot spots. Cold formula isn't good for the bird either because it can cause crop slowdown and infection. The baby food temperature has to be just right. Stir *very* well to avoid hot spots or clumps.

Handfeeding your birds: The how-to

To handfeed your birds, just follow these easy steps:

- 1. After washing your hands thoroughly with soap, take the baby out of the brooder and place it on paper towels or a small, clean towel on a counter or table.**
- 2. Holding your nondominant hand over the baby, stand or sit in front of the baby, fill your dropper or syringe with formula using your dominant hand, and then place the tip of the dropper on the left side of your baby parrot's beak.**

The baby should begin *pumping* at the dropper, bobbing his head up and down, as you slowly squeeze the food into the beak.

3. Wipe the baby's face if you make a mess and continue.

Try to avoid feeding too fast, and don't get the food in the baby's nostrils. If the bird coughs or pulls back, stop feeding, and allow it to recover. After feeding, wipe the baby's face gently with a damp washcloth. Remember to feed slowly and gently, especially if you're new to this process.



TIP

If you're nervous and worried about aspirating the baby, you can use a tiny spoon filled with formula and tip it gently into the bird's beak. The baby will eat the formula right off the spoon. This is a slower method of feeding, but it's safe. When the baby is older and less apt to aspirate, switch to a syringe because too much pressure too often with the spoon can cause the beak to misalign.

You'll know when your parrot babies are hungry because they'll beg loudly, and you'll see that their crops are empty. Baby parrots with half-full crops may beg too, which may mean that the consistency of your formula is too thin.

The best way to figure out how to handfeed is to have someone experienced show you. You can also watch some video tutorials online. Handfeeding accidents are common, but you can avoid them if you take your time. I've handfed and weaned probably 1,000 baby parrots, and I've had two aspiration deaths. That was too many, and I still mourn those babies years later. Both happened in the middle of the night when I was very tired and weary of feeding clutch after clutch for weeks. I suggest you take breaks between clutches if you sense that you're becoming overwhelmed.

Being aware of handfeeding potential problems

Here are a few more things you absolutely need to beware of when handfeeding your babies:

» **Crop burn:** If the handfeeding formula is too hot or has hot spots, the formula will burn the crop severely, causing a white spot on the crop, which can eventually open up to the outside, creating a hole in your baby bird. This requires immediate medical attention, can become infected, and is deadly. If you do handfeed, test the formula before you feed it! *If it's too hot, you'll kill the baby!*

- » **Slow crop/sour crop:** When there's an infection in the crop or the food or baby's environment is too cool, the crop can slow down or *sour*. You'll notice that food isn't digesting like it used to and the baby's breath will smell sour or yeasty. This requires flushing of the crop, which you absolutely shouldn't attempt yourself. Make an appointment with your avian veterinarian immediately.
- » **Stretched crop:** If you overfeed and the crop becomes distended too many times, bacteria can thrive in it.
- » **Dehydration:** Dehydration is caused by infection or too little water in the handfeeding formula. When lightly pinched, the skin of a dehydrated baby will stay in a wrinkle instead of springing right back into place. It requires medical attention and generally subcutaneous fluids.
- » **Infection:** Clean all your feeding implements thoroughly after use and toss *all* unused formula after each feeding. These items can harbor bacteria and cause a deadly infection in parrot babies. Don't ever use old handfeeding formula. Make a new batch for every feeding. An old batch, even from a couple hours before, can grow bacteria or fungi that can be deadly for your babies.
- » **Respiratory distress:** It's painfully easy to aspirate a baby parrot during feeding. Feed slowly and deliberately. Sometimes a novice to handfeeding will force too much food down the bird's beak, causing traces of it to enter the respiratory tract, ultimately leading to pneumonia or *instant death*. It's better to feed with a smaller, slower tool, such as an eyedropper, than risk aspirating a baby bird.
- » **Split breast:** Fledging babies that are just trying their wings or birds that have been clipped too severely can split the breast open from a hard landing on a hard floor. A split breast requires immediate veterinary attention.
- » **Scissor beak:** Inexperienced hand-feeders can often create *scissor beak* where one part of the beak doesn't align with the other, making the beak lopsided. If the beak grows like this, the parrot may eventually not be able to eat. A veterinarian or experienced bird expert will be able to train the beak over a period of months or years by filing and trimming it. *Training* means that the beak will eventually go back to its proper position over time. Don't do this yourself! Sometimes, birds have scissor beak even if they were parent-raised, so no one really knows why this happens, but most of the time handfeeding is the issue.

» **Socialization:** The person handfeeding baby parrots should take care to properly socialize the chicks. Feedings shouldn't be a one-two-three-*done* process. The hand-feeder should gently caress and talk to the chicks. Believe it or not, the chicks know when the person handfeeding them loves them and will thrive if they're given love and affection.

Figures 18-3 through 18-7 show the growth of a baby Ducorps cockatoo. Note how quickly the bird grows.



FIGURE 18-3:
The baby at
five days.

Photo by Sherlynn Hogan



FIGURE 18-4:
The same baby
at nearly a
month old.

Photo by Sherlynn Hogan



FIGURE 18-5:
The same baby
at about
six weeks old.

Photo by Sherlynn Hogan



FIGURE 18-6:
The same baby at
about ten weeks
of age.

Photo by Sherlynn Hogan



FIGURE 18-7:
The same baby at
three and a half
months old.

Photo by Sherlynn Hogan

Weaning Baby Parrots

Parent birds naturally wean their babies after they learn to fly. The babies follow the parents to feeding sites and learn to eat by watching and trying. If you hand-feed your babies, *you'll* have to wean them, which can be a little more of a difficult proposition than just showing them what they should eat.

First, never, ever (did I say *never*?) force your babies to wean. They need to wean on their own time, not on yours. But this is tricky, because many baby parrots will continue begging and eating handfeeding formula as long as you're willing to feed them. You have to arrive at a happy medium (refer to Figure 18-8).

As your babies feather out and begin to explore the brooder, it's time to move them to a small cage without the wire bottom. I say *small* because a large cage can intimidate youngsters who haven't learned to climb and perch yet. Offer them seed, pellets, plain toasted oats cereal, millet, and fresh fruits and veggies, chopped, grated, cooked, and so on. Before you handfeed them, make a shallow dish of their warm formula mixed with oatmeal, and offer it to them on your finger so that they get the idea that it's food. Then feed them their formula. The idea is to get them eating while they're hungry. Always offer a shallow dish of water.

FIGURE 18-8:
This little
parrotlet is still a
chick, but it won't
get much larger
than this.



Photo by Donna Dywer



TIP

If babies of weaning age are still begging, you can quit the dropper/syringe feeding and move on to spoon feeding. Bend the sides of a spoon toward each other using a wrench or use a tiny spoon. Fill it with the baby formula and offer it that way. Continue to offer the warm foods and a wide variety of other foods. You can cut the feedings down to two a day, one in the morning and one at night, with lots of soft, warm foods during the day. Eventually, do only one feeding at night, but make sure the babies are eating during the day.



WARNING

I promise that your babies will eventually wean. Don't *ever* starve them in hopes that they'll eat on their own. This is a good way to kill baby birds, or at the very least make them far less socialized than they should be. Babies that are forced to wean can retain baby feeding behaviors, such as pumping, well into adulthood and may become insecure and maladjusted adults.

A MUCH-NEEDED REST

After your parent parrots have blessed you with two or three clutches of babies, give them a well-deserved rest. Having them continue breeding after three full clutches isn't a good idea, because having eggs and tending to babies is very stressful, and the hen will need to replenish her calcium supply. Depending on your climate, give them a summer (warm climate) or winter (cold climate) off of breeding. If a pair is particularly prolific, rest them for a year before putting them to nest again.

Parrot Genetics 101 — Just the Basics

Possibly the most fascinating part of breeding certain small parrots is understanding something about why they show up in so many patterns and colors. This section gives you the very basics of parrot genetics. There's way more to know than I'm going to offer here. I'm just touching the surface.



REMEMBER

Genetic calculator programs online can help you determine the colors of your offspring before you even set a pair up to breed. In particular, I'm talking about budgies, cockatiels, lovebirds, parrotlets, ringnecks, Quakers, and some conures, the smaller birds that have the more complex genetic *mutations*.

For starters, you should know that the visual color of a bird isn't always indicative of all the other *genes* a parrot carrying (if it's of a species that expresses colors and patterns in mutations). A gene is part of the programming that occurs on chromosomes that determines what characteristics an organism has. For example, two humans with brown hair and blue eyes can produce a red-haired, hazel-eyed child. That's because the brown-haired, blue-eyed parents were carrying other genes that expressed in their offspring. It's the same with some parrots.



REMEMBER

Some genes are dominant, and some are recessive. When a parrot's visual color is the color most often found in the wild, green in lovebirds, for example, the bird is referred to as *nominate* or normal. It's showing the genetically dominant color. When the bird is visually showing a recessive color (not found often in the wild but found in aviculture), that bird is a *mutation*, for example, a blue or yellow (also called *lutino*) lovebird.

So how do you come up with a blue lovebird? You actually don't need two blue birds. You can breed two green birds and produce a percentage of blue babies. The color of the babies is determined by the genes of the parents. For example, a green lovebird may be *split* to blue, meaning that it is carrying blue genes, although they are not visually expressed. The word *split* is used to indicate that a bird is carrying genetic traits other than the ones it is visually showing.

With sex-linked recessive genes, the female bird receiving a recessive gene will always show that recessive color, for example, the gene for yellow. So, she can't be split to lutino, because she will always show the recessive gene; she will be yellow. A green male can be split to lutino, and the genes will show themselves in a percentage of the offspring, all of which will be lutino females. I know, it's complicated!

You never really know what you're going to find in a nest box until you breed the pair. After a couple of clutches of babies, the genetics of the parents should be

obvious. Some parrot genetics, such as those of lovebirds and cockatiels, are pretty complex because of the hundreds of mutations available.

When you know which genes are dominant, which are recessive, and which are sex-linked, and you know with certainty what genes your pair is carrying, you can definitively determine the color of the offspring. Before computers became so popular, people used a Punnett Square to determine sex and color in parrots, and although this method is accurate, it's far easier to find a genetics calculator online. If you don't know what genes your birds are carrying, you'll once you breed them a few times and see the colors of the babies.



TIP

Keeping fastidious records will help you keep track of the many mutations in your flock and help you to determine the potential mutations of future babies. You can keep simple records on notecards and place them in a card file if you're in an analog mood, or you can find bird breeder apps for your phone. Believe me, you'll soon forget which of your babies is carrying certain genetic traits. Following the genetics is a huge reason why hobbyist breeders enter the fancy and show their birds.

- » Joining parrot clubs and societies
- » Seeing how a show works
- » Understanding what the show standard is
- » Getting your bird ready for a show
- » Volunteering at the show

Chapter **19**

In the Ring: Showing Your Parrot

Showing small parrots such as lovebirds, cockatiels, and budgies (and other birds, like canaries and finches) is a fun and rewarding hobby that is another aspect of bird guardianship. Single-species shows and all-bird shows draw hundreds of people passionate about parrots, all toting along their well-conditioned show birds in hopes of taking home a prize. The species most popular at shows are the birds that come in a variety of mutations: finches, canaries, budgies, lovebirds, and cockatiels. They're the most exciting classes to watch during the show and the most popular classes with the most entries. In fact, cockatiels, budgies, and lovebirds have their own shows around the nation, drawing breeders and exhibitors from every state.

Many serious breeders show their small parrots so that their aviary can claim prestigious prizes and so their babies will bring higher prices. Other fanciers will want to purchase offspring from a winning show bird. Some people show their birds just to be involved in the hobby and for the self-satisfaction of breeding and conditioning a bird that is close to the standard (which I discuss in this chapter).

Still others attend shows to mix and mingle with the other exhibitors, to meet other people, and to find out more about the species and the hobby. I was involved in bird showing for several years, and I was there mainly to be caught up in the excitement of the shows and to see if I could win prizes with my lovebirds (which

never came in above third place, but that was okay with me). I learned a lot and met many interesting and knowledgeable people whom I've kept as friends for many years.

Shows are also great places to trade small birds and to buy and sell birds, if that kind of thing is allowed. Each show has different rules. Tables are generally set up with a lot of great birdy merchandise for sale as well. There may be toy workshops and other types of demonstrations. You can usually also enter a raffle and win door prizes, which are often the best parts of the day.

This chapter gives you the lowdown on what you need to know about bird shows: how to attend, what to expect, and whether or not you should enter your parrot to win a ribbon and bragging rights.

Being Wary — Words of Warning for Showing

If you're thinking of entering your parrot in a bird show, I have two major points of warning for you to consider before doing so:

» **Don't breed birds just to show them for the sake of showing.** If you're going to breed birds, do it because you love the birds and the hobby, and be sure the babies will get good homes. Stick with the birds that are shown most often and have a lively show presence: lovebirds, cockatiels, and budgies (and canaries and finches).

The reason why these species are shown so often is because they come in hundreds of different mutations and because they're easy to breed. There's a real challenge in *mixing mutations*, using genetics to come up with something really stunning or new, which is what fanciers are after. If that's your passion, great. But I can't advocate entering your companion African greys, Amazons, macaws, or other large birds into a show. These birds are sensitive, and there's no reason to expose them to all the chaos. However, people do bring all kinds of species to shows to win prizes and have a great time, and most of the birds are none the worse for wear, though some individual birds may become frightened by the experience, and it's not worth stressing out your parrot.

» **Beware of bird health.** The birds that hobbyists show most often — lovebirds, cockatiels, and budgies — are prone to a number of diseases and can be carriers without showing symptoms. Some of these diseases are

airborne, meaning they can get to your beloved bird from across the room. Also, most of these shows also allow birds to be sold at vendor tables, and you never know the background or health of these birds. Most shows hire an avian veterinarian to check out all the birds as they come in, but there's no real testing done. The whole thing is kind of on the honor system, which can be compromised when it comes to a competition, no matter how small.



TIP

The first thing you should do is go to a couple of these shows without bringing any birds. See what they're all about. Watch some of the judging. Talk to the vendors and club members. Stay for the raffle, which always happens at the end. It's a really fun day if you can stick it out till closing time.

If you do decide to bring your birds, make sure you quarantine them when you get home. They should spend 30 to 40 days in a separate area in case they picked up a bug at the show. You don't want disease spreading to your other birds. Most show people don't quarantine, in my experience. Because it's on the honor system, they assume that everything will be okay. I haven't heard of any show-illness tragedies, but that doesn't mean that it hasn't happened.

Looking into Parrot Clubs and Societies

Bird clubs and societies host the bird shows. Most medium to large towns have one or more parrot clubs, either an independent club or a chapter of a larger, national club. They generally hold meetings once a month and have holiday parties, dinners, and other social events. They bring in speakers each month to speak on bird issues, they put out a monthly newsletter, and most have an adoption program. If you love parrots, no matter what species, these clubs are a great place to learn and socialize.



REMEMBER

Most clubs have a show or an exposition once or twice a year. A show is where judging takes place; an expo doesn't necessarily have a show included, but has guest speakers and lots of vendors. Some all-species clubs combine a show and an expo, allowing one or two of the parent clubs of a species to show there, for example, the American Cockatiel Society, the National Cockatiel Society, and the African Lovebird Society will allow affiliated local clubs to hold a show within their expo. A qualified member of the parent club does the judging.

Walking You Through How a Bird Show Works

Bird shows begin in the morning with the check-in. An avian veterinarian views the entries for signs of illness. Never, ever bring an ill bird to a show! The birds are entered into classes according to mutation and gender (if gender is obvious, as with cockatiels). For example, male lutino cockatiels are judged against other male lutino cockatiels. The winner of this class goes on to compete against the other birds that have won their classes, and the winner of the division (in this case, the lutino division) goes on to compete against the winners of the other divisions and then on to the competition for the Best in Show title. If you're exhibiting in a cockatiel show, only cockatiels will compete for the Best in Show title. If the show is an all-bird show, the best cockatiel will compete against other species in the final round of judging.



REMEMBER

When you check your bird into the show, make sure he's going to be judged in the proper class. Ask a show official to look at your bird if you're doubtful of his mutation or which class he should be judged in. If you're new to bird showing, enter in the novice division. Even birds with clipped wings can enter in novice, and you don't necessarily need a show cage for the novice division either. Novices may show cockatiels that they've purchased; those birds will have bands that indicate that another breeder bred them. If you want your birds to earn points toward a championship, they must be banded with a closed band carrying your individual aviary's code or initials.

After your bird is checked in, you get a schedule of the show that tells you when your bird is going to be up on the show bench. Try not to become too excited while you watch the judging, because you don't want the judge to know which bird is yours. Also, if your bird sees you and he's a tame companion, he might become agitated and not show well.

After the judge has selected the top three to ten birds on the bench, depending on how many are entered in the class, she might explain why those birds were selected. Be sure to listen carefully. Occasionally, you can speak to a judge after the show is over and ask for details as to why your bird wasn't selected to win (or why he was!). If he doesn't win, remember that there will be other shows and other chances to win. Be a good sport. Bird judges go through a long and rigorous process to get their titles. The judge must be a person of outstanding reputation in

the bird community, must have bred and shown champion birds of a particular species, and must have completed an apprenticeship, among many other requirements.

The winners in their class, division, and show, as well as the best novice bird, all receive a ribbon and occasionally even a plaque, trophy, or cup. Don't become disheartened if you don't win in your first few shows. Remember that showing birds is done mainly for the fun of the hobby. Your birds are still marvelous, even if they don't go home with ribbons and plaques. If your birds are banded with your personal bands because you've bred them, the winners receive points that will apply toward a championship title. The number of points received is determined by the number of birds entered in the class.

Most shows have a youth class for kids under 18, and some shows even offer scholarship money. In any case, showing is fun for kids and gets them involved. Think: willing cage cleaners and bird feeders!



REMEMBER

You should only take your birds to a show if they're confident around other people, are all right with being out of your sight, and if you're willing to risk them becoming stressed or ill. There's always a risk when you take your bird out of the home, especially if they're going to be around other birds. Only you know how much your birds can handle.

Knowing the Show Standard

Knowing whether you have the right bird for showing takes a keen eye for comparing your bird against the *standard*. In a cockatiel show, for example, the birds aren't compared with one another, but against a standard written by a particular cockatiel club or the national parent club. The standard explains how each part of the perfect show cockatiel should look and is what the cockatiel judge measures against for each bird on the show bench. Each part of the standard equals a certain number of points, and the winning bird in a class is the one that gets the most points. To buy or breed show birds, you have to be very familiar with the standard.

Figure 19-1 shows the cockatiel standard used by the American Cockatiel Society. Does your bird measure up?

The American Cockatiel Society Show Standard

© The American Cockatiel Society

General Conformation

The cockatiel is a long bird, with graceful proportions, but of good substance (full bodied). From the top of the shoulder curve to the tip of the wing, from the top of the skull to the vent and from the vent to the tip of the tail (ideally) should measure 7". The goal being a 14" bird with a 3" crest. The total bird being 17 inches.

Crest

Should be long (goal 3"), with good density, curving from the top of the cere fanning out to give fullness.

Head

Should be large and well-rounded with no flat spot on top or back of the skull. Baldness will be faulted according to the degree of severity of each bird on the show bench. Our aim is for no bald spot even in Lutinos. The eyes should be large, bright and alert, and placed at mid-point between front and back of the skull. The brow should be well pronounced when viewed from the front, the brow should protrude enough to indicate good breadth between the eyes. The beak should be clean, of normal length, and tucked in so the lower mandible is partially visible. Cheek patches should be uniformly rounded, well defined, (no bleeding), and brightly colored (especially on the males). Adult male cockatiels will have a bright, clear, yellow head, sharply defined where the yellow meets the border of the main body feathers. A deep bib is preferred. There should be no evidence of pin feathers.

Neck

Should be relatively long, have a very slight curvature above the shoulders, and have a small nip above the chest area, giving the bird a graceful outline and eliminating the appearance of a "bull" neck or the "ramrod" posture of some psittacine species. An exaggerated "snake" neck would be reason for fault.

Body

The body of the cockatiel when viewed strictly from the side angle can be somewhat deceptive, as only a well-rounded outline of the chest will indicate whether the specimen has good substance. A frontal (or back) view shows more truly the great breadth through the chest (and shoulder) areas of an adult cockatiel (more prevalent in hens). It is the strong muscular development that enables the cockatiel to be such a strong flier. A cockatiel should have a high, broad, full chest (more prevalent in hens), a slender, tapering abdomen, a wide, straight back (no hump or sway), and be a large, sleek bird.

Wings

Should be large, wide and long, enveloping most of the body from a side view. Should be held tightly to the body, tips close to the tail with no drooping of the shoulders or crossing of the wings. The wing patch should be wide (goal of ¾" at the widest point), well defined, and clear of darker feathers. All flight feathers should be in evidence. Covert feathers should illustrate their growth pattern clearly.

Legs and Feet

Should hold the bird erect at approximately 70 degrees off the horizontal. Must grasp the perch firmly (two toes forward and two back), be clean, and claws not overgrown or missing.

Tail

The longest flights should be the extension of an imaginary line straight through the center of the bird's body. A humped back will cause the tail to sag too low, and a "swayed" back might elevate the tail higher than desired. The feathers themselves should be straight clean and neither frayed, split or otherwise out of line. All flights should be in evidence.

Condition

A bird in top condition has clean, tight feathers: no frayed or missing feathers, no half grown or pin feathers. The beak and claws must be of suitable length. There should be no unnatural roughness or scaling on the cere, beak, legs or feet. If a bird is in good condition, it will be almost impossible to get it wet. Water will roll off like it does off a duck.

Deportment

In a good show stance, the exhibition cockatiel should indicate a central line approximately 70 degrees off the horizontal. The bird will present and display well on the perch.

Classification on Types

The following categories concern specific coloration aspects of the Normal and Mutant cockatiels. While definition is necessary for each type, it is to be remembered that coloration is not as emphasized on the show bench as it may appear to be in the written standard.

Normals

The color should be a dark grey, ideally uniform in color throughout

FIGURE 19-1:
The cockatiel
standard.

Pieds

The ideal Pied will be 75% yellow and 25% dark grey. The goal being yellow pied markings over white pied markings. The aim being for tail and wing flights to be totally clear. The mask area should be clear, with no grey to create a “dirty” effect. Symmetry of pied markings are ideal.

Lutinos

Ideally a rich, deep buttercup yellow throughout. Long tail feathers and primary flights will not be severely faulted for being a lighter shade of yellow than the body.

Pearl Hens

Extensive “heavy” pearl markings that are well defined, uniform and without splotching. Ideally the pearl markings will be a deep buttercup yellow.

Pearl Males

The same as for hens with less influence placed on the pearl markings.

Cinnamons

The color should be cinnamon, uniform in color throughout

Fallows

The color should be light cinnamon with a yellow suffusion, uniform in color throughout. The eyes should be ruby or red.

Silvers

The color should be a dull metallic silver, uniform in color throughout. The eyes should be ruby or red.

White Face Pearls and Pieds

Same as the Normal but void of all lipochrome. The mask area of the cock will be pure white.

Albinos

Will be void of all lipochrome, a pure white bird, with ruby or red eyes. Primaries and flight feathers will not be severely faulted for being an off shade of white.

Yellowcheek

Cheek patch appears gold with a lemon yellow face color in the male bird

Pastels

Cheek patch appears peach with a lemon yellow face color in the male bird.

Single Factor Dominant Silver

The body being darker metallic silver than expressed in the silver mutation. Face has an orange cheek patch. Eyes, feet, and beak are black, with the exception of Pied; this mutation having flesh colored feet and beak. A skullcap of darker pigmentation is visible on the head. Available in all color mutations, including whiteface.

Double Factor Dominant Silver

The body being a very light metallic silver than expressed in the silver mutation. Face has an orange cheek patch. Eyes, feet & beak are black, with the exception of Pied; this mutation having flesh colored feet & beak. A skullcap of darker pigmentation is visible on the head. Available in all color mutations, including whiteface.

Whiteface Single Factor and Double Factor Dominant Silver

Same characteristics as silver with the exception of being a whiteface mutation.

Olive

Available in all color mutations, including whiteface. This mutation has a green wash and a light feather pattern resembling spangling on the body.

Cross-Mutations

Will be judged by combining the color standards for all mutations involved.

Splits

Markings on Split birds will not be penalized, as these expressions, a genetic factor of birds split to pied and are not a matter of faulty breeding. A bird showing the split mark is split to pied. It can be split to other mutation, but will not show the split markings.

FIGURE 19-1:
(continued)

Looking at Different Show Equipment

Birds are generally shown in special show cages that are designed to emphasize a bird's good points. The show cage doesn't contain anything that would distract the judge from the bird. The cage is solid on three sides, with vertical grating on the front, which is generally painted black. The three solid sides are painted white or light blue, accentuating the bird's color. The show cage is also easy for the show steward to move around on the bench and stack. You can show in another type of cage, but doing so isn't in your bird's best interest. You can purchase these cages online. Your show cage should be in pristine condition on the day of the show. Paint it each season so that it looks new and doesn't distract the judge with chipping paint, dried poop, or dirty smudges.



TIP

Just before you check your bird into the show, attach a tube-style waterer to the front of the cage, as far to one side as possible, and line the floor of the cage with something that won't get your bird dirty, such as absorbent shredded white paper, crushed corn, or plain seed without food coloring. Newspaper, rabbit pellets, and other litters can cause a light-colored bird to become stained during the course of the show, causing him to lose points, so if you have a white or light-colored bird, use shredded white paper and plain seed.

Conditioning Your Bird for a Show

A bird must be in absolutely perfect condition on the day of the show. This means that you'll have to begin conditioning him about 8 to 12 weeks before the show begins. A good diet is key to a primed and good-looking bird. You should be feeding a nutritious, balanced diet year-round (see Chapter 8). Condition a few birds at once so that you can take the finest-looking of your flock to the show and leave the others behind. Don't bother stressing out a bird with a show if you know he's not in show condition.



REMEMBER

Begin conditioning by doing the following:

» **Give your bird a daily bath.** Mist him, soaking him to the skin in warm weather, every day. This encourages preening and makes the feathers shiny and waterproof. You want a bird in good feather condition. Some exhibitors put a little bit of glycerin in the misting water about a week before the show.



WARNING

Don't overdo this, however, because your bird will ingest it during preening. Discontinue bathing a few days prior to the show.

» **Look for any frayed or broken feathers.** Pull out 8 to 12 weeks before the show, but err on the side of caution with doing it, and only pull the feathers that *really* need pulling. If you're squeamish, have your avian veterinarian do it. Pulling feathers is painful for the bird, and I can't recommend it. I'm just telling you what people who show their birds do to get their birds into show condition. All feathers must be intact, and the tail must be straight, especially in long-tailed species, like cockatiels and ringnecks. You can train the tail to be straight by dipping it in warm water and using your fingers to straighten it out. Keeping your bird in a large-enough cage helps maintain feather quality as well. Birds in small cages tend to have ratty looking feathers.



WARNING

If your bird begins to molt before the show, you've just lost your big contender. You can't show a molting bird, because he won't be in peak feather condition. That's why you should be conditioning a few birds at a time.

Preparing Your Bird: Show Training

A show can last 8 to 12 hours, and your bird will need to be patient inside the show cage for that period of time. Buy your show cage early and begin show training as soon as possible as soon as you decide which birds are going to the upcoming show.



REMEMBER

To begin training, place your bird inside the cage for a few minutes a day and offer him a treat that he loves. Make the experience fun and praise him. Increase the time he spends in the cage and move the cage to different locations around the house. The judge will use a thin wand to move your bird around the cage so that she can view every side of the bird. You can use a chopstick to make your bird turn around. It's important that your bird sits quietly on the perch, with good posture, and that he doesn't fight with the judge's wand.

Finally, a few weeks before the show, hold a mock show at a friend's home. Take your bird in his show cage to a friend's house and set him on a table. If you have several birds or if your friend has birds, this will work very well. Play the radio and the television. It's very noisy at a bird show. If you have a recording of birds, play that too, or you can find one easily on YouTube. Have your friend play judge with your cockatiel, using a wand (chopstick) to move the bird around gently. Do this a few times to get your bird used to the chaos of a show. Watch some videos online of bird shows to get an idea of how the judging works.

Try to keep your birds as calm as possible for the few days before the show. Continue with the usual routine to avoid stress or anything happening to your bird's feather condition. Don't feed anything that will discolor the feathers, such as beets. There's nothing like good preparation to help your bird have the best shot possible at winning. Good luck!

WHERE THE SHOWS ARE

You can find out about upcoming shows from your local bird club, from a species club or society, and by surfing the web. Simply type “bird show” (or the species name) into a search engine, and you should be able to find the information that you need. There are a few large national bird shows each year where you get to see all kinds of birds you wouldn’t normally see in your area. These big shows are a lot of fun and very educational.

Helping Out at the Show

If you’re a member of a club and you’ve been around a while and attended a few shows, you can ask to be a steward at one of the show benches. Attend the business meetings for the show because you may have to be nominated. As steward, you’ll put the show cages on the show bench and then move them around based on the judge’s indications. She’ll tap a cage and point to the position where you’ll move it. Eventually, all the birds will be in the order the judge wants them, from top bench to bottom. The primary show steward is the person who enters all the birds, keeps track of them, and then makes sure they get back to their guardians at the end of the day. This is a big job and the steward always needs assistants, so pitch in if you can.



TIP

Or you can work the raffle table, which is the most fun, because you get to talk to everyone, sell raffle tickets, and answer birdy questions. You can also work the membership table, the coffee and snacks table, or be a runner who does everything from providing basic security to helping vendors. Also, if there’s a bird auction going on, you can help bring the birds out and keep everything organized. You’ll win major points with your bird club if you volunteer for clean-up crew. They also need people to help set up and break down the show and to help organize the pre- or postshow dinner. Remember, you’ll meet more people if you volunteer.

6

The Part of Tens

IN THIS PART . . .

Understand ten things all parrots should master, from being trained how to step onto a stick to knowing their own last name and phone number.

Discover what you can do and make to keep your parrot entertained.

Find out how to safely travel with your bird and how to choose a pet sitter if you can't take your bird along.

Read about some common surprises that parrot guardians sometimes aren't aware of before they decide to choose a parrot.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Keeping your parrot safe by using her brain
- » Socializing your bird to her carrier
- » Teaching the bird her name and phone number
- » Reprimanding the right way

Chapter 20

Ten Things All Parrots Should Know

Keeping a parrot safe and healthy can be a full-time job. It's a good idea to teach (or socialize, more accurately) your parrot to understand or get used to things that can save her life someday. Here are ten things that all parrots should know.

Understand the Step-Up Command

All parrots should know the Step-Up directive, which I discuss in Chapter 16. In short, when you say, "Step up" and present your hand or finger, your parrot should become conditioned to put her little foot in the air and step onto your hand. Some parrots become so used to this directive that they'll lift a foot if they hear "Step up" from across the room. Some parrots will even say "Step up" and lift a foot when they want your attention.

If your bird doesn't know how to step onto your hand, removing her from a dangerous situation or retrieving her from somewhere she's not supposed to be will be more difficult. If she flies away, you have a better shot at getting her back if she knows that an extended finger or hand means "Step up" and that it's always safe to do so. Even a stranger will be able to retrieve your bird if she's not hand-shy.

Comprehend Stick Training

After teaching the Step-Up command onto the hand, all parrots should be taught to step up onto handheld perches and sticks of various lengths and diameters. This is useful for handling unpredictable parrots or those that like to get themselves out of easy reach, such as on top of the curtain rods. Chapter 16 explains how to stick train your parrot.

Know Her Carrier

Every parrot should be familiar with a safe bird carrier that is designated specifically for that individual bird. If you have the opportunity, start desensitizing the bird to the carrier when she is young. Allow the carrier to remain in sight of the bird, and play with her on and around the carrier, offering food on top of it. Place the bird inside the carrier with her breakfast or dinner. Don't close the door. You're just giving the parrot the idea that the carrier is something fun and not something scary. You'll be glad you did this when it's time to go to the veterinarian, while traveling, or when there's an emergency.



REMEMBER

Socializing the carrier to an older parrot is a little tougher, but not impossible. Use this same method. Realize that springing the carrier onto any bird is scary. You have to let the bird see it and live with it for a while in her nearby environment. That way, at least the carrier will be a familiar object when it's time for travel or if you have to evacuate in an emergency.

Identify Windows and Mirrors

Windows and mirrors can be deadly for fully flighted parrots. They don't understand that the windows and mirrors are solid; instead they see them as more free space in which to fly. Even clipped parrots that can fly a little are in danger of injuring a beak or neck by landing hard against a sliding glass door or full-length mirror.



TIP

Walk your parrot around to all the windows and mirrors, and tap on them with your fingernail, allowing the bird to get very close and tap on them with her beak. Doing this a few times with larger parrots should be sufficient. Smaller parrots may learn by trial and error (and hopefully won't get hurt doing it). All parrots will eventually learn the landscape of the home. Your best bet is to allow your mirrors and windows to become dirty, or to place stickers on them so that the bird can see the difference between the glass and what's behind it.

Say Her Name and Phone Number

If you have a talking species, it's not a bad idea to teach the bird your last name and phone number, maybe even an email address if your bird is a very good talker. Some birds will even learn their home addresses. Just repeat the information over and over. Creating a catchy song is a great way to teach this information, too. If the bird ever flies away or gets stolen, whoever finds it (or buys it) will know whom to call to return it.



REMEMBER

But you don't necessarily have to teach your parrot her name and number for her to come back home safely to you. Your avian veterinarian can insert a small microchip into your bird's breast muscle that contains a unique number, which you then register with the chip company. Most shelters and veterinarians own a scanner that reads these chips. When your bird is found, she can be easily returned to you if the information you provide the chip manufacturer is up to date.

Recognize Her Cage As a Safety Zone

A parrot should feel that her cage is a safe place where she can sleep and eat in peace. Don't change the cage around too much once the bird is settled. Leave the perches and toys as they are. You can rotate new/old toys in and out of the cage, but try to keep them in the same basic location. Chapter 17 discusses some advanced training techniques that can help you allow your bird to choose her favorite cage items.



TIP

Don't move the cage around a lot. After the parrot gets established in one room in one spot, try to leave her there. If you absolutely have to move the cage, that's fine, but don't do it capriciously.

Try not to place scary things near the cage. Parrots are often scared of things you wouldn't even think twice about, like weird pieces of art, balloons, and large, loud electronic equipment.



REMEMBER

If the bird doesn't want to come out of the cage for whatever reason, and you're sticking your hand in there only to bring her out to play, leave her alone and try again later. Don't force or fish her out unless you're taking her somewhere important. If she's on top of the cage, you can persist a little more, but if she's in the cage, allow her to have her space. The only exception to this is when a bird becomes territorial around the cage. Find out more on cage territoriality in Chapter 14.

Know How to Take Medicine

If you have the time and the patience, try to get your parrot to take a few drops of baby food, coconut milk, or juice from a plastic eyedropper, pipette, or small plastic syringe. You are *not* going to be handfeeding the bird or even simulating handfeeding. This can cause behavior problems in a weaned bird of any age. What you're trying to do is to get the bird to take a little bit of what you're offering out of the dropper. Make it fun. Eventually, if you ever have to give medicine or vitamins to your parrot, you'll be glad that she likes to nibble out of the dropper.



TIP

Another way to administer medicine is on a small square of moist pound cake. Offer pound cake once a week, toasted if your bird is fussy. Getting her used to this tasty treat will make giving her meds or liquid and powdered vitamins so much easier.

Be Able to Trust You

You are your bird's best and closest ally, but you're not much good to her if she doesn't trust you. A hands-on avian pal must come to understand that you're on her side and that you mean only to provide for her and keep her safe and loved. Sure, she may give you a nicely placed nip (or full-on bite) now and again. If you react with anger, you reinforce the bite and begin to chip away at the bond you've built.



TIP

Build trust by being consistent. Birds thrive on routine and reliability. If you behave erratically and send your bird mixed messages, she'll learn to become suspicious and fearful. Be calm, gentle, and loving, and view your bird as an individual with individual likes and needs. If you understand that you're in a real *relationship* with your parrot, you can treat her as a whole being, not just as decoration for the living room.

Eat Well

All parrots should be exposed to various foods. If you wait too late to offer a variety of healthful foods, your bird may not understand that certain objects are actually food and may ignore them. It's much easier to get a bird to eat well while she's a youngster. However, a lot of older parrots do take to new things with the verve of a fledgling. Discover how to make new foods palatable in Chapter 8.

Understand the Word “No!”

Unlike dogs, parrots will never truly understand the word *no*. However, parrots, like dogs, are mischievous and do get themselves into things they shouldn't. Life in the average home is full of interesting and dangerous distractions. A very sharp “No!” does get a parrot's attention. Once you have that, you can stop the bird from doing a behavior by removing her from the situation. Using a sharp “No!” doesn't work for chronic behaviors, such as plucking or screaming (check out Chapter 14).

Using *no* is better than using *stop it!*, which may sound like *step up* to parrot ears. *No* is also preferable to shouting your bird's name. Always use the bird's name associated with positive things and praise, never as a reprimand.

- » Giving lots of attention
- » Making your own parrot toys
- » Finding the right television channel
- » Getting your parrot a pet

Chapter **21**

Ten Ways to Entertain Your Parrot

A human becomes bored due to a set routine of dull tasks, doing the same thing over and over every day, with little variation. Life becomes tedious. For a parrot, the opposite is true. Birds thrive on routine, as long as that routine involves having a variety of activities, such as chewing and playing, and a schedule that's full of activity and mental stimulation. Amusing a parrot doesn't mean forcing your bird to break out of his routine. On the contrary, a parrot needs a routine, but one that fills his days with play, work, learning, and interesting things to look at and listen to.

When many people think of birds, they think of the cliché of the *bird brain*, the tiny intellect that doesn't think, reason, or have emotions. Although it's true that parrots do function on a highly instinctual level, they are intelligent animals, capable of problem-solving and of extreme boredom. You may not believe that a parrot can think, but you have to concede that it can *suffer*. Many parrots suffer from the lack of mental, emotional, and physical stimulation, which can have terrible consequences for this sensitive creature. A bored parrot will *find* things to do, including feather plucking and chewing, self-mutilation, screaming, and other symptoms of neurotic disorder. Lack of physical activity can also lead to mental and physical disorders, such as obesity and aggression.

So what exactly is a parrot's *job*? In the wild, a parrot spends his days flying, searching for food and water, chewing on trees, clay, and other things, finding a safe spot to sleep, preening and mutual preening, finding a mate, finding or making a nest and making it suitable for raising babies, mating, protecting the nest, raising babies, and doing it all over again. That's a lot of work!

In captivity, your parrot doesn't have nearly as much work to do. His food and water is provided; he has a safe spot to sleep; and he doesn't really need to search for a mate, because either you serve as his mate or you've provided one for him. What a cushy life! So that leaves him with only a few activities in his repertoire: chewing, preening, nesting (and nesting isn't even part of the package for a single parrot or a pair that isn't set up for breeding), and possibly flying, depending on whether or not you have a safe place for him fly. Because your companion parrot is limited in his activities, you have to go out of your way to ensure that he has *plenty* to do to keep him from becoming bored, neurotic, and overweight. This chapter offers some fun activities that you can add to your parrot's routine.

Feeding Him — Food

Certain food or ways of presenting food can give your parrot a sense of purpose at mealtime. You can buy a birdy-kabob onto which you thread fruits and veggies so that your parrot has to work to get at the food, rather than just stand at a dish. Hang several of these kabobs in and around the cage, and he'll have a fun time foraging. Speaking of foraging . . . a simple search online for "forging toys for parrots" will offer you endless varieties of toys to entice your parrot to work for his food.

Here are a couple other suggestions to make meals more exciting for your parrot:

- » Thread spinach leaves, dandelion, chard, and kale or millet spray through the bars of the cage so that your parrot has to hang onto the bars to eat them. Very wet greens in a shallow plastic or ceramic dish make for some fun eats and a nice bath, too.
- » Take goodies such as popcorn, small nuts, cereal, and other dry foods that your parrot loves, and make them into a white-tissue-paper packet tied up with a bit of sisal rope. Place or hang the packet in the cage, and your parrot will have to tear it open to get to the goodies. You can do the same thing with paper lunch bags (sized appropriately for your bird) or paper towels.

Chapter 8 discusses feeding your parrot an array of nutritious food.

Entertaining Your Bird — You're the Star

One of the best activities to keep your parrot entertained is out-of-the-cage playtime, especially with you. A companion parrot should spend several hours, at the very least, outside his cage daily. A parrot that's cooped up will become crazed to get out of his cage and will become anxious about being confined. Long-term confinement can lead to plucking and other neurotic and health disorders.



REMEMBER

If you are your parrot's only pal, hands-on playtime is essential. Give your bird lots of head scratches and time on your shoulder (if you trust him near your face). You can do many other activities that I discuss in this chapter with your bird present. Include your bird in your daily activities. He simply wants to be in the same room with you.

Stimulating Your Parrot's Mind — Parrot Toys

Toys are essential for a curious parrot (and they're all curious). A parrot living in a cage without a variety of toys is like a human living in a home without a cell-phone, tablet, television, books, magazines, games, or any other type of entertainment. How boring! Your parrot can't take himself out shopping, to the movies, a friend's house, or anywhere else for entertainment purposes. But he can have toys.

Toys are part of a parrot's job. He wants to chew and create a custom-made environment for himself. Toys provide your parrot with a sense that he can furnish his home the way he wants it. For example, he'll slide his toys around and chew them to just the right degree. Toys also provide a sense of security, something to cuddle up to, argue with, and take out his tensions on.

Store-bought toys come in many materials and sizes. Buy one or two of each kind of toy, such as wooden, rope, leather, preening, acrylic, foraging, puzzle, hidden treat, and so on. This way, your parrot can choose his favorite. Always choose the proper size for your bird. Too large a toy may frighten your parrot, and too small a toy can break when he plays with it and cause injury, or worse. When you buy toys from a store, inspect them for potential dangers, such as places where a toe can catch or a ring where the parrot can stick his head through and hang himself. It happens!



TIP

Look into subscription services online that will send you a box each month filled with a variety of goodies and toys for your parrot. A monthly goodie box is a great way to add some variety to your bird's life and allows you to offer fun and novel items without too much effort.

Making your own toys is also a great way to entertain your parrot. You can buy bags of ice pop sticks and tie them together with sisal twine (from any hardware store) into all sorts of towers and ladders (small to medium-size birds only). Make sure that you buy only *untreated* sisal rope.

For little birds, take a plastic hanger, and wrap it tightly all the way around with sisal twine. Then, with the same twine, tie plastic buttons all over it. Hang it in the cage or outside as a little play swing.



WARNING

All handmade toys should be used only under strict supervision. Never, ever leave your parrot alone with a homemade toy.

There are a lot of instant fun, cheap toys that your parrot will love:

- » Untreated wooden honey dippers are fun, especially if you put almond butter on the end and roll it in seeds or pellets.
- » Remember those straw, woven Mexican finger-cuffs everyone had as a kid? You put a finger in one end and your other finger (or someone else's finger) in the other, pull, and then you're locked. They're really inexpensive, and they make great parrot toys. It's best to buy the uncolored ones.
- » If you can find those inexpensive, woven twine or straw drink coasters, they're a lot of fun for medium to large parrots to shred. Even little guys like lovebirds will enjoy them.
- » Untreated wooden spoons make great chewing toys, too.
- » A whole roll of white, unscented toilet paper makes a great shredding toy, but just get ready to clean up! Remove the cardboard roll when the bird is done.



WARNING

Any item that uses any kind of glue or colored ink isn't good for your bird to chew. These items may contain zinc or lead, which can poison your bird.



TIP

If you want to color any of your toys (such as the ice pop sticks), boil some of them with beets for a red color and others with blueberries for a violet color. Natural vegetable dyes like these are fine to use. Avoid other dyes.

I discuss toys in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Turning on the TV and Some Music

There's nothing more boring than talking to yourself all day, and that's exactly what a single parrot does while his family is away. Leave the television on for your bird, but leave it on low. Some evidence indicates some of the frequencies on the television can be annoying to birds.

I leave the TV on low for my birds and put it on one of the nature channels or on public television. I've found that the commercials on regular TV channels are too stimulating for my African grey. Well, perhaps it's not that they're not too stimulating for him, but that they're more annoying for me. When he watches regular television, all he does is mimic the commercials. I don't enjoy constantly hearing about new carpet or being told to buy a certain kind of car insurance.

Music is also great for keeping birds company, but be careful about the type of music you leave on. Try for something soothing *and* stimulating, like Mozart or jazz. Talk radio and podcasts are also good. YouTube has bird room videos that you can play for your parrot, and some are even livestreamed. However, you have to gauge whether that's more stressful for your bird than interesting. Sometimes, hearing other birds is fun for your bird, but he may become concerned about where those birds are and if they're going to give him some competition.

Spending Time Outside — The Great Outdoors

Your parrot will appreciate being taken outdoors on days when the weather is warm and sunny. He'll be able to hear and see other birds and to bathe in the sun's rays, which are very good for his overall health. Take the opportunity to give him a misting with water, too. The change of scenery will do him good. Only take him outside if he's in a cage or carrier or if he's clipped. Don't risk him flying away.



WARNING

Be careful that you don't place your bird directly in the sun, especially for too long. Doing so can cause overheating and can lead to death if the bird gets too hot. Place the cage so that half of it is in the sun and half is in shade, so that he can move away from the heat if he needs to.

Watch the cage carefully when you put it outside, because predators may become interested in your bird, and many, such as raccoons, can even figure out how to open the cage. Also, objects outside may scare your bird, so staying with him is comforting. If he gets scared, bring him back inside.

Letting Him Spread His Wings — Flying

Flying is the absolute best physical activity that your parrot can do. However, it comes with many potential dangers. The average household contains dozens of items and places that can injure and kill a parrot. Also, an unclipped parrot is far more likely to fly away than a clipped one, obviously.

Fortunately, considerable numbers of people are following the trend of building safe places for their birds to fly. You don't have to house your parrot in an aviary or habitat, though it would be great if you could, but you can build a safe, large area where your parrot can spend a few hours a day flying. You can still house your parrot inside your home, but at least he'll have the benefit of stretching his wings and exercising. Refer to Chapter 5 for more information.

Shaking Your Groove Thang — Dancing

Okay, here's where I'll probably lose you, but I'll give it a shot. Dance for your bird. I know, it sounds silly. But parrots love it when you make a fuss and behave like a silly fool. Put on some music and dance around. Get the whole family involved. What great entertainment for your parrot! I'm serious. Now get out there and dance!

If you like to exercise in your home, let your parrot watch. Why not? Perhaps he'll become a good coach.

Belting at the Top of Your Lungs — Singing

You may as well sing, too. Parrots love hearing songs, especially if you're the one who's singing. Parrots that are apt to talk will pay close attention to a heartily sung song, especially if you're dancing around too.

I sing a made-up, off-key “la la la” song to my African grey. It's kind of like the scales, but I vary it. He sings it to me all the time and waits for me to sing it back. Then we sing together, a whole off-key symphony of “la la la.” I just hope the neighbors can't hear us.

Introducing a Friend — Parrot Pets

If you're away for much of the day or your lifestyle has changed significantly and you find that you're not playing with your parrot as much, consider buying or adopting a pal for him. Parrots of the opposite sex are likely to take to each other right away, but this isn't always the case. The parrot pet doesn't have to be another parrot, anyway. See Chapter 7 for more details on how to bring a new parrot into your home,

If you don't want to get another parrot, you can purchase a couple of parakeets, a canary, or a pair of finches to keep your parrot company. These birds will give him something to watch and someone to talk to in "birdese."

A small fish tank close-ish to the cage makes a nice view, too. Just be sure that the tank is covered well so that your parrot doesn't accidentally fall in when he's out of the cage. One of those little tanks with the fake magnetic fish works too, and they don't go belly up if you forget to change the water. You can even just buy a bowl or little tank, put an air-stone in the bottom of it, and leave an air pump on during the day — your parrot might enjoy watching the bubbles. Again, make sure the tank or bowl is covered and always supervise a parrot around any standing water.

Training Him Different Tricks

I don't like to call any of the behaviors that you teach your parrot *tricks*, but some behaviors are pretty fun (and funny) and are more like tricks than they are useful. For example, you can buy little parrot roller skates and, with a little patience, teach your bird to use them. You can also buy a ring toss and a little basketball hoop and wiffleballs to dunk. All it takes is time and a lot of persistence. The real reason to engage with this kind of training is the attention that you're giving the bird. This kind of intense, hands-on training is invaluable to creating or maintaining the bond between you and your parrot.

Chapter 16 discusses basic tricks you can work on with your parrot. If your parrot is smart and ready to be challenged with more advanced training, Chapter 17 can get you started.

- » Planning ahead
- » Traveling by air and road
- » Finding hospitable hotels
- » Hiring a parrot sitter

Chapter **22**

Ten (or So) Tips When Traveling with Your Parrot

Because some parrots have the potential to live up to 80 years, chances are that you'll move or travel with your bird several times. Traveling with a bird isn't like traveling with a dog or cat. You have to work out a few more details to move these sensitive creatures with care. This chapter helps you prepare for a safe trip, whether or not you take your feathered friend with you.

I once had to quickly evacuate from an impending hurricane with more than 30 birds. A typical three-hour drive north took ten hours because the roads were packed. Oddly, for someone who loves birds, I'm allergic to feathers! It was a stressful trip, and I'd wished I had packed some allergy medication, but we all made it to a hotel safely. I allowed the birds to come out of their carriers in stages to give them all a break from being confined. One of my macaws decided to chew one of the tables in the hotel room! Traveling with parrots is always an adventure.

Being Prepared — Packing Your Parrot's Suitcase

You should always have a bag for your parrot packed and ready to go in case of an emergency or impromptu trip. Having a packed suitcase for your bird makes any vacation or trip to the veterinarian far easier. If you're not prepared, traveling with birds can be a nightmare and can be dangerous. Your parrot should have at least a little duffel bag where you keep a few important things for traveling. It should contain the following:

- » Bottled water. Never give tap water to your parrot from places other than your home (and even then I recommend filtered or bottled water).
- » A spray bottle filled with clean water in case of overheating.
- » Paper towels for quick cleanups.
- » Your parrot's regular dry diet, such as seeds and pellets. Keep in a seal-tight bag.
- » Edible treats to keep your bird occupied, such as nuts and parrot-safe cereal.
- » Canned fruit with pop-top lid (unsweetened) for a quick sugar rush in the case of an injured or ill bird; the fruit is also a good snack.
- » Grapefruit seed extract (to disinfect anything that you'll use near your bird, even your hands, one drop per ounce; also good for disinfecting drinking water).
- » Perches, just in case.
- » Toys, also just in case.
- » Clean newsprint and/or a roll of paper towels to change the carrier lining.
- » A birdy first-aid kit in case of emergency. Chapter 10 gives you a list of items to include.
- » Bungee cords in a variety of lengths and thicknesses to fasten down your bird's carrier.
- » An index card with your veterinarian's phone number and your emergency phone numbers written on it, as well as a black Sharpie to write any additional information directly onto the carrier if needed.

Every time you walk out of the house with your bird, you can quickly grab her suitcase. You never know when you're going to need something on the fly. A quick trip to the veterinarian could turn into an hours-long adventure if you get a flat tire or your car breaks down.



TIP

You should have at least seven days' worth of food and water in your bird's travel kit. You never know when you'll have to toss your bird in a carrier, grab her suitcase, and escape from a dangerous situation. Also, should something happen to you, someone who comes in to care for your bird should easily be able to find the bird's kit and take it if needed.

Thinking Safety and Comfort — Bringing the Right Carrier

You also need to bring a safe carrier for your bird. Chapter 5 discusses choosing a carrying cage for your bird.

Before choosing the type of carrier, know your bird and how she'll behave in the carrier. You can find some cute backpack type and shoulder bag carriers made for birds, many with a clear bubble on front or clear sides, so your bird can see out. These are good for birds that aren't going to chew their way out. A fashionable carrier can be cute, but don't choose fashion over safety.

I like the clamshell plastic carriers with metal grating and a sliding door on top for smaller birds (marketed as small animal carriers) and carriers with a grated door in front for larger birds (usually marketed as dog and cat carriers). Your parrot will feel secure with four solid sides surrounding her and will like to see out of the slats in the plastic. If you're taking your bird on an airplane, use a carrier with only one door on the front and make sure it closes securely.



WARNING

The longer your bird's tail, the larger your carrier should be. A macaw with roughly the same body size as an Amazon parrot will require a much larger carrier. Your long-tailed bird will be very uncomfortable in a carrier where her tail is scrunched.



WARNING

Some large birds can even chew out of a regular plastic carrier. If you have a voracious chewer, take an extra carrier with you or invest in an acrylic carrier. These are much more expensive, but they're nice for car travel and your bird will enjoy the 360-degree view. For air travel, you'll have to cover three sides of an acrylic carrier with cardboard (with window slots cut out so the bird can see her surroundings).

Here are some tips for preparing the carrier for travel:

- » Buy a low-pile, 100-percent cotton bathmat with rubber backing a few days before the trip, and wash and dry it in unscented detergent. Cut it to fit the bottom of the carrier. You should be able to get several carrier liners this way. Place two or three of them in the bottom of the carrier. When the top layer becomes soiled, take it off to reveal a clean layer underneath.

- » Place a thick layer of white paper towels over cotton mat that you've cut according to the directions above. Sandwich them in between the other mats.
- » If you want, you can tear plain newsprint into long strips and put it in the carrier as well.
- » Loose crocks or cups in the carrier can be dangerous. There are coop cups designed to be used with wire-front carriers. For clamshell carriers, you may have to figure out a way to attach a couple of cups to the sides. I drilled a hole into the side of one of my carriers and then used two washers and a wingnut to attach an appropriate cup to the side and it works beautifully.
- » Place apple wedges, oranges cut in half, berries, and grapes in one corner of the carrier or in an attached cup.
- » Place seed on the bottom of the carrier in one corner or in an attached cup.
- » Don't put perches in the carrier for a short trip. For a longer trip, fashion a sturdy, rough cement perch onto the front grate of the carrier or drill holes into the sides and use screws, washers, and a wingnut to secure a perch from side to side. Place any perches low in the carrier, but high enough so that your bird's tail doesn't drag too much.
- » Clip the bird's wings. In case of accident or emergency where the bird is removed from the carrier, you don't want it flying away. A quick trip to the vet doesn't necessitate clipping measures, but a longer trip does.
- » Write all your contact information and your veterinarian's phone number on an index card, and tape it to the carrier. Include flight numbers and other travel info, along with your bird's personal info and feeding information. If you want to be really sure the info doesn't get lost, write all your info on the carrier with permanent marker.
- » Tape an additional perch to the top of the carrier, along with a note indicating that if people have to handle the bird for any reason, they can use the perch to pick up the bird. Most people will be afraid to put their hand in a carrier with a bird they don't know, and for good reason.
- » Affix a few "Live Animal" stickers to the carrier.
- » Hang a couple of soft toys from the holes in the sides of the carrier, but make sure they're toys that your bird can't ingest. Hard toys can swing around in the cage and hurt your bird.
- » Even though the doors to your carrier will lock, use quick link (not zinc plated) as an extra lock on every door on the carrier. Don't use a carabiner.
- » Take a towel with you to cover the carrier, should you need to use it in cool weather, or to keep people from scaring your parrot with unwarranted attention.



TIP

If your parrot's cage is on the smaller side or you have a small cage on hand and you're just going a short distance in your car, you can remove the toys and most of the perches and use it as a carrier. Cover three sides with a towel or blanket. If the cage has a removable plastic bottom, tie it to the metal part of the cage so that it can't fall off. Fill the water dish about a quarter full and put juicy fruits and veggies in the cage for additional moisture. Use quick links to lock every door on the cage. If the cage has parts that can disassemble, such as the roof from the sides or the sides from the bottom, use twist ties or zip ties to make sure the cage stays together. Remove the ties when you return home so your bird doesn't chew on them.

Hitting the Friendly Skies — Traveling by Air

Most airlines allow you to travel with your parrot in an airline-approved carrier slipped under your seat if you pay a fee. In general, most airlines will allow one carrier per person. If you have more than one parrot and they can't travel in the same carrier (don't put birds that are unfriendly or unfamiliar with each other into the same carrier!), you'll have to take other people with you on your trip, or the airline may allow you to purchase another seat for your bird's carrier.

If your carrier is too large, the airline will want you to check your bird with the baggage. This may be fine in certain times of year, but I personally wouldn't do it in winter or summer, and in fact, I wouldn't check my bird into cargo at all. The scary stories of airlines losing pets or of carriers being crushed should be enough to put you off the idea. But if you *have* to check your parrot into the cargo hold, it's better than leaving your parrot behind. If you're going on vacation and you can't place the carrier under the seat, consider a bird-sitter instead (refer to the section, "Using a Parrot Sitter," later in this chapter for more information).



REMEMBER

If you're moving to another country with your parrot, check with the regulations for that country. You may have to leave your bird in quarantine for a period of time, and some countries may not want your bird to enter at all.

Here are some other airline tips:

- » Try to take a direct flight. If you're going somewhere more than eight hours away, plan a hub in between, and make sure the airline will let you see your bird during the layover (if he's in cargo).
- » Make sure the carrier you use is airline approved.

- » Place “This End Up” stickers on the carrier or write it directly on the carrier with clearly visible marker. You don’t want the people packing the cargo hold to flip the carrier over or onto its side.
- » If the parrot is being shipped in the cargo hold, USDA has temperature limits for departure and arrival: 45 to 85 degrees Fahrenheit.
- » Some airlines require a veterinary health certificate before flying. Call the airline to find out how long before the flight the certificate should be issued.
- » If the parrot is going cargo, fold a piece of hardware cloth (not coated with zinc) over the front of the carrier, and secure it with zip ties. This will help deter someone from opening the front of the carrier. Tape a pair of small nail clippers onto the side of the carrier in case someone has to remove the ties. This can be touchy in terms of security, so you’ll have to ask about it. In any case, there has to be some way of removing the wire in case of emergency.
- » If the weather is cold, tape or zip tie a piece of cardboard halfway over the grating in the front or on the top of the carrier.
- » Prepare the carrier as I detail in “Thinking Safety and Comfort — Bringing the Right Carrier” section earlier in this chapter.
- » Prepare to answer a lot of questions about your parrot. The people around you on the plane and in the airport will definitely want to know about your bird!
- » When on board the plane, don’t take the bird out of the carrier, but you can remove the carrier from beneath your seat to interact with your bird. He may be frightened by all the noise, and your presence can have a calming effect.

Taking a Road Trip — Traveling by Car

Car travel is a fine way to transport your parrot, but you’ll have to be very cautious and prepare well. First, never, ever, *ever* leave your bird unattended. Someone could smash your car window and steal her. If you’re traveling alone, and you have to leave your bird to pump gas or use the restroom, park in a safe, visible spot, and be as quick as possible. If it’s warm, park in a shady spot. When you stop to eat, park in front of a window so that you can watch your car.



WARNING

Never, ever leave your bird in a warm car, even for a minute. Keep the air conditioner on, but don’t let it blow on the bird directly. Extreme cold is dangerous as well. Make sure your bird is warm enough in the wintertime.



TIP

Always, no matter what, buckle your bird's carrier in when you ride. If you want your bird to be able to look out the window (which many birds do like), place a larger carrier or some blankets or other stable items beneath your bird's smaller carrier and then buckle the whole thing in with the seat belt. Use bungee cords to strap down the carrier even further.

Yes, parrots get carsick. I had a blue and gold macaw that used to toss his cookies every time we rode in the car. If you're concerned about carsickness, don't feed your bird for a few hours prior to the trip (but always offer water). You can put ginger extract in the water as well to settle the stomach. You can also use a few drops of the Bach Flower essence in the water, which is often used to calm nerves.



WARNING

If you're thinking of traveling by train with your parrot, think again. You can't legally take your parrot on Amtrak. You can probably take her on local trains in a carrier — most authorities won't stop you. As for Amtrak, I used to take my love-birds on long train rides all the time. I bought a private room on the train, put my birds in small plastic critter-keeper containers, and then put the containers in a duffle bag, which I kept with me all the time. I only got caught once, when they started chirping, but the conductor was nice and didn't make an issue out of it. We could have been put off the train. I was lucky. Today, with all the luggage inspections, I doubt my little trick would work.

Keeping Your Bird Hydrated — Bringing Bottled Water

Take bottled water with you when you travel, or fill several bottles with the filtered water that your parrot is used to drinking. Water from other places can irritate your bird's intestinal tract — not something you want to have happen while you're traveling (or ever, for that matter). Bottled water is good because it lasts a long time before the seal is broken and comes in many different-size bottles. If you have to give your bird different water, add one drop of grapefruit seed extract per ounce of water to kill any nasties that may be in it.

Sleeping for the Night — Staying in a Hospitable Hotel

Before you get to your vacation destination, make sure your bird is welcome. Call the hotel when you make the reservation to make sure you know the hotel's policies about birds. Often, you'll only have to pay a small per-night fee to bring the

bird, but many hotels don't accept pets, and if you don't plan ahead, you could be sitting on the side of the road with your parrot in one hand and your suitcase in the other.



TIP

If you're staying a while, keep the privacy tag on the door and ask that the house-keeping service doesn't come into your room. The vacuuming and turning down the bed may frighten your parrot, and some of the cleansers that the housekeepers use are highly toxic. Instead, bring a handheld vac with you for easy clean up. Make the bed yourself. I know, you're on vacation, but this is the price you pay for having your bird keep you company!



TIP

If you're traveling by car and are only staying overnight in a motel, you don't necessarily *have* to explain that you have a parrot with you. Simply slip in, sleep, and get out in the morning. This advice is for the wearied traveler only. In any case, some motels don't consider birds to be pets the way they do dogs and cats, and most front-desk people will overlook a parrot in a carrier. A simple web search can help you find pet friendly hotels. You can also use apps, such as BringFido, BarkHappy, and Trip Advisor, dedicated to helping you travel with a companion animal.

Feeding Your Bird — Helpful Travel Tips

Of course, you're going to bring your bird's base diet with you, but you can also feed your bird the things you're eating on the road if you're careful about what you order. Feed her the following:

- » **Breakfast:** Well-done scrambled eggs, buckwheat pancakes, and fruit
- » **Lunch:** Well-done turkey and whole-wheat bread
- » **Snack:** Fresh apples and bananas, washed well
- » **Dinner:** Veggies, well-done chicken, baked potato

Dealing with an Emergency — Finding an Avian Veterinarian on the Road

If you're already at your destination and have an emergency, you can take your chance. You can search online for an avian veterinarian's office, but I recommend planning ahead and saving the phone numbers of veterinarians in the area ahead of time.

The Association of Avian Veterinarians is a good place to begin at www.aav.org.
Phone: 720-458-4111. Email: office@aav.org.

Relying on Help — Using a Parrot Sitter

Traveling with a parrot can be a lot of work and stress, so if you're thinking of leaving your bird at home, you're going to save yourself a lot of worry. Traveling with a bird is tough and should only be done out of necessity.

If you're unable to travel with your bird, keep the following suggestions in mind about where to keep her:

- » **Swap bird-sitting duties with another bird lover.** The best parrot sitter for your bird is someone who has experience with birds and isn't afraid of handling your bird. Ideally, you've attended some bird club meetings or have been involved with some bird groups in your area. They'll care for your birds when you're out of town, and you'll do the same for them. Remember to give your bird sitter a souvenir or gift upon your return!
- » **Ask someone related to you who is familiar with your bird and who doesn't live far away.** A responsible relative may be your best choice, because he or she has a stake in your relationship and won't want to let you down. A friendly neighbor who also has animals may be a good choice as well. A friend that has to drive more than 20 minutes to your home isn't the best choice, but if you have a friend who can follow very specific directions and who lives around the corner, that's a better option.
- » **Have a backup parrot sitter.** Just in case your first choice is unable at the last moment to watch your parrot or she's unable to continue to sit for some unforeseen reason, be prepared. Your backup can be a family member or friend that your parrot sitter can call, or you can set your parrot sitter up with an app and let her know that you've preapproved a certain parrot sitter in case of an emergency.
- » **Hire a pet sitter.** If you don't have anyone responsible to look after your bird, contact Pet Sitters International at (www.petsit.com/) or the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters (<https://petsitters.org>). You can also use one of the many apps, but be sure that the pet sitter you choose has experience with birds. Dog and cat experience doesn't apply. Some apps have a built-in feature that shows you when a pet sitter has arrived and left, shows you how much time your pet sitter has spent in your location, and gives the pet sitter an option to upload photos and info about the visit.

» **Board your parrot at a boarding facility.** If you can't find a parrot sitter, then you may have to consider this option, although I recommend that your bird stay at home in her own housing while you're away, which is far less stressful for her than taking her to a boarding facility. However, if you're out of options, boarding may be your only choice. Avian veterinarians often do boarding, but be warned because they also see a lot of birds with illnesses that can be transmitted to your bird.

Some cities have dedicated facilities just for parrot boarding. I haven't used one, but some look fun and appear knowledgeable about bird care, such as the San Francisco Bird Hotel in San Francisco (www.sanfranciscobirdhotel.com/), and The Parrot Hotel in Acton, Ontario, Canada (<https://parrothotel.ca>). Search online to see if there are any bird hotels in your area.

To plan for your trip away from your parrot and to keep an eye on your parrot while you're gone, consider doing the following to give you some peace of mind:

» **Set up a live feed camera facing your bird's housing that you can access using your phone.** Set up the app to notify you when the camera senses a human (most good cameras will do this). This way you can see your bird anytime, and you can also be sure that the parrot sitter who visits your bird every day does what you've asked. You can also purchase a lock for your door that works with an app and will tell you when someone has entered and exited (you can give your parrot sitter her own code so that you know when she has visited, and you can remove the code upon your return). These types of locks also allow you to open your door remotely in case of emergency. What would you do if something happened to your parrot sitter?

» **Set up timers or smart plugs in your home that you can use to turn on a television or radio, something that will make noise to keep your bird company.** You can schedule these smart plugs to turn on and off daily or turn them on and off remotely. Most people don't have an old-school radio around, but it's worth getting one for this purpose. If you have a light in the room where your parrot lives, you can also use the timer or smart plug to turn this on and off as well.

» **Before you leave, have your designated parrot sitter come over and walk through your parrot's care.** Ideally, show your sitter how to handle your bird and detail what to do in case of an emergency. Keep your bird's carrier and go-bag next to the cage to make an emergency vet visit easier for your parrot sitter.



TIP

Before you leave your parrot with a pet sitter, make sure you share all the important information with her. Check out www.dummies.com and search for "Parrots For Dummies Cheat Sheet." There you can find a handy vacation care sheet that you can print and give to your pet sitter to ensure that she has all the information needed for your parrot's proper care.

- » Dealing with mess
- » Coping with the noise
- » Planning for your parrot's future

Chapter **23**

Ten Surprises for Parrot Guardians and How to Respond to Them

Parrot guardianship has more surprises than you may have expected. Here are a few aspects of having a parrot that you may not have thought about before.

Handling the Inevitable Mess

If you're new to parrots, you may be in for quite a shock when you realize how messy they can be. The mess knows no boundaries. If you walk barefooted around your home, you may even end up finding seeds and pellets in your bed. I once had millet seeds sprouting in the carpet beneath one of my birds' cages, which is after I used to clean for two hours a day for more than 100 parrots.

Poop is also an issue. I remember once going to a gas station and a cute guy asking me if I had a bird. I was really flattered because I thought maybe he saw me around town with one of my birds on my shoulder. I smiled said, "Yes, I did have

birds.” Then he pointed out a squiggle of bird poop on the shoulder of my shirt. How embarrassing! Poop happens. Fortunately, parrots are mostly vegans, so their poop doesn’t smell. If your parrot’s poop does smell, that’s a cause for a visit to the avian veterinarian.



REMEMBER

To keep on top of the mess, keep these tips in mind:

- » **Invest in a good handheld vacuum.** I have a one for small messes, but I really rely on my cordless stick vacuum. Can’t get by without it!
- » **Buy a small dustpan and handheld broom.**
- » **Stash several spray bottles with cleansers all over the house.** Have a designated color for alcohol, water/vinegar solution, and baking soda solution, or write on them with a permanent marker so you don’t mix them up. Chapter 5 discusses natural cleansers you can use.

Cleaning up bird poop from hard surfaces is very easy. If it’s wet, simply spray a little alcohol (not on your bird’s cage) or a vinegar and water solution on it from a spray bottle and clean it up with a paper towel. Cleaning fabric is a little tougher, so let the poop dry. Then you can just pick it right off. It may leave a green residue, but you can easily remove it with a cotton swab and your favorite soap or cleanser, and the residue will certainly come off in the wash.



TIP

I suggest you have a designated shirt that you wear when you play with your birds or carry a parrot around on your shoulder. You can wear a used button-down flannel or cotton shirt, or you can stop by your local thrift store to buy a few if you don’t have any. You can also purchase or make a parrot clothing protector, which looks kind of like a bib or cape, with the bib part is on both your front and back. A hairdresser’s cape also works, but make sure it’s not plastic or too slick for your bird to stand on.

Being Ready for the Noise

Most new parrot guardians tend to underestimate the amount of noise that their parrots will make. Even parrots that aren’t loud can be incessantly noisy. For example, macaws are extremely loud, but they don’t screech all day (under normal circumstances), whereas birds like cockatiels and budgies aren’t loud, but they’re all-day chatterers and whistlers.



REMEMBER

Noise is subjective, and what annoys you may not annoy someone else. Actually the noise isn't what tends to bother people, it's the actual hertz frequency, which has to do with the pitch level of a noise. Some birds are lower pitched, and some are higher. A certain pitch may bother you (or your family or neighbors) but may not bother someone else.

The good news about noise is that after a while you stop hearing it. I can have a hundred lovebirds chirping in every direction, and I won't really hear it. Your brain starts tuning out sounds you hear on a regular basis. This news may be great for you, but maybe it's not so great for your friends or neighbors who aren't used to bird sounds and may be annoyed by them.

The other good news is that most bird guardians love the noise that their birds make. In fact, a quiet home may begin to seem spooky to someone who is used to hearing parrots chattering all day. Another great aspect to chattering birds is that if you notice that they've stopped chattering all of a sudden, you can be sure that something strange has happened; maybe they've seen something odd in your yard, like an animal that isn't supposed to be there or an intruder. Always investigate if you notice that your typically noisy birds have abruptly stopped vocalizing. Also, a typically noisy bird that becomes quiet might be ill.

Feeling Guilty

A lot of bird guardians have *bird guilt*, which is when you feel guilty that your bird is in the cage for too many hours a day. You feel guilty for going on vacation or leaving town for whatever reason. You feel guilty going to happy hour after work or staying out all day and evening on a weekend. Your bird is cage-bound, after all, and relies on you for everything.

Let me try to alleviate your guilt a little bit. Your parrot will be fine if you miss a day taking him out of the cage for several hours. He won't hate you and he won't die. If he's in a large enough cage and has plenty of toys and external stimulation (television, radio, and so on), he won't hate you if you miss a day of extensive handling and out of cage time.



WARNING

Some guilt-ridden bird guardians set up cameras to watch their parrots. Many cameras also have the option of using an app to talk to the bird through the camera. A camera is great for keeping an eye on your bird, but it's not a substitute for hand-on interaction. Don't let the idea that you can see your bird all day alleviate you of the responsibility of actually caring for your bird in person.

Requiring Constant Supervision

Parrots are like toddlers. They'll get into a lot of trouble if left unsupervised outside of their housing. You'd be amazed at how much mischief and destruction they can accomplish in just a few unattended minutes! Sometimes this mischief can even be deadly for them. As a result, they require you to always keep an eye on your parrot when he's out of the cage, especially if you know that he's a wanderer or will make an effort to try to find you.

Nobody's perfect. Your parrot will inevitably get into mischief, so don't feel terrible when he does. I hope the mischief is something you can undo or something more funny than dangerous. Once I walked out of the room for just a few minutes and came back to find my blue and gold macaw on the dining room table taking a bite out of every single piece of fruit in the large fruit bowl in the middle of the table. Another time I found him on the floor making a hole in the drywall large enough for him to stick his head through. What the heck was he looking for? I was relieved that he hadn't gotten into anything electrical inside the wall. What a naughty bird, right? Well, not really . . . I was naughty for not supervising closely enough.

Preparing to Open Your Wallet — The Expense

Parrots are expensive. You have the expense of the parrot itself, anywhere from \$14 to \$14,000, and you also have the up-front costs of proper housing, toys, food, and so on, but you also have to be aware of the hidden expenses that often surprise people.

For example, you may be unaware of the necessary yearly or bi-yearly veterinary visits. A healthy diet consisting of organic fruits and veggies can get expensive. A camera to watch the parrot while you're away, a pet sitter, or travel expenses to take your bird with you when you leave town can be a hit to the wallet.

Replacement costs can add up as well. Your parrot can wear out toys, and he may also wreck things in your home, such as curtains, carpet, flooring, wooden furniture, antiques, wallpaper, and countless other household items, that you may need to be replaced.

You also have to consider the expenses of upgrading supplies, such as a new, larger cage, a sleeping cage, a better carrier, nicer toys, and so on. All these expenses are worth it for the joy and love that a parrot brings to your life. Just make sure to dedicate a little of your paycheck each month to your bird's wellbeing.

Bonding with You . . . to an Extreme

Parrots are social creatures, and you may be surprised how strongly a lone parrot bonds to you. To your bonded parrot, you hung the sun and the moon. He becomes excited and dreamy-eyed when you walk into the room. His focus is on you and his devotion is absolute. For a parrot like this, your attention is critical for his wellbeing.



WARNING

Nothing's wrong with a strong parrot/human bond. You're buddies for life. However, if the bond becomes distorted and the parrot begins to see you as an actual mate, it can become an issue, especially if you have a parrot with a powerful beak, like an Amazon, cockatoo or macaw, that can inflict severe bites on you or someone else if another person gets too close. You'll know that your bond has gone a little awry (on your parrot's part) when your bird regurgitates to you a lot and when he becomes very jealous and territorial of you. Refer to Chapter 14.

Seeing How Funny Parrots Are around Mirrors

You may be surprised to see how many birds react to mirrors. It's quite amusing. A lot of bird guardians bring their birds into the bathroom when they're getting ready for work or bedtime, which gives the parrot ample time to study the bird in the mirror. Some try to woo the mirror bird, which is cute, but it can be less than constructive if your bird becomes lovesick by his reflection. Some birds behave as if the reflection in the mirror is a buddy to interact with.

I don't recommend keeping a mirror inside your bird's housing or too close by all the time because your bird may respond negatively to it. Some birds behave aggressively to the mirror bird, such as trying to fight with it. Unless your bird is having an aggressive response (which doesn't happen very often), you can enjoy watching your parrot engage with his reflection sometimes. This is a great time to film your bird for his Instagram account.

Recognizing How Smart Parrots Are

Even if you already believe that your bird is intelligent, he may be leagues more intelligent than you think. Some parrots can be taught to solve elaborate puzzles, to distinguish colors, and even to read. However, many parrots don't even need

this kind of instruction to understand how to manipulate their human or their foreign (not in the wild) environment. Just search online for “Can Wild Parrots Solve Puzzles?” and be amazed.

Your parrot’s intelligence may frustrate you at times. Most parrots figure out how to escape their cages, which can be stressful for you and even dangerous for your bird. Don’t worry though. This behavior is very typical. You can plan ahead with a quick link (also called a *maillon*, similar to a carabiner, but with a screw and threads as a closure rather than a spring) or other kinds of locks on your bird’s cage doors. Check out Chapter 5 for ways to reinforce your cage.

I used to have one little lovebird who would easily escape his cage and then go around to all the other cages in the bird room and let out all the other lovebirds. I’d wake up in the morning to find dozens of escapees flying around, having the time of their lives. It took me months to discover the identity of the little jail breaker.

Figuring Out Who Inherits Your Parrot When You Die — Estate Planning

Though the smaller parrots tend to live to be 12 to 15 years old, the larger parrots can live upwards of 50 to 80 years. If you acquire one of these long-lived birds when you’re 30, 40, 50, or older, consider that your bird might outlive you and plan what you’ll do with your winged friend after you die or are no longer able to care for him.



REMEMBER

You may choose to include your bird in a will or an estate plan, thereby designating who will take over care of the bird. The ideal situation is choosing a younger person, perhaps a relative, who will take on the responsibility of your parrot should that need arise. You should also name an alternate caregiver in case the first person can’t provide adequate care.



TIP

Set aside some funds for the person who will take on your bird. You can even consider setting up a trust for your bird’s care. Figure \$400 a year for a smaller bird and \$600 for a larger bird. So, if you believe that your bird will live ten years beyond your life, have at least \$4,000 to \$6,000 in the trust. The trust can release funds yearly to the new caregiver and designate how the money should be spent.

If you can’t find another person to take the bird in the event of your death or incapacitation, you can name your avian veterinarian or a bird sanctuary in your estate plan. Make sure both parties agree in advance, and you should give them the permission to find your parrot a new home. Your parrot’s trust fund should go to this

entity and designate that the remaining funds be transferred to your bird's new home when one is found.



WARNING

Some people plan for their parrot to be euthanized upon their death for fear that no one will be able to adequately care for their bird. Don't do this! Most veterinarians won't euthanize a healthy animal anyway, so even if you put this clause in your will, it's doubtful any ethical veterinarian will carry it out.

For your living will or estate plan to be executable, seek the advice of an attorney who specializes in this area. Make sure that your trusted relatives or friends have copies of this document and have committed to follow your wishes.

Being Prepared for the Unexpected — When Your Parrot Dies

The majority of parrot deaths are very sudden, unlike dogs and cats, where you may have a reasonable idea of how your animal companion is doing. You wake up in the morning or come home to a quiet house. Why isn't the bird whistling, chattering, or talking? You approach the cage to find your bird stiff at the bottom.

Because I've had so many birds, I've been in this situation many times. A parrot's death never gets easier and it's always a shock. Birds have a lifespan, and you can't do anything about it. Your parrot isn't going to live forever. Also, birds hide their illnesses and can die before you even notice an issue.

Losing a bird is like losing a family member, even more so than losing a cat or dog. Why? Because parrots bond with their guardians in an almost human way. Some birds even speak your own language. Imagine that your parrot is communicating with you on the level of a two- or three-year-old human, and then one day, out of nowhere, the bird dies. That loss is huge.



REMEMBER

Your other birds who were friends with the deceased bird, especially the bird's mate, may also be upset by the loss. They may call to the missing bird and constantly look for him for a period of time. If your bird had a mate, remove that bird from the vicinity of your other birds if you suspect that the bird who died may have been ill. Changing the mate's cage, toys, and location can help the mate get over the loss. Sometimes, if a bird dies of old age, its bonded mate of a similar age will die not long after. If the remaining mate is young, he'll likely accept another mate after a period of a few weeks.

Check out the Cheat Sheet at www.dummies.com for what you can do when your parrot dies. Just search for "Parrots For Dummies Cheat Sheet" in the search window.

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About the Author

Avian care and behavior consultant, Nikki Moustaki, M.A., M.F.A., is the author of more than 17 books on bird care and behavior, including *Parakeets For Dummies* and *Finches For Dummies*, and is the author of a bird-themed memoir, *The Bird Market of Paris*. In her practice as an avian consultant, she works with clients to heal the strained relationships between themselves and their feathered friends.

Nikki has been involved with birds since 1988, when she became active in several bird clubs and began breeding and showing birds. She had several dozens of parrots at that time, many of them rescues, as her hobby grew. She worked in pet shops for seven years and eventually went on to manage an all-bird shop. These many years spent working in pet shops, breeding birds, and traveling to bird shows gave her unique insight into the various issues that people encounter with their avian companions. She acquired a variety of birdy mentors, including veterinarians, breeders, and rescuers, and received invaluable hands-on experience through them, as well as through her own birds, who were her best teachers. Nikki has kept lovebirds, cockatiels, budgies (parakeets), lorries, multiple species of macaws, Amazons, conures, Brotogeris, and poicephalus, along with an African grey, finches, and canaries. She became aware of the bird overpopulation problem around 1993, stopped breeding birds, and began helping in rescue efforts.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the loving memory of my grandfather, Soli B. Moustaki, who loved birds and who gave me my very first pair of parakeets when I was a little girl.

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SOURCE: 123 RF, PURPLEQUEUE

This handsome African grey parrot (refer to Chapter 3) shows off its bright red tail.



SOURCE: 123 RF, KENDONICE

If a bird is amenable, you can teach him all sorts of fun behaviors (see Chapter 16) , like this male eclectus being held upside down in his guardian's palm.



Here are a blue mutation peach-faced and a Fischer's lovebird. These disparate species can be friends, but shouldn't be bred together.



Eye pinning is common in birds when they are excited, as with this blue and gold macaw.



Every parrot should have a yearly well-bird checkup, preferably with an avian veterinarian (refer to Chapter 10).



The sulfur-crested cockatoo (see Chapter 3) is one of the more popular species among the cockatoos.



The black palm cockatoo is among the rarest parrots kept in captivity.



These Indian ringnecks are nesting in a tree hollow. (Chapter 11 discusses parrots in nature.)



The budgie, by far one of the most popularly kept species of parrot, has quite a variety of common mutations.



The Alexandrine parakeet is friendly and talkative. Chapter 3 discusses both species in greater detail.



This closed band on this blue and gold macaw's leg has information on it about the bird's breeder, state, and hatch date (see Chapter 18).



The scarlet macaw is all beauty. See Chapter 3 for more about this species.



Flying is an important exercise for any parrot (see Chapter 12).



A handfed sun conure can make a gentle companion for everyone in the family (refer to Chapter 7).



Sun conures flying in the wild. Chapter 3 discusses these species in greater detail.

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