

Bird Behavior and Basic Handling Safety

Our topics for this week are::

- **How different types of birds have different behaviors**
- **Basic bird handling techniques**

Bird Behavior

Birds are social animals that preferably live in groups (flocks). Flocks provide added protection, scouting for food sources, and mutual grooming in areas of the body not reachable to groom unassisted. Small nomadic species, such as budgerigars, congregate in large groups for protection from predators. Pair bonding is weaker in nomadic birds than in larger species that are more territorial as with South American parrots. Conversely, attempts to establish dominance over others is less intense with small nomadic species compared to large territorial birds.

Vision and taste are birds' predominant senses. Vocalization can be very complex. Vocalization helps coordinate activities such as foraging for food and announcing time to roost and aids in locating mates, establishing territories, and alerts to danger. Birds that make loud noises, such as screams, are species that will mingle with other avian species in the wild. Birds that do not mingle with other avian species are quieter.

Birds clean and align their feathers by preening, using their mouth to stroke their feathers. They also coat their feathers with an oil from their uropygial gland near the tail while preening. The oil helps waterproof their feathers. Preening occurs after bathing and eating. Social birds may allopreen, i.e., preen each other.

Other than mutual grooming, birds do not normally use physical force for interactions among each other. Communications, including dominant aggression, involve vocalizations, posturing, blocking access to resources, and position within the immediate surroundings. Apprehension is often indicated by an open beak while leaning away from an object or handler. Fighting is reserved primarily for territorial disputes. Play activities build combat and mating skills and assists in determination of social rank.

Birds do not possess a diaphragm. Their lungs are always filled with air. Air sacs are able to move air in and out. Some of the air from air sacs are delivered to the bones providing some distributed warmth in cold weather, dissipation of heat in warm weather, and adding buoyancy when in water for water birds. Heat stress causes panting as a last resort and, in some species, rapid fluttering of the throat. Exposure to cold weather leads to fluffing of feathers to trap insulating pockets of air, and sitting on their feet to keep their feet warm.

Bird mannerisms include alternating pupil dilation and constriction and flaring tail feathers when excited. Wings are spread when acting secure. Puffing out its feathers momentarily or wagging its tail signals a greeting.

The major activities are being on alert for predators and foraging for food. Although both can be stressful, these activities are important in maintaining normal mental health and behavior.

Handling and Bird Behavior

Many companion birds may enjoy interactions with humans, but none enjoy being restrained. Always reassess the need for whether a bird must be handled and restrained before subjecting it to those stresses.

Hooked beak birds such as parrots are generally more tolerant of being handled. There are many species of parrots (psittacines). Small-sized parrots include budgerigars, love birds, lorries and lorikeets, small conures, Caiques, Pionus, Poicephalus, and cockatiels. Large-sized parrots are cockatoos, Amazons, African Grey, large conures, electus, and macaws. They can be socialized with humans and may bond with a human family member if socialized while young. Birds that are hand-raised are imprinted with humans and require more human attention for a feeling of security.

Companion birds use their beaks to balance going from perch to perch. Most only aggressively bite as a last resort when frightened. They also use their beaks and tongues to investigate their surroundings by touch and taste. Large psittacines may make biting a game if they can evoke a reaction from a bitten handler.

Small, straight-billed perching birds (finches, canaries) resent being handled and will defensively stab or bite. Parakeets, parrots, other psittacines may also bite, and since large parrots can crack walnuts with their beak, they can just as easily break a finger. Raptors (birds of prey) primarily use their talons to attack. Pigeons and doves are not aggressive and pose no physical threat to handlers. When handling any bird, a handler must expect to be defecated on and should wear appropriate outer clothing. Ear protection is advisable if handling a large psittacine screamer. The sense of sight in birds is excellent, and birds, like most animals, are very inquisitive. Handlers who wear bright colors or shiny jewelry invite being pecked when handling birds.

Birds demonstrate their dominance over other birds by assuming a higher perch positions. Allowing a bird's head to be above the handler's eye level by the bird resting on the handler's head or shoulders, gives the bird the impression it is dominant to the handler. Furthermore, allowing a parrot to perch on a shoulder positions them in a way that the handler cannot control them well and invites bites to the handler's ears, neck, lips, and possibly to the eyes. The lack of control from shoulder perching can also increase the risk of serious injury to the bird, if it becomes suddenly startled. A handler should not hold them higher than the handler's mid-chest level.

Attempts to bite should be reprimanded by either being startled, i.e., suddenly dropping the hand the bird is perched on a short distance, or human attention should be taken away by isolating the bird from human attention for a short period.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Socialized hooked-beaked birds are more tolerant of being handled than socialized straight-beaked birds.**
- 2. Handling of birds should be kept to a minimum based on need to do so for environmental enrichment or health concerns.**
- 3. Reprimands for bad behavior should be limited to dropping a hand holding the birds a short distance or briefly isolating it from any attention, not yelling at the bird or attempting to strike it.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 250 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.