

Domestication and Behavior of Companion Birds

Our topics for this week are:

- History of birds as companions
- The behavior of common companion birds

COMPANION BIRDS IN HISTORY

Birds have been kept in cages for their beauty and companionship for more than 4,000 years. Ancient Egyptians kept doves, pigeons, and parrots as pets and ancient Greek aristocracy kept mynahs and parakeets. Egyptians and Persians used homing pigeons to carry messages 3,000 years ago. Royalty and the very wealthy kept companion birds during Medieval and Renaissance Europe. In the 15th century, canaries were bred in captivity to be placed in underground mines to detect poisonous gasses.

When the Aztecs were conquered by the Spanish in 1521, the Palace of Moctezuma I, (Montezuma) in Tenochtitlan (Mexico City) had a caged bird zoo and one for birds of prey. Other cities in the Aztec empire also had birds in zoos.

There are about 9,000 known species of birds. The largest order is *Passeriformes*, containing the perching birds (canaries, finches, mynahs). Passerines have three front toes and one back toe on each foot. They are also known as song birds for their ability to vocalize melodies. The order *Psittaciformes* contains the most popular companion birds (parrots, cockatoos, macaws, lorries, and budgerigars). Psittacines have two toes in front and two back toes on each foot. Their beaks are hooked which they use for climbing, breaking nuts, and defense. Toucans are the only common companion birds in the order *Piciformes*. Toucans have large pointed bills which can be as long as their body. Pigeons and doves are in the order *Columbiformes*. This order is characterized by small head and beak, large wings, and a bobbing movement of their head. They have excellent flying ability.

Caged companion birds include a wide variety of birds. Some can learn to mimic the human voice, such as budgerigars, cockatiels, and African Grey and Yellow-naped Amazons. Some birds, such as canaries, like to live alone while others, such as finches, prefer living in small groups.

Since common tame species can be confused with similar untamed species, companion bird names are often rendered more specific by reference to their Latin genus-species name, such as cockatiel (*Nymphicus hollandicus*).

Cockatiels and budgerigars (parakeets, *Melopsittacus undulates*) are the easiest birds to manage for new bird owners. Both are very social and need frequent interaction with other birds or humans. Budgerigars are the most popular companion birds. They are smaller and less expensive to own but more flighty and willing to bite when irritated.

Popular passerines are canaries and finches. Canaries prefer to live alone. Finches prefer to live in small groups. Neither canaries nor finches tolerate handling well.

Many popular caged companion birds are exotic to the U.S. The budgerigar and cockatiel came from Australia. The canary came from the Canary Islands. African Grey parrots are from

west and central Africa. The Rosy-faced Lovebird is from the Namib Desert. The Common Hill Myna comes from south and southeast Asia, and the Common Myna is from India and Australia. The Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992 prohibited importation of most exotic wild birds into the U.S.

Wild caught parrots cannot be imported into the U. S. or Europe. Export of all native birds of Australian has been banned since 1960. Some wild caught Central and South American parrots are still smuggled into the U.S. from Mexico.

NATURAL BEHAVIOR OF COMPANION BIRDS

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.

SAFETY FIRST

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.

Handler Safety

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.

Bird Safety

Most birds will resist being handled and endanger themselves trying to escape. For most species of birds, restraint of the wings is the first objective for handlers. Bird bones are very light and break easily, particularly wing or leg bones. Handlers must remain mindful that it is easy to restrict a bird's respiratory movements by holding them too tightly, which can cause unnecessary struggling and lead to shock. The sternum's movement must not be restricted or they cannot breathe. Their tracheal rings are complete and relatively resistant to collapse when birds are held by the neck. Birds do not have a complete diaphragm and the lungs are associated with the chest

wall. Slight compression around the chest during restraint can eliminate their ability to breathe.

Feathers trap air and provide efficient insulation. However, when birds are handled the insulation of their feathers can predispose them to becoming overheated. Physical restraints should be used for the shortest period possible to reduce the risk of the bird overheating.

Birds are very susceptible to pneumonia caused by chilling or exposure to drafts; therefore, a bird should never be placed near an open window or air conditioner vent. Damage to flight feathers may endanger birds that are released for sport such as pigeons and raptors. Birds should never be left unsupervised with dogs, cats, ferrets, reptiles, or children. Banding young birds can put them at risk of constricting the leg during growth or being caught on objects by a loose band.

Companion birds should not exercise freely in a house. The dangers are numerous and include the risk of eating poisonous plants or household pesticides, pecking electrical cords, eating carpet, being injured by a fan, being burned by heaters and stoves, becoming entangled in terry cloth towels, getting caught in open toilets, inhalation of ammonia from cleansers, injuries or death from attack by predator pets, and escape through open doors or windows.

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

- Birds cannot breathe if pressure is applied to their chest.
- Restraint of birds involves pressure on their neck and control of their wings and feet.
- Birds are very susceptible to drafts and odors.

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

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.