

TIPS TO PREVENT FEATHER PICKING

ENVIRONMENTAL ENHANCEMENT

By Charlie Harding

This is an outline of an audio tape narrated by Charlie Harding on Parrot Behavior Modification.

Rarely is abnormal parrot behavior due to one specific factor. Rather it is often due to a number of issues related to the parrot's environment and how the owner relates to the bird. The following is a list of important topics that each client should think about and possibly alter to enhance the behavior of his or her pet parrot.

THE MAJOR ISSUES

1. Diet
2. Mental Stimulation – Toys
3. Bathing
4. Sleep

OTHER IMPORTANT ISSUES

5. Humidity, Light, and Sound
6. Smoking – Nicotine
7. Time out of the Cage
8. Wing Trimming and the "Step-up" Command

DIET

KEY POINTS:

AVOID AN ALL SEED DIET. PELLETS ARE RECOMMENDED. FEED LOTS OF TROPICAL FRUITS AND VEGETABLES. VARIETY IS IMPORTANT – IT BECOMES



MONOTONOUS AND BORING IF THE SAME THING IS EATEN EVERY DAY. GOOD NUTRITION KEEPS A PARROT AT PEAK PERFORMANCE AND THIS AFFECTS BEHAVIOR AND PERSONALITY.

- 1. Avoid a diet that is primarily seeds, especially sunflower seeds, safflower seeds, and peanuts.**
- 2. Think about it – parrots do not eat these kinds of food in the wild. These seeds may give birds a high – it’s like us taking in lots of caffeine.**
- 3. Seeds should not make up more than 20% of the daily food intake. Less is even better.**
- 4. A commercial pelleted diet is recommended. It should make up about 60% of the diet.**
- 5. Feed lots of tropical fruits such as mango, papaya, kiwi, banana, passion fruit, etc.**
- 6. Avoid citrus fruits – these are too acidic.**
- 7. Offer fresh fruits whenever possible. Frozen is next best, then canned, and then dried.**
- 8. Offer dark green, leafy vegetables.**
- 9. Beans, lentils, rice, yams, sweet potatoes, cooked rice, pasta, breads and nutritious cereals are all good additions to the diet.**
- 10. It may take persistence and imagination to come up with ways of getting your bird interested and used to a new, more varied and nutritious diet.**

MENTAL STIMULATION - TOYS

KEY POINT:

PARROTS NEED LOTS OF TOYS. OFFER THEM TOYS FROM EACH OF THE FOUR CLASSIFICATIONS: TEAR UP TOYS, PUZZLE TOYS, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TOYS, AND PERMA TOYS. ROTATE TOYS EVERY 7-14 DAYS.

- 1. Birds need lots of toys**
- 2. These should be evenly spaced and firmly attached along the back and sides of the cage. They should not inhibit normal movement inside the cage.**

- 3. Think of a parrot as a 3 year old child – they like lots of toys. They also have a short attention span and get bored quickly.**
- 4. There are four classifications of toys – parrots need them all.**
 - a. Tear up, chew up, destroy type toys**
 - 1. Examples are things made of wood, leather, and rope**
 - 2. These kinds of toys help parrots vent their frustration in a positive way. This decreases stress and helps lessen the likelihood of parrots chewing on household items and being aggressive toward owners.**
 - b. Puzzle toys – food interactive**
 - 1. Toys that contain food or other desired items that takes the bird at least 5 minutes to open or remove.**
 - c. Physical activity toys**
 - 1. Includes swings, ladders, and perches**
 - 2. These should be inside the cage**
 - 3. If they don't fit well, then most likely the cage is too small which can also lead to stress.**
 - d. Perma or durable, long lasting toys.**
 - 1. These include toys made of metal, hard plastics, and acrylics.**
- 5. Rotate toys every 7-14 days. Have a box with extra toys available. Every month or so, buy new toys.**
- 6. If birds are afraid of toys:**
 - a. Start by putting the toy in the same room as the bird. Every day move the toy closer to the cage. Finally attach it to the outside of the cage, down low. Then move it up. Then put it in the cage, but down low. Slowly move it up to where you want to position it for several weeks. This arouses curiosity and decreases fear of a new object.**
 - b. Attach shelled seeds to the toy with Elmer's glue**
 - c. Let the parrot see you playing with a new toy.**

BATHING

KEY POINT:

MIST YOUR BIRD DAILY. GIVE A HEAVY SHOWER AT LEAST ONCE WEEKLY.

- 1. Most parrots come from the rainforest where it rains almost every day. As such, they should get wet at least once a day.**
- 2. Bathing should be a positive experience of social significance. When you're clean, you feel better. You don't itch as much.**
- 3. Birds should receive a light misting at least once a day. Weed sprayers, in which you pump air into a water canister, produce a fine mist which is often non-threatening to the bird.**
- 4. Birds should receive a heavy shower once a week.**
 - a. Can be in a regular shower stall utilizing suction cup perches.**
 - b. Can be in the sink or tub using a standard wand to spray down the bird.**
 - c. This helps remove excess dander, dust, and dirt.**

SLEEP

KEY POINTS:

PARROTS SHOULD HAVE AT LEAST 10 HOURS OF UNINTERRUPTED SLEEP EACH NIGHT. HAVING A SLEEP CAGE THAT YOU CAN PUT IN A SEPARATE, DARKENED ROOM IS A GOOD SOLUTION.

- 1. When it is dark, parrots sleep or remain inactive.**
- 2. Most parrots come from near the equator where the photoperiodism is about the same year round.**
- 3. In the wild, parrots probably sleep about 10 uninterrupted hours or more each day.**
- 4. In captivity, most parrots probably don't get enough sleep, especially uninterrupted sleep. If the lights don't go out until midnight and then come on again at 7 AM (or whenever dawn occurs), then this is not enough. This may cause sleep deprivation which in turn may affect behavior.**

5. Daytime naps may not help as much as we think. This is light sleep, and not deep, uninterrupted sleep.
6. Solution? Have a sleep cage in a separate room. This can be a small, inexpensive cage, just big enough for a perch, a few toys, and a place for some food and water.
7. Put the bird in this cage and isolate him in a dark room for at least 10 hours each night.

HUMIDITY

KEY POINT:

BIRDS SHOULD BE KEPT IN AN ENVIRONMENT OF HIGH HUMIDITY (AT LEAST 55-60% OR HIGHER).

1. In the rainforest, the humidity is always high (90-100%).
2. The humidity in the home should never fall below 55-60%
3. High humidity is very important in regards to feather picking birds, especially African Greys and Cockatoos.
4. Ways to increase the humidity in your home:
 - a. Run a central or room humidifier for at least 12 hours a day.
 - b. Have a 20+ gallon aquarium in the same room
 - c. Have a running water, table top fountain in the same room. Have it operational for at least 8 hours a day. Recommended to have the fountain on a timer. This helps create an “event” in the parrot’s daily routine.

FULL SPECTRUM LIGHTING

KEY POINTS:

FULL SPECTRUM LIGHTING IS IMPORTANT FOR BIRDS KEPT INDOORS. IT SHOULD BE ON FOR AT LEAST 8 HOURS DAILY. IT MAKES BIRDS FEEL BETTER. IT MAY HELP ALLEVIATE FEATHER PICKING. USE FLUORESCENT FIXTURES OR TUBES, NOT BULBS.

1. Natural sunlight is full-spectrum.
2. It is very important for the overall, well-being of animals. It invigorates birds and helps them “feel good.” It is also critical for Vitamin D3 metabolism which in turn affects calcium absorption from the GI tract.
3. Low blood calcium may cause some birds to feather pick, especially African Greys.
4. Glass windows filter out ultraviolet rays, which are the most important components of full-spectrum light.
5. Full-spectrum light is especially important for feather picking birds. It helps eliminate stress.
6. How much full-spectrum light should a bird have each day? No one knows for sure, but up to 8 hours is recommended. They get this much, if not more, in the wild each day.
7. Full-spectrum light is superior in the form of a fluorescent fixture or tube, not in a bulb.
8. Follow company instructions on wattage required and distance lights should be placed from the cage.

SOUNDS

KEY POINTS:

VARIOUS SOUNDS CAN BE USED TO HELP PREVENT A STATIC ENVIRONMENT, ESPECIALLY IF THE PARROT IS LEFT ALONE ALL DAY. USE TIMERS TO TURN ON THE RADIO, TV, ETC. TO CREATE “SOUND EVENTS.”

1. Birds are very sensitive to auditory stimulation.
2. Birds get bored easily if they are left at home alone all day while the owners work, especially in an unchanging, static environment.
3. Birds thrive on “routine” and “daily events.”
4. Timers can be used to create “sound event.” This can include the automatic turning on and off of the radio, TV, table-top fountain, etc. at specified times each day.
5. Birds like the sound of running water – it is very soothing. These sounds are fun and exciting and may mimic sounds in the jungle. These help prevent a “static” environment.
6. Regular, relaxing sounds help decrease anxiety and stress.

SMOKING - NICOTINE

KEY POINT:

NICOTINE CAN CAUSE FEATHER PICKING. DON'T SMOKE AROUND YOUR BIRD. WASH YOUR HANDS REGULARLY IF YOU DO.

- 1. Second-hand smoke (nicotine) can lead to feather picking.**
- 2. Nicotine transfer can occur when a parrot comes in contact with the skin, hair and clothing of an owner who smokes.**
- 3. Some birds are much more sensitive to nicotine than others.**
- 4. Don't smoke around your bird.**
- 5. Owners who smoke should always wash their hands before handling their bird or any bird paraphernalia.**

TIME OUT OF THE CAGE

KEY POINTS:

BIRDS SHOULD BE ALLOWED OUT OF THEIR CAGE FOR AT LEAST TWO HOURS EACH DAY. THE OWNER MUST MAINTAIN CONTROL OF THE BIRD'S COMING AND GOING WHICH HELPS DECREASE BAD BEHAVIORS.

- 1. Birds should be allowed out of the cage for a minimum of 2 hours each day.**
- 2. This can include being on a T stand, climbing tree, playpen, or jungle gym. It's OK if it's in the same room.**
- 3. Allowing the bird to be away from its cage helps alleviate biting or aggressive tendencies.**
- 4. Being in other places also helps decrease stress and lets the bird know that it's OK to be elsewhere.**
- 5. The regular cage provides structure and guidance. Don't allow the bird free access to come and go from his cage as he chooses. You should decide when the cage door is to be opened or shut.**
- 6. Too much independence makes some birds bite more.**

7. Avoid allowing the bird to be on top of his cage or on your shoulder excessively. This makes him feel like he's "king of the hill." Height dominance leads to aggression and biting tendencies.
8. By allowing the bird to be "in charge" you are increasing his stress and anxiety which lead to bad behaviors.
9. Birds should not be allowed to follow you throughout the house. This also makes them feel "in charge."
10. Beware of letting birds see clearly out of windows. They may see things that are stressful to them that we don't perceive as such. Birds are very "flight orientated" when stressed. If they can't get away because they are caged, this may lead to more anxiety which might increase bad behaviors.

WING CLIPPING

KEY POINT:

YOU HAVE MORE CONTROL OVER YOUR BIRD WHEN HIS WINGS ARE CLIPPED

1. Parrots are generally less aggressive when their wings are clipped.
2. This is a "control issue" for birds. It prevents them from flying away from you.
3. Many birds whose wings are clipped quickly learn that if they try to fly, they will only end up on the floor. And most birds don't like to be down there. In the wild it is dangerous to be on the ground for any length of time. Birds usually won't bite you when you try to pick them up from the floor because of this fact.

HANDLING THE BIRD – STEP-UP COMMAND

KEY POINTS:

THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT COMMAND THAT ALLOWS YOU TO BE IN CHARGE OF YOUR PARROT. AVOID LETTING YOUR BIRD PERCH ON YOUR SHOULDER.

1. Teaching your parrot to "step up" on your hand is probably the most important command to teach your bird.

- 2. It helps you gain control and establishes you as the “top bird.”**
- 3. Once learned, birds will follow this command even when they want to bite you.**
- 4. Teach this command in a loving, caring manner so the bird will trust you.**
- 5. Avoid letting your bird sit on your shoulder too much. This makes him feel that he is on an equal or even superior level with you as far dominance. You lose control.**
- 6. Birds tend to relate mostly to your hands and head, and not so much to your body.**
- 7. If a bird is perches on your shoulder and he sees something threatening, he will bite at you – a form of misplaced aggression.**