

What does a pair-bonded relationship with your parrot look like, and why does it happen?

Compiled by Dr Bernice van Huyssteen BVSc

The Owner-Pet Bird "Bond"

Most pet owners grew up in homes with companion dogs or cats, and comparatively few pet bird owners were raised in homes where their parents kept birds as pets. For the most part, we are a society that has greatest familiarity and experience with pet dogs and cats, and are comparatively naïve in regards to pet birds that function in a similar role in our lives.



Most wild parrots are social creatures except, perhaps, when they pair up and concentrate on raising young. Commonly the birds will spend brief periods of time allopreening (preening the feathers on each others' heads) or otherwise interacting and vocalizing with a flock. These flocks can be very noisy and active. As our birds' surrogate flock, we need to fulfil this role without inadvertently taking on the role of mate. Talking, dancing, training, and playing games with your bird are excellent ways to fulfil your bird's need for social interaction. Even just having your bird nearby on a perch, stand, or travel cage, wherever you are at the time, is good quality time. To avoid the impression that you are a willing mate, avoid prolonged cuddling, allopreening, or perching on your shoulder. To a parrot, these can suggest a more intimate interest.

Lengthy or constantly repeated allopreening activities between owner and pet bird over time are more consistent with behaviours found between that of a breeding pair. Normally, most birds do not give each other extensive physical pleasure unless they are pairing up. Long petting sessions or touching your birds in sexually-stimulating ways will reinforce the perception of you as a willing mate. Regular amounts of shoulder time may also convey a perception of sexual intimacy with you. This can lead to the forming of an inappropriate pair-bond with your parrot, which is the basis for a large number of inappropriate behaviours and health problems.

Avian reproductive behaviour

Puberty

- The onset of reproductive or broody behaviour varies with the species.
- Puberty begins at a mere 2 months of age in the Zebra finch.
- Small parrots like the budgerigar parakeet, cockatiel, and lovebird reach puberty between 6 months to 1 year of age.
- Conures achieve sexual maturity between 1 to 2 years, while lorries and lorikeets are 2 to 3 years old.
- Larger psittacines reach puberty between 3 to 6 years of age.
- Males usually achieve sexual maturity at a later age than the female.
- Captive-bred birds tend to become mature earlier than wild-caught birds.

How do breeding pairs behave in the wild?

There are a host of physiologic, anatomic, mental, and behavioural changes that occur with the onset of the breeding season. There are also a number of behaviours that mating pairs exhibit which appear to strengthen and maintain the pair bond.

- Preening each other, particularly in hard to reach areas like over the back, around the vent and under the wings.
- Feeding each other, regurgitation
- Copulation
- Inspection of the nesting site or nest box

What does broody behaviour look like in the pet bird?

Normal sexual behaviours by companion parrots are frequently misinterpreted as .problem. behaviors in captivity.

- Some birds may look for dark places as a sign of nest-seeking.
- Early signs of nest building may include paper shredding and increased wood chewing. (Lovebirds may put strips of paper in their wings while nest building).

- Cage territoriality and aggression may also be observed.
- Some birds masturbate by rubbing their vents against inanimate objects and people.

Some pet birds develop a relationship with their owner that mimics pair bonding. This mated pair behaviour may induce the need to protect the mate and nest leading to territoriality and aggression. These birds may also be more likely to ovulate and lay eggs, potentially leading to problems such as chronic egg laying, egg binding, and dystocia. There is also a syndrome of recurrent cloacal prolapse, primarily seen in adult Umbrella and Moluccan cockatoos that may be related to this mated pair bond in some instances.

Environmental cues that promote reproductive activity

- The most powerful stimulus for breeding is often a long day (>12 hours of light).
- The nest is also a powerful stimulus for breeding. Parrots are cavity nesters and dark container with an opening may promote breeding such as a box or paper bag.
- Other stimuli include warm temperatures, rainfall, and an abundant food supply.
- Of course the presence of a mate is another strong motivator. The mate may be real or perceived such as a mirror, a favourite toy, or a human being.

What can you do to minimize reproductive behaviours in your pet bird?

1. Halt mutual grooming and mutual feeding. Grooming over the back and under the wings is a sexually charged behaviour birds. Also avoid encircling the body, putting pressure on the back, touching near the vent, or playfully wrestling with the beak.
2. Modify environmental cues. Do not provide your parrot with a nest box or any item that could be considered a nest box unless you want to promote breeding behaviour. If your pet is demonstrating chronic egg laying or suffers from reproductive disease, your avian veterinarian may advise you on additional environmental cues to manipulate such as photoperiod (day length) or the presence of the mate.
3. Establish yourself as the flock leader to set guidelines for your pet through positive reinforcement training. A better understanding of where she fits in the household flock may prevent your pet from mimicking a pair bond relationship with you.
4. Ignore masturbation. If your bird rubs its vent on you, calmly return him to his cage.
5. Improve your pet's plane of nutrition. Gradually introduce formulated foods and healthy items like orange and yellow vegetables and dark, leafy greens. These should be restricted to just 2 or 3 types of vegetables at a time to avoid the perception of abundance. For smaller species, I suggest trying grated or thinly sliced fresh vegetables or offering clean sprouts or broccoli. A frozen vegetable mix (e.g., corn, diced carrots, and peas or beans) can be convenient. Just thaw out a small amount each day.
6. Do not place your bird on your shoulders during reproductive or broody periods. Any urges to protect its mate or its territory may result in acts of aggression, and a bird placed on a shoulder has great access to the face.
7. Stick training is a valuable tool for maintaining hand control of an aggressive or territorial bird during the breeding season.

Restricted foods: These include fruit, seed, nuts, pasta, rice, and other people foods. These items pack lots of calories which can stimulate reproductive behaviour. Also, regularly offering softened or warm foods can simulate regurgitative feeding that might be offered by a mate. Very limited amounts of these items should be offered only through foraging and training. Making your bird work for what they want will help balance their lifestyle, prolong your healthy interaction, and limit the amount of those items that they actually eat.

References

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