



Royal Animal Hospital

10 Amazing Tips for Living with a Feathered Friend

Living with a parrot can be challenging, rewarding, fun-filled, stressful, heart-breaking, nerve-wracking, and many other adjectives. Our parrot's behaviour is directly related to their interaction with us and how we care for our birds. Below are some tips for living comfortably with your pet parrot:



1. Don't teach your bird to behave badly - Many parrot owners unknowingly teach their birds to behave badly. For example, you're watching a movie on TV. Your parrot is on the other side of the room squawking loudly so you can't hear what's being said in the movie. You turn to your bird and shout "Shut up, Oscar!" Boom! You've just taught your bird that s/he can get your attention if s/he squawks loudly when you are watching TV. Completely ignoring the squawking will teach a parrot that the noise won't get a reaction from you (hang in long enough for the bird to learn!). Turning up the TV volume won't work because a parrot might squawk louder and louder until its voice can be heard above the TV volume. Be aware of your reaction to your bird's behaviour to ensure you aren't teaching your bird the opposite of what you want her/him to learn, and also to ensure you don't confuse your bird. A confused parrot may behave badly because s/he isn't sure how to behave.

2. Rewarding (or not) - Always, always, reward positive (good) behaviour immediately after the positive behaviour. This means when your parrot steps up on your finger when you give the "step up" command, reward the bird with its favourite treat (just 1, not a dish full), pet the bird, or praise the bird. In some way, let your parrot know you are pleased with his/her behaviour. Your bird will learn this is acceptable behaviour. Never reward negative (bad) behaviour. For example, your parrot is sitting on top of its cage and it's time for bed. You ask your bird to "step up" and the bird tries to bite you. You pull your hand back and allow the bird to stay on top of its cage. Boom! You've just rewarded your bird for trying to bite you by allowing her/him to stay out. You've also taught your bird that biting results in the bird getting its own way. A reward to a bird can be eye-to-eye contact with you, a look from you, you covering its cage and other subtle reactions. When your bird tries to bite you or actually bites you when you are interacting, you should put your hand right back up to your bird and insist the bird step up in order to be put away. You may need to use a perch to get the bird inside its cage. Control your bird; don't allow your bird to control you.

3. Healthy diet is key - A nutritious, healthy diet is key to your bird's behaviour, psychological (mental), and physiological (body) wellbeing. A variety of nutritious food during a bird's lifetime will help to ensure your bird stays healthy and happy. Good nutrition for a bird is no different than good nutrition for humans. Fast-food, fried foods, salt, sugar, caffeine, soda, chocolate, avocados, dairy products, and citrus seeds should not be fed to parrots. Raw, clean, pesticide-free vegetables are great, cooked beans/lentils, various fruits, multigrain/wholegrain foods like dry, sugarless cereals/breads, etc. , cooked brown rice, or any other types of food that are healthy and nutritious. Parrots can be finicky about their food, so you might have to try various shapes and sizes to find what suits your bird's fancy! Piece size should be based on the parrot's beak size, not the size of the bird. Also, some species of parrots don't like particular types of foods and some parrots have specific dietary requirements which must be met, so research your particular bird's species for this information. For example, a lot of parakeets and cockatiels don't particularly care for fruit, and Lories require fruit, nectar, and pollen in their diets. An important tip about parrots and food - a parrot won't eat something it doesn't recognize as food. Therefore, keep offering the new food every day...the bird will eventually try it. To encourage your bird to try the new food, allow your bird to see you enjoying it!

4. Mental stimulation - An often overlooked part of keeping a parrot healthy is mental stimulation. Parrots are intelligent, some more than others. As a result, they need mental stimulation every day in order to stay psychologically fit. Provide challenging toys to fit the type of bird. A challenging toy would be one where, for example, the bird has to find the nut hidden inside; the bird has to open the lid to find the treat inside, a series of rings a parrot can climb through, etc. Many parrots enjoy music (or TV) when you're away, but watch the type (they can learn to mimic what they hear)! Talk, play, and interact with your bird daily, particularly with cockatoos, macaws, and grays (not exclusively). Allow your parrot to be part of your flock (family)...your bird considers you (your family) his/her flock...by including him/her in as many things as possible with you in your home. Lack of mental stimulation can result in feather plucking, bad behaviour, shortened lifespan, and a very unhappy bird.

5. Start with a tame bird - Most people confuse taming with training. Taming is the process of imprinting a parrot to humans so a bird is friendly. Training is the process of teaching a bird tricks, to step up/step down, to fly to you on command, etc. If you want a pet bird, one that doesn't bite, that will sit on your finger or shoulder, and otherwise be a good companion, you have to start with a tame bird. Taming a bird begins by hand feeding when the bird is very young (about 10 days old). By hand feeding, a baby bird imprints on humans, resulting in a friendly (tame) bird. Once tame, daily human interaction has to occur or tameness can diminish. Don't fall prey to many pet shop statements "you can start training it as soon as you get it home." Taming takes much time, patience, and knowledge on the new bird owner's part. Buy your just-weaned parrot from a reputable parrot breeder who hand feeds their baby parrots so you start with a tame bird. This isn't to say all pet shops sell untamed birds...you have to do your homework and know what you're buying. Most pet bird owners want tame birds they can handle right away, so seek out a parrot breeder or search pet shops carefully to find the tame, young bird you really want.

6. To breed or not to breed - It is a myth that parrots should be kept in pairs. The best pet bird is a single bird in the home. This means one parrot in the home can be tame and friendly, but when a second parrot is added, since birds prefer other birds to humans, some or all tameness can disappear. In most cases, one cannot keep pet parrots as breeders. In other words, a bonded pair of birds is either breeder birds or pet birds, but cannot be both. There are exceptions to the latter statement. In addition, if you don't want baby birds, don't buy a male and female of the same species and house them together. Baby birds may eventually result and/or the female may become an excessive egg-layer. Before you start thinking how nice it would be to have baby parrots, do some research to see if this would be something you'd enjoy. Dealing with baby parrots is a whole new aspect to keeping birds. Stick with a single bird. If you want multiple parrots, think about keeping different species if you aren't interested in breeding them.

7. Think like a bird - You have to learn to see the world the way your parrot sees the world. Most parrots have a mental capacity of a 2-year old child. They are very psychologically skilled! Therefore, one should deal with them based on these facts. In addition, be aware that most parrots are afraid of new things, that is, things that are new to them. You might be familiar with something, but that doesn't mean your bird is! Birds don't know about things, such as window glass, water running from faucets, hot stoves, sinks of hot soapy water, commodes, the toy your child is playing with, the neighbour or your friend that they shouldn't fly out of the open door, etc. A parrot does know the cat and/or dog is a natural enemy though! Be aware your bird can become stressed out, frightened, disoriented, and confused by new things. Painting the walls, bringing in new furniture, changing the furniture around, moving to a new home, addition of a child, loss of someone, are examples of some things your parrot might not understand so be sensitive to how your parrot might perceive changes in his/her world.

8. Respect your bird - A bird's cage is its personal space, its territory, its safety zone. This is the one place in a bird's world s/he can call his/her own. Of course, bird owners have to enter the bird's territory to accomplish certain chores. However, when your bird is taking its afternoon nap, put off the cage cleaning until your bird awakens. Our parrots don't always want to do what we want them to do when we want them to do it! Set up a daily routine of when you service the cage, when your bird naps, when you play together, etc. Birds love routine! There are some days when a parrot might not feel "up to par" or is in a bad mood. Give your bird the time it needs.

9. Time to visit the vet - A trip to the bird veterinarian can be a very stressful experience for a parrot. Some parrots get so stressed out they go into shock and die as a result of a car ride. Therefore, it's always a good idea to occasionally place your parrot in a pet taxi or small, escape-proof cage, for short trips in your vehicle. Being ill is stressful enough for a parrot. Eliminate added stress and possible death by preparing your parrot for this occasion. If you own a parrot, you will eventually find it necessary to take your parrot to the birdie vet.

10. Lifetime Commitment. - Be prepared for a lifetime commitment. A healthy, well cared for bird will live for a long time. Small birds live for 15 to 25 years. Large parrots live from 30 to 50 years (or more). The birds can easily outlive you! What if your health fails, or an emergency develops where you can no longer care for your bird. Do you have someone ready to take over? Most birds turned over to rescue agencies are the results of an owner passing away, and none of the family members want the bird! Many people think of their children when they prepare their wills...and totally ignore their most loved pets.

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