
The Human-Bird Bond and its Impact

Hand raising also produces tame birds and trusting of humans. The hand raised baby birds are kept in brooders, tubs, either singly or in small clutches, and fed until weaning. This definition of weaning is very different from that which occurs in the wild. As a result, chicks are forced to wean at a very early age, sometimes months earlier than would occur naturally.

Weaning of hand-raised birds generally starts when the birds fledge and are often completed after two weeks. After fledging, the birds are more difficult to control and often have their wings trimmed before developing adequate flight skills. The sale of the birds occurs as soon as weaning has been achieved (and often before). Birds are often sold before weaning so the birds can "bond to the new owner". This practice is extremely detrimental to the birds, as I will explain. These birds have essentially been raised in isolation from the time they can visualise.

They have only seen humans providing a food source, and there is minimal socialisation for any of these birds with other birds. They are then sold into generally a single bird household.

So what happens? Many of these birds have not developed an appropriate sense of self. Although not the same as imprinting, these birds often have a human self-orientation. As a result, an abnormal human-bird bond develops, which produces many problem behaviours:

- Separation anxiety. The new human family becomes the bird's flock. The bird does not understand why the flock leaves it alone all day, defenceless. If this were a wild scenario, the alone bird would be predated upon. This situation causes severe anxieties for many companion birds.
- Aggression. The new owners generally have no real understanding of the techniques required to discipline or train their bird, as would naturally occur in the flock situation. Therefore you will hear of many birds becoming "feral" and aggressive after being cuddly babies.
- Sexually fuelled separation anxiety. Before maturity, the bird will choose a mate from the human flock. The bird has the same expectations as the wild breeding pairs. The bird expects never to be more than a few metres from its breeding mate. It does not understand the need for us to enter another room

without it, go to work or leave for holidays. Again, extreme separation anxieties occur, resulting in screaming, feather plucking and other self-mutilation, stereotypic behaviours, aggression, and destructive behaviours.

- Mate aggression. The bird will adore one family member (its breeding mate) but attack all others which come close.

- Territorial aggression. These birds will defend their cage from other flock members, biting anyone who ventures too near the nest site (cage). Often birds will develop a predilection for different locations around the house for nesting and defence, e.g., behind kitchen appliances, in drawers, behind cushions, under beds or other furniture or inside the owner's clothes whilst being worn!

- Sexual frustration. Aggression is not an uncommon result of failure to provide gratification.

- Excessive egg production. Female birds (hens) breed as a result of several external factors. The primary factors are generally long day lengths, a high energy diet and a stablemate (human or feathered).

Birds with an abnormal human-bird bond, kept under artificial light after dusk and in a temperature-controlled environment, have all the prerequisites for egg-laying whether a nesting area is supplied or not.

Conures & Caiques are instinctively hollow, and cavity sleepers are not natural perch sleepers.

Nest/Sleeping boxes for mature hens is essential as they use the box and material in it to create heat and humidity that is a vital part in the passing of an egg more freely as the warmth and humidity relax their muscles for laying their eggs (Apart from diet) not being able to get the required warmth to relax their muscles is a significant contributing factor in the cause for egg binding in hens sadly.

Birds learn to be birds in this initial social development window, and once this abnormal human self-identification occurs, it is essentially impossible to reverse. As a result, many owners consider getting another bird to alleviate the anxiety. Still, without social interaction skills, they often appear to live like "two lamps on a shelf" with no recognition of each other.

It is difficult to entirely eliminate these problem behaviours once this abnormal bond develops, but they can be ameliorated with education and training.

Of course, prevention is better than cure. For example:

- Educating breeders about the detrimental effects that the present method of hand-raising has on birds is a start.
- Encouraging breeders to crèche weaned birds for some time after weaning to allow socialisation with other birds ensuring a "bird self-orientation" develops.
- Banning the sale of unweaned birds and promoting the benefits of multiple bird households, and
- Educating potential owners about what to look for in a new bird before its purchase.

We must continue to educate breeders and future companion bird owners of the potential problems resulting from the development of abnormal human bird bonds. We can encourage new bird owners to seek education through a new bird examination by an avian veterinarian. Further education can be sought through parrot preschool and training workshops the larger bird societies provide.