

BITING PARROTS

Why They Do It and How To Control It

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During my behaviour consultations, I have encountered many different manifestations of aggression in pet parrots. This article discusses what I find to be the most common – biting – and how to use the foundation of what Blanchard calls Nurturing Dominance or Nurturing Guidance to control it. Fortunately, I find this to be one of the easiest parrot behaviour problems to correct – IF the owner is patient and consistent. **Biting Isn't "Natural"** It is important to understand that parrots in the wild rarely appear to use their beaks as a weapon against other parrots. If needed, the beak is a protection against predators such as snakes and raptors (birds of prey), but not against others in their own flock. In their natural environments, competition and/or conflict between parrots rarely escalates to physical violence --- instead, they vocalize (scream) and/or use body language by strutting, posturing, and fluffing feathers to make themselves look bigger. Beaks are used for climbing, eating, playing (wrestling) and preening... not for biting. This means that biting is not instinctive behaviour -- in actuality, biting is considered to be a "displacement behaviour." Parrots only have two mechanisms of defence, flight and bite, and in that order, if clipped, their first method of defence has been removed, so that leaves bite as the only form of defence or communicating their displeasure of anything. Natural behaviours design for survival in the rain forest are generally not possible in a human's living room so other behaviours take their place -- these are displacement behaviours. These "improvised" responses are not all negative, either --- a positive example would be a parrot's ability to bond to a human in the absence of members of its own species, and to accept the humans with whom it lives as members of its flock.

Why Is The Bird Biting?

The first question to ask when dealing with a biting parrot is why --- under what circumstance is this happening? From my experience, birds bite for generally one of two reasons: survival or control. The category of "survival" would include a bird biting when it is terrified (i.e. when your smoke detector goes off and your parrot runs

up your face) or when it is hurt. Contrary to that nice old saying, most animals CANNOT sense when you're trying to help them (i.e. "I was only trying to pull a broken blood feather, but he bit the @&%\$# out of me!") A slight variation on this theme would be hormonal behaviour, which I will discuss in more detail in another article. Suffice it to say, an increase in aggression is common with many life forms when hormone levels are raging -- after all, look at many teenagers! (The parallel I like to use is myself and my bouts with PMS). Learning the bird's body language will go a long way towards preventing hurt feelings and fingers during this time and the advice is simple: when they are in full sexual display, DON'T REACH FOR THEM. Leave them alone until they settle down.

CONTROL PROBLEMS, or How To Turn A Nice Parrot Into A

Biter Since biting in parrots is a displacement, not an instinctive behaviour, it is logical to assume that the behavior must be reinforced in some way or it would not continue. In other words, if it did not accomplish something positive in the parrot's experience, then the parrot would not continue to do it. This is important to understand: parrots in captivity are actually *rewarded* for biting -- by humans that simply do not understand how differently parrots can perceive things. The following are a few classic examples.

"The Teething Stage" Young bappies (baby parrots) often have no idea what their beaks can do, especially if they were raised isolated from other bappies. During "The Teething Stage", the bappy is learning to eat and explore with it's beak, and a tragic scenario is often acted out. The bappy, in the process of exploring with it's beak, encounters those wondrous things called human fingers. If the human makes the mistake of using their fingers as toys in the baby's mouth, sooner or later the baby will bite down harder than the finger's owner might like. If the human responds to this accidental nip by *yelling* (as in, "OUCH, NO BITE!!!"), then they have inadvertently taken the first step towards actually *teaching* their bappy to bite. Contrary to human beliefs, parrots really enjoy it when humans yell at them. Parrots often scream simply for the fun of it so it is a fallacy to think they perceive that yelling is a reprimand. On the contrary, they generally interpret yelling as positive feed-back. This is what we call The Drama Reward. So the baby parrot will nip again, because the human inadvertently rewarded it for nipping. Sooner or later, the experimental nips will

actually hurt the human (emotionally as well as physically), and the human's response becomes something to the effect of "YOU BAD BABY, YOUR MOMMY (or DADDY) LOVES YOU, HOW COULD YOU BITE YOUR MOMMY (or DADDY)??!?! The bappy doesn't understand what's happening here, of course -- it thinks this is a wonderful new game. You know, grab a finger and your person makes lots of WONDERFUL noise!!

The Wishy Washy Pick Up

This scenario usually happens when an inexperienced owner is not clear in their signals to the parrot. For example, when offering a hand for the bird to step up, a novice owner often isn't quite sure of him/herself... so their hand motion is uncertain. The bappy may wish very much to climb on, but like a workman unsure of the stability of a ladder, it reaches with its mouth (in this case, the beak functions as a hand) to steady the human perch. The human, afraid of that beak, pulls their hand away. Now the bappy is confused! The next time the human's hand is offered uncertainly, the bappy grabs onto the hand with its beak to hold it steady so it can climb on --- and the human jerks away. The baby has no idea what has happened but if the scene is repeated (as it usually is), the bird will learn that its beak will make its person go away. The bappy doesn't really *want* the person to go away, but it is fun to control one's pet human so the behaviour will happen again and a-gain. Once again, the parrot has no idea it has done anything wrong.

Fear = Lost Control

If the human is afraid of being bitten, then he/she will often unconsciously pull away when the bird reaches with their beak. The parrot will now use lunging and biting as an effective technique with which to control the human and that bird will remain in control for as long as the human remains afraid. Parrots can sense when someone is frightened and will take advantage of it every time. If the person cannot get over their fear response, then (s) he will probably never gain control of the bird.

Other Mistakes to Make

So what else DON'T you do? You do not under ANY circumstance, use violence against the bird. If you do, even if you don't physically harm him, you will do

permanent damage to your relationship with him -- like I said earlier, violence does not appear to be a routine flock behaviour, and your parrot simply will not understand your use of violence against him -- so odds are, he will never be able to trust you again. There is a lot of out dated and incorrect advice being given about biting parrots. People are often told to grab the bird's beak and shake it and yell NO!! This doesn't work for two reasons. First, we have now realized that grabbing a parrot's beak [what experts call "Beak Wrestling"], is considered to be *play behaviour* between parrots. Secondly, as mentioned before, parrots *love* the drama of a person yelling. So once again, in our effort to give negative feed-back to parrots, we have only succeeded in rewarding them. It also doesn't usually work to punish by putting the bird in its cage, because by the time you get him there he's probably completely forgotten the connection between biting you and being locked up. Obviously, he can't bite you again because you've removed him from your vicinity, but you haven't taught him anything about NOT BITING.

So What SHOULD You Do?

Enough of this stuff about all the things that don't work -- what exactly does? Actually, it is quite simple. If you have already established a relationship of Nurturing Dominance with your parrot, then he already perceives you as head of the flock and he is already trained to step onto your hand when you say, "Up". To then thoroughly reprimand that bird, you need only do the following things immediately. First, show the bird your displeasure by giving it a REALLY DIRTY LOOK ("The Evil Eye"). I'm really serious about this -- you have to look at it as if it were the lowest of the low, or pond scum, or something you might find stuck to the bottom of your shoe. Parrots are extremely empathic creatures who watch our facial expressions closely. He will understand your displeasure if you give him a tremendously dirty look. Then, make him step from one hand to the other over and over while you keep saying "Up" in a very firm but not loud voice (remember the Drama Reward). Do this several times in a row (i.e., 3-4 times) and you will be amazed at the difference. This is a non-aggressive, nurturing technique with which to give the parrot negative feedback because *parrots really understand this as a reprimand*. We call this technique "Laddering" and it is an exercise in control -- reminding him that YOU are the alpha in the flock, NOT him. If you are *firm* and consistent, reminding him of this will put

him back under control. And without the positive feed-back that he inadvertently received before, the biting should end. When dealing with a bappy in the Teething Stage, it is also quite simple. When the baby bites too hard, say No in a firm voice and give the baby a very dirty look. The bappy will understand that you are unhappy and will try very hard not to do it again. Under NO circumstances should you yell. My favourite story about laddering parrots came from a client of mine named Debbie who has a three year old Yellow Naped Amazon named Charlie. Charlie had been getting overly rambunctious and to regain control, Betsy laddered him over and over with the Up command until he calmed down, then she put him on his perch with the Down command and went on about her business, leaving the room. A few minutes later she returned and found Charlie stomping back and forth on his perch, saying Up! Up! Up! in an EXTREMELY disgusted voice!

Now, THAT is a bird who understands Exactly what laddering means!!

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