

A Brief Overview of Psittacine Behaviour

Sandy Hume
Canberra Veterinary Hospital

What is Psittacine Behaviour?

Like other forms of behavioural medicine, psittacine behavioural medicine is in its' infancy. Dog and cat behavioural medicine are also regarded as very young sciences and still rapidly evolving and expanding. Much of cat and dog behavioural medicine is derived from human behavioural medicine, particularly the methodology, terminology and definitions and pharmacology. Avian behavioural medicine seems to be following in these footsteps

Some of the currently recognised avian behaviourists started working in the field about 25 years ago. Only in the last decade has it become widely recognised as a "serious" part of avian medicine. Although significant articles have been published in previous AAV proceedings, the 1998 proceedings was the first in which it was a dedicated topic at the conference.

Those of us in clinical practice around the world have always been aware of behaviour problems, particularly in relation to feather picking, aggression and screaming. Until recently, few tools have been available to deal with these complex and time-consuming problems. It is easy to put these problems in the too hard basket because all too often, it is too hard. The time, energy and skill required by the clinician, owner and bird to solve the problems is enormous. The argument for taking a preventive approach wherever possible is overwhelming.

Why Do We See Behaviour Problems?

It has been demonstrated in every species studied, that behaviour is the end product of a complex interaction involving individual and species genetic makeup, neurochemistry, neurophysiology, learning, and internal and external stimuli.

A problem such as feather picking for example, may be directly caused by 1 of these factors or many combined. It is well documented that as the length of time of the behaviour increases, the behaviour becomes more strongly embedded through reinforcement. More importantly, due to the plasticity of the nervous system, the behaviour, related anxieties, fears and phobias literally become "hardwired" into the brain and CNS.

From this point on, even if the bird wanted, it is unable to spontaneously change its behaviour or control its anxiety when faced by the normal challenges of its daily life. Generally the problems just get worse. Its ability to interpret the world has been reprogrammed.

This situation can be reversed. However, the causal factors must be removed and a therapeutic set of stimuli and behaviour patterns put in their place. If the problem is longstanding and has become “hardwired”, considerable time, effort and skill are needed to reverse the changes and “rewire” the bird. Some are never “cured” but the problems become controlled and manageable. Whilst this sounds pessimistic, if done properly, the success rate is very high.

Again whilst still in its infancy, the judicious use of drugs *in combination* with behavioural modification, can be very useful in the early stages of therapy. The main role of drugs is to allow anxious or phobic animals to become calm enough to concentrate and learn the new behaviours that will heal them. Whilst drugs are not a substitute for behavioural modification, some animals never become drug free.

Psittacine Behavioural Traits Relevant to Behaviour Problems

1. Fear

Psittacines are prey species and they view the world as an extremely dangerous place. Any new objects, people, animals, noises or activities are potential threats until proved otherwise. This is in stark contrast to the way normal cats and dogs view the world. In other words Am I going to be eaten? versus What does it taste like? Therefore in birds, many behaviour problems seen in birds, particularly feather picking and aggression, are the result of fear and anxiety about personal safety.

2. Social Organisation

Psittacines are flock animals for both survival and reproductive purposes. They have a complex social system, which is a large and vital part of their existence. Failure to satisfy these needs is a common source of behaviour problems

- Lack of social interaction and companionship is thought to be a major cause of screaming and feather picking due to separation anxiety.
- Conversely many birds seem to require a lot of sleep, 10-12 hours a night and an afternoon siesta. Problems can occur when birds are overexposed to late night activities in particular
- Birds are very hierarchical. The mechanisms are complex and bird signalling is not fully understood yet. Height and eye contact are considered very important. In general it is advised to interact with birds by keeping their eye level just below your shoulders. Any higher and they feel dominant, resulting in aggression. Much lower and you become extremely threatening. Dominance problems in birds are very common, especially in larger birds sitting on shoulders. Dominance is also a key issue in solving behaviour problems, as owners will need to be taught to become dominant, without being overtly threatening, to enable the effective use of behaviour modification techniques.
- Birds make noise. Screaming at dusk and dawn is normal behaviour for many species. Many birds also love loud, dramatic displays, so people who become angry and vocal at certain behaviours will actually reward and reinforce them. Prospective buyers of birds need to be aware of the noise factor of their preferred species.
- Sexual Politics. Psittacines are generally monogamous and if encouraged, often inadvertently become pair bonded to a specific family member. When this occurs, often at social maturity, aggression to others and their “mate” becomes problematic.

- Territoriality. This particularly applies to a bird's cage. This may be the only safe haven for the bird and if it is invaded it may produce either aggression or a flight response injuring bird or owner. Birds need to be given some space to feel secure. Also placing another bird, particularly a female into a males' established territory is a common cause of severe injuries.

7. Wild Caught Birds

Unless they are caught extremely young and/or hand raised, these are the most problem prone birds. Their perception of themselves as prey species is most powerfully ingrained and difficult to extinguish. They are the worst pet option.

8. Captive Bred Birds

Adult bird raised, aviary bred birds are more habituated to living with humans and our pets, but few could actually be called tame. Hand raised birds are always going to make the best pets, and whilst many aviculturists dispute this point, I believe they will ultimately make the best breeding birds for the pet market. The importance of selecting those birds with the best pet type qualities and behaviours is vital if we are ever going to approach the same degree of domestication seen in cats and dogs.

Remember, apart from a few species such as budgies, cockatiels and canaries, most bird species in captivity are only a few generations from the wild. They do not have the thousands of years of selection for domestication that cats and dogs do. This means that whilst some birds "domesticate" readily, many others will not and people need to be aware that this lack of consistency is common.

9. Hand Raising

This is an important issue in itself. Not all hand raising is of the same quality. This has become an important issue in the USA in particular. A number of people such as Phoebe Green-Linden have been very vocal in criticising mass production techniques, which do little to socialise birds or provide mental and physical stimulation during vital developmental periods. It is postulated that this is the reason that many of these birds develop severe behaviour problems in later life. Similar experiments on other animals and people have shown exactly this. I feel that good hand raising technique is one of the most powerful weapons we have in the prevention of behaviour problems. I would encourage all of you who have clients producing the larger species in particular, for the pet market, to examine these techniques.

10. Emotional Intelligence

In general, psittacine birds are regarded as having the emotional range of a 2-3yo child. And it does not progress. On the positive side this encourages birds to be playful, curious, enjoy social interaction and be affectionate. The downside is that psittacines can be overactive, have short attention spans, be possessive of people and things, can produce dramatic tantrums and attention seeking displays and be very self centred. Their owners need to be aware that this is for life.

11. Intellectual Intelligence

Many psittacine birds are regarded as having the intellect of a 5-6yo child, which is considerable. Therefore their need for intellectual stimulation and interaction is very high. If unsatisfied it will cause severe frustration. Birds are very high maintenance pets. Lots of interesting toys, which need to be rotated, cage furniture and game playing by the owner will help keep birds tired and happy. We have no problem doing the same thing for our dogs.

Preventing Behaviour Problems

Help owners select the right bird. There is lots of information aimed at both professionals and lay people. An excellent reference is “The Appropriate Bird for the Appropriate Owner”¹.

Help your aviculturist clients match the right owner to the right bird.

Encourage hand raising of birds that are well socialised and well adapted, if they are for the pet market.

Educate your clients on the basics of bird behaviour and nutrition in particular. Many behavioural problems seem to have some genesis in poor nutrition. The concept of “Bird leadership” is most important if people are going to have an easy relationship with their bird.

Parrot parties. Not yet a reality in Australia but not far off. It will mainly be an opportunity to educate clients rather than a lot of parrot training and socialisation. The Avian Behaviour Booklet² is an ideal starter kit.

Discover and encourage people in the avicultural industry who are interested and talented in the field of behaviour. This can give you access to a behaviour consultant who can provide a valuable service for your clients that you are unlikely to be able to provide. Successful behavioural modification needs considerable long-term support.

References and Useful Resources

1. Wilson L. The Appropriate Bird for the Appropriate Owner. *Sem Avian Exotic Pet Med.* Oct 1999;8:165-173
2. Welle K. *Psittacine Behaviour Handbook*. Association of Avian Veterinarians. 1999 Bedford Texas, USA
3. Davis C. Behaviour. In: Altman R, Clubb S, Dorrestein G, Quesenberry K, *Avian Medicine and Surgery*. Philadelphia PA: WB Saunders 1997:96-100
4. Davis C. Behavioural Problems. In: Altman R, Clubb S, Dorrestein G, Quesenberry K, *Avian Medicine and Surgery*. Philadelphia PA: WB Saunders 1997:653-658
5. Behaviour: Section 2 of the Proc Assoc Avian Vet 2000, Portland, Oregon
6. Behaviour: Section 2 of the Proc Assoc Avian Vet 1999, New Orleans, Louisiana
7. Behaviour: Section 4 of the Proc Assoc Avian Vet 1998, St Paul, Minnesota