

The "One Person" Bird

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Psittacine birds exist in large flocks the wild, and spend large amounts of time congregating and socializing with members of the flock. During breeding season, breeding ready pairs often spend increasing amounts of time in seclusion, even actively chasing and rebuffing other flock members. Once young are fledged, birds return to "flock status."

A well-socialized bird in a human flock should tolerate the presence of other flock members, and be willing to interact to some degree with confident, willing humans. The "One Person" bird that actively drives all but the preferred person away and will not tolerate other people near the preferred person is often engaged in a pair or sexual bond. Serious aggression can result. Prolonged hormonal stimulation may result in a variety of adverse physical and psychological effects. In contrast, it should be noted that birds that exhibit fear toward strangers likely suffer from poor socialization.

The ideal time for intervention is actually prevention, specifically, the young bird's very first veterinary visit. The average first-time bird visit includes, in addition to physical examination and wellness testing, extensive behavioral instruction, with demonstration and practice in the examination room, and written go-home "homework". The average first-time visit can last an hour or more. Therefore, in the author's practice, experienced technicians assume much of the responsibility for the client education portion of the visit, which is reinforced when the veterinarian enters the room.

At every subsequent visit, the technician collects a thorough "behavioral history" along with the standard medical history to help immediately identify those birds in need of intervention. Questions must be direct and pointed: "Do you have any behavioral problems?" is much less useful than a more specific inquiry such as "Will your bird willingly step up for every member of your household?"

TIPS TO PREVENT CREATION OF THE "ONE PERSON BIRD"

Tips that help prevent the "one person bird" are also those that help create a well-socialized, well-adjusted member of the household in general:

1. Establish a favorite food reward that can be used to positively reinforce desired behavior. Most young birds willingly cooperate with owners; however, like human children, they generally require specific motivation to continue desired behaviors later in life. The treat should be small and readily accessible, for example, small bits of nuts in a sealed container.
2. Train birds from an early age to step up and step down from the hand to a training perch, and back, and to enter and exit the cage on command. Reward each success with verbal praise and a treat (see 1. above) All able members of the household and willing confident strangers should practice step up and step down commands regularly for life.
3. Do not allow the bird to perch anywhere except for the hand, and only when invited.

4. Actively work to prevent the bird from bonding to one person. A valuable technique is the “hot potato” game, where the bird is gently and quietly passed from person to person receiving positive reinforcement (praise, brief petting, treat) from each participant.
5. Minimize touching and stroking the bird, and limit petting to brief scratches on the head.
6. Encourage natural flock behavior by establishing multiple “stations” in the house where the bird can join household activities independently (without being carried and entertained). Examples include the kitchen nearby during meals and in the family room during television time. Stations should include toys and other interesting activities.
7. Minimize other external factors thought to trigger breeding readiness, such as increasing photoperiod, and presence of a nest or nesting materials.

TIPS TO HELP BREAK THE “ONE PERSON BIRD” BOND

Birds already engaged in bonding behavior may need intervention to help re-establish a healthy social bond. While some practitioners advocate the use of hormonal therapy, the author has found that most birds can be managed with behavioral modification alone. When hormonal therapy is used, it must be in conjunction with behavioral modification for optimal success.

1. Have a “bird divorce”. The preferred person should not handle or interact with the bird for an extended period, preferably until other family members are able to successfully interact with the bird as noted above. Any solicitation from the bird or attempts to make contact should result in the owner actively shunning the bird by leaving the area.
2. Destroy the “nest”. Move the bird temporarily to an unfamiliar cage in an unfamiliar area of the house to simulate “nest gone.” The new cage should contain new toys and furniture.
3. Have other members of the household work on step up and step down, preferably in a neutral location away from familiar areas of the house, as described above, with verbal praise and a treat reward. Beginning step up exercises from the floor is often beneficial with aggressive birds and less confident owners.

RECOMMENDED READING

Blanchard S (1999). maintaining flock acceptance. Companion Parrot handbook. Oakland Ca Abbey Press, p 177.

Wilson L and Lightfoot T (2006). Concepts in Behavior: Section III. In Harrison G, Lightfoot T (eds) Clinical Avian Medicine. Spix Publishing, Palm Beach FL, p 73-84.