

BEHAVIOR: NORMAL & ABNORMAL

Juvenile Feeding Behavior and Defensive Behavior

Baby altricial (hatched naked and fed by the parents) birds have normal behaviors designed to either obtain food or protect themselves from danger. The first is the begging/chirping that prompts the parents to regurgitate food. When the parents begin to feed, the young bird begins head-bobbing to keep the flow of food coming from the parent. Another normal behavior of baby psittacines is “swaying and growling” when the nest is disturbed. This behavior is self-defense designed to frighten away predators and gradually ceases as the bird weans.

Sleeping Habits

In the wild, psittacines are active during daylight hours and sleep during the evening and nighttime hours. Caging for sleeping should be provided to attempt to mimic these patterns as close as possible. It may be best to have a sleeping cage in a dark, quiet place – away from evening and nighttime family activity – in order for the bird to get adequate sleeping time.

Biting

Birds bite, some more than others. This can be a complex problem and one that can be discussed in detail with your avian veterinarian. Birds also bite to hold on to lift themselves up, like using a third hand. This is “grasping” rather than aggression biting.

Birds bite in self-defense. Until a bird is accustomed to handling by humans, it may try to bite. Avoidance of the bite until the bird is conditioned to handling through positive reinforcement is the best response. If biting becomes a problem, consult your veterinarian for the name of a reputable trainer.

Social Noise

In the wild, many species of birds congregate in the morning and at dusk for social interaction. These activities include vocalizing, eating, and grooming. A common complaint in the pet home is that pet psittacines “scream” morning and evening. This is normal vocalizing behavior of the bird and it may be unrealistic to expect it to change. The bird will consider the humans in its home as its social contact, and want to maintain the “communication” it would normally have with other birds. Try using this time to interact with the bird. Social activity is an important part of the bird’s day, and may help build a proper social flock relationship between you and the bird. The best attitude is to let the bird have its social noise and accept it as part of keeping a bird as a pet. If the bird(s) are outdoors, try to prevent neighbor complaints; create a sound buffer between the birds and neighbors.

Inappropriate Copulating Behavior

Birds that are not paired with suitable mates or that are bonded with their owners may attempt unnatural copulation. The targets of this misplaced behavior are often cage fixtures, toys, human hands, or cagemates. Such behavior should not be encouraged. Removing the inappropriate objects of the bird’s affection, are the most common responses to this problem. Sexual behaviors can be curbed by a number of measures including controlling caloric intake, encouraging foraging, cessation of inappropriate petting behavior, removing real or perceived nesting sites, light cycle control, and certain medications. If reproduction is desired, birds ideally should be paired with a mate of the same species. If two species are paired that may produce hybrid offspring, it is best they be separated and properly paired. If the birds are compatible cagemates and where reproduction cannot possibly occur, such as a cockatiel and a budgie, the birds are of similar size, and one is not injuring the other or exhibiting mating behavior, no harm is done by permitting them to remain together.

Stereotypical Behavior

If the bird develops a pattern of behavior that is nonsensical, incessant, or habitual, such as pacing, head bobbing, rocking, swinging the head or body, or spinning, it should be examined by a veterinarian. Causes could range from disease to boredom. Disease should first be ruled out as a cause, but boredom is a frequent cause of obsessive behavior. Every attempt should be made to provide the bird with environmental enhancements such as toys or interesting foods. Nontoxic, non-injurious items that the bird can destroy or take apart are one choice.

Talking Birds

Some parrots and softbills talk, most do not. If you want to teach the bird a few words, it is best to separate them from other birds as early as possible, and teach them by repetition. The model-rival method has been shown to be the best method of teaching birds to talk, and even use language appropriately. Investigate which species are likely to talk before purchase if talking ability is important in your choice of a pet bird.



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Feather/Skin Picking

Birds that have underlying disease problems or psychological problems may pull feathers or tear at their own or another bird's skin. The bird should be seen by an avian veterinarian at the first sign of feather picking in order to rule out a potentially serious medical problem. Watch for an unusual number of feathers or pieces of feathers on the bottom of the cage.

Some feather destructive behaviors, especially those that involve simply cutting or shredding feathers may be linked to boredom, poor socialization or anxiety. Proper housing, provision of toys and teaching to "forage" for food is important for any bird. A consultation with a qualified avian behaviorist may be beneficial.

Actual feather plucking may have behavioral origins as well. However, as pulling feathers out is actually painful to birds, this represents a serious behavioral abnormality. All attempts must be made to rule out underlying medical disorders before diagnosing any bird with a strictly "behavioral" feather disorder.

If one bird is pulling feathers from a cagemate, the birds should be separated as this behavior can sometimes lead to injury if the feather pulling becomes too aggressive. Normal molt is a semiannual event not related to behavior but does not usually expose the underlying down or bare skin.

Observation

Observation is the best tool for helping your veterinarian with a diagnosis. If the bird exhibits behavior problems, make a video or take notes about what is happening before, during, and after the behavior occurs to take to your avian veterinarian for evaluation. Birds will often continue to eat and drink when they are sick. This common behavior helps sick birds avoid attracting the attention of predators. Ask your veterinarian for the AAV brochure "Signs of Illness in Birds" to help you evaluate your bird's general health.

AAV: Setting a Standard in Avian Care Since 1980

Avian medicine is a distinct and very specialized field that requires extensive training, advanced skills, and facilities specifically designed and equipped to treat and hospitalize birds. The Association of Avian Veterinarians was established to provide veterinarians with this special education, and to keep them up to date with the latest information on bird health. The AAV holds an annual conference on avian medicine and publishes the peer-reviewed *Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery*. AAV also makes annual contributions toward avian conservation and sponsors studies advancing the understanding of avian medicine.

For More Information

For more information on birds, ask your veterinarian for copies of the following AAV Client Education Brochures:

- Avian Chlamydiosis and Psittacosis
- Veterinary Care for Your Pet Bird*
- Basic Care for Companion Birds*
- Behavior: Normal and Abnormal
- Caring for Backyard Chickens
- Digital Scales
- Feather Loss
- Feeding Birds
- Injury Prevention and Emergency Care
- Managing Chronic Egg-laying in Your Pet Bird
- Signs of Illness in Companion Birds*
- Ultraviolet Lighting for Companion Birds
- When Should I Take My Bird to a Veterinarian?*
- Zoonotic Diseases in Backyard Poultry*

**Available in multiple languages. All others are available in English only at this time.*

Online Resources

Follow AAV on Facebook (www.facebook.com/aavonline) for great tips and the latest news for pet bird owners. You can also find us on Twitter (@aavonline) and YouTube!

Our website, www.aav.org, offers a Find-a-Vet tool to help pet bird owners locate avian veterinarians around the world. We also offer a variety of resources such as basic bird care instructions and more. Visit the website today!



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