WHO'S A NAUGHTY PARROT, THEN?

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GREG GLENDELL examines the most common behavioural difficulties seen in companion parrots

THE sight of a badly plucked parrot in the surgery with its owner hoping for some cure is all too frequent.

Sometimes the bird has removed 90 per cent of its own feathers and may even be mutilating its own flesh. We might ask why such a sight is so common in parrot-like birds. It is, of course, as easy to acquire these exotic birds as it is to acquire a hamster, a rat or a goldfish.

Buyers are simply required to be more than 16 years old. Most of the needs of species such as small domesticated rodents can be met while these animals are kept as pets - the provision of these needs is not particularly demanding for the animal's keeper. Nor are these animals particularly long-lived.

Conversely, the mediumsized and larger parrots have complex needs and a lifespan similar to humans (Low, 1992). However, it is as easy to acquire a parrot as it is any other commonly available species and this ease of acquisition bears no relationship to the knowledge required to keep tha t bird well. This is perhaps at the heart of the matter when we look at the quality of care many parrots receive as companion animals.

While the condition of the plumage of wild parrots varies and these birds may damage each others' feathers, there are no incidents of self harming in wild parrots - the behaviour is confined to captive birds. Here, the condition seems more common in lone (caged) companion birds, as opposed to aviary birds that have the company of their own kind. Since there may well be dietary and medical

issues that contribute to self harming in parrots, these aspects should always be investigated when presented with a bird in this condition.

However, self harming always includes a behavioural component, since the bird is making a voluntary decision to damage its own body, so this aspect needs to be examined as well.

We know that where an animal's behavioural needs are frustrated, it is vulnerable to behavioural problems. Engebretson (2006) writes: “The freedom to express normal behaviour and the freedom from distress appear to be inextricably linked in captive parrots and other birds kept as pets.”

While we do not have many detailed studies of the behavioural ecology of many specie of wild parrots, we do know that they are highly social animals that typically spend most of the day engaged in foraging for a range of foods, fl ying and mutual preening (Birchall, 1990).

Captive parrots, in addition to being unable to perform many of their normal, natural daily behaviours, are also subjected to a range of other common management practices within the bird-keeping world, which would seem likely to exacerbate behavioural frustrations. These include parental deprivation (hand rearing), being confined to small cages for most of the time, deprivation of flight through wing clipping and being kept in solitude. It is worth reviewing how captive parrots are produced and kept at present.

Hand rearing

While some aviculturists allow some of their breeding pairs to raise their own young, most parrots are hand reared.

Even before the ending of the commercial importation of wildcaught birds into the European Union last year, most captivebred parrots destined for the pet trade were being hand reared. The hand rearing process may start with removal of eggs, as these are incubated artificially. The reasons for hand rearing are essentially commercial.

Where eggs are removed from a laying female, she is stimulated to re-lay her “lost” clutch, so more eggs can be sourced from her each year than is natural. As a result of being fed by humans as neonates, hand reared parrots exhibit submissive behaviours to humans. This trait continues at least until the birds reach maturity at two to five years old (depending on the species).

The submissive behaviours ensure the birds are tractable and can be handled by potential buyers - “cuddle-tame” parrots sell much quicker in the pet shops than those that are not so tame.

At sexual maturity, many hand reared parrots tend to show sexual imprinting to humans. The process of hand rearing has adverse effects on the behaviour of African grey parrots when they mature (Schmid, Doherr and Steiger, 2005). Indeed, many behavioural problems do not manifest

until the birds become young adults. Typically, these problems include over-bonding to one member of the householdand aggressive biting ofanyone who approaches thebird's favoured person.

The bird's normal contact calls often escalate into distress calls whenever the favoured person leaves the room, so the bird becomes a “screamer” or noise nuisance. These sexually imprinted birds experience behavioural frustrations with which they fail to cope. These birds are then vulnerable to a range of unwanted behaviours, the most common being stereotypies and self harming of feathers. This tends to manifest itself when the birds are no longer immature. So the hand rearing, or what we might more accurately call parental deprivation, sets in place a behavioural time bomb with a two to five year delay in behavioural problems. Indeed, according to Schmid, Doherr and Steiger, the maladaptive behaviours of hand reared birds appears to be largely in proportion to the amount of parental deprivation they have experienced.

Where birds are part-parent raised (not removed from the nest until at least eight weeks old), they suffer fewer behavioural problems as adults than those that have been solely hand reared from the day of hatching. In addition to adverse behavioural issues caused by hand rearing, there can be adverse physical effects, including osteodystrophy (Harcourt- Brown, 2003, 2004).

Flight deprivation

Birds use their ability to fly to escape from many fearful situations. While this escape response is the bird's most essential predator-avoidance mechanism, it is also used to avoid a range of other adverse encounters. However, parrots are often subjected to wing clipping, even if they are still immature birds.

Clipped birds will still execute this fear-induced, escape-by-flight behaviour, since they have little control of how it is initiated.

Such birds are then at risk of crash landing and injuring themselves. So, an already fearful situation is exacerbated by the bird's often painful crash landings. Such events would not be repeated in a wild bird, since a flightless wild bird would soon be dead.

These events can trigger so-called “phobic” behaviours in parrots. Phobic birds display an apparently exaggerated fear in response to “harmless” situations (Luescher, 2006).

In my experience, many phobic birds are flight impaired due to self mutilation or having their wings clipped. Since these birds cannot employ their escape reaction their phobia is likely to be reinforced each time they try to avoid some fearful event.

If they do not escape the problem because they cannot, and possibly hurt themselves when crash landing, then pain and fear become more frequent and unavoidable realities to them. Where phobic

birds have flight restored (by imping or removal of feather stumps to initiate replacement) their confidence improves and their fearful reactions tend to subside.

As clipped birds risk breaking their growing blood feathers, imping also offers good protection while these feathers grow back. Non-wing-clipped birds can, of course, easily be taught several requests to fly to and from their keepers and this obviates the apparent need for wing clipping.

Over-use of the cage

Were dogs and cats to be confined to small cages and only let out for an hour or two each day, we would not be surprised to see more incidences of behavioural problems in these animals.

Captive birds are, by default, often confined to cages for most of their lives. For parrots, overuse of small cages - which may also be bereft of environmental stimulation - commonly leads to stereotypical behaviours, particularly route tracing and self plucking (Meehan, Garner and Mench, 2003).

However, where birds have many hours out of their cages each day and are provided with a stimulating environment, which includes facilities to forage for some foods, they are far less likely to suffer behavioural problems. Without direct, physical contact with their keepers or other birds, the caged bird is, essentially, in solitary confinement.

While captive parrots are commonly subjected to some or all of the above conditions (conditions that are inimical to their behavioural needs), they have a further common problem.

This relates to how their keepers interact with them when they are out of the cage.

Relationship with owner

Where the bird's keeper can be persuaded to provide it with a more stimulating general environment - which includes several hours out of the cage each day, facilities for foraging for some food and flying opportunities - the bird's general behavioural frustrations will be reduced. However, some unwanted behaviours, such as biting and self plucking, may still occur. Changing these behaviours will require a more focused, scientific approach from the bird's keeper. In my view, the most effective means of reducing and even eliminating unwanted behaviours is to use methods grounded in applied behaviour analysis (ABA). The use of ABA for modifying some parrot behaviours has been advocated for some years by Susan Friedman (see www.thegabrielfoundation.com) in the USA. The efficacy and suitability of ABA lies in its use of positive reinforcement (rewards) for desired behaviours, while eschewing any aversive interactions with birds (such as punishment or negative reinforcement).

The rewards used are determined, essentially, by the particular bird. Some respond very well to

food treats, others will “work” for a head scratch or access to a favourite toy (Glendell, 2007). Where unwanted behaviours occur, a non-antagonistic approach is maintained. Birds are not reprimanded or “challenged” for any unwanted behaviour. The concept of “dominating” a bird and forcing it to do certain actions and be 100 per cent compliant is rejected, largely on welfare grounds.

As a highly social animal, a parrot's need for companionship and company can be used to ask it to refrain from unwanted behaviours. So, instead of returning a “bad” bird to its cage in response to some unwanted behaviour, the keeper calmly removes himself or herself from the company of the bird for a few minutes by walking out of the room.

Once a bird understands the connection between an unwanted behaviour and its favoured person leaving it, it has an incentive to cease the behaviour. To make real progress in the care of companion parrots, many traditional practices (in particular, many avicultural practices) need to be dispensed with.

A cessation of hand rearing - simply letting parrots raise their own progeny - will certainly help. Training birds to accept some simple flight requests from their keepers removes the “need” for wing clipping and most birds learn these requests within a few days.

Ensuring owners are fully aware of the need for birds to be out of their cages for many hours each day will also help.

Of course, all of this first requires people to change their behaviour, and that is always the really difficult task for vets and behaviourists alike.

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Stimulation can stop birds from self harming.

This parrot has been plucking its own feathers. Behavioural problems are just one factor to consider.