Husbandry Considerations for Better Behavioral Health in Psittacine Species

Lynne M. Seibert, DVM, MS, PhD, DACVB
Veterinary Behavior Consultants
Kirkland, Washington

Keeping psittacine species as companions presents several unique challenges that are not involved in the ownership of dogs or cats. Because psittacine species are prey species, they respond differently than dogs and cats to seemingly benign challenges, such as the introduction of a novel item, sudden gestures, or even minor changes to the environment. Most psittacine species kept in captivity do not have the extended history of domestication that dogs and cats have. Because of a tendency to form flocks in the wild and the important functions of these flocks, psittacine species may be less tolerant of isolation from conspecifics in captivity. Many psittacine species have a life expectancy similar to that of humans, requiring a lifelong commitment from the caregiver. In addition, most psittacine species remain reproductively intact, which can contribute to behavior problems as the birds reach sexual maturity.

Husbandry considerations that affect mental wellness and behavior in pet birds have been reviewed by Luescher and Wilson1 and me.2 Environmental considerations for pet birds include air quality, social interaction, intellectual stimulation, diet variation, foraging opportunities, adequate sleep, reduction of stressors, exercise, appropriate housing, and expression of species-typical behaviors. Inadequate husbandry for exotic species is an extremely important welfare issue, contributing to both mental and physical suffering. Caregivers should be encouraged to learn effective behavior modification techniques to address common behavioral issues, including screaming, reproductive behaviors, and biting.

PET SELECTION

Many psittacine species are available as pets, and selection of the appropriate species is critical in developing a healthy human–bird bond. Veterinarians and aviculturists can counsel potential bird owners in selecting the appropriate species and individual with regard to size, life expectancy, noise level, space requirements, friendliness, intelligence, destructiveness, feeding behavior, mimicry ability, cost to maintain, exercise requirements, social needs, and susceptibility to disease. Bird owners need to understand the specific requirements and behavioral idiosyncrasies of the particular species of interest. Understanding and recognizing normal avian behavior are important in maintaining reasonable expectations for bird ownership.

Practitioners should support aviculturists who allow baby birds to be weaned by their psittacine parents and combine parent rearing with early exposure to human handling. Potential owners should be encouraged to purchase only parent-weaned birds. The detrimental effects of hand weaning and maternal deprivation on development are well documented in various species; therefore, rearing of baby birds by human surrogates is not recommended.
In addition to addressing the physical needs of the bird, enclosures should provide privacy and security. One side of the cage should be placed against a wall or covered with a blanket. A hide (i.e., a soft or solid barrier for privacy) can also be provided in the cage.

The ideal position of the enclosure depends on the bird. Timid birds or birds that aggressively defend their cages can benefit from the cage being placed in a low-traffic area. Outgoing, friendly birds can benefit from the cage being placed in a high-traffic area to maximize social interaction. Varying the location of the cage may benefit some birds. A variety of stable perching options should be placed primarily at or above the eye level of standing family members.

Bird owners should examine the environment and minimize their bird’s direct contact with stressful stimuli (e.g., predator species, drafts, sudden or loud noises). Psittacine species should be allowed out of their cages for regular exercise, with the owners providing appropriate supervision and attention to safety. A variety of playpen stands, play gyms, hanging perches, freestanding perches, and activity centers are available for birds. Flighted birds can be trained to wear a harness and leash for outdoor safety. Because of predator risks, psittacine species should never be left outdoors unsupervised, even in a cage.

FORAGING OPPORTUNITIES
Pet birds should be fed a variety of nutritious foods on a schedule that mimics natural feeding behavior. Free-choice feeding of commercial diets does not provide opportunities for foraging. Captive birds may actually prefer to manipulate foraging devices for their food. The provision of foraging opportunities has been shown to reduce feather picking in laboratory-housed psittacine species. Foraging may be enriched by placing food in objects with openings, mixing inedible materials with the food, or placing food behind chewable barriers. In laboratory studies, foraging enrichments were preferred over physical enrichments.

SOCIAL INTERACTION
Pet birds must be provided with some form of social companionship and can form and maintain healthy relationships with humans or nonreproductive relationships with other birds. Meehan et al. found that orange-winged Amazon parrots that were housed with another bird spent less time preening, less time screaming, and more time being active than singly housed cohorts. Parrots housed in pairs were less fearful of human handlers and did not develop repetitive behaviors. Compatibility
is important when considering pair or group housing; some species should not be housed together. Gradual introduction of individuals is recommended with attention to safety. Pair housing that promotes reproductive behaviors should be avoided in nonbreeding situations.

Owners are often the only sources of social interaction available to a pet bird and serve the functions of flock members. It is important for owners to make eye contact, answer contact calls, talk to the bird, play with it, preen it, and involve it in family activities. Some birds respond favorably to hearing recordings of other birds, nature sounds, or music.

Early socialization experiences are important for young birds. Early exposure to a variety of people and novel stimuli that do not cause fear or increase risk for exposure to disease is recommended. Avian social gatherings, playgroups, and flight schools are available in many communities.

**PREDICTABLE ENVIRONMENTS**

Daily activities of psittacine species in the wild, including foraging, maintenance behaviors, and roosting, are highly predictable. Two periods of high activity (i.e., early morning and late afternoon) are common. Captive environments in which feeding, attention, exercise, and sleep are unpredictable do not allow birds to develop skills for coping with challenges. Predictability is important for birds in developing a sense of control.

**TOYS**

A stimulating environment can improve welfare and prevent certain behavior problems in birds. Recommendations include offering a variety of interactive toys that provide intellectual stimulation or simply an opportunity to chew. Birds should be supervised with any new toy. Toys should not contain toxic metals or pieces that might be consumed. Various avian toys are commercially available. Caregivers should provide different toys in varying colors and locations until the bird’s preferences have been determined.

**BATHING**

Many psittacine species enjoy bathing, which, when done regularly, can improve feather quality. Gradual exposure to misting is recommended. Alternatively, these birds can be placed in the shower on a shower perch, taken into the shower with the owner, or given a water dish for bathing. Shower perches are commercially available. The frequency of showering depends on individual preference.

**GROOMING**

Wing trimming, if elected, should be conservative until the bird’s response is known. Wing trimming should be symmetric to allow the bird to glide to the ground but not gain elevation. Poor wing trimming should be avoided, particularly in species predisposed to feather picking. If the bird remains flighted, precautions should be taken to prevent injury during flight. For clumsy birds, it may be advisable to trim the wings and nails at different times or have conservative wing trimming. Nail trimming may be unnecessary if the bird spends some time on concrete perches.

**TRAINING**

Command training can serve several functions for pet birds. It provides intellectual stimulation, improves the human–bird bond through positive interaction, and gives owners a mechanism for directing the bird to engage in positive behaviors. Pet birds should be taught basic commands using positive reinforcement, such as praise, an object reward, or a favorite treat. The number and type of commands that birds can learn are limited only by an owner’s imagination. Birds can be taught to step up, speak, spread their wings, shake, wave, touch a target, swing, turn around, come, and stay. Birds with vocal abilities can also learn to identify and request objects as well as sing songs.

Caregivers should be aware of the impact of attention on their birds and should provide reinforcement in the form of attention only when the bird is engaged in an acceptable activity, such as playing, chewing on appropriate objects, or sitting quietly. Undesirable behaviors should be consistently ignored to prevent inadvertent reinforcement.

Behavior modification should focus on positive reinforcement of desirable actions. In some situations, punishment can be used. Appropriate interventions, known as negative punishment, include leaving the room, withholding attention, placing the bird in a time-out cage, or covering the cage for a few minutes when the bird misbehaves.

**CONCLUSION**

Potential bird owners should receive counseling regarding the ideal species for their environment and caregiving abilities. Birds should be purchased from reputable sources, preferably breeders who follow recommended rearing practices. Re-homed birds may already have behavior problems and may need special placement.

An understanding of the natural behavior of the species is essential in optimizing emotional health in captivity. Recognizing the importance of flock social
behavior and the behavior of prey species is pertinent to psittacine husbandry. The environment must provide security, predictability, and adequate opportunity for sleep, particularly in the absence of flock support.

The intellectual capacity of psittacines is an important husbandry consideration. Caregivers should provide regular mental stimulation in the form of training, language acquisition, objects to manipulate, foraging opportunities, and social interaction.

REFERENCES