

## The Human-Bird Bond and its Impact on Companion Bird Behaviour

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Birds are the most common companion animals in Australia. Most are bred, raised, sold and kept by breeders, retailers and owners with little or no knowledge of their management or care. There has been no firm structure to educate breeders and owners on the management, care or training of these birds. Hence, the primary reason for the rehoming, abandonment or rescue of companion birds is the result of behavioural problems. Many of these problem behaviours are preventable with effective education.

The formation of an abnormal human-bird bond is the primary cause of many of these behaviours.

Firstly, let us overview normal bird social development. I will focus primarily on psittacines (parrots). Most companion birds are altricial, they are hatched dependant on their parents and require intensive nurturing until fledging. Fledging is when the young birds leave the nest for their first flight. These birds are still dependant on their parents for food and protection for varying periods of time from weeks to months after fledging. When the birds are independent from their parents they are deemed to be weaned. After the breeding season, most species of parrots form large family groups or flocks. They will remain in the flock until the following breeding season when adult pairs will again leave the flock for breeding. Non breeding birds will remain in the flock until maturity and breeding opportunities arise. Some parrots do not reach sexual maturity for up to five years and socialisation continues through this adolescent flocking period. When a bird reaches sexual maturity and chooses a mate, an extremely strong, long term monogamous relationship develops. Bonded pairs are always by each other's side 24/7 for their entire lives. This bond has enormous implications for companion birds. When a breeding pair finds a suitable nesting location, generally a tree hollow, they will defend their nest from all other intruders. The innate drive to breed is very strong and considering that most of our companion birds are sexually entire, this also has behavioural implications. If there is nest failure (loss of chicks) then the parents will generally have another breeding attempt.

Now, let's look at the companion bird market.

Most companion birds reaching the pet market are hand raised. This implies that the birds have been taken from the nest at an early stage of development and raised in brooders and fed hand raising formulas from a spoon, syringe or crop needle. Most birds are taken from the nest at approximately two weeks after hatching. This is about the time that the eyelids open but some are taken as eggs, artificially incubated and raised from hatching. This is akin to nest failure in wild birds where the birds are lost due to predation or other causes. Hand raising birds often allows the parents to double or triple clutch in a season. This greatly increases the financial return from a pair of breeding birds. Hand raising also produces birds that are tame and trusting of humans. The hand raised baby birds are kept in brooders, in tubs, either singly or in small clutches and are fed until weaning. This definition of weaning is very different to that which occurs in the wild. Chicks are forced to wean at a very early age, sometimes months earlier than would occur naturally. Weaning of hand raised birds generally starts at the time when the birds fledge and is often completed after two weeks. After fledging, the birds are more difficult to control and often have their wings trimmed prior to developing adequate flight skills. Sale of the birds occurs as soon as weaning has been achieved (and often before). Birds are often sold prior to weaning so the birds can "bond to the new owner". This is extremely detrimental, as I will explain. These birds have essentially been raised in isolation from the time

that they can visualise. They have only seen humans providing a food source and there is minimal socialisation for any of these birds with other birds. They are then sold into generally a single bird household.

So what happens? Many of these birds have not developed an appropriate sense of self. Although not the same as imprinting, these birds often have a human self orientation. As a result an abnormal human- bird bond develops which produces many problem behaviours:

- **Separation anxiety.** The new human family becomes the bird's flock. The bird does not understand why the flock leaves it alone all day, defenceless. If this was a wild scenario, then a lone bird would be predated upon. This situation causes severe anxieties for many companion birds.
- **Aggression.** The new owners generally have no real understanding of the techniques required to discipline or train their bird, as would naturally occur in the flock situation. This is why you will hear of many birds becoming "feral" and aggressive after being cuddly babies.
- **Sexually fuelled separation anxiety.** Before maturity the bird will choose a mate from the human flock. The bird has the same expectations as the wild breeding pairs. The bird expects to never be more than a few metres from its breeding mate. It does not understand the need for us to enter another room without it, go to work or leave for holidays. Again, extreme separation anxieties occur, resulting in screaming, feather plucking and other self mutilation, stereotypic behaviours, aggression and destructive behaviours.
- **Mate aggression.** The bird will adore one family member (its breeding mate) but attack all others which come close.
- **Territorial aggression.** These birds will defend their cage from other flock members, biting anyone which ventures too near the nest site (cage). Often birds will develop a predilection for other sites around the house for nesting and defence e.g. behind kitchen appliances, in drawers, behind cushions, under beds or other furniture or inside the owners clothes whilst being worn!
- **Sexual frustration.** Aggression is not an uncommon result of failure to provide gratification.
- **Excessive egg production.** Female birds (hens) breed as a result of several external factors. The primary factors are generally long day lengths, a high energy diet and a stable mate and nest environment. Birds with an abnormal human-bird bond, kept under artificial light after dusk and on a seed based diet have all the prerequisites for egg laying. These birds generally lay large numbers of eggs. This excess production has a dramatic impact of the hen's nutritional status and often results in osteopaenia, fractures and reproduction complications. When laying, most birds will display territorial aggression around the nest site.

Birds learn to be birds in this initial social development window and once this abnormal human self identification occurs, it is essentially impossible to reverse. Many owners consider getting another bird to alleviate the anxiety but without the skills of social interaction they often appear to live like "two lamps on a shelf" with no recognition of each other.

It is difficult to completely eliminate these problem behaviours once this abnormal bond develops but they can be ameliorated with education and training.

Of course, prevention is better than cure. For example:

- Educating breeders about the detrimental effects that the present method of hand raising has on birds is a start.
- Encouraging breeders to crèche weaned birds for a period of time after weaning to allow socialisation with other birds ensuring a “bird self orientation” develops.
- Banning the sale on unweaned birds and promoting the benefits of multiple bird households, and
- Educating potential owners about what to look for in a new bird prior to its purchase.

We must continue to educate breeders and future companion bird owners of the potential problems that can result from the development of abnormal human bird bonds. We can encourage new bird owners to seek education through a new bird examination by an avian veterinarian. Further education can be sought through parrot preschool and training workshops provided by the larger bird societies.