

Evergreen Avian & Exotic Animal Hospital

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Re-Adjusting a Pair-Bonded Relationship with your Bird

By Dr. Brian Speer, www.medicalcenterforbirds.com

Should your pet bird view you more as a mate than a member of its flock, there is a greater risk of potential reproductive or hormonally mediated problems. This pair bonded relationship becomes even more risky if the majority of the interactive behaviors between you and your bird are of a pair-bond enriching type, as opposed to general flock interactions. Allopreening activities, when offered by their owners to their pet birds, are typically received much more willingly by the bird than true “petting” which does not have a natural counterpart in their wild counterparts. Lengthy or constantly repeated allopreening and other closely interactive activities between owner and pet bird, over time, are similar in many ways with the constant types of enrichment behavior of a bonded and/or mating pair of the bird’s wild counterparts. A continuously reinforced pair bonded relationship between the owner and bird can function in many circumstances as an undesired owner-to-pet bird signal that breeding activity and the hormones and behaviors that come with it, are justified. The reproductively stimulated pet parrot is potentially vulnerable to a wide variety of problems. Many of these problems are initially manifested behaviorally. Some of these may include normal behaviors in an unacceptable or undesired setting such as territoriality, aggression, abnormal vocalization, feather damaging behaviors and masturbation. If not addressed properly, these problems can easily lead to more serious behavioral or medical conditions. Medical problems that can be encountered include but are not limited to chronically recurring egg laying, osteoporosis, weight loss, muscle weakness, bone weakness and fractures, egg binding, egg yolk peritonitis and internal ovulation, cloacal prolapse, oviduct torsion or impaction, and even possibly the sternal mutilation syndrome of cockatoos and foot mutilation syndrome in Amazone parrots.

General actions that need to be pursued to alter the nature of a reproductive pair-bonded relationship between owner and pet bird are outlined below:

1. Reinforce basic training with your bird. A pet bird that has successfully established its own rules in your home and with your behavior is going to be challenging if not impossible to train.
2. Enhance social interaction on a flock basis. By altering the nature of when and how you interact with your bird, the signal sent can be a healthier, flock-based one—and, a lot more fun in more ways than you can imagine!
3. Decrease pair-bond reinforcement interactions. It is not realistic to simply “stop” interacting with your bird in the manner that it is accustomed to. It is important to replace those pair-bonding interactions with more normal flock ones.
4. Standardize the diet and decrease pair-bond reinforcement types of feeding. A lower energy diet and a manner of eating that does not simulate regurgitative feeding is important to send a signal to your bird that reproductive activity is not desired or appropriate.
5. Followup. Regular communication and followup evaluations are essential. Behavior does not usually change after one single action plan is set. Things change, and we need to change and adjust too.

Think of a triangle for your bird’s behavioral health and well-being with social interaction, foraging, and feather care at the points.

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