

Biting in Companion Parrots

Did your bird really bite you?

The parrot beak is not inherently a weapon. Instead it is a sensory organ used to touch and explore the world. Much of the exploration parrots do with their beaks is not biting, however this exploration can get a little rough, or even painful at times.

Baby birds must be taught how far they can go with “beakiness”. Exploration should not be punished or discouraged, but work with your parrot to keep his beak manipulations gentle to save your skin in the future. Train your baby bird to recognize the pain threshold of its humans. When a parrot gets too excited or rough and starts pinching with pressure, softly say the word “gentle”. Be consistent, so the bird gets the message that this type of beak exploration is unacceptable. If the bird is too excited to be gentle, calmly removing your hands from the beak area. Keep a foot toy with vegetable-tanned leather or knotted 100% cotton near to give the baby bird something else to chew on besides your fingers

Why Do Birds Bite?

Biting may become a pattern, but it is not a natural behavior unless a parrot is severely provoked. In the wild, parrots rarely initiate aggression.

Always try to figure out why your parrot bit you.

- Many parrots begin biting as juveniles, when they start asserting themselves to see who within the family will be the flock leader.
- Some birds bite during mating season as a sign of increased hormone activity. While certain Amazon species have the worst reputation for this, other species, such as cockatoos and African Greys may also become hormonal breeding season biters. Defense of territory and/or a perceived mate may be observed.
- Some birds are “recreational biters”. These individuals seem to bite for fun as part of their game playing behavior. *Poicephalus* and caiques may be recreational biters. Recreational biters usually playfully bite someone they like and bite individuals they feel they can dominate more seriously. These individuals often treat domination biting as fun, often chasing and biting someone as part of a game.
- Companion parrots may also bite as a reaction to something that frightens, confuses, or overstimulates them. Lots of parrots go into “overload” behavior when they become excited. Confusion in response to mixed messages or inconsistencies from the human flock is also believed to be an important cause of biting.
- Some parrots bite when they are approached too quickly or if approached by wiggling fingers. Parrots may also bite when approached by a person that is too stressed or whose attention is too unfocused. Attempting to pick up a bird when they are eating or napping can also be a good recipe for trouble.

Behavioral Dos and Don'ts for birds that have shown a tendency to bite:

DO:

...teach your companion parrot limits. Assume flock leadership using nurturing guidance. Teach it that you and other primary care givers are allowed to reach inside the bird's cage without being challenged.

...teach birds to step up onto a finger, hand, arm, or wooden perch when an “up” command is given. Use of a perch may be especially helpful for cranky “hormonal” birds.

...allow a bird that has shown a tendency to bite to be no higher than chest level of the shortest human caregiver—including the perches within its cage and the play gym on top.

...return an overstimulated bird to its cage and leave it alone to let it calm down before you try to handle the bird again.

...respond as quietly as possible, without excitement or aggression. Reacting with anger or drama can quickly escalate the aggression by reinforcing the behavior.

...be prepared to create an abrupt, slight jiggle or “earthquake” if your companion parrot bites at your hand. This serves to make the bird lose its balance and therefore stop biting to retrieve its balance.

...handle the situation yourself if you can. Avoid allowing another person—particularly the parrot’s favorite person—to rescue you from being bitten. A parrot may quickly learn to bite you in order to go back to another person.

DO NOT

...use punishment. Parrots do not possess the long-term sense of cause-and-effect logic to understand that your punishment is related to their behavior. The most effective discipline is a stern “no” while looking directly into the bird’s eyes for no more than a few seconds. A quick dirty look given the minute the parrot misbehaves (“the evil eye”) communicates immediate disapproval that the parrot can understand.

...give a bird that has shown a tendency to bite access to your face via the shoulder, chest, or arm. If the bird is on your finger and lunges, make sure to hold it at chest level and far enough away from your face that it cannot reach you. Only the most trusted birds should be allowed near the face, and even these individuals should be watched for seasonal or territorial mood changes that might lead to biting.

...get in the habit of pulling your finger or hand away from a bird that attempts to bite. One of the best ways to reinforce biting behavior is to jerk your finger or hand away from the striking beak. Most birds begin biting with a tentative attempt at dominance—striking without trying to grab hard. When the owner pulls away from the bird and shows fear, the bird sees this as a submissive reaction and will bite harder the next time.

...insist that your parrot come out when a stranger (“perceived intruder”) is in the room. Many parrots are much easier to handle when no one else is around.

...take bites personally. A common mistake many people make is to turn one biting incident into a pattern by their immediate and long-term reactions. A cycle of more and more loss of trust between companion parrot behavior and owner may begin when a person who has been bitten becomes afraid of his or her parrot. Parrots are extremely empathic creatures, and they are most comfortable with people that are comfortable with them. Parrots respond strongly to the moods and energy levels of the people in their human flock.

Getting Past the Fear

Remember it is your responsibility to maintain the positive bond between you and your companion parrot. Although there may be companion parrots that have never bitten anyone for any reason, the truth is that most parrots will, at one time or another, bite someone. Pay attention to your parrot and learn to understand him well enough to prevent a bite rather than having to deal with one when it happens.

- Learn to interpret your parrot’s body language carefully. Increased alertness, flashing eyes, a raised crest, erect feathers on the nape, feathers tucked tight against the body, and beak lunging are usually obvious signs of a bird that should not be handled. Many parrots also have their own more subtle signs that say “leave me alone”.
- Also pay attention to moods, and learn what time of day your parrot’s behavior is most mellow.

- If you are trying to work with a parrot that you have become afraid of, plan ahead to make the situation as positive as possible for both you and your parrot.
 - Minimize distractions. Focus completely on what you are doing with the parrot and maintain soft, gentle eye contact.
 - Parrots tend to be far more aggressive around their cage than in neutral territory. A “neutral room” is one that the bird is not used to being in and in which it has no established sense of territory.
 - Work with the companion parrot on a T-stand. If you are afraid to take your parrot out of its cage, you may need someone else to take him to the neutral room and leave him there for you to work with. If there is no one else who can handle the bird, bribe him to come out onto a T-stand by placing favorite treats in the food cup. Once the bird is on the stand, move slowly, pick the stand up, and move it into the neutral room.
 - Pick a time when you and the parrot are most relaxed. Make sure you can relax enough to approach the bird calmly and decisively. If it helps, shut your eyes and say a little positive mantra so that you convince yourself to let go of the fear that your parrot will bite you.

References

Blanchard S. *Sally Blanchard's Companion Parrot Handbook*. Abbey Press, Oakland, California, 1999.

Blanchard S. Biting: Getting Past the Fear. *Pet Bird Report*.

Hallander J. To Bite or Not to Bite. *Pet Bird Report*.

Lightfoot T, Nacewicz CL. Psittacine behavior. *In*: Bays TB, Lightfoot T, Mayer J. *Exotic Pet Behavior*. Saunders; St. Louis, Missouri, 2006. Pp. 51-101.

Written December 2006; updated December 7, 2007.