

Avian Reproductive Behavior

Puberty

The onset of reproductive or “broody” behavior varies with the species.

- Puberty begins at a mere 2 months of age in the Zebra finch.
- Small parrots like the budgerigar parakeet, cockatiel, and lovebird reach puberty between 6 months to 1 year of age.
- Conures achieve sexual maturity between 1 to 2 years, while lories and lorikeets are 2 to 3 years old.
- Larger psittacines reach puberty between 3 to 6 years of age.
- Males usually achieve sexual maturity at a later age than the female.
- Captive-bred birds tend to become mature earlier than wild-caught birds.

How do breeding pairs behave in the wild?

There are a host of physiologic, anatomic, mental, and behavioral changes that occur with the onset of the breeding season. There are also a number of behaviors that mating pairs exhibit which appear to strengthen and maintain the pair bond.

- Preening each other, particularly in hard to reach areas like over the back, around the vent, and under the wings.
- Feeding each other, regurgitation
- Copulation
- Inspection of the nesting site or nest box

What does broody behavior look like in the pet bird?

Normal sexual behaviors by companion parrots are frequently misinterpreted as “problem” behaviors in captivity.

- Some birds may look for dark places as a sign of nest-seeking.
- Early signs of nest building may include paper shredding and increased wood chewing. (Lovebirds may put strips of paper in their wings while nest building).
- Cage territoriality and aggression may also be observed.
- Some birds masturbate by rubbing their vents against inanimate objects and people.

Some pet birds develop a relationship with their owner that mimics pair bonding. This “mated pair behavior” may induce the need to protect the “mate” and “nest” leading to territoriality and aggression. These birds may also be more likely to ovulate and lay eggs, potentially leading to problems such as chronic egg laying, egg binding, and dystocia. There is also a syndrome of recurrent cloacal prolapse, primarily seen in adult Umbrella and Moluccan cockatoos that may be related to this “mated pair” bond in some instances.

Environmental cues that promote reproductive activity

- The most powerful stimulus for breeding is often a long day (>12 hours of light).
- The nest is also a powerful stimulus for breeding. Parrots are cavity nesters and any dark container with an opening may promote breeding such as a box or paper bag.
- Other stimuli include warm temperatures, rainfall, and an abundant food supply.
- Of course the presence of a mate is another strong motivator. The mate may be real or perceived such as a mirror, a favorite toy, or a human being.

What can you do to minimize reproductive behaviors in your pet bird?

1. Halt mutual grooming and mutual feeding. Grooming over the back and under the wings is a sexually charged behavior birds. Also avoid encircling the body, putting pressure on the back, touching near the vent, or playfully “wrestling” with the beak.
2. Modify environmental cues. Do not provide your parrot with a nest box or any item that could be considered a nest box unless you want to promote breeding behavior. If your pet is demonstrating chronic egg laying or suffers from reproductive disease, your avian veterinarian may advise you on additional environmental cues to manipulate such as photoperiod (day length) or the presence of the mate.
3. Establish yourself as the flock leader to set guidelines for your pet through positive reinforcement training. A better understanding of where she fits in the household “flock” may prevent your pet from mimicking a pair bond relationship with you.
4. Ignore masturbation. If your bird rubs its vent on you, calmly return him to his cage.
5. Improve your pet’s plane of nutrition. Gradually introduce formulated foods and healthy items like orange and yellow vegetables and dark, leafy greens.
6. Do not place your bird on your shoulders during reproductive or broody periods. Any urges to protect its mate or its territory may result in acts of aggression, and a bird placed on a shoulder has great access to the face.
7. Stick training is a valuable tool for maintaining hand control of an aggressive or territorial bird during the breeding season.

References

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