

# Becoming a role model in the examination room handling parrots.

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*Abstract;* Addressing the welfare and wellbeing of parrots is our responsibility as avian veterinarians. Handling parrots, veterinarians need to know the basics of parrot behavior.

A 5 step protocol enables veterinarians and caregivers to deal with parrots in a professional way reducing the stress of handling and creating mutual trust and respect.

It is the responsibility of veterinarians to be positive role models in the examination room. As a role model avian veterinarians can make a difference by organizing parrot events for clients.

Parrots, under our care, deserve so much better in the new millennium. Educating owners/clients about how to take care of their parrots is an important responsibility of avian veterinarians.

Organizing an annual parrot walk/parrot picnic is part of the policy within the Clinic for Birds for the best interests of companion parrots and their caregivers.

## **Introduction**

Dealing with and working with animals as veterinarian, it is essential to know and understand the basics of handling and manipulating the animal in a professional manner.

A professional manner is about preventing problems from occurring, avoiding unnecessary stress and trauma to the animal and biting to the handlers.

The major dogma within veterinarian science is Do Not Harm.

Reducing stress is an important responsibility for everybody dealing with and working with animals.

In general, there is still a lack of awareness that, when we are dealing with parrots, we are dealing with non-domesticated animals that are kept in captivity. Without understanding normal behavior in the context of a non-domesticated animal, many owners consider normal parrot behaviour, like being noisy, as a problem. Many owners also underestimate the high intelligence of parrots. Therefore, when normal behavior is misunderstood and parrot intelligence is underestimated, a wide variety of behavior problems are apt to occur depending upon the individual parrot, species and circumstances surrounding the bird.

Within the Clinic for Birds many parrot owners share to have experienced that veterinarians are showing that they feel very uncomfortable dealing with a parrot. In the author's experience veterinarians often show fear for the parrot and difficulties in handling and manipulating the bird. When the owner experience that handling and dealing with a parrot is not performed in a professional manner they will, no matter the expertise, not trust the veterinarian.

The first impression of the veterinarian towards the parrot is very important.

In general the veterinarian should show interest, care, experience and knowledge about the background of parrots and the species involved.

In the context of the veterinary clinic we have to realize that owners may be nervous and uncertain about what to expect during the consultation, examination and treatment treatment.

We need to consider that the attitude of the owner can have a negative influence on the behavior of the parrots and an important factor to keep in mind before approaching and dealing with the parrot.

For the caregiver as well as for the parrot it is essential to experience a professional. Professionals show to be in control, to have no problems, to be nice and interesting because a professional is also a teacher.

In daily practice we experience that there are many behavioral problems, which are often not understood or even acknowledged by the caregiver.

A fearful, screaming parrot in the examination room is likely to have behavioral problems at home. Caregivers mostly explain that the parrot is never screaming at home and is just afraid of the unknown situation.

Veterinarians experience the difference between a well educated dog compared with the not educated dog within veterinary practice.

We often have to talk about basic behaviour issues with the caretaker before approaching and dealing with the parrot. Ignoring the parrot completely during the conversation with the caregiver gives the parrot the opportunity to learn who you are and what your intentions are.

For a parrot it's like a class of children with a new teacher. Children respect the new teacher because of his/her attitude OR NOT. Children trust the new teacher OR NOT.

Everything takes place within a few minutes.

I always make the owners sit on a chair while I keep standing. The parrot is put behind my back in a lower position instead of on top of the table being in the middle of the attention. The caregiver is asked not to look at the parrot under any circumstance but to look at the whole situation and to me instead.

When the parrot shows fear, every time the caregiver looks at the bird, we have to be aware of the rewarding effect of that response that is confirming the fear and uncertainty. Owners are not allowed to reassure the parrot because it is in general not productive especially when owners are showing that they are not comfortable themselves with the situation. That attitude rewards fear and creates a stressful situation to begin with.

## **Behavioral problems**

Behavior problems are a major reason for owners to donate their parrot to a parrot rescue facility. The most common behavior problems are screaming, aggression/biting, feather destruction, phobic behavior and making a mess. This whole issue of unwanted parrots is an unnecessary tragedy that is addressed during every parrot consultation, within the Clinic for Birds, talking about the long term future of parrots that may outlive their caregivers.

Every avian veterinarian has a responsibility to learn which behaviors are normal for each species and at the same time appreciate the differences between individuals within the species.

In the case of serious behavior problems, it is a major responsibility for avian veterinarians to educate owners about options available to them other than donating their parrot to a rescue facility.

When the avian veterinarian is not able or capable of addressing those behavior issues, it is his or her responsibility to refer the owner to a colleague who is experienced or to a parrot behavior consultant having the experience dealing with companion parrots.

Behavior in nature is partly driven by instinct and partly driven by learning and experience. The concept of normal behavior is that it is driven by the desire to survive.

We must realize that when birds show abnormal or unwanted behaviors, they are demonstrating that they have a problem as it is with children and dogs. Caregivers must realize that what is often considered unwanted behavior, in general, is normal behavior in an abnormal context.

In the Clinic for Birds, owners contact us often because their birds have serious behavior problems with their birds. They ask us for a solution or want us to find another home.

Our response is always that we can provide a better situation for the birds. They only have to make an appointment to talk about the different possibilities.

We always ask clients to come with the whole family to involve everybody in that process. Before the appointment, they have to watch a video about parrot behavior and they can see pictures in the waiting room with clients biking and hiking with their parrots. When they enter the examination room, I ask them about their motives when they purchased their parrots and we discuss the reasons they decided to find a better place.

During that process we let the parrot be free in the examination room and have the bird sit on my knee or hand while I'm talking with the family.

They are often amazed to see how easily their parrot can be handled within a short period of time.

I ask them whether they have watched the video and seen the pictures of happy families with happy parrots. When I ask them why they are not a happy family with a happy parrot, the answer is often that they were never properly informed about how to care for the bird and never had positive role-models.

Our approach is that we convince the family that we have no better places available for their parrot and consider it as our responsibility to work with the family to create the circumstances that are better for everybody involved.

In all of these situations, wing-clipping, as part of the approach, is critically important to ensure that family members will undertake action and take their bird in the garden and provide a new place in the house outside the cage.

The family gets a lot of written information and is asked to create a kind of diary describing situations and formulate questions that arise.

After 4 weeks, we make another appointment and it's often amazing to see the change in attitude of the family and to see the change in attitude of the parrot.

Receiving pictures of family members with their parrot, hiking or biking is always a major gift that shows the new situation. The pictures we show in the practice are very much motivating owners/families to work toward new goals.

It is important for caregivers to learn to distinguish between normal behavior and unwanted behavior. Many problems occur when caregivers consider the normal behavior of the bird as unwanted and respond to that in a negative way.

Fear as behavior can be seen as a normal behavior and driven by instinct and influenced by learning and experience.

Birds in nature develop fear for predators as part of their survival strategy.

The fear we see daily in my Clinic for Birds is mainly learned behavior and often fear is dominating the behavior of the bird. We see birds that are afraid of branches, toys, rain, showering, other birds, strangers, and even of their own caregivers.

Fear is a situation that can be described as a stressful event. In my experience many birds within captivity are living in inappropriate environments that create high levels of stress. In many cases fear even becomes panic/phobic behavior where birds injure themselves in their cage or in the house by falling or abruptly flying blindly against objects and windows.

Within the Clinic for Birds we experience that birds showing feather-picking, self-mutilating, screaming and biting behavior are fearful and show behavior that can be described as insecure. Sometimes, simple events in the eyes of the caregiver make those birds start to show abnormal behavior.

It is the experience within the Clinic for Birds that the behavioral problem has always been the outcome of a long, previous period of insecurity and stress. The simple event is in general not the cause of the problem

As an example, unwanted human behavior like biting nails, in general, starts in adolescence.

Adolescence is a phase of life characterized by low self-esteem, insecurity, stress and hormonal changes. For that reason it is difficult to distinguish the specific reason for nail biting behavior.

Owners and families start to realize that having a parrot with the intelligence of a 3-5 year old child is a never-ending story. It's a daily challenge and well-educated owners are constantly looking for alternatives to stimulate the parrot. For parrots that are well taken care of, it's an everyday joy. For well-educated owners, it's an everyday joy as well.

In time we see the difference in the attitude and behavior of the caregivers and their families and we can see the parrot flourish more and more as a result.

We always emphasize that it takes time for caregivers to grow in their role as caregivers and it may take months and sometimes even years before they are no longer making the common mistakes when dealing with their parrot, especially when it concerns parrots showing behavior problems..

A survey done in the Netherlands showed that there are many cockatoos within aviculture showing behavior problems. It's obvious that we can expect behavior problems in youngsters coming out of that aviary when the caregiver does not understand the importance of welfare issues. When we want to solve a problem, we have to start where the problems evolved. It is the responsibility of the aviculturist to take care of the parrots welfare and well-being.

Ignoring that is not serving the best interest of the parrots and cannot be called responsible aviculture. Ignoring behavior problems is not acknowledging the real problems many parrots are facing and showing.

Ignoring behavior problems is also not serving the best interest of the caregivers, who will miss the joy of dealing with a happy parrot in their lives.

The parrot needs an avian veterinarian who is able to handle him/her according to its basic needs to create a relationship based on trust and respect.

### **Parrots as prey animals**

Dealing with parrots it is vital to realize that parrots are prey animals. A typical characteristic is the placement of the eyes. Prey animals have their eyes more at the side of the head to be able to cover a wide area within their environment.

Predators have their eyes in front of their head to be able to focus on their prey. Owls, eagles, cats and dogs are typical examples showing the position of the eyes.

We have to realize that when we look at a parrot, the bird is looking at a face that resembles the face of a predator because of the position of our eyes. For that reason it makes sense that it is threatening for a parrot to be looked at the way people are used to look at the bird.

We also have to consider that body language is a main part of communicating.

Within the Clinic for Birds we are using the example that when people visit a restaurant as a couple, people sit opposite of each other. When parrots would make an appointment to have dinner together they would sit next to each other.

Walking towards a parrot is very different from the way parrots are approaching each other.

For that reason we educate owners of parrots not to walk straight to their parrot and try to avoid looking "face to face" with their parrot but more from aside and our body not towards the bird.

It's up to veterinarians to create a situation in which insecurity is not intensified by the way we are looking at the parrot or by our body language. Within the Clinic for Birds we avoid looking at the parrot when the bird enters the examination room and we do not put the bird in the centre of the table in between the owner and the veterinarian to begin with. In that way we are creating a situation in which we allow the parrot to observe without being observed and learn from that experience that we are not another predator.

## **Protocol dealing with and manipulating the parrot in the exam room.**

Although it is not possible to describe all the different possibilities dealing with each parrot and each species, there are common guidelines to follow when dealing with parrots.

The most important aspect of dealing with parrots is the attitude of the person or persons caring for the parrot.

A basic protocol for veterinarians and caregivers of parrots can be summarized in five steps. This protocol can also be used with any parrot showing any behavior problem.

1. Establish yourself as a leader through nurturing guidance. You must convince the parrot that you are in charge through your confidence and self-assurance. Show that you are comfortable, that you don't have a problem with anything and be happy in your situation. In a way be a positive role model. Show that without any interaction with the parrot; don't even look at the bird. Be sure you will have all the attention of the bird when you are doing your stuff and be silly, playing with whatever, throwing a little ball against the ceiling or whatever. Parrots feel comfortable with people who are comfortable with parrots and with themselves. Your interaction around the parrot will tell him all about you. It means that people often have to act and play a role around the parrot.
2. Establish yourself as the one who is showing unconditional love and care. Tell the parrots that it's the most beautiful creature on this planet and how precious the bird is to you. Show the parrot that you love him and consider the birds as the most beautiful creature you have ever seen and mean it. Again it means acting as a professional actor. Step 2 can be considered as rewarding the behaviour that has been manipulated by our attitude performing step 1.
3. Establish yourself as the best teacher the parrot can wish for. Show respect for his intelligence by sharing, in detail, what there is to see around him, i.e. birds in the trees, toys on the table, colours, shapes, sizes, objects. Make him feel important. Parrots truly enjoy a good conversation, no matter who's doing the talking, but especially if it's someone they admire and respect and that someone is talking to them! You talk (teach) and they WILL listen. Praise the bird for his intelligence.
4. Tell the bird that it's okay to touch your pen, toy, paper or towel and praise the bird enthusiastically. Only let them touch items when you tell it is okay. When they reach out for anything, just take it away without a word and present it later after telling that now it's okay to touch or even bite into the item. Then they are in general very gentle touching with their tongue. Ask the bird to participate in the learning process by offering him new, small, unthreatening objects.  
Ask the bird to touch and feel the objects and allow it to investigate. Praise each positive move. Each time you present your hand for a "step-up" and he does it, praise him enthusiastically. The parrot will perform the wanted behavior because it is being positively reinforced.
5. Show them that accepting new situations is okay because there are reasons to trust you under the circumstances that you have created. When the parrot shows fear, do not reassure the bird. Reassurances can easily create more fear and insecurity. It is the experience of the author that after point 1 - 4 there seems to be a situation of mutual respect and mutual trust. When he fears a place or object like the towel, be understanding and start over again with step 1 of the protocol. Soon he will accept it. Then tell him how brave and wonderful he/she is. Each time he overcomes a fear, praise him for it. This will help to stimulate the self-esteem all parrots need to develop normal parrot behavior. The outcome is to create a situation in which a parrot can accept novel situations. It can be an examination, taking blood, grooming, wing clipping, gently towelling and so on.

The protocol is a way of desensitization. Showing respect and trust is creating respect, trust and self-esteem.

Dealing with parrots it is critical to always use the five points in the right order and never start with point four or five or only show that you love the parrot. The whole protocol may take less than two minutes and can even be performed within 30 seconds.

Within the Clinic for Birds, the minimum length of high quality time spent per day with a parrot experiencing behavior problems is 20 minutes. Working with a bird for ten minutes, 2-3 times a day can make all the difference in the world. At the same time, it's important not to respond to (undesirable) behavior of the parrot all the time. Responding to behaviour that is not manipulated is rewarding that behaviour. Behavior that is rewarded that way can easily become unwanted behaviour. The 5-step protocol is creating a relationship based on mutual respect and trust. It's amazing that it doesn't take a lot of time to create a positive situation. Depending the situation and on request of the caregiver birds can be hospitalized because of behaviour problems like biting, severe featherpicking, or selfmutilating. Within the Clinic for Birds I use some of my own birds to show the scary parrots that they can trust me as much as my own birds seem to do. That works also very well.

Within the examination room it may only take a few minutes, using the 5-step protocol, before performing any handling to ensure that the birds understands that the veterinarian does not intend to do harm but is using positive reinforcement to achieve positive behaviour even under scary circumstances.

It's like educating blind guiding dogs, police horses that do not experience fear for fire work, shootings and so on.

It's amazing to experience how parrots easily accept procedures out of trust and respect. After doing a good job they show even more respect and trust.

It's like visiting a professional dentist who is respected afterwards no matter how painful a procedure may be.

That's what we all expect from the pediatrician too dealing with our children.

To experience that the fear disappears and towelling and injections are accepted and that the parrot easily steps up the hand afterwards as if nothing ever happened, is really rewarding. I don't experience that the birds behave because there is no other alternative. To me that would be underestimating the intelligence of parrots. To me they respond to the positive circumstances that are arranged in their environment. Owners are amazed and impressed.

I am very much impressed myself about the way parrots are able to adapt to fearful situations. Wild caught parrots have shown that over the centuries. I'm impressed about parrots because they can so easily overcome fear in a way that most men can be very jealous about. By doing so, parrots show their impressive intelligence and surviving skills as a results of their evolutionary background.

I tell my clients that I do not expect them to get the same results within 10 minutes as they often experience in the examination room. I tell my clients that they should have realistic expectations. Sharing my developments as an avian veterinarian over more than twenty years and explaining that we are still learning every day. It may take weeks or more before the owners are able to change their attitude towards the bird and learn the proper timing of positive reinforcement and how to reinforce the proper behaviours. I tell my clients that it takes a lot of time and thinking before they are able to be the actor they have to be dealing and interacting with their parrot. Parrots that show fear and no self-esteem have owners that are wrong role models and having often to many good intentions but not a clue about their own behaviour and not a clue about parrot behaviour.

Some owners tell me after a year that they finally have the feeling that they do things now without thinking, feel comfortable and notice their bird is now as comfortable as they are.

Parrots will only be comfortable when the caregiver is comfortable under all circumstances.

Some owners tell me after a year or more that they at last have the feeling that they do things now without thinking and feel comfortable and notice their birds is now as comfortable as they are..

## **Educating**

With the exception of some species, dealing with (companion) parrots, it is essential that caregivers realize all the time that we are dealing with non-domesticated animals. Their family members are still flying in nature.

Learning about the background and normal behavior of wild animals is critically important in order to be responsible caregivers.

In general, caregivers underestimate the intelligence of parrots and in combination with a lack of understanding about normal behavior, it is no surprise that many parrots suffer from a lack of proper care.

We are responsible for the wellbeing and welfare of the birds in our care. In that way it's the same kind of responsibility as taking care of children or taking care of a companion dog. The welfare and wellbeing of those that we are responsible for is the most important priority.

An important part of care-giving is to ensure that the bird learns what his position is within the family/group/flock.

Taking care of a bird and educating the bird is out of respect for the special characteristics and needs of the birds.

Taking care is a long term, lifetime commitment and responsibility borne of love for the individual bird.

Taking care of companion parrots is also ensuring that they experience the family as a flock situation, for instance by being taken out for a walk or family picnic.

A good education is important to ensure ;

- The wellbeing and welfare of the birds
- The safety of the bird
- The prevention of unwanted behavior

Education is also learning to accept, out of respect, that the caregiver may have to do things the bird doesn't want in the first place but accepts that situation without exhibiting resistance or negative behaviors, based on mutual respect and mutual trust.

A bird that is well taken care of, has self-confidence, has no fear, is playful and can easily adapt to different situations.

Educating a bird is showing that we love the bird and are in control of the situation the same as with children and dogs within a family.

Educating is learning and stimulating the abilities and the intelligence of a bird as with children and dogs.

Essential in that learning process is that the bird likes to do simple things like stepping up because it makes him/her feel well.

Educating is about ensuring that the birds develop a high level of confidence in novel situations.

It is the experience of the author that educating a parrot, based on mutual respect and mutual trust solves and prevents unwanted and abnormal behavior.

## **Wing-clipping**

Birds that are allowed to fly around in the house in general don't come outside because the cages are often too large to handle and it happens only when the weather is beautiful the whole day and everyone is drinking tea in the garden.

It's a potential risk that birds that are allowed to fly, escape because the window or the door is open in the summer. It is the experience of the author that very few owners are capable to deal with a full flighted parrot.

Losing a bird that way is the responsibility of the owner and can usually be prevented. It's a tragedy, especially when it happens in the winter during bad weather conditions and the bird disappears and is never found again.

Over the years, wing-clipping has become, in many situations, a major part of taking care of a companion parrot.

Parrots have in common that they are able to fly with the well-known exception of the Kakapo ( *Strigops habroptilus*).

Flying is for parrots essential to survival, looking for a place to eat, to drink and to look for a safe place to sleep. Considering that parrots are prey animals, flying is also a way to escape from predators. Flying can also be a part of their natural courtship behavior and providing food for the partner and youngsters.

In nature flying takes only a very small part of the time they are spending each day.

Flying has in nature different functions and most of them are no longer valid as companion parrot or as parrot within aviculture.

In captivity , flying to escape from danger is often the only reason for birds to fly, looking for a safe , higher place in the surrounding.

Within the Clinic for Birds, wing clipping is never performed because it has benefits for the owner.

Wing clipping without a thorough behavioral consultation has to be discouraged. Wing clipping is more than just clipping wing feathers. Wing clipping has to be part of responsible care of the needs of a parrot that is kept as a companion bird within a family.

There are cases in which we do not perform wing clipping the first consultation to make the owner aware of the risks that are involved when the owner is not well educated.

Wing clipping should only be performed in parrots that have learned and practice to fly as part of their physical development. In young parrots it is advised to perform wing clipping gradually in a period of several weeks.

Within the Clinic for Birds the first time the procedure will only be performed in combination with a serious behavioral consultation that takes at least an hour.

Owners receive a written report and recommendations and are asked to call after 7-10 days with an update. The caregivers are encouraged to keep a logbook to write down specific situations or events and questions that arise.

In the Clinic for Birds the next behavior consultation is recommended after 4 weeks to reevaluate the situation, to answer questions and to discuss the future possibilities and to educate about the responsibilities of the caregivers.

In our clinic we recommend that the owner is visiting the clinic at least once a year for a physical examination and for a behavior consultation.

Many owners visit every 6-8 months.

Wing clipping, as part of a good education, of parrots that are kept as companion birds can have different advantages for the birds:

- Birds develop a higher self-esteem.
- The caregiver can undertake much more with the parrots within their situation. That ensures a better bonding between the parrot and the caregiver.
- Parrots show less fear/ defensive / insecure/ “aggressive” and other unwanted behavior.
- Birds can be taken out daily, on the hand into the garden, hiking or biking into the woods, on a boat trip, to the play garden or zoo and so on.
- Not only the caregiver but also other members of the family and friends are able to take the bird on the hand and interact with them under all kind of circumstances.

Birds with a full wing are not able or allowed to participate in all kinds of family activities and are convicted to spend their time in a cage sitting on a perch waiting till the family is coming home again..

The protocol of wing-clipping can be done in different sessions always symmetrical so the bird is always in balance and can exercise wing flipping as normal part of its behavior. It is advised to wing-



clip young parrots after giving them the opportunity to fly as part of their physical development. The number of outer wing feathers that are clipped depends on the species

After a period depending on the species and the circumstances, wing-clipping is performed in a way that the bird is still able to fly for about three meter in an easy way to prevent injuries. The number of outer wing feathers that are clipped is depending the species. For African grey parrots we clip about eight feathers, for cockatiels more. The feathers are clipped about 2 cm from the upper wing cover feathers.

During their molting, clipped feathers will be replaced by new feathers. It takes about 3-4 weeks to create a new feather at the same length as the clipped feathers.

The advice is to look carefully at the development every day as a simple routine to ensure that new feathers are not growing to long.

The number of times new feathers have to be clipped depends on the species and the molting activity of the individual bird. Wing-clipping is a reversible procedure.

Owners are educated to perform the procedure of wing clipping as a daily routine to ensure that the procedure is experienced as a positive part of the daily routine ending with rewarding the bird for it's behavior. This daily routine prevents also that the parrot "suddenly" can fly again.

The same procedure is advised for dealing with the nails using a file.

In daily practice we experience fewer problems with wing-clipped parrots when manipulating them for a physical examination, treatments and injections. They show respect and trust when we need to do the nails and beaks and show self-confidence afterwards. They do not develop what would be described in human behavior "hard feelings".

Birds that are not wing-clipped, show, in general, fear and are hard to handle, while experiencing a simple procedure as a stressful event. They show a lack of trust, and no self-esteem.

Owners send photographs of the events they have undertaken. Walking, biking and playing outside with their birds in the woods and in the sun, taking the birds for a holiday or visiting friends.

Even parrots that are kept for decades, easily adapt after being wing clipped and when the caretakers change their behavior and stop making the common mistakes and start taking the needs of their bird seriously.

These birds show, in a short time, the benefits of what has been hold back from them all those years. Owners often are emotional about that, realizing that their bird must have suffered because of their ignorance for many years.

Owners often recognize that wing clipping has been a huge advantage for their bird's welfare, wellbeing and health.

It has become my experience that wing clipping as part of taking care of a parrot can prevent common problems and provides the birds more freedom and joy than having the opportunity to fly free in the house without the possibility to be taken out everyday for a walk becoming more a part of "the human flock".

It is the opinion of the author that for the average parrot owner, it is the only way to take care of their bird and ensure the health and wellbeing of that bird.

Wing clipping can also have advantages for parrots within aviculture when the birds are housed in cages too small to give them the opportunity to really fly.

Wing clipping enables the aviculturist to take the birds out of their cages and interact with them in a positive and trusting way.



### **NOT on the shoulder.**

There are many misunderstandings and contradictions concerning responsible ownership, nutrition, housing, behaviour and educating parrots.

Behavior problems are very common among parrots. Behavior problems are main reasons that parrots become donated to parrot rescue facilities or end up in the trade again.

Within the Clinic for Birds, the most important and most common behavior problem we are faced with can be described as insecurity.

There are major misunderstandings concerning the issue of having parrots on the shoulder.

Parrots showing behavior based on insecurity tend to look for a higher position. That can be considered as the main reason parrots want to sit on the shoulder. Parrots sitting on the shoulder show in general defensive behavior. This behavior is often interpreted as dominant behavior while the behavior is based on insecurity.

Those birds often refuse to step up the hand. Those birds are in most cases shy, show a strong binding to one person and show unreasonable fear for certain objects or situations.

Most birds that are sitting on the shoulder seems to bite more often other people and show more often screaming behavior and feather picking.

The owner has no control over the bird in that position. It's not uncommon that the owner gets bitten in the ear or cheek

In our experience, birds sitting on the shoulder may like the owner but do not show respect for the owner. At the same time, owners with parrots on their shoulders show that they love the parrot but don't show respect for the bird.

At the end, the behaviour and attitude of the owner determines the behavior and attitude of the parrot. The same can be stated for insecure children, dogs, horses and so on.

Owners or parents that are creating insecurity often show good intentions without common sense and without the needed knowledge/expertise.

When a bird, sitting on the shoulder is frightened under certain conditions, they can fly off or fall without notice and the owner can do nothing having the bird not under control. That can lead to dangerous and unwanted situations. That kind of situation is very much unwanted while walking in the town, biking on the road or visiting a zoo.

Owners often use the argument that it is very convenient to have the bird on the shoulder. We have to consider that falconers are having their birds on their hand for thousands of years and not on their shoulder. Falconers are having a long tradition of handling, dealing and working with raptors in captivity and show their knowledge and expertise handling

Despite all the differences between raptors and parrots, owners of parrots can learn from the expertise of falconers.

Well and positive educated parrots show self esteem, show respect for the owners and people in general and are playful and interested to learn even more and according to the experience of the author do not have the intention to sit on the shoulder.



### **Organizing a Parrot Walk/Picnic**

For the health, welfare and wellbeing of a bird, it is essential that the bird is outside as much as possible. They have the right to get as much sunlight as possible.

The general rule should be that a bird should be outside at least once a day to have the benefit of direct or indirect sunlight and fresh air.

Within the Clinic for Birds we explain that for that reason even criminals in prison have the right and privilege to go outside every day.

Sunlight is an essential part of the wellbeing and health of man and animal.

It is known that people can develop serious psychological problems when there is too little sunlight.

People get light-therapy to prevent sleeping disorders and depression. It is known that lack of sunlight is a reason for serious health problems. The most common is bone deformities in young children or baby parrots called rickets or decalcification in older people or parrots. Sunlight is crucial in the formation of vitamin D3 and, therefore essential in, for instance, bone-formation.

What about birds that are not taken outside every day? What can we expect over the years? The health problems and psychological problems are predictable and underestimated.

Going for a walk without taking the bird, is not taking care of the needs of the bird. It is the same as with children and dogs that need to go to the playground, the beach the petting farm, and the Zoo. Visiting friends without bringing the bird is not in the best interest of the bird.

When dogs are hardly ever taken out and spend their lives mainly inside a kennel, they develop abnormal behavior. A dog in a kennel will always behave like a dog in a kennel.

Since 2000 the Clinic for Birds has organized an annual Parrot Picnic-Parrot Walk for invited clients. The event is supported by and sponsored by Harrison's Bird Foods -The Netherlands and by the Society for Parrot and Parakeet Welfare (SPPW). In 2004 five outdoors parrot events were organized as the result of the cooperation between the different organizations.

Organizing a Parrot Walk for owners of parrots has proven to be a great and stimulating event. Complete strangers became friends and were even more motivated to do the right thing, ensuring and promoting the welfare of their parrots. Exchanging experiences is fun and a learning process at the same time.

By organizing these events there has been local and national media attention in newspapers, radio and television. The media attention has been used to get attention for the welfare issues of parrots.

The events are also used as opportunity to bring attention to the ongoing tragedy of the importation of parrots that are captured in their natural habitats. Participants donated lists of names petitioning a statement against the importation of parrots from nature.

The parrot-walks have become one of the most rewarding days as an avian veterinarian over the past twenty years.

Clients/owners are looking forward to the next parrot Picnic/Parrot-Walk. At this moment we have over 800 families on the invitation list for the next event.

We are creating a network of dedicated owners to ensure that when problems occur within families, others are available to help, including a network of families that are willing to become adoption homes for those parrots that we have to rehome.

In this way we are trying to create a social structure to ensure the wellbeing of the parrots under our care. We are fortunate that the list of possible adoption homes is longer than the list of parrots that need to find a new home.

I would like to encourage everyone, who has the opportunity to create situations like this, to do so. It can be organized for instance by avian veterinarians, parrot rescue organizations and organizations like the Society for Parrot and Parakeet Welfare (SPPW) or World Parrot Trust. It can help in a positive way to make everyone aware of the responsibilities of taking care of a parrot. It is a great way to bring attention to the many parrots that are living under devastating circumstances all over the world because of ignorance, neglect or being just used for commercial purposes.



## **Courses**

The Clinic for Birds started to cooperate with the main animal behavior institution in the Netherlands organizing one day courses for owners, breeders, veterinarians, technicians about responsible ownership. In 2004 one days courses and three day courses have been organized. Those that attended the one day course are able to sign up for 3-day courses about parrots.

Creating more understanding and knowledge about the background of parrots, proper management, medical problems and behavior issues has become a major goal within the Clinic for Birds.

## **Conclusions**

Taking care of the health, welfare, wellbeing and conservation of parrots in the world is our primary responsibility as avian veterinarians.

It is very rewarding to work for and with dedicated owners/caretakers/aviculturists to improve the welfare of parrots in captivity.

Parrots are honest and show whether you are doing a good job as children show whether their teacher is doing a good job. In that way parrots have become my best teachers because they correct me when I'm wrong.

I'm grateful for the parrots in my life because they force me to be a better avian veterinarian. Parrots can act like good friends who encourage you to be a better person.

*If Not Us, Who? If Not Now, When?*

### **Acknowledgement**

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