NORMAL AND ABNORMAL PARROT BEHAVIOR

Brian Speer, DVM, Dip. ABVP (Avian), Dip. ECZM (Avian)

Abstract

Behavior and behavior-associated issues are an important part of psittacine medicine. However, many veterinarians have an approach to parrots from the basics of handling and restraint to their assessment of behavioral issues (e.g., feather plucking), that fails to take into account the importance of understanding a bird's natural behavior in the wild, and how these actions can be adapted to optimize interactions between the bird and their human owners. Understanding how to influence parrot behavior by positive reinforcement rather than punishment is key to improving the welfare of these captive birds and their owners. Copyright 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Key words: abnormality; behavior; interaction; parrot; reinforcer

There is an increasing interest in behavior and behavior-associated problems in avian species. Unfortunately, our understanding regarding the proper methods for the identification, description, and treatment of behavior problems still remains inconsistent for most veterinarians caring for birds in general practice. Generally, most medical records often reflect the documentation of historical and physical examination findings, and diagnostic testing for and treatment of identified or perceived states of disease. Comments regarding behavioral observations are rarely mentioned in most medical records. Overall, recommendations for behavioral intervention are rare or far from complete and rarely documented in regard to treatment response or outcome. In the absence of recognition and documentation of problems or a proactive discussion of behavior, relatively advanced states of behavioral problems should logically be expected. The presentation of avian patients with advanced behavioral problems commonly occurs in most veterinary practice settings. Therefore, behavioral intervention efforts seem to be comparatively futile, frustrating, and unfortunately not a practical pursuit in day-to-day practice.

The common veterinary terminology that has been used for describing approaches to the examination, diagnosis, and medical treatment of birds has included descriptions such as "capture and restraint." Most of these procedures have involved direct physical overpowering of the birds and restraint with or without the use of chemical immobilization. Granted, these approaches tend to "get the job done," but with time, there seems to be a learned and undesired fear-associated response by many of these birds. This in turn can lead to greater long-term concerns about their behavior, risks to the bird and handlers when the birds are being examined, more risk of problems during medical procedures, and more difficulty separating stress-associated changes from early to moderate states of disease in some laboratory diagnostic test results. In recent years, it has become increasingly apparent that many medical procedures can be performed with less force or coercion with the handling and restraint methods used and less of a resultant undesired experience by the birds. A higher standard of care continues to evolve; one that includes more of an emphasis on animal welfare, with higher standards of animal care, informed recommendations of techniques to

From the Medical Center for Birds, Oakley, CA USA
Address correspondence to: Brian Speer, DVM, Dip. ABVP (Avian), Dip. ECZM (Avian), Medical Center for Birds, 3805 Main Street, Oakley, CA 94561. E-mail: avnvet@aol.com.

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implement enrichment and training programs, and, in many cases, increased use of operant conditioning for husbandry and medical procedures. Starting with less aggressive methods of restraint and physical evaluation, practitioners should be positioned more optimally to have the time to observe, identify, discuss, and guide their clients and patients toward a more balanced address of real or potential behavioral issues in the future.

WHY IS BEHAVIOR AN IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION IN DAILY PRACTICE?

The behavior of avian species in a captive setting directly affects the quality of their lives, their interactions with their stewards/owners, their health, and the probability of a veterinarian maintaining a long-term doctor-client-patient relationship. It is known that behavioral conditioning of captive bird species in most circumstances can lead to a reduction of the risks associated with physical evaluations or medical procedures. Conditioning and guiding medical behaviors also allows for a reduction of expenses associated with maintenance and preventative health procedures and allows for a more complete patient evaluation in most circumstances. A behaviorally conditioned and less fearful bird will likely provide diagnostic test results (e.g., complete blood count) that are minimally affected by stress, thereby reflecting the true physiologic state of a patient. Diagnostic test results altered by physiologic stress can lead to misdiagnosis and errors that effect the veterinarian's assessment of what proper treatment protocol to prescribe.

Assisted mostly by the recent veterinary advancements in the diagnosis, treatment, and preventative management of infectious and nutritional diseases, the position of the pet bird in society is changing. The pet bird as a "family member" is emerging as a significant portion of the patients seen at veterinary practices that treat avian species. Clinical patterns of diagnosed conditions are progressively shifting from predominately infectious diseases toward metabolic, neoplastic, and behavioral disorders. Some of the more commonly discussed parrot behavioral disorders in avian practice include attention-acquiring behaviors (e.g., screaming and aggression), undesired displacement behaviors (e.g., self-mutilation), territoriality (e.g., protection of a specific person and other bird or inanimate object via aggression), biting, feather damaging, unwanted or excessive vocalizations, reproductive issues, phobic-type behavioral problems, or apparently psychotic issues including obsessive-compulsive type disorders. Many of these behavioral disorders are often chronic or extremely advanced at the time of the initial veterinary visit. As with most other medical issues, the chronicity and severity of avian behavioral disorders often correlate with a much lower success rate for complete resolution. Earlier recognition and diagnosis should be expected to result in more successful intervention and resolution. The means by which we can recognize the components of behavioral problems earlier is important and key to a more effective prevention and early intervention with many companion bird behavioral disorders.

BIRD BEHAVIOR: THINKING THE BASICS FROM AN ORNITHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Behavior is the most direct tool that a wild bird has to respond to its environment, and it ultimately determines whether it survives and breeds within its natural environment. The behavioral response that a captive bird has to its environment has importance for the maintenance of homeostasis, both physically and psychologically, in its nonnatural environment. There are 2 general functional categories of avian behaviors: self-maintenance behaviors and social behaviors. Self-maintenance behaviors are aimed at accomplishing some specific task to maintain the physical condition of the individual. Social behavior is intended to communicate information to another individual.

In most bird species, daily maintenance behaviors are self-maintenance behaviors that are life-sustaining activities performed throughout the year. These behaviors include feeding, feather care, locomotion, concealment, communication, and display. With captive parrots, feeding, feather care, communication, and display behaviors are commonly observed daily maintenance behaviors. Enrichment of these behaviors is shown to benefit captive parrots. Nevertheless, abnormalities of these activities comprise the most common behavioral disorders of companion parrots.

Birds engage in a large number of behaviors that are predominately performed for the purpose of communication or signaling. These behaviors, in general, rank among the most complex of all avian traits. A communication *signal* is a behavior of the sender in a way that results in consequential