



Figure 1. Nest box.

The Aggressive Behaviour of Parrots, THE CONSEQUENCES AND PREVENTION MODELS

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Unlike most of other birds, parrots *Psittacidae* often manifest some sort of aggression. The aggression is forwarded to objects (see figure 1), other birds or man. It is very important to recognize the aggression towards other birds in an enclosure, in order to prevent possible injuries. It is substantial to know that aggressive behavior can be directed to the individuals belonging to different bird genus, same bird genus, and to the birds of the same subspecies as well. Likewise, aggressive behaviour is usual towards the same or opposite sex of the same species, even towards their own young.

The definition of aggression explains that it is a behavior based on the intention to cause damage; to hurt someone physically or mentally. Hence, these can be predicted or unpredicted emotional reactions of parrots caused by irritation and directed to someone or something.



Figure 2. Aqua Turquoise Rosy-faced lovebird.

The aggression of parrots can be:

- direct – towards a bird which is the cause of the frustration; (Figure 2)
- indirect – “shifted aggression” – towards someone weaker, an ‘easy target’. For instance: constant nest controls done by the breeder, can upset the parrots, cause aggression, and parrots can kill their young (Figure 3).

Likewise, the aggression can be divided in the following manner:

- active – the results are injuries.
- passive – the consequences are the result of not performing necessary actions. For instance: the parent does not keep the young warm in the nest and the young birds die.



Figure 3. Pacific parrotlet female bird with blue mutation.

1. The results of the active aggressive behaviour towards other birds can be: damaged feathers, the loss of the whole feather parts (Figure 4); but parrots can cause serious wounds to the opponent in form of cuts, stabbings and laceration. They cut



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L to R: Figure 4. Western rossella (blu). Figure 5. Pacific parrotlet female.

with the beak, rarely with nails. The injuries can be diagnosed, and they are: hematoma, abrasions (Figure 5), laceration, rupture and puncture. The injuries can be accidental: sprains, leg dislocations, wing-bones fractures; and they are the result of the escape from the opponent. The fight can last for several hours; and it can be merciless; and at the end of the drama, the epilogue is the death. Postmortem examination can reveal the following death injuries: vital organ damage, the inability of reparation and restitution of the damaged tissue, losing too much blood, large areas enclosed in injury, wound contamination or the occurrence of the primary, the secondary and the superinfection, septicemia, but also prevented food intake.

It is a well-known fact that different bird species do not tolerate each other. This is very usual if the parrots are from different latitudes or continents. Sometimes, even if they are from the same continent and their natural habitats intertwine, there is no mutual tolerance between the two parrots. Rosellas: **Eastern rosella** (*Platycercus eximius*) and, **Pale-headed rosella** (*Platycercus adscitus*), will be like fighters in a boxing ring when they are in the same aviary. Fortunately, I have not recorded serious injuries.

Spouse aggression occurs in a large number of family members, from the **Pacific parrotlet** (*Forpus coelestis*) to the **Cockatoo** genus *Cacatua*. As you can see, the aggression of parrots does not depend on the size of the individual of the specific species; but the outcome can be equally fatal.

There are forms of aggression which are not characterized by injuries; but they can cause death. There are many cases when the male does not allow the female to access food and water by cornering her in the box. Several days spent without basic energy elements will lead to general weakness, weight loss, mood disorder, vital organ damage, low immunity and a series of irreversible changes which will cause death. If the female of the **Pacific parrotlet** *Forpus coelestis* avoids the injuries of the aggressive male outside the box, the above described sequence of events can happen to her (Figure 6).

The science defined the cases of parrots plucking feathers themselves. This is a late alarm that shows that a bird is miserable, that it came to the decline of voluntary dynamism, that it is necessary to find the cause and to take measures in order to stop that behaviour permanently.

Ten years ago I diagnosed a leg injury on a male **Monk parakeet** (*Myiopsitta monachus*), of an unknown etiology. Even though it was a small, scanty and superficial injury, it was obvious that the localisation and the pain disabled normal functioning. The pain was unbearable, the parrot was irritated by the injury and, therefore, he cut his leg with his own beak, with the precision of a surgeon's knife; and he bled to death. I tried to make a collar for him, which would prevent him from touching the injury; but I was unsuccessful because he himself did not allow me to help him. So, suicide is a type of aggression towards one's body; and it happens to parrots as well.

The females of the **Lovebird** (*Agapornis*) are prepared to fight to the death in the struggle for the nest boxes. This will always happen if we have only one nest box and more females, or if the space is small and several couples are settled there. Even though this species reproduces successfully in colonies, these situations are frequent.

The irritated parrots can develop the tendency to destroy their own eggs; and if the irritation is the main cause, I can firmly claim that it is one of the types of the aggressive behaviour. This occurs among all birds from the parrot genus.

There is a belief among the breeders that **Red-rumped parrots** (*Psephotus haematonotus*) are very good parents. However, they can

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L to R: Figure 7. Blue-fronted amazon. Figure 8. Rose-breasted Cockatoo. Figure 9. Orange-faced lovebird.

be aggressive to their offspring, namely, when the fledglings are not separated in time, it is possible that a male kills his own young.

The parrots can express aggression even towards their sick cousins; and in some species the necrophiliac affinities are present, i.e., they cause injuries on the dead bird. The example is **Rose-ringed parakeet** (*Psittacula krameri*).

The parrots can have aggressive reactions towards the breeders, if they entered the aviary, especially during the mating period or upbringing period. Then they can attack the breeder and cause minor injuries. These are the characteristics of the **Amazon parrot** (*Amazona*) (Figure 7) and **Rose-breasted cockatoo** (*Cacatua roseicapilla*) (Figure 8). During that period it is not rare for them to leave the nest because of the disturbance. If the parrots are kept in the cages in the house, the reason for the aggressive reaction occurs if you do not dedicate enough attention, the attention the bird expects from a breeder. The parrots see other pets in the same room as competition; and they express some reactions due to the insufficient affection and devotion. Accordingly, we can say it is a form of pathological jealousy. It is necessary to provide uninterrupted flight for the bird during the day, in order to spend energy surplus. The parrots are the mirror of our emotions. You must not transfer your own anxiety to them. If you shout at them, they can take that as a challenge; and they can start singing louder or even attack you. In time, it becomes the acquired reflex for the bird functioning. So, instead of sublimation, taken into consideration that the bird already lives in a form of coexistence with man, the breeder can, often unintentionally, develop a harmful behavior pattern of the bird, i.e., certain forms of learned aggression can become the accepted forms of behavior; and that is bad for the health of the bird long-term. This has to be recognized and corrected. Hence, the birds have to be observed as human beings, with dreams, hopes, emotions and fears.

2. The passive aggressive behavior happens if the parents are irritated and they stop feeding the offspring prematurely, the outcome of which is the death of the young birds. This is unintentionally not taking any actions when they are necessary. The reason for passive aggressive behavior can be objective, because of the presence of ectoparasites (Figure 9). On the other hand, the reaction to the same stimulus does not have to be the same with different birds. The parrot can pluck its

feathers because of the ectoparasite; and this is considered to be a form of active aggression.

The question is: What are the reasons and causes that influence the occurrence and manifestation of the aggression? It is absolutely certain that there are numerous reasons leading to the expression of the aggressive behaviour. These reasons can be individual, a mixture of several factors at the same time, a cumulative effect; or a series of different circumstances and factors as well.

The reasons for aggressive reactions in cages and aviaries:

The injuries caused by mutual fights of the parrots in the natural habitat are very rare. However, even in the natural habitat, the changes in behavior can happen. The reasons are numerous: the decrease of the living area due to the wood cutting for fire, or flooding; living area interrupted by the neighboring couples; fluctuations in the climate conditions such as increased or decreased humidity in the habitat, the number of sunny hours or temperature changes, the quantity and the quality of food and water accessible all year long, prior to the mating period and during the upbringing period. The aggression in parrots can be caused by feral cats, rodents, reptiles, birds of prey and other animals if it is possible to visit them in the nest or at least to come close to the bird's home. The birds do not react or only slightly react to the majority of the sounds in their natural habitat. However, they clearly recognize the sounds of danger; and only then do they take necessary precautions. The shots from fire arms scare the birds.

In the aviaries, the breeder is the creator of the conditions, so it is likely that he will unintentionally make a mistake. It leads to the direct change in the behavior; and it can cause aggressive reactions, which is a prerequisite for injuries. That is why, when you breed the bird in the cage, you must have in mind the conditions of the natural habitat to which the birds are adapted and which have no side effects on their physical and mental health.

The reasons for the aggressive behavior are common and numerous. They can be: genetic predisposition, hygiene and diet, vitamin and mineral deficiency, hormone imbalance, living in a too small space, unconditional space, frequent change of

residence and the immediate environment, stress, proximity and bad neighboring interactions, verbal threats, watching the courting and the act of mating in the adjacent aviary, increased secretion of hormones during the mating period, preservation of the determined area, fight for the affection of the certain female, fight for the box, fight for the dominance, the expected attack, the fear for personal safety and the safety of the offspring. These are the most common reasons which lead to the occurrence of the aggressive behavior; and the reaction is mainly forwarded to other birds, because they are in immediate contact with them, and thus are the targets of the attack.

Likewise, various sounds from the immediate environment of the aviary can irritate the birds. The noise that is produced by the means of transportation in the cities, and outside the cities, sounds that birds of prey make, dog barking, etc. In the house, the parrots in the cages can be disturbed by the sounds of the vacuum cleaner, hair dryer or the sounds from the internet or television. Only a small number of parrot species organized their natural habitat life in accordance with urban environments; so in the aviaries they will easily accept the noise characteristic for the urban areas. **Rose-ringed parakeet** (*Psittacula krameri*) and **Red-breasted Parakeet** (*Psittacula alexandri*) live in parks and are easily adapted to the aviaries in the noisy city environment.

The aggression can be present all year long; but certainly the most sensitive period is at the beginning of the mating period. It is very important to know the personalities and the characteristics of the birds you raise, as well as the causes that can lead to behavioral changes among the inhabitants of the same aviary. The changes can occur successively; and this is why the birds are given the food that stimulates mating. The aggression can happen almost immediately; and it can be caused by placing the nest box in the aviary. So, the birds are the most vulnerable in springtime, due to the beginning of the mating period, while during the late autumn and winter the intensity of the aggressive behavior decreases. The aggression of birds can occur in winter; and it can be caused by the reduction of the quality and the quantity of food. However, this type of

aggression can be easily removed. The spots where contact is the most possible is next to the feeder and the entrance to the box, where usually the female reacts.

The phases of the aggressive reaction towards other birds:

The birds have different levels of tolerance and intensity of the aggression towards other birds. Certain bird species, or birds with bad life experience, have low levels of tolerance and react quickly and fiercely in the situations when they feel threatened. It should be stated that even the most aggressive parrot species do not start fighting immediately; but there is a series of warning



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activities which are prior to the fight. The parrots can show their anger and rage in various ways. Understanding the bird's body language is very important. The breeder must recognize each change and take necessary measures.

The color – This is one of the first and the mildest reactions to warn the intruder that the bird is irritated by the unwanted presence. The change in the intensity of the color and a stiff attitude is a form of threat which warns the visitor; and the aim of it is to indicate forthcoming confrontation with the unwanted guest. The bird evaluates the intentions of the opponent and every movement he makes all the time. **Lineolated parakeet** (*Bolborhynchus lineola*) often uses this mechanism for deterring the opponent of potentially bad intentions (Figure 10).

The posture – spreading the wings and lifting the body and feathers makes the bird bigger than it really is; and the aim is to show the power and readiness for fight (figure 11). The lifting of the crest is one of the characteristics of the **Cockatoo** (*Cacatua*). (Figure 12), after which the parrot tries to peck the opponent. The species from the genus of **Pyrrhura** (*Pyrrhura*) usually make a posture which allows both defense and counter-attack. At the end, the parrots start simulating the attack. They open and close the beak, their tongue pulsates, they tilt their heads forward, almost to the horizontal position, they rhythmically repeat the movements rocking back and forth on the perch. The contraction and the dilation of the eye pupils show how much the birds are excited.

The sound – the parrots can make alarming sounds and warn that they are nervous, raging or angry because their integrity is threatened. This is followed by an open request in form of all the mentioned reactions aimed to make the opponent leave the territory, and then a direct attack follows.

The attack – When all the defensive mechanisms are spent, they will come to the attack and fight, till the death if it is necessary. They can cause injuries using the beak or the sharp claws. The most frequent injuries are on the fingers and legs (Figure 13 and 14), wings (Figure 15) and on the beak (Figure 16). Of course, the injuries can be located on the other parts of the body.

The flight – One of the manners to frighten the opponent is to dive while flying. Some species of the parrots will attack the breeder this way, if he enters the aviary. If the female is laying on the eggs or taking care of the offspring, the male of the **Eclectus parrot** *Eclectus roratus* and the **Amazon parrot** *Amazona* will do this.

The prevention of the aggression:

From the above said, we can conclude that the aggression is harmful behavior. The inferior experiences the physical and mental damage; and this also has side effects for the aggressive parrot. At the same time, this is a great problem for the breeder or the worker in the zoo who is in charge of that area. The question is how to avoid the aggression. In the natural habitat the aggressive reactions in parrots are rare, even though they spend most of their lives living in colonies.



Top to bottom: Figure 10. Lineolated parakeet Cobalt and turquoise. Figure 11. Little corella. Figure 12. White cockatoo.



Being the target of the birds of prey and other predators, this life style provides safety. However, in the aviaries, they are not threatened; but they are limited and dependent on the man. This is why it is very important to provide them with all they have in the natural habitat and thus avoid the occurrence of the frustrations and aggression. First, the breeders must not cause damage to their birds. You must not provoke them in any way; but you must provide them with lots of affection and attention.

The parrots must always have enough food and water. It is very important that there are a great number of drinking pots and feeders, placed in various posts, and preferably out of view of the birds that are temporarily present. The space must be adequate for the species living in the flight. Sometimes the hidden places are necessary. The breeder must put up several nest boxes and sleeping boxes. Some species need more openings on the box in



L to R: Figure 13. Rosy-faced lovebird. Figure 14. Lutino Rosy-faced lovebird. Figure 15. Rosy-faced lovebird. Figure 16. Crimson rosella.

order to evacuate in case of the attack. The permanent control and monitoring are necessary, especially during the mating season; but you must not disturb their privacy and additionally irritate them, since this will cause the occurrence of the aggression. It is good to keep record of random situational reactions, and whether the particular situation is the immediate trigger for the aggressive behavior. If you acknowledge that a form of the aggressive reaction occurs always after the same stimulus, you must take necessary measures to remove the stimulus.

You must not keep together the bird species that do not tolerate each other. You must separate the offspring from the parents in time. I have never put together the birds that do not live in the same area in nature into the same space. You must provide them with peace, disable physical contact with other species, and prevent the birds from the neighboring aviary to irritate them. If it is necessary, the birds that are troublesome should be isolated.

Certain parrot species have a specific emotional circuit. The research showed that a lot of cockatoos are prone to plucking their feathers. This is why the toys are necessary. They serve for

focusing the parrot's attention in cases when the aggressive reaction is expected. Likewise, their purpose is to release the energy surplus or negative energy. The cockatoos must always be kept under your eye level. If not, they will think that they are superior to the breeder; and they will behave in that manner. It is significant to say that a cockatoo can bite if he feels threatened.

The parrots that live in the house conditions need constant work and training, during which they learn what is acceptable behavior. The aggressive behavior can be eliminated this way. They must be physically active; but working on mental state is also very important.

The bird must have enough light during the day. The night must be quiet and dark so the parrot can sleep. Water bath is an inevitable part of life of almost all parrots.

The noisy and lively melody of the male is the way he attracts the female. The male uses the song to explain that he is healthy, ready for mating, and that he provided the territory with lots of food for the successful upbringing of the offspring. The parrots show they rule their territory and that they are safe and satisfied using singing and making acrobatics. These are the characteristics of physically and mentally healthy birds.

Each bird is an individual with the personality which needs to be recognized and respected. Only then will it trust the breeder. The survival of the parrots living in cages and aviaries depends on man. The aggressive behavior of birds can happen; but we must not allow that. If that has already happened, the causes must be eliminated.

I hope this text explained at least part of the problem, and that all of those who read it carefully will be able to recognize the critical cases in time to find the solutions to prevent the unwanted reactions.

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