



People are fascinated with the big colorful birds on display at Animal Kingdom and wild bird sanctuaries. It's always fascinating to see someone walking down the street with a big beaked bird on his or her shoulder as a companion. We are all drawn to these sights. What might it be like to have our own pet bird? So what are the joys and challenges of inviting a bird into your family?

If you want a bird as part of your family it is best if you are an extremely patient person who is willing to learn as much as possible about bird behavior and be willing to learn how to train your bird. Too many people purchase or adopt an Amazon parrot or a Macaw and leave it imprisoned in a cage because they are too scared to pick it up and have no training to learn the skills involved. A large adult Psitticine (hook bill) even a well trained one, can have a great amount of fun lunging at a human who is putting a hand in the cage to clean or place food. Will they bite or not? Sometimes it is hard to tell. One has to know the bird and have worked with it, and know how to approach the bird in the cage. If you want to adopt a bird a great place to do so is Foster Parrots in Rhode Island <http://www.fosterparrots.com/about/staff-and-volunteers/>. This organization encourages you to volunteer before you adopt one of their birds.

Training is a very gradual process and is all done with treats (tiny crumbs of a favorite nut or fruit that is only fed during training) and bridging word "good" when they come close to performing the desired behavior. To coax a bird onto your hand first let them come out of the cage on his or her own. Then offer a perch. If the perch is terrifying your bird put it in the corner of the room. If the bird is calm say good and give a treat. Move it 6 inches closer and repeat. Training may last 5 minutes only. It may take 1-2 weeks to intro a new perch close enough to the bird. Then you start rewarding when it touches the perch with a foot. Once perched, reward when it sidles down the perch one inch closer to you. Eventually a foot will land on your hand. Reward with bridge word "good" is the behavior is closer to the desired behavior.

To train a bird one must understand their behaviors in the wild. Birds are wild animals, even tame, docile individuals. Early socialization with humans is important. That is why there is so much talk about hand feeding baby birds. A human can still socialize a baby bird even while its parents are feeding it. Just picking it up and its hearing your voice will socialize it. Large breeders of birds that sell to big box stores claim the babies are "handfed" and tame when in actuality they are machine feeding baby birds and the birds are not tame at all because they have had no exposure to people. It is not recommended that you purchase a bird that still needs to be hand-fed. Just make sure the bird is not scared of your hand and is willing to step up on your hand.

Parrots are highly social. They stay in touch by calling to one another. Make sure to greet your bird when you enter the house or leave the room. Respond to them with a

quiet response when they make a chirp or quiet call. Expect some loud screams at sunrise and sunset. This is the rise and shine call and the time for bed call. It is best to ignore these loud calls and not reinforce with yelling and loud calling back.

Parrots are visual. They communicate with eye contact and body language. A gentle loving look from you will communicate a lot to your bird. If they are being naughty “the evil eye” is a good way to communicate that you disapprove. (Yelling will just get them screaming right back at you)

Parrots can perceive your moods. Their behavior and mood may reflect the energy and mood of their humans. Calming down and lowering our energy is an important way to calm our birds.

Parrots do not understand that you are “the boss” They think of you as part of the flock. You need to interact with them as a member of the flock. They will watch to see if you or another bird is eating the new food just introduced. It is best if you eat it to demonstrate that it is good. They like to forage for food so it is best to set up games and toys where they have to hunt for the food.

In the wild parrots spend most of their time preening themselves and others and foraging for food. Destroying fruit and tree branches and tearing up leaves is a normal part of their food gathering behavior. In your home this normal behavior may translate to throwing food, tearing up cage substrate or even furniture. You can avoid a lot of this behavior by keeping your bird busy with a wide variety of foods of different textures and toys that involve them doing some work to get the food. You can also give them things to destroy such as nonpoisonous tree branches or cardboard. You must be prepared to throw out a lot of food that falls to the bottom of the cage.

Birds are highly intelligent and need social stimulation. They cannot be put in a cage as an ornament and be left there. They must be trained and have constant access to social interaction with family members and other birds. They must be allowed out of their cages for at least a couple hours every day. They do best if on a play gym when out of the cage rather than on your shoulder. You have no control of a bird when it is on your shoulder. If the bird is suddenly scared it may bite you on the face.

Rather than snuggling with your bird while it is out of the cage, teach it how to do something. You can offer a bit of its favorite food that it only gets during training. You may need to introduce a toy the bird doesn't like. You can incorporate the toy into the training session by placing the toy in the corner of the room. Every time you move it an inch closer to the bird and it is calm you say good and immediately offer the treat. It may take you a week or two of 5-minute training sessions to get the toy into the cage. Much more information on bird behavior training can be found on goodbirdinc.com. Barbara Heidenreicher is a phenomenal trainer.

Have fun with your bird by interacting with it rather than snuggling. The stimulation of the training will keep your bird active and involved in good behaviors rather than screaming and destructive behavior. This will make your life as a bird family much more enjoyable.

Dr. Elizabeth Bradt

