

AVOIDING PROBLEMS

By Joanie Doss

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Many people think that the secret of having a well-behaved parrot is to buy a hand-fed baby. This helps, but it takes more than that. A hand-fed baby, while it may be a more trusting parrot, is not necessarily a well-behaved one. As these babies mature, owners are often surprised when some of their lovely pets begin nipping, and then "graduate" to full-fledged biting!

I work primarily with Amazons, and so this article will deal with handling such birds. Many of the same rules can be applied to all types of larger parrots. A mature Amazon's actions are governed by a surge of hormones during the breeding season. I've trained horses since I was fourteen years old. I have learned much from working with stallions—animals that are also governed by their hormones. I find that male Amazon parrots react very much like the stallions I trained in the past.

I once told a woman whose stallion I was working with that her horse lacked discipline and would hurt her some day. By discipline, I do not mean beating. I mean having rules and limitations set so the animal knows what is and is not acceptable behavior. She told me that the horse would never hurt her because he loved her. She thought that just loving him and being kind to him were all that were needed. It was true that the horse loved her very much, but love had nothing to do with this situation. It wasn't too long after this conversation that the horse became very excited, and when she lost control of him, the horse bit off her thumb!

Accidents occur in seconds. A larger parrot can injure an eye, pierce an eardrum or disfigure a face. During the breeding season, a parrot can become very excited and can injure a person in an instant. Parrots are not playthings for children. Youngsters must always be supervised when handling and playing with a parrot. A large bird can easily remove small ears, fingers and lips.

I tell most owners of larger parrots to teach their birds to remain on their forearms or wrist, and not let them wander up to their shoulders. A woman was once eager to show me a trick that she had taught her stallion. She went towards the horse, raised her arms, and the horse rose on his hind legs. She looked at me for approval. When I gave none, she asked what was wrong. I said, "The trick isn't to get a stallion to rear. The trick is to get him to keep all four feet on the ground." Any fool can get a stallion to rear in a couple of minutes. This encourages a stallion to dominate. It takes considerable training to keep them under control.

This is also true with parrots. Anyone can teach a bird to run up to the shoulder because a parrot will always attempt to scramble to the highest point. When you allow your parrot to run up to your shoulder, you are actually encouraging him to

become aggressive. The trick is to teach the bird to remain on your wrist or forearm.

I know, I know. You love having your bird on your shoulder. Yes, it is easier having him there than having to carry him on your wrist. He always wants to go up to your shoulder anyway, and it takes less effort to allow him to do it than it does to take him down and put him on your arm (or lap if you are sitting).

Here are some reasons why it is important to keep your parrot from getting into the habit of perching on your shoulder.

- 1. When a parrot is allowed to sit on your shoulder, he soon comes to regard this place as his "territory" and will often bite anyone coming close to you. He regards them as invading his "territory."**
- 2. The parrot may bite you out of jealousy when someone approaches. He bites in order to keep his "mate" away from danger or another potential mate. By biting you, your parrot is attempting to drive you back to the nest. The best and quickest way for him to do so is to bite to get you to move.**
- 3. When a parrot is at your eye level, it feels more in charge. Thus, it will bite when things do not go its way. This feeling of power encourages a parrot to do things it would be hesitant to do to you otherwise.**
- 4. A parrot on your shoulder quickly learns to run behind your neck and bite you when he doesn't want you to remove him. He knows how difficult it will be for you to try. If he is an exceptionally mellow Amazon, he may not bite, but it will be exasperating and time consuming to try to remove him.**
- 5. Parrots are easily attracted to earrings. They learn how to take the backs off pierce ones and unfortunately, often swallow them. If your bird has done this before, he may try removing those with wires. This could result in a seriously injured ear lobe.**
- 6. If you hair is long, it could become wrapped around a tongue, toes, or legs. A single strand of hair may be hard to see, but it can wrap so tightly that it can cut off a bird's circulation. Birds can also become tangled in your hair and either hurt themselves or you when trying to escape.**
- 7. When a bird is on your forearm, you know where it is. People have walked outside with birds on their shoulders, almost forgetting that their birds were there. Once outside, if the bird becomes frightened, he can fly off in an instant.**
- 8. A parrot on your shoulder is in a position to do quite a bit of damage. Within seconds it can injure your eye, ear, lips, nose or cheek. There is very little you can do to protect yourself from a bird in this position. Should your bird bite you when it is being held on your arm or wrist at waist level, the resulting damage will be not be as serious or as painful.**

9. **Need I suggest what your back and shoulder will look like if your bird isn't potty trained? If you are paying attention to your bird when it is on your arm, you will be able to tell when it is necessary to move him to a place where a mess does not matter.**
10. **Because a bird is obviously easier to observe when it is on your arm, you are more likely to know how your bird is feeling. You can quickly read his body language to see his mood.**

Every time you pick up your bird or interact with him, you are teaching it something. The way you handle him will either encourage him to obey or become a pest. You can spend hundreds of dollars to have someone train your parrot, but if you continue to mishandle him, he will return to his old habits. Every time your bird successfully gets away with biting you, it encourages him to become more and more aggressive.

As with teaching other behaviors, it takes a bit of time and patience to get your bird to stay on your forearm or wrist. If your bird has gotten into the habit of perching on your shoulder, it will be much easier to train him to remain on your forearm or wrist than if it has been running up to your shoulder for years.

When you ask your bird to step onto your arm, try to induce him to mount near your wrist. Keep your forearm bent parallel to the floor to discourage him from scrambling to your shoulder. An arm that is held out straight or angled slightly down from your shoulder will only serve as a ramp for your bird to go straight to the highest point—your shoulder.

Keep your arm and wrist at waist level for aggressive birds, but you can hold the bird somewhat higher for shy ones that lack confidence. Each time your parrot tries to get to your shoulder, tell him, "No," and put him back near your wrist again. If you are training him, that means EVERY TIME he attempts to go to your shoulder you are going to return him to your wrist. Do not give in! You must react each and every time in order for your training to be effective. It will only confuse your bird if it is allowed to go to your shoulder every now and then if it persists long enough.

It may take a while as your bird continues to test your authority, but if you always return him to your wrist or forearm, eventually he will get the idea. Do not put your bird on your arm if you do not have the time to reinforce your command. It is better to place him on a T-stand or on his cage than to teach him that he can get his way if he just keeps at it long enough. Every time you relent and allow your bird to perch on your shoulder, it will be that much longer before your bird will become trained. Any bird can go to your shoulder, but a trained bird sits quietly on your wrist.

A bird that has been trained to stay on your shoulder when you put it there, and comes off right away when you command, will not show the territorial and dominant behavior we have been describing. Please remember that every time you allow your bird to camp out on your shoulder on its own, you are encouraging it to

misbehave. I find birds to be very intelligent, and it does not take them very long to train their owners.

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