

BITING THE HAND THAT FEEDS HIM

By Joanie Doss

Based on her article that appeared in the October 1995 issue of Bird Talk

Although birds are great pets, one behavior is very annoying and upsetting. Without a doubt that behavior is biting. When people hear that I have Amazons, many of them say, "Oh, Amazons are nice, but I would rather have a cockatoo because they don't bite." I hate to burst their little bubble, but all birds can bite. Biting is more an individual behavioral problem than a species problem.

Several years ago, a person brought his wild-captured bird to a sexing clinic where I was catching and holding birds for the veterinarian. He told me this was the sweetest bird and had never attempted to bite. When I put the towel over the bird, it did not attempt to struggle or bite. I immediately informed the veterinarian that something was very wrong. It is not normal for a bird to be that calm when a stranger towel grabs and holds it. When the vet drew blood from the bird, it was a light red in color. The reason this bird never attempted to bite or nip was that he was extremely ill. He was severely anemic and died three days after the sexing clinic. Many birds classified as sweet-tempered and non-biting are in reality desperately ill birds.

A Different Set Of Rules

Birds do not have the same morals and rules of conduct as humans. It is wrong for a person to bite, but in the bird world biting is an accepted means of communication. Although a bird's bite can sever another bird's toe or worse, many bites do little, if any damage to another bird. The bird receiving the bite has thick down and glossy outer feathers that cushion a bite or even cause it to glance off the bird completely. Humans, however, are not equipped with protective feathers. Bites come in direct contact with skin causing welts, bruising, or cuts. Bites range from a gentle pinch to bone crushing.

I receive about three good bites a year. This is usually my fault for not following my own advice. My troupe, The Amazing Amazons, is asked daily to do many behaviors that put me in a vulnerable position. Although the Amazing Amazons are known for their performing abilities, they are also known for their good dispositions. As many as 250 people held them after a single performance. In over 10 years of performing, they have never bitten when handled by the public.

One of the best ways to keep from receiving a bird bite is to learn what provokes a bird to bite. Understanding why a bird bites and what triggers these bites will help you avoid most injuries. When these circumstances exist, keep your eye on your bird to avoid receiving a nasty bite.

Preventing The Problem

BECOMING SEXUALLY MATURE

Most people do not have trouble with their bird until it starts to mature sexually. I have seen very sweet babies turn into horrible monsters when they reach this stage. This type of biting is usually limited to the breeding season and the bird generally returns to his sweet self afterwards. When the bird sees he can get his way by biting, this hormonal biting can develop into a behavioral biting problem.

Be aware that a period of increased light, rise in humidity and warmer evening temperatures, can trigger a hormone rise in your bird. Increasing the amount of showers can also trigger hormonal behavior. He may not nip directly after the shower, but watch him closely the next day as it sometimes takes several hours.

Male Amazons are generally more aggressive when hormonal than females. However both can be aggressive when nesting. Anything that brings out the nesting behavior in Amazons will also bring out the aggression in male Amazons.

VISUAL TRIGGERS

Seeing another bird in full display can cause some birds to get so excited that they react by biting. Sexual behavior in some birds is triggered when they are near a pair of breeding birds. Just keeping a bird next to a bird of the opposite sex (although they are different species) may turn his thoughts to romance.

PLAYING IN A BOX OR PAPER BAG

This can stimulate the breeding instinct as the box or bag may suggest a nest box. With a nest box found, the bird must persuade his perspective mate (you) into going to nest. Having courted you, he is now upset that you will not go to nest with him (or her). The male will react just as he would with a female that refuses to go to nest, he will attack.

The male will nip his mate if she does not go to the nest box when a threat is present. He will nip you to send you back to the nest box or nip. He may see another person as a rival or threat and bites them to drive them away. Birds often bite the ones they love the most. I call these love bites. These love bites can be very hard and painful.

SOUND TRIGGERS

Paper rustling and running water are two common sounds that may trigger aggression. The sound of birds breeding, territorial screaming, or babies begging to

be fed can also trigger this aggression. These sounds stimulate breeding behavior and thus make the bird more testy and likely to bite.

TERRITORIAL

A bird that plays all day on the top of his cage (he is above a person's eye level) and has free access to come in and out of his cage at will, may develop a very strong territorial behavior. He will nip or bite any person or animal that comes within range of his territory. To help curb this behavior the bird should be put on a play gym or T-stand that is about waist high. Moving the bird's t-stand to different locations in the room will also make him less territorial.

AGGRESSION

One of the quickest ways to turn a good bird into a bad one, is to allow it to walk up to your shoulder whenever he pleases. This puts him in a position of power as he is level with the person's eyes. It puts the person in a very vulnerable position for in a matter of seconds the bird can pierce an ear drum, injure an eye or disfigure a face. It is very hard to get a bird down from your shoulder when he does not want to come. He quickly learns he can get his way by nipping when you try to remove him.

ROUGH PLAY

This is similar to playing roughly with children. It starts out fine, but it escalates and soon gets out of hand. As a baby bird, the playful nips and bites do not hurt their human companions. As the bird matures, this type of play soon becomes a test of dominance. The bites become harder as the bird playful tries to figure out his social position in the household. If the human allows the bites, they will become harder as the owner is condoning the action by his silence. A firm "No" and ceasing the playing when this biting first begins, will do a lot for setting limits on biting. Better yet, avoid all rough play.

NO LIMITS OR GUIDELINES

The bird has never learned what is acceptable or unacceptable behavior. He has always done what he pleases when he pleases. Now when he can't get his way, he bites. It is difficult to make a bird understand that biting as a five year old is wrong when he has been biting since he was six months old. Just as young children soon learn that spitting, hitting and screaming are not acceptable behaviors, so too baby birds must be guided and taught that biting is not acceptable behavior.

JEALOUSY

Birds can become jealous not only of other birds, but also of other animals and things. Some birds hate the owner's mate, afraid that the owner will like the person more than him. He can become jealous of the owner's children or friends. Parrots can become jealous of the time you spend with the telephone and become upset whenever they see the telephone or even when they hear it ring.

FEAR

A cornered bird will react to fear by biting. Many wild-caught birds or abused birds bite because they are afraid. A bird that is sitting on your arm may bite if it has been startled. Something may not look scary to you but your bird may interrupt it as very frightening.

Off Their Schedule

LATE FEEDINGS

My Blue Fronts become upset when I am late with their feedings. Because food is so important to them, they are very easy to motivate in training. This has nothing to do with starving or weakness from lack of food. Some birds, like some people, really enjoy eating. When late with their food, the birds become very upset and may charge the person feeding them.

NOT ENOUGH SLEEP

Birds require a lot of sleep. Ten hours of sleep a night is not excessive. Birds act similar to a very young child that has not had enough sleep. They will get testy and cranky.

Birds that receive an increase of light may be thrown into breeding behavior. A bird's sexual organs get larger with the increase of light and smaller with the decrease of light. If the bird sleeps more hours in a darkened room or cage, it will help to keep him from wanting to breed.

MORNING BITING

Some birds are testy when they first wake up in the morning or from a nap. Sometimes they need about 15 minutes to half an hour before they are handled. If not given time to fully wake, they will bite.

RETURNING AFTER AN ABSENCE

This could be just a couple of hours or returning from a long vacation. When I return from a vacation, my Amazons are very excited to see me again. If I were to

reach in their cages and take them out when I first step into the room, they would bite me. After they calm down, they eagerly climb out of their cages and onto my arm, bowing their heads for a scratch or snuggling close to me.

Training Troubles

MOVING FASTER IN HIS TRAINING THAN HE IS ABLE TO HANDLE

Each bird should be allowed to move at his own pace. Some birds learn quicker than others. Patience is the key. When a bird is pushed to do something he is not ready to do, he may let you know by biting.

WORKING A BIRD TOO LONG

Training session should always last less than 15 minutes. When the bird tires of his lessons, he may let you know by biting. Training sessions should always be fun. If you are getting frustrated because the bird is not responding the way you want, stop and try again at a later date. Do not make the bird work until he finally performs correctly in one session.

TEACHING A BIRD TO TALK

This does not result in biting unless the bird becomes overly excited when you talk to him. Sometimes it seems as if the bird becomes upset when he is unable to produce the same sounds as you. Watch an excited bird carefully when working on talking and keep the bird far enough away so he cannot bite your face.

TAKING A BIRD IN AND OUT OF HIS CAGE

Biting happens when a bird does not want to go back to or come out of his cage. He has discovered that if he bites a hand coming into his cage, it is quickly withdrawn. He may also learn that if he bites a person as he is being returned to his cage, the person will let him stay out longer. I believe that all Amazons should be stick trained as well as arm trained. Since biting the stick does not hurt, the owner continues to put him back into the cage or take him out, thus defeating the bird's plan of getting his way.

HOLDING A BIRD FOR TOO LONG A TIME

Young Amazons are very active birds and do not like sitting still very long. When you go to hold a young bird, do not do so for extended lengths of time. Sit with the bird and when he starts to get restless, put him back into his cage or on a T-stand. You do not want him to nibble and bite because he is tired of sitting still.

The Bird Is In Control

THE BEAK, NAILS AND WINGS HAVE GROWN

Clipping the wings is an important help in training a bird and keeping it from flying into a wall or window. When a bird's wings and nails grow out, he becomes more aggressive.

EYE CONTACT

Some birds will not bite as long as you maintain eye contact with them. The second you take your eye off them, they will bite. These birds are lightning quick and in that brief second can connect with exposed flesh. However, a hormonal male Amazon will see a steady gaze as a challenge and a threat and will return the challenge. He may attack you for challenging him thinking you want to take his territory or mate.

BARE FEET

Birds seem to know when people are vulnerable to their biting. I have seen birds behave perfectly until their owners take off their shoes. A chase will ensue until the people manage to put on their shoes or are out of the bird's reach.

HOLDING MORE THAN ONE BIRD

Amazons can become jealous or territorial if a couple are held at the same time by one person. You may not be able to keep your attention on both birds, allowing one bird to sneak in a nip at the other bird or you. Twice the number of birds held means twice the chance of getting bit.

ENJOYS BITING

When I first bought Pepper, my Blue Fronted Amazon, I was warned that he was a "difficult" bird. Indeed this was an understatement. He bit me every day for 18 months. He bit through a former owner's nose and hung from it like a giant nose ring. He bit completely through my lip, attacked my eye, scared my arms from my wrists to my elbows and would tear chunks of flesh from my scalp. Pepper was a very talented and innovated biter. He enjoyed this activity greatly, pitting his mind against humans.

When a stranger would walk into the room, Pepper would fluff his head feathers, lower his head, and push hard against the bars of his cage. In his sweetest voice he would say, "Come on. Come on. Good boy." I would warn people not to touch him. His sweet demure and gentle voice would make people disregard my warnings. They

would foolishly stick their fingers through the bars to scratch his head. In a flash Pepper would grab the finger with his foot and hold it against the bar so tightly that the person could not pull away. Then he would bite, and bite and bite! Pepper loved this game, however, very few humans found it amusing. Few birds fall into this category. Watch out for the smart ones. You are more apt to be bit by a smart bird than a dumb one.

These are not the only things that cause or trigger birds to bite. The list will vary with the individual bird. When your bird bites you, try to figure out why. Once you know the cause, you can avoid getting bit in the future.

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