

PHOBIC BIRDS

By Joanie Doss

Parrots by nature are fearful animals. They must be in order to survive since many others look at them as a tasty meal. This survival instinct is still very strong in many of our birds. Since flight is their main means of survival, many problems can arise when they can no longer use this to escape.

One of the biggest mistakes in handling birds is that people just assume the bird is not afraid of anything. Especially people or things that it comes in contact with daily. When a bird has lived with humans for awhile they assume that they understand people, furniture, pictures on the wall, etc., will not harm them. Many birds do, but many do not.

First of all, forget he is a tame bird and treat him as if he were brought in from the jungle and had to become acquainted with everything around him. If he is afraid of only one person, then that person must keep this state of mind. Never assume that he is not afraid of everything and everybody just because he grew up around them. Introduce him to everything. If he allows you to hold him on your arm, start with objects and people in the room where he stays.

FOR OBJECTS: Bring him close to objects to see what bothers him. You must be very intune with the bird. At the slightest sign of uneasiness, stop. Do not force the bird to the object. Over several days gradually work to getting closer to the object. Let the bird decide how fast you will move. Keep a close eye on him and at the first sign of uneasiness always stop.

I am an old horse trainer. When I was training horses, many people would just rope and tie a horse, bridle him, throw a saddle on his back and jump on him. The horse was terrified and of course bucked. Eventually the horse was conditioned to accepting man and his equipment, but it took a long time to regain its trust again. Along the way, many horses picked up bad habits from this type of training such as biting, kicking and rearing. However, there were people that took training a horse seriously and would begin by slowly introducing it to everything. They built on what the horse knew and expanded that. These horses would eventually accept and learn far more than those that were roughly caught and broken. I took my time and introduced the horses to everything even when I had raised him as a colt. I do the same with parrots. I never assume the bird will not be afraid.

People "bronco bust" their birds. They may be cuddled and played with as infants, but then are left to their own ways until they are sold. (No so with the lucky ones who continue to have human contact.) Suddenly they are expected to step up on everyone's arm and not be afraid or nip. The differences in sizes, shapes, smells, and clothing are never considered to be foreign to the bird and he is expected to like and accept everything.

My birds are introduced to everything in the room where they stay. Once they have accepted everything in that room, I move onto the next, etc. They are shown paintings, furniture, dishes, toys, windows until they show no fear for anything that we encounter. Just because they accept all this, they can still become afraid to anything new added to their environment and here again it is slowly brought into their room.

FOR PEOPLE: If a bird is afraid of only one person, it helps if someone else will service the cage until the bird learns to accept that person. Otherwise that person will have to do the cage but slow way down and explain everything you are doing to the bird. Talking or singing is important as predators never vocalize when they are stalking. This will help the bird realize that you are not going to eat him!

A truly phobic bird does better in a small cage as it makes them feel more secure. I also drape the cage with a sheet with only the front open so that they only have to deal with what is in front of the cage. As he gains in mental health and confidence, the draping can slowly be removed over a period of days or months....depending on the individual bird. As he improves, the cage can be larger. If it is going to be quite a bit larger, you can put the small cage inside the larger cage until the bird is confident in his surroundings. If the cage is draped, you slowly remove the draping until the bird is able to cope with every thing around his cage.

Most phobic birds do better unclipped. This means you must be very careful, when you begin to work with him so he does not fly into windows or out a door.



Kodiak as an extremely phobic bird. Note the missing feathers, stress feathers down the back, slightly opened mouth with wings partially opened and ready for an escape if needed.

OVERCOMING FEAR OF A PERSON OR PERSONS: While the bird is in his cage, walk towards him. Watch him very carefully for any signs of uneasiness. The moment you notice any, stop and take one step backward or back up until the bird is at ease again. Now put a piece of masking tape on this spot.

Now several times a day walk to that spot and stop. At first say or do nothing. Do not move your arms. Do not look at the bird. Do not stay there for longer than a few minutes.

After several days, walk to the spot and just look at the bird. Do this several times a day. Next will be walking to the spot, looking at the bird and talking or singing. Finally it will be walking to the spot, looking, vocalizing, and moving slowly such as slowly raising a hand to your face. Do not make any movement toward the bird or move quickly.

Now that your bird accepts this take one step forward and put a piece of masking tape here. Repeat what you did before. Watch the bird carefully. If any signs of uneasiness show, go back to the old mark and continue to work from there. If he is uneasy, it means that you are pushing him to fast. The amount of time varies with the bird and how scared he is.

The tape and eye contact, talking and moving are done until you are finally up to the cage. This can be a matter of days, weeks or even years depending on the individual bird. If the bird is fearful of everyone, then only you should be servicing the cage and feeding him. If the bird is only afraid of one person, then that person should not service the cage until the bird accepts him.

Once you are able to walk up to the cage with the bird showing absolutely no fear, you can start with more advanced training. Once you get to the cage, you will now hold a treat in your hand. The bird should be on the hungry side such as doing this just before his normal feeding time. At first hold the treat near the cage and gradually work up to the point where you can put it close to the bars. When the bird takes the treat and eats it in front of you, you are ready to work on getting the bird onto your arm. Eating a treat offered by you is a very big step that the bird has taken in overcoming his fear of you. If he is still afraid, he will take the treat and drop it. Only when he starts to trust you will he eat it in front of you.

After letting the bird take the treat from your hand for several days and he is eating it, you can open the cage door and slowly put your hand near the opening for the bird to take the treat. He may quickly take the treat and retreat with it but when he takes it with the door open and then eats it calmly in front of you, you are ready for the next step.

With the cage door open put your arm or hand so that the bird must step up onto it in order to get the treat. By now, he has learned that arms and hands do not try to grab or poke at him. If all is going well in his mind and you have not rushed any of the steps, he will step onto your arm, take the treat and eat it on your arm. If he takes it and runs, it means you must stay at this level until he will take it and eat it from your hand or arm.

Once he does that, it is time to move to the next level. When he steps onto your arm, move it slightly away from the door and then give him his treat. Now your aim will be each time moving him further away from the cage. If he gets upset then move back a level and work with him at the level he is comfortable and slowly advance him again over several days or several weeks.

Once he allows you to walk away from the cage with him, then you will start to work him on accepting all the objects in his room. When that is accomplished, you can start on people.

Before you work with people, you need to work him on stepping up from a T-stand or a back of a chair. From there you put him on various objects such as a table or a arm chair. Slowly introduce him to these objects first. When he allows himself to be put on these objects and taken off again, he is ready to accept other people.

You need another person that is willing to work with you. At first just have the person in the same room with you, then slowly over several days, have the person move closer to you. Finally coax him onto the person's arm. Let him on that arm for only a few seconds. Each time you put him on that person's arm increase the time.

Kodiak now. Although he needs to preen the one flight feather to put it back in place, the feathers have improved. Kodiak is no longer phobic. His feathers are better, his mouth is shut, and he is relaxed when sitting on a perch.



There is more, but for now this should get your bird started on the right path. The main thing to remember is that when a bird shows any fear of anything, to slow everything down and work slowly on getting him used to the thing he fears.

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