

WHAT'S WRONG WITH AMAZON PARROTS?

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You mention the name Amazon and you will get a wide variety of reactions. Some people will say they are the best birds ever while others will say with disgust, "I wouldn't have one of those things in my house!"

Why such a range in the popularity of Amazons?

Amazons have gotten a bad rap over the last few years. They have been labeled as mean and unpredictable. Some people believe they can't be kept as pets after they become physically mature. These statements are untrue. Amazons are wonderful birds and pets. For years they were the bird of choice because they could amuse themselves, talked, sang, were beautiful, smart and survived even during bad care. The most important factor though, was that wonderful Amazon spirit that allowed them to adjust to captivity better than many other species.

Can Amazons be kept as pets after they mature? You bet. I have five male Amazons (two Blue Fronts and three Napes) with ages that range from 11 years to over 20 years. They have been with me for most of their lives and although they have required special handling at times, they are still pet quality. My birds are also performing birds and have had as many as 250 people hold them after a performance. In order to live with Amazons you first have to understand them.

Amazons are not Greys with green feathers despite the fact that they are equally smart, great talkers and about the same size. Amazons react differently than Greys to situations. If they were people, the Grey would be the intellectual college graduate while the Amazon would be the street smart and life-of-the-party type of guy.

The Amazon classification covers a wide group of birds. They are basically all green with different colorations on their heads. The problem birds can be limited to a few species. They can be broken down further by sex. This group is made up of the males of the Double Yellow Heads, Yellow Napes and Blue Fronts. I have called this group the "Hot Three". When sexual, these birds become extremely aggressive and one has to be careful when handling them. Species such as Lilac Crowns, Green Cheeks and Mealies are less excitable and remain much calmer than the "Hot Three" during the breeding season. There is a huge difference in the species of Amazons, their sex and their age. A five year old Lilac Crown female may bite but she will not go into a hormonal rage. A nine year old male Double Yellow can very easily do so if they are healthy and their environment is right.

The females of the “Hot Three” are also calmer and some even demand cuddling during the breeding season. Other species of Amazons will not be as excitable but that does not mean the other Amazons do not bite. They do, but you do not have to contend with the hair trigger of the “Hot Three” males.

All birds (Amazons or not) can bite when breeding behavior is present including species that are known for their calmness. The “Hot Three” males, however, can be completely out of control when sexual. They seem to go into a trance like state and do not hear you or understand what they are doing. An attack by a hormonal male “Hot Three” is very vicious and will not be limited to one bite. They bird will bite, and bite, and bite. They have broken bones, opened skin to expose the bone and disfigured faces. Care must be taken when working with these birds and it is up to you to make certain others are not hurt when the bird has a mate or a mate substitute.

The time of aggression varies with the individual bird. It usually appears between the ages of 5 to 12 years. During this time there will be one to two years in which they will be very aggressive. Once they go through this, they generally settle down with little or no aggression shown when they are not hormonal and some aggression when they are. People often ask me when will an Amazon become hormonal and for how long. This varies with the individual bird. One of my Napes, Magnum, was showing sexual behavior when he was nine months old! He began tearing paper, screaming, nipping and was trying to mount all the other birds. Of course, he could not father babies at this age, but the behavior was already there. My Nape Tequila Joe did not show obvious signs of sexuality until he was 8 years old.

Not all male “Hot Three” will become aggressive when hormonal. Young males, ill males or those with a low sex drive will be average to mellow. However, a large portion of “Hot Three” males do become aggressive when hormonal. No one knows which ones will give you problems when they go through this period. My Nape, Tequila Joe, never bit me the first 8 years I had him. When he turned eight, he bit me so hard that he did nerve damage to my left hand. All my males were bad when they were 8 year olds. Tequila Joe however, was the only one that had to be pulled from performing. He was extremely aggressive for that entire year. As a nine year old, he was back performing again and getting back to being his normal sweet self.

Many people think they have cured an Amazon’s biting problem when all they have done is allowed the bird to finish his hormonal cycle. I could tell a person to hop on one leg four times a day in front of the bird cage, and in a few months, the bird would began to be calmer and bite less and less. It isn’t the hopping, it is the bird’s body no longer putting out high levels of hormones.

Another thing that is often misunderstood is the role illness and diet plays in the bird’s hormonal aggression. A person rescues a “Hot Three” male from poor

care. They take a sweet Amazon to the vet to cure illnesses and improve his diet. They expect the bird to be forever grateful. Instead, one day the bird bites them. Hard! What happened? The bird is now healthy and his body is functioning normally. A slight bacterial infection often keeps a bird from breeding condition as does malnutrition. Anything that encourages hormonal behavior will also increase the bird's aggression.

“Hot Three” males are programmed to guard the nest, territory and family. The female does the incubating and the male stands guard outside the nest. In the wild, there is competition for nesting sites so hormonal Amazons will try to drive any bird that might compete for his territory (outside of his mate) from the nesting area. The problem with Amazons is that people fail to realize that these birds will be aggressive when in breeding mode. Amazons have been programmed to be this way for many centuries so that they are able to survive. Although pets, they are still programmed to defend their territory.

Amazons are extremely loyal and devoted to their people. Some of these birds will risk their lives to protect them. There have been a couple of newspaper articles about pet birds attacking and chasing intruders out of the house when the person tried attacking the bird's people. It should be no surprise that the birds were Amazons. Amazon owners have to realize that this can happen if the bird miss-interprets other people's actions. As an Amazon owner, I always keep tabs on how my birds are reacting to people and situations around us. Amazons may also bite the ones they love the most as they try to drive them from danger or keep them from being attracted to competitors.

The main factor of throwing a bird into breeding behavior is the amount of light they receive. The light will increase the size of their sexual organs and the decrease in light causes them to shrink. If I am trying to bring an Amazon down from breeding behavior I cover his cage with a heavy dark cover so that no light can enter into the cage. He is then put to bed earlier or allowed to sleep later. I start with limiting his daylight by covering him for 13 hours. This will be increased or decreased by his actions. If he is still doing hormonal screaming, biting, charging, excessive paper tearing, or masturbation, I will increase the amount of darkness.

Since my bird cages are so close together, I also use the covers to keep the birds from seeing their neighbors. They would spend most of their time challenging each other during the breeding season to protect their territory if I did not do this. I have my covers so the front is open but they can't see their neighbor on either side. They do see each other from the front part of their cages or when they are out of the cages. Covering the sides allows them to relax and not feel as though they must guard their territory from another male. If I had room to put more distance between their cages, this would not be necessary. The aggression shown toward another male in guarding territory often throws the birds into breeding behavior. Large breeders will alternate a species of Amazons so that pairs of the same species do not see each other. Although the protection of territory may start them into

breeding behavior, pairs seldom breed if they are kept next to pairs of the same species as they spend their time challenging and charging each other instead of building nests and raising a family.

Rise in humidity, increase in food and increase in the evening temperature are other factors that help in bringing the bird into hormonal behavior. Many times the birds become hormonal in late fall and winter. The reason is that people turn on their heating systems and the evening temperature rises. They also turn their electric lights on sooner and thus are giving their birds more light. With the increase of light and evening temperatures, the bird's body reacts as if it is spring.

Once nesting is over, wild Amazons return to groups and have few problems getting along. This behavior should be remembered when pet birds shows signs of sexuality. It is better to be over-cautious when your male "Hot Three" is sexual by keeping him where he cannot attack another bird. It only takes a second for a bird to amputate another bird's toe or worse.

One must learn the Amazon's body language to avoid getting bit. Amazons always warn before biting. It may be a slight quick warning, but it is there. The obvious time not to handle an Amazon is whenever he is excited. If his tail is flaring and his eyes dilating, it is best to avoid handling him until he is calmer. Even when birds are extremely hormonal, they may still have a short time during the day or evening when they will be calm enough to handle. After 20 years of working with Amazons I find the best way to handle biting is to avoid it in the first place. It seems that every time a bird bites it increases the chances that he will bite again. It is very important to learn to read the bird's body language and then not put yourself in a position where you can get bit. You do not want to change hormonal biting into behavioral biting.

Sometimes it is better to have all female birds or all male birds for pets. Male "Hot Three" Amazons can be set off by females of other species. One would think that a bird that is this sexual would be easy to breed. Amazons can be difficult to produce as most will only have a clutch once a year. They can be very choosy about their mate. Some birds have lived together for years and have a platonic relationship. Large breeders allow Amazons to chose their own mates. Having only a clutch a year and difficulty in finding a compatible pair have discouraged many breeders from having these birds. Other species are far more profitable.

There are several things one can do to keep calm and harmony in your relationship with an Amazon. Baby Amazons are sweet and wonderful. Most people do not believe that their baby will ever bite them. It is a good idea to start when they are young to keep them off your shoulder. In a matter of seconds a hormonal male can damage an eye, ear, or scar a face. Another important handling suggestion is to stick train the bird. This will enable you to be able to transfer the bird from his cage to a play stand or gym. Letting the bird play on top of his cage

will increase the chances that he will become territorial. Rough play should also be avoided as it gets most Amazons overly excited. If the bird never becomes aggressive, the training will not hurt him and if he does, you will be glad you took the time to train him.

A large cage is important when keeping a male “Hot Three” Amazon. My males are kept in Macaw size cages with Amazon spacing for the bars. The bars need to be close enough that the bird cannot stick his head between them. The need for the cage is for the short time in the bird’s life when he is extremely aggressive. They may be in their cage for a day or two if they become too excitable to put on a T-stand or gym. With plenty of room and toys, it won’t hurt him to be in his cage for a while. I still interact with the birds when they are extremely hormonal, but I keep the bars of their cages between us.

Wing clipping should be done on any male showing aggression. It helps to make him less confident in attacking plus it keeps the bird from hurting a person. Some of these boys can become downright dangerous and you don’t want to contend with an aggressive male flying into your face to bite.

Male Amazons are wonderful companions that are extremely intelligent, outgoing, talkative, loyal and devoted. They display more fully and more often than the females. The “Hot Three” males are extremely macho. They are also very funny birds. I have seen my birds in full display so preoccupied with showing off that they walk off a perch and fall in an unglamorous heap on the floor. They pick themselves up and then act as if this is what they intended to do in the first place.

Even though you may not be able to handle your Amazon when they are going through a particular intense hormonal period, they are still very entertaining. These plain green males suddenly burst into a rainbow of colored feathers. They spread their tail and wings showing off those beautiful red, yellow and blue feathers. Their bright orange eyes dilate. Their head feathers are raised while they hold their wings fully extended and away from their body. Then they do a stiff legged walk. Some will even turn slightly from side to side to show off their stunning display and then shake their feathers as well. It is a sight to behold. If I were a predator or rival, I would be afraid. If I were a female I would swoon. As long as I have been around Amazons, I still have to stop and admire a male in full display. I call this the “Amazon strut”. Amazon males display frequently but when hormonal, they will also go into that fascinating strut.

Amazons are such great companions that their owners often overlook their indiscretions. The few bites they receive are far outweighed by the joy they bring. Amazons are not for everyone, but with a little understanding of why and how these birds react, they can become outstanding pets. To know an Amazon is to love them.

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