

# Handling Your Amazon

By Joanie Doss

Amazons by nature have very strong personalities and can be very aggressive. They get along best with **assertive people that have set rules and limitations.**

It seems hard to imagine that a 3-month-old Amazon will ever be anything but sweet and cute, but at 4 or 5 years of age, many change. The aggression becomes intensified when the hormone level changes as the bird reaches sexual maturity. If groundwork has not been laid when the bird was young, you will have a very difficult time keeping your bird pet quality.

My performing Amazons (*The Amazing Amazons*) are 4 wild-caught males and one domestic. After their 45-minute performance, they have been handled by as many as 250 people. These birds work through the breeding season and are handled by children as young as 2, the handicapped and the aged. In over 6 years of performing, they have never bitten anyone. The children that help me can reach inside the bird's cage and take them out any time I need them.

## Handling the Bird all Over, Every Day

A handed baby should not be afraid of humans. You need to handle him so he will allow you to touch him all over. You should be handling him EVERY DAY. If he is afraid of you, work slowly and patiently until he allows you to touch him. The toes are a good place to start if he is afraid of you. Take your time. Even if it takes weeks to be able to touch one toe. Don't push him faster than he is willing to accept. This is not a race, so take your time. ***When your baby accepts you holding him, it's time to introduce him to the rest of the family.*** Encourage everyone to hold him so he does not become a one person bird. Take him from room to room and show him new things. If he shows fear, back off and approach the new place, person or thing slowly. The baby should also be left by himself several times a day so that he gets used to being alone.

If there are no other birds for him to pattern from, you will have to act as his parents and show him how to behave. Show him how to play with toys by *playing with the toy yourself*. He will go through a period of tasting and testing. In the wild, he would be learning his place in the flock. The bird will begin chewing on your fingers and hands. At first it will be very light and will be exploratory but as he gets older, the pressure will be harder and harder as he tries to dominate. I do not let my young Amazons chew on my hands even though it is very light. *When they put their beaks on me they are told "No bite!"* as I remove the beak from my finger. When they mature and are in full display, I can pick them up by telling them "No bite" as they step onto my arm. Do not expect your Amazon to stop applying his beak to you when you first remove it and tell him "**No bite**". Amazons are stubborn animals and they will continue testing your authority several times a day for several months, until they realize that you are not going to give in.

I believe all Amazons **should be stick trained** as well as hand tamed. A mature Amazon during the breeding season, especially if a bird of the opposite sex is kept near him, can be quite hard to handle. During this time, having him stick trained will save you from several bloody bites on your arm when you transfer him in and out of his cage.

### **Shoulders are a No-No**

I also believe that Amazons should not be kept on a person's shoulder. Accidents occur in seconds. A large parrot can injure an eye, pierce an eardrum or disfigure a face. I tell most owners to teach their birds to remain **on their wrist** and not to let the bird wander up to their shoulders. A parrot will always attempt to scramble to the highest point. That's encouragement for him to dominate over you. He is at eye level on your shoulder and feels more in charge. If things don't go his way, he'll bite. He'll regard your shoulder as his "territory" and will often bite anyone coming close to you invading his "territory". He may bite you (its mate) out of jealousy when someone approaches, or to keep you from danger. That's what he does to his mate attempting to drive her back to the nest. The bird may also run behind your neck and bite you when he doesn't want to be put back in his cage. Bites can be serious. Often, owners walk outside with a bird on their shoulder, not realizing he's there.

### **Wrist Training and Benefits**

It takes training to have him remain on your wrist. If a bird bites at wrist level or on your hand at waist level, the damage may not be as serious or as painful. A wrist held bird is at a level you can see and if not potty-trained will give you a clue he is about to pass feces and you can move him (quickly) to a place where it doesn't matter. It will take time until your bird stays on your wrist. You must be very consistent. Every time he moves towards your arm or shoulder, put him back on your wrist. It may seem as if he'll never learn, but don't give up. Don't yield. If you are tired, or busy, place him on a T-stand or a play gym until it's time to enforce training again. Eventually, he will be trained.

Every time you pick up your bird or interact with it, you are teaching it something. The way you handle the bird will either encourage him to listen and become a good companion or bite and be an obnoxious pest.

### **Doss Guidelines to End Cage Dominance**

- Teach the "up" or "stick" command. Use authoritative voice and expect your bird to obey.
- Situate cage so it is below your eye level. If high, use a box or step-stool to be above bird's eye level.
- Don't let the bird play on top of his cage. Use a T-stand or play gym.
- Pay attention to your bird when taking him in or out of the cage. Prevent bad habits before they start.
- Back your bird into the cage, so he does not grab wires, and do it quickly and decisively.
- Don't put him back into his cage as a means of punishment. He will associate it with yelling or punishment. Use another cage, maybe not as large or well outfitted.
- Always reward and praise your bird if he attempts to do what you ask.

- Work with him every day. Be consistent. You can't expect him to learn if you only work with him once a week, or let him refuse to come out one day, but not the next.
- Don't let others take him out of the cage until he's fully trained, especially if they permit him to climb on top of the cage, or refuse to obey.
- Change your attitude about your bird's cage. Many see the cage as a prison. The bird sees it as a safe haven. If it's clean, has play things, roomy enough, it can be a place he enjoys. To leave a bird out of the cage unsupervised is a court disaster. Parrots are very curious animals and can get into a lot of trouble unsupervised, even die in the hands of other animals in the home or from biting hot wires, chewing poisonous house plants, or putting his beak into a wall socket, etc.

### **Coming Out Tips From Doss**

If you want your bird out of the cage, don't give up and walk away. You've reinforced his dominance.

- Clean the cage the same time each day. The bird can expect to be out of the cage, and to be returned.
- Praise him for coming out and going in the cage when he does so without fighting.
- Make coming out a fun thing, special treat, playing on the gym, meeting another bird, head scratches, chew on wood block time.
- Tell the bird to get on the stick to come out, with a towel behind your back. If he doesn't get on use the towel. He'll eventually get the idea. Less trouble to get on the stick.

### **Teaching Your Bird to Come and Stay**

- Each bird is an individual.
- Don't rush through training sessions.
- Break training into sections or levels. Don't proceed until bird has mastered the level, is at ease and unafraid. Birds don't learn good things well or at all when afraid.

#### **Assuming he is already stick and arm trained:**

- Use a steady table. Few distractions.
- Put bird on arm, more at ease than on a stick.
- Walk around the room gradually approaching table.
- If bird is tense, slow down, talk to bird.
- Don't put him on table first time. May take days.
- Later, let him step onto table.

- Let him stay a second or two before picking him up.
- Each time, a little longer.
- Tries to fly, climb or jump, tell him "no", return to table.
- Don't punish him for leaving the table.
- Keep training sessions short. 10 minutes.
- Several (separated by hours) 10 minute sessions a day.
- If difficult: Then coax him onto table with treat. Get another treat for him to make the second step.
- Use techniques of training previously learned.
- Let him explore table on his own.
- When walks on table on your command, praise, reward.
- Do it more before going on to next behavior. Patience.
- When bird remains for about a minute, then it's time to teach him to "Come on".

Have bird step on table. Place arm a few inches away. Call his name and say and signal "come" or "**come on**". If he doesn't, try luring him with a treat. If bird is still reluctant, use a stick for him to get on. Later, you can substitute your arm for the stick. It may take several days. When he finally gets on the arm, lengthen the distance, but not too quickly. As he walks, tell him "good boy" or such. When he walks the whole table, move him to the floor and repeat the process. Remember command, praise and reward.

The command "**stay**" and a palm upwards should stop the bird, but if not **slap the table** and repeat. Later, on chairs, T-stand, etc., use the commands and if he leaves, pick up and place back on the place where you wanted him to stay.

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