

The Essential Bath

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Bathing parrots – parrots and water – why, it's a combo as natural as hookbills in the rain forest! Since most parrots come from some degree of rainforest climate in the wild, it makes sense that their domestically raised offspring living in our homes would be genetically inclined to enjoy bathing. Bathing birds is a vital and necessary part of their regular routines, just like good diets, fun toys, and interaction with their humans. Bathing helps keep skin and feathers in tip-top condition. It's also helpful during molting, for birds with respiratory ailments, hyperactive birds, pluckers, and those easily bored. A good soaking bath helps soften pin feather sheaths, removes dander, and encourages preening.

So, why is it so many people either rarely bathe their birds, or tell me their parrot "hates" baths? It doesn't make sense! So, let's examine the bath in all its glory. First of all, all you need to give a parrot a bath is a bird, some water, and some time! I always chuckle when I see ads for "X" # of dollars for bathing a parrot. At our boarding facility a daily bath is part of routine care and included as part of basic care. Parrots rarely need cleaning with anything more than plain old water. In fact, using soaps can overdry skin and feathers, and remove essential oils. The only time a shampoo would be needed is in the rare instance of a bird getting into something messy, oily, or sticky – and, of course, since all out of cage time should be fully supervised, this should never happen, right?! Some Cockatoos who enjoy playing in newspaper can become soiled and discolored to the degree that occasional sudsing is needed. (Since you should ALWAYS wash hands before handling birds, they should NOT be getting soiled with potato chip grease or nicotine or ANYTHING else on your fingers!)

How to bathe? There's lots of options – the shower, a spray nozzle with the bird in the sink, plant misters, bowls of shallow water, etc. Some birds love water in any form, they tend to be the guys who are always dipping as many body parts as possible into their water dishes. Others are more selective as to presentation and temperature. Sherlock, my male B&G Macaw, loves to bathe in the back yard, on a playstand, with cold water straight from the hose thoroughly soaking him. Amber, my female, prefers that I hold her on her back under a soft, warm shower spray that gently soaks her tummy. One of our clients, Sam, the Quaker, likes to puff up in a big ball and walk backwards in circles in a glass pie plate with 1 ½" of water, any temp. I generally recommend a lukewarm temp for bathing most birds. With spray bottles, filling with hot water usually results in a warmish spray by the time it comes out. **Spray bottles should NEVER be used as a form of discipline, punishment, or training. This "quick fix" does NOT resolve any behavioral issues, but DOES violate a parrot's trust and lead to a dislike of bathing! For birds who've been treated this way, try any method BUT a bottle. There are also pump-type misters that you prepump and they remain pressurized. All you do is push a button and they put out a very fine, soft steady mist that's virtually soundless. Many apprehensive bathers have become total converts with these misters.

How often? Bathing is best done daily, year-round, early in the day so the bird fully dries before bedtime. I'm not a big fan of blow drying birds as it's excessively hot and very hard on skin and feathers. Also, many blow dryers (especially when new) have a Teflon coating which, when very hot, emit the same toxic fumes as non-stick

cookware. Many parrots, however, seem to love being blowdried, so if you do use one, turn it to the lowest setting and only partially dry the bird with it. Most parrots enjoy being cuddled in a towel post-bath, which soaks up excess moisture. This also fosters trust and helps birds get used to toweling as a gentle, positive experience. If you can't bathe your bird daily, then 2 – 3 times per week is the minimum I recommend. Feather pluckers and molting birds especially need baths as often as possible. Avoid drafts, and turn up the heat if need be. If your bird still seems overly chilled, use a heat lamp next to his cage.

How to encourage reluctant bathers? Be patient and creative! Many birds head for the water dish as soon as you start the vacuum – the sound seems to stimulate a bathing response. So, before the bath, turn on your vacuum in a corner of the room and leave it on as you bathe your bird. Like eating and playing, bathing is a learned behavior and easier with a mentor. Let the timid one watch your other birds enjoying bathing. If he's an only bird, show him by putting him on the shower curtain rod while you shower, or spray yourself (and other game family members) with a spray bottle. Laugh and have fun! Your attitude toward birdie-bathing is a definite factor and influence on how your bird responds. All bird interaction needs to be trust enhancing and fun for the bird. If you are apprehensive and fearful, he will be, too! Spray up in the air so it falls gently, like light rain, as opposed to squirting him full force in the face. African Greys, in particular, tend to be shy about many new things, including bathing. Even the ones who love it, like my Timneh, Ani, may complain and seem offish at first. Use lots of encouragement and verbal praise, and go s-l-o-w. Try little mini-baths daily in the beginning, and pay attention to what your bird enjoys. Start with feet and tail, then gradually move up the body.

The ultimate goal is to get birds used to regular bathing to the point where it's a positive and integral part of their daily routine. Whether a dusty, powder down 'tiel, 'too, or grey, or a rain loving Macaw, Amazon, or Conure, it's best to "soak 'em to the bone", as I say. Nothing is more satisfying than seeing your parrot, sopping wet, hanging by his toes, as he's dripping, flapping wings, and vocalizing to his heart's content! Now that's a happy, healthy, and content bird, one much less apt to pluck, scream, or exhibit obsessive behaviors. So, NO MORE EXCUSES – let's all get wet!!