

Solutions for Screaming Parrots

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Screaming problems are always created by the owner. While difficult to accept, this is the truth. Often, the stage is set by inappropriate dietary and environmental provisions. When the parrot lives in circumstances that prevent him from getting his needs met or conditions that cause increased hormone production, he will be noisier. When the increased noise becomes evident, caregivers typically reinforce (reward) the behavior in different ways.

Our actions that reinforce the behavior are usually the result of some story we are telling ourselves. Example: "He must be scared about something he saw outside the window. I should go to him and reassure him." Our social response to the behavior rewards it. Often over time, we change our responses as we get more desperate to stop the problem noise. We might leave the room when the parrot begins to scream, or go over and cover the cage.

However, these are still social reactions that can reward the behavior, *even though our intention was to punish the behavior or get it to stop*. We know this fact about behavior: **Any behavior that gets a reward will occur more often in the future**. As the behavior gets rewarded by the caregiver's actions, it occurs more and more often until a true problem is in place.

Thus, the first step toward resolving a screaming problem is to change the way that we think. We must stop trying to make the parrot happy. We must stop telling ourselves stories about why the behavior is happening. We must *stop trying to figure out* why the behavior is occurring. Instead, we must become more objective in our thinking. We must examine our own responses to the behavior. If our behavior caused the problem in the first place, it follows then that we must change our own behavior in order to get the problem to stop. We will not change our own behavior unless we change the manner in which we think.

The second step toward resolution is to identify what is currently reinforcing the behavior. A bird will not continue to offer a behavior in the absence of reinforcement. Thus, if you have a continuing problem with unwanted noise, you know for sure that some type of reinforcement is maintaining the behavior. Once we have discovered what actions or conditions are rewarding and maintaining the behavior, we must then remove the reinforcement for the problem noise. This results in the typical advice to ignore the behavior.

Ignoring the behavior must be an integral part of the behavior modification plan, but if used alone will never solve the problem. It is only a small part of the solution and to be a successful part of the plan, it must be followed religiously. If you are ignoring the behavior, you don't walk out of the room when it occurs. Neither do you roll your eyes or comment to your spouse about the behavior. You simply pretend that the parrot doesn't exist as long as he is screaming. Wear hearing protection if you have to.

For parrots who tend to go on screaming jags of some duration (longer than 5 minutes) it can be helpful to reward the cessation of the noise. When the parrot stops, immediately mark the event with a "Good!" and walk over to offer a favorite food treat. If done consistently, the parrot will soon learn to scream for shorter periods, realizing that when he stops he earns something he values.

The third, **and most important**, strategy is to begin to reward other, more desirable, behaviors that can serve the same function for the parrot as the screaming previously did. This might include talking or making other pleasant noises. It could also include interacting with enrichment items. As the parrot no longer gets rewarded for screaming and instead earns treats for talking, the caregiver soon begins to hear more talking and a lot less screaming. During this phase, maintain an awareness of your parrot's activities and work hard to reward any that you would like to see him perform more often in the future.

These same strategies will work well with any unpleasant noise that your parrot offers. He doesn't need to be screaming for you to consider his noise a problem. If you have a grey who imitates the car alarm until you're about to lose your mind, implement these recommendations!

In order to effectively reward these new, alternate behaviors we must (1) identify reinforcers that the parrot values, and (2) refine our timing. Often finding good reinforcers is as easy as removing favorite foods from the diet and using these instead as reinforcers. For parrots eating a seed mix as a staple in the diet, it may be necessary first to convert to a formulated diet before the parrot will have any true interest in earning reinforcers.

Timing is crucial when reinforcing desirable behaviors. Science has proven that an effective reinforcer must be delivered within 3 seconds in order to influence future behavior. Since it may take you more than 3 seconds to walk over to the parrot to offer the treat, you must first mark the behavior with a sound. When your parrot offers a sound or word that you enjoy, immediately focus on him and say "Good!" This will convey to him that his behavior was correct and that a treat is on the way. *Always* follow the marker with a treat.

All of these interventions will not completely resolve the problem unless the diet and environment are also corrected to best meet the parrot's needs. If certain conditions "set the stage" for the problem to evolve, it makes sense that we must change those same environmental conditions that support the screaming if we are to fully resolve the problem.

This requires that we change any ways we care for our parrots that are "deal breakers." *Deal breakers are any provisions that are so oppositional to a parrot's innate needs that he can't possibly behave well over the long run under those conditions.* How do we identify these?

It helps to take a lesson from the wild, since most of the parrots with whom we live are not yet domesticated. Wild parrots typically experience predictable environmental conditions. Most wake at first light. They spend hours foraging every day, usually during two different periods. They bathe regularly and spend hours chewing on plant materials. Parrots who live in flocks of any size are never isolated, since safety depends upon numbers. Instead, they live an independent existence within the flock.

Typical "deal breakers" that I have encountered include: #1: Parrots who only get out of the cage once a day. (Parrots need a minimum of 3 to 4 hours out of the cage each day, and this must be broken into two periods.) #2: Parrots who are not allowed to begin their day early enough in the morning. (Since parrots wake as soon as light creeps into the room, they need to be up and fed as soon after that as can be managed.) #3: Parrots who have little enrichment or foraging opportunities provided or who do not interact with enrichment. (Parrots need to be busy and to spend part of their days foraging or working for food through training.) #4: Parrots who do not bathe regularly. (Bathing is essential for normal preening and to diffuse pent up energy.) #5: Parrots who eat a high fat, high carbohydrate diet. (Such a diet can cause an increase in hormone production, which leads not only to malnutrition, but results in more noise, more aggression and sets the stage for feather destructive behavior.) #6: Parrots who live in isolation, perhaps off in a room away from the main living area. Parrots living in such conditions simply cannot behave well.

Perhaps the most difficult thing to realize is that, in order to change the parrot's behavior, we must change our own. It may be gratifying to point the finger at the parrot and blame him for our own discomfort. However, in doing so, we remove all empathy and ethics from the relationship equation and prevent ourselves from ever resolving the problem. Instead, we must maintain an awareness of the facts that it is not necessarily easy for these birds to live in captivity and that we are responsible for seeing that they enjoy an excellent quality of life and for guiding them into appropriate behavioral channels.