

Adopting and Living with Previously-Owned Parrots: Part One

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Things have changed a lot during the decades that we've been keeping parrots. Decades ago, those who wanted a parrot almost always had to acquire a wild-caught bird from a quarantine station or dealer. Once we became successful at breeding, it became more popular to adopt a baby from a pet store or local breeder. Large production breeding facilities sprang up to meet this new demand.

Now, trends have shifted once again. Unprecedented numbers of parrots are being sold through venues such as Craig's List or Pet Finder. Still others are being relinquished in record numbers to rescue and adoption organizations. In the United States, these organizations struggle with an unending list of people who want to give their parrots up and have very long waiting periods for taking these birds in. New organizations are forming every week to now meet the current demand of people wanting to give up those baby parrots they previously adopted with such excitement.

Now, those wanting to adopt a parrot cope with both internal and external pressure to take in an older parrot who needs a home. The internal pressure exists naturally, stemming from our love of parrots, commitment to them as a group and desire to do the right thing. If so many older parrots need a home, can I in good conscience adopt a baby? External pressure is also quite present and is most obvious on the Internet. We may get judged for adopting a baby parrot because of the fact that so many older parrots do need homes. I've seen individuals take a lot of heat over even discussing the adoption of a baby parrot.

I don't take sides in this debate. I have lived with both babies that I raised and previously-owned parrots that I have taken in. Both present challenges, as well as learning opportunities. However, the challenges presented by adopting an older parrot are often different. My hope is that this article will serve as a guide for those of you contemplating the adoption of a previously-owned parrot. When taking in a parrot who has come from a previous home, it is important to have some idea of what you can reasonably expect, as well as resources for successfully dealing with any challenges that arise after adoption.

Examine Your Motivations

If you're thinking about adopting an older parrot, start by examining your motivations and expectations. I've helped a lot of people to adopt an older parrot. Frequently, residing just below that surface enthusiasm is a deep sense of foreboding. What will I be getting myself into? What if he's a *biter*? What if he won't bond with me? It is natural to want to avoid problems, but you can't make good decisions based upon fear.

The truth is there are no guarantees. Many parrots given up have no real behavior problems and are relinquished solely due to what is termed "lifestyle changes." A new baby arrives or a couple gets divorced and the parrot is given up. A great many parrots, however, are given up for problem behaviors and you won't necessarily know the truth when you decide to bring an older parrot into your home.

If a reputable rescue organization is in possession of the bird, and has had the parrot in foster care for at least a few weeks, they may be able to provide information about existing behavior issues. However, if you are adopting from an individual, you will not know what you are getting into. Many owners wishing to unload a parrot, especially if they hope to recover a bit of their original financial investment, are not 100% honest about their reasons for relinquishment.

It is important to set your fears and worries aside, make the best decision you can based upon the information at hand, and then make a 100% unconditional commitment to stick by this new parrot and resolve any future challenges. There are no behavior problems that can't be resolved with patience and consistent effort over time. Behavior problems are always created by the caregiver and result from a

lack of appropriate diet and environment, coupled with a lack of effective training and guidance. All you need for success is the commitment to do a better job than the last caregiver.

Further, you can rest assured that the tools for you are at hand. If you find you don't know how to deal with something that comes up, you can certainly find the information you need from behavior professionals. We now have evolved to the point where excellent behavior information and resources are only a mouse click or phone call away.

Occasionally, I encounter someone who wants to bring a parrot home for a "trial" period. This simply doesn't work. Parrots, when in a new environment, never display their typical behavior until they have settled in. This can take up to a year for a conservative older parrot.

Further, I disagree with this conditional approach. Any problems that a parrot has will only be made worse by the stress of first being given up and having to leave his home, adapting to conditions in his new home and starting to form bonds there...only to be taken back to the first place where he wasn't wanted either. This simply isn't fair. So, please be prepared for a leap of faith. You will be making a commitment to an "unknown." Great rewards stand in store for those who do.

Please don't adopt another parrot unless you really *want* another parrot, have the financial and emotional resources to care for another parrot (including annual veterinary visits) and are committed to care for this individual over the long run, even when things get difficult.

Early Considerations

The wisest way to proceed is to first make your decision about which species best fit your expectations and lifestyle. A decision about adoption should not be based solely upon the parrot's need for a new home. Sooner or later, those of us who are into parrot-keeping for the long run understand that we cannot save them all.

If you haven't had the opportunity to interact with a variety of species, do plenty of research. Read parrot profiles that you find on-line. If you have a bird store and/or rescue organization within a reasonable distance, visit and interact with the species they have there. Pay attention to the feelings of attraction that arise.

Are you more drawn to the contained way that adult grey looks into your eyes taking your measure or to the talking, singing and playful antics of the Amazon who is more oblivious to your presence? In years of behavior consulting, I have learned that certain people are attracted by certain species. Which species will best fit into your home and family?

Size is another factor to consider, especially in terms of expense. Larger parrots need larger enclosures which are more expensive. They need larger toys and may be more destructive, requiring replacement of these more often. Even veterinary care may be more expensive for a larger parrot, since many charges in the industry are weight-based.

One of my favorite quotes came from breeder and behavior consultant Phoebe Linden: "Cleaning cages is not nearly as much fun the second decade." This becomes especially true when dealing with larger parrots. Do you want to clean up poop from a 400 gram Eclectus Parrot or do you want to clean up poop from a 1200 gram Moluccan Cockatoo who swings his rear to the side effectively spraying your walls with feces? Given that consideration, the fact that this cockatoo may be "cuddly" is placed in the proper perspective.

Lastly, it's also important to evaluate the quality of life that you can provide in comparison with the conditions the parrot has enjoyed in the past, assuming you can get information about this. For example, if the parrot you are considering used to live as a single parrot in the middle of the living room and you intend to put him in a bird room with five other parrots, then your home might not be the best one for this individual, who likely relates to people better than to other birds.

If the parrot is currently flighted, and you don't want a flighted parrot, when don't consider adopting this one. The goal when you adopt your next parrot must be to provide at least the same quality of life,

if not a better one. Quality of life is dictated largely by the number of choices that the parrot can make. Flighted parrots are able to make considerably more choices than clipped parrots can. If someone adopted my flighted parrots after my death and clipped their wings, I would die a second death in my heart.

Beginning Your Search

Once you've narrowed your choice down to two or three species, you can start your search for a bird to adopt. Before you do so, it's important to come up with a list of questions that are designed to help you make the decision. These should be both questions that you want to ask the person currently housing the parrot, as well as questions you will ask yourself when you meet the bird. These will serve to discover something initially about the parrot's living skills and personality.

Consider asking the current caregiver:

- Does he eat pellets? If so, what percentage of what he consumes do these represent?
- Does he eat a seed mix? If so, how much a day?
- Does he eat vegetables if you offer them?
- What are his favorite foods/treats? How many does he get a day?
- How often do you shower him? How do you do this? What is his reaction?
- Who is his favorite person? Does he show a preference for either women or men?
- Do you have any information about his previous homes?
- Does he step up for you? If so, can you show me? (You'll make a note of this so you can use the same approach later.)
- Does he play with toys?
- How often does he come out of his cage and for how long?
- When was his last vet visit? Which vet did you take him to and what laboratory tests were done?
- Does he come with a cage?
- What do you like most about him? What do you think he needs to learn to do better?
- Does he fly? If so, how often?

Consider asking yourself during the first and subsequent visits:

- What foods do I see in the cage? What does it seem this bird really eats, despite what I may have been told?
- How does he respond when I walk up to him? Does he seem curious and friendly or does he lean away from me?
- Does he show any signs of cage territoriality?
- What toys does he have in the cage? Do they look new or like they have been hanging there for some time?
- How does he respond when the current caregiver attempts to interact with him?
- Are his feathers well-preened and shiny or does he have a rough appearance?

Making the Decision and a Word of Caution

The responses you receive to the questions above, as well as the observations you make yourself will give you a better idea of whether the parrot in front of you is the one you want to bring home...but they will not be the whole story. First, realize that a negative response to any of those questions doesn't necessarily mean that the parrot isn't a good candidate for adoption. The same holds true for any observation you make that worries you. Even if the parrot is very cage territorial, this can be changed by

setting up other perching sites around your home and making sure that he gets out of his cage and into other areas each day. If you observe excessive noise, understand that a screaming problem is one of the easiest behavior challenges to solve. If his feathers appear rough, this may very well resolve with increased bathing opportunities and a better diet. If he doesn't play with toys, you can teach him to play with toys.

It's important to keep in mind, though, that you won't necessarily be able to rely on information being offered by the current caregiver, if adopting from a private individual, so place this information in the proper perspective. All animals behave in order to get what they want, including humans. If someone wants to get rid of a parrot, they're going to say and do what will accomplish that goal.

Even those who are well-intentioned and want to find the best home for their parrot won't necessarily have the knowledge to understand and describe to you their bird's behavior accurately. A caregiver might tell you that her bird can be "aggressive with men" when, in reality, the parrot only bit her husband because he was insensitive to the bird's body language during physical interactions and pushed past the point where the parrot was comfortable. This same bird might behave well with other men.

Your job when seeking an older parrot to add to your home is to first figure out what species might best fit your personality and lifestyle and then to go on a fact-finding mission by meeting individual parrots, asking questions and making observations. Get in touch with your feelings as well as your thoughts. Use your intuition. Then, finally, make your decision and bring that parrot home with a sense of excitement matched with an even deeper sense of commitment.

In the next issue, we will examine the best ways to transition the new parrot into your home, create an early sense of safety and security, begin your assessment of living skills and behavior challenges, and finally put into place a plan for progress.