

Adopting and Living with Previously-Owned Parrots: Part Two

By Pamela Clark, CPBC, CVT

Congratulations! You've now brought your older parrot home and are faced with the challenge of helping him to settle in. There are important goals for these early days. First, you'll want to do what you can to make the bird feel safe and secure. Second, you'll want to begin assessing who he really is. Third, you'll want to begin a list of goals for the future. Rarely does an older parrot arrive into his new home with a full set of living skills and an absence of problem behaviors. In most cases, you'll need to do some teaching to increase living skills and implement behavior modification plans to deal with any problems that arise.

Fostering Safety and Security

If possible, bring your new parrot home as early in the day as possible. This will allow him to get used to his new surroundings before night falls.

Next, it's a good idea to keep as many things the same as you can. Even if he's been living in a cage that's too small, go ahead and bring this home if you can. You can introduce him to a new and better cage in the coming weeks. If he has only one old, poop-covered toy in the cage, go ahead and bring it along. Who knows how much of an old friend he might consider it to be?

If he's eating a colored pellet and you abhor chemical food dyes, make peace with this for the moment. Let him eat what he's used to for now. The same advice goes for parrots eating a seed mix. You know that a seed mix is a poor diet, but you'll want to transition him to a more healthful diet gradually. Changes are usually best made slowly with companion parrots, especially when they have just changed homes.

If he hasn't had any toys in his cage in the past home, now is **not** the time to abundantly furnish him with lots of new things. And, if he's not used to being covered for the night, but you cover your other parrots, let him remain the one who goes uncovered for now.

I often try to imagine what it must be like for a parrot to suddenly find himself in a completely new environment with people he may have met only once or twice before. It could be like the experience we would have if abducted by aliens and taken to a different, but similar, planet. We'd be scared and we'd be looking for any signs we might be able to discern about how we could stay safe and be successful in this new and strange place.

For years, it has been written that when bringing a new parrot home, you should leave him alone for a couple of days. I hate generalizations when it comes to parrots. Instead, we should be observing and taking our cues from the bird. A parrot new to your home might want to step up right away. Another might only want to hide in the back of the cage. Act based upon the information he gives you.

Your first step will be simply to begin building a bond of trust without asking too much of this new parrot. Since you've collected information about the things he likes, begin to offer him small treats from your hands. Your first goal will be simply this – that he trusts you enough to take a bit of food from your fingers. If he steps up readily, don't assume this means that he's ready to tour the house with you. Instead, ask him a few times a day to step up and then just put him right back down again. This too will foster trust because he will learn that you won't necessarily ask more from him than he can comfortably give.

Always take your cues from what the parrot tells you rather than acting on information you might have been given by the previous caregiver. If you were told that he steps up easily, but he leans away from you when you ask for this, you've got to base your future actions on his body language. If he seems reluctant to step up, you'll realize that a bit of retraining will be needed.

If possible, just keep his cage door open when you are around to supervise so that he can climb out to perch on his door or the cage top if he wants. This will allow you to discover if he steps up more readily from the top than from the inside. It will also allow him to gain a little more empowerment in his new surroundings, since he will be able to make his own choice about where he wants to be.

Assessing the New Family Member

As the days pass and you observe your new charge, building trust a little at a time, you will want to consciously begin assessing both living skills and any signs of behavior problems that might begin to reveal themselves. As I stated before, most parrots who come to you as adults will need some encouragement to learn skills that will lead to greater quality of life. Many will also show you at some point that their behavior needs improvement.

I believe that we start out owing a debt to the unwanted parrot when we take him in, even though it was not we who incurred that debt. The simple truth is that, if a parrot doesn't possess good living skills and the ability to live effectively with people, he will be sentenced to a life in which he is bounced from home to home as owner after owner become disillusioned with him. Thus, it falls on the shoulders of the new caregiver to assess these skills and to begin the process of broadening the parrot's living skills base.

Living Skills

Parrots must have certain captive living skills in place if they are to live healthy and happy lives. These can be described as the willingness and ability to:

- Eat a healthful diet
- Enjoy a regular drenching shower
- Interact with all family members to some degree without aggression
- Interact with enrichment items, including foraging opportunities
- Entertain himself independently and happily
- Step up and otherwise display willing compliance with other handling cues
- Exercise in whatever manner is possible, given physical restraints (clipped wings) and environmental limitations
- Go into a carrier and ride in a car without distress
- Allow physical examination by a veterinarian without undue stress
- Preen normally without feather destruction

Thus, as you get to know your new parrot, you will begin to make some notes about what you observe in these areas. If he eats only a seed mix despite the fact that pellets also are offered, you'll make it a future goal to improve his diet. If he shows a preference for you and lunges at your husband, your second goal must become to even out his social bonds. If he is terrified of being showered, teaching him to bathe will land on the list as well. I hear many people describe their parrots as "picky" "doesn't like men" and "afraid of bathing." You won't be one of those because you will understand that all these issues are nothing more than training opportunities.

And, since you've committed 100% to the success of your new parrot, you'll begin to find the information you need to teach these things. Unfortunately, it's not within the purview of this article to describe how to gradually transition a parrot to eating a better diet or to outline a shaping plan for bathing. However, there are excellent resources for caregivers who need help with such things.

Behavior Problems

Parrots differ in the length of time that they remain in that “honeymoon” period I mentioned earlier. A confident macaw may show his true nature after only two weeks, whereas you might not really understand that new grey until six months down the line. However, sooner or later in most cases, you will see the behavior of that new parrot change, sometimes rather dramatically. This is the time when you can assess any behavior challenges that reveal themselves. These can include:

- Excessive screaming or other unwanted noise, such as repetitive “peeping” that some greys display
- Aggression toward any family members
- Fear responses toward new things or people
- The desire to bond strongly to one person while displaying aggression toward others in the house.

Feather destructive behavior doesn’t make this list because parrots usually carry on with this behavior throughout the transition to the new home. For many, this is partially a coping mechanism that occurs at an increased rate when stress is present.

Do not be distressed if the parrot who has lived quietly for the past seven weeks now begins to scream for long periods. Neither should you be surprised if the parrot who went to your husband in the first week, now lunges aggressively at him when he passes the cage. Just as with the issue of living skills, all of these problem behaviors can be changed. These problem behaviors simply represent the past learning that the parrot has done. Your job is to teach him other, more productive and effective, alternate behaviors.

Again, it is not within the limitations of this article to outline a behavior modification plan for each of these problems. However, there are many good resources available to caregivers. Barbara Heidenreich has on her website a list of common behavior topics and resources that may be of assistance.

If one-on-one help is needed, the advice of a good behavior consultant is invaluable. Those of us who help caregivers with both behavior problems and the development of better living skills can evaluate every aspect of the parrot’s diet, environment and behavior and assist you in developing a plan tailored specifically to you and your parrot.

A Debt of Gratitude

Although a long article, this has really only been a brief overview of a complex topic. However, I hope it serves to illustrate that taking in a previously-owned parrot is not only a worthwhile thing to do, but also a very “do-able” one. Each one of us can be an answer to one parrot’s need for a home. If we have a deep sense of commitment, a willingness to keep the bird “no matter what” and to get the knowledge and assistance needed to do so, we can be most successful. Often, the gifts we receive and the skills we ourselves learn in the process are greater than those delivered to us by the rearing of a baby parrot. Any one of us who takes delight in our own companion parrot owes a debt of gratitude to all parrots. A most wonderful way to act on this is to adopt an unwanted parrot...making him wanted once again.