

## *A Portrait of the African Grey*

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Although each of my parrots is a cherished companion, I must admit that I am biased. I enjoy the unique qualities of each species and their company without reservation, but I find African Greys particularly fascinating. This has been true for 28 years, from the moment I saw my first African Grey parrot (*Psittacus erithacus erithacus*). He perched on a simple T-stand in a local strip-mall pet store, and met my gaze steadily with eyes that reflected back to me the most unexpected and profound mixture of intelligence and emotion. I was completely taken aback and have often wondered since what became of that parrot. I continue to regret that I was not able to ransom him at the time.

The road between then and now has included a variety of experiences with this species that leaves me today feeling as if my heartstrings are connected directly to every African Grey in captivity. As both a specialist breeder and behavior consultant, I am fortunate to know these birds intimately. Such familiarity has only increased my fascination with them over the years.

### **Popularity in Captivity**

Reference books describing parrots indicate that many people have been so charmed. The African Grey has been one of the most sought-after and cherished of companions in captivity for hundreds of years. As long ago as 1767, the Count of Buffon in his *Natural History* described his enjoyment of his own Grey parrot, saying, "This bird recreates us, distracts us, amuses us, he is a companion in loneliness. In a conversation he is a partner, he answers, calls, bursts in laughter, expresses love, can be very serious. His small sentences thrown carelessly cheer us, also when inopportune, or sometimes surprise us with their comprehension and rightfulness."

Many are the qualities that account for this popularity. Greys are widely recognized for both their intelligence and talking ability. However, I believe it is the depth and quality of their interactions with us that makes the African Grey such a favorite. I have heard several parrot owners state that, if they could only have one parrot, it would be a Grey.

Despite, or perhaps because of, this popularity, Greys also have their share of problems in captivity. They are relatively easy to breed, and when done so in large numbers for profit, often do not respond well to the techniques used and become predisposed to later problems such as phobia and feather picking. They will not develop the confidence and coordination necessary to carry them successfully through life as a captive companion unless they are allowed to wean at their own pace and learn to fly skillfully when young, as is their rightful due.

Further, many of the qualities displayed by our companion Greys reflect their instinctive behavior in the wild. The majority of breeding pairs in the United States are wild-caught birds. Thus, most domestically raised Greys are only one or two generations from the wild. An understanding of some of their wild habits will allow us to keep them more successfully in captivity.

## **Observations from the Wild**

The African Grey, often referred to as the “Congo,” originates in Central Africa, ranging from the Ivory Coast to western Kenya and northwest Tanzania, where it frequents swamps and mangrove forests. It is often also called the “Red-tailed Grey.” The subspecies, the Timneh African Grey (*Psittacus erithacus timneh*) is found in Western Africa, in southern Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and westernmost Ivory Coast. Thus, these two sub-species come from quite different, distinct regions.

Greys are notoriously difficult to study in the wild, being extremely shy, reclusive birds that nest in remote, hard to reach areas. For some time, the information available about them was scant. In recent years, however, more information has been gathered by undergraduate students from the University of Arizona, who have traveled to Africa, working under the direction of Dr. Irene Pepperberg. This research is ongoing and will no doubt bring us further information as it proceeds. To date, one of the most important observations is that, unlike many other species, Greys tend to flock in large numbers as a single species. Even when breeding, several hundred Greys may nest in the same vicinity. This habit of flocking by the hundreds as one species, rather than intermingling with other species of parrots, has some advantages to Grey parrots in the wild. It also helps to explain some of the behavior we encounter with our companion Greys.

## **Pet Qualities**

To those who know them well, the Grey parrot is often thought of with some humor as being “dominant,” “bossy,” and “obstinate” as parrot personalities go. This tendency of Greys reflects back to their habit of flocking as a single species. Generally, any species in the wild for which this is true has some sort of “social hierarchy” that is usually based upon genetic heritage. In other words, social order is maintained due to the fact that members of the flock innately possess varying degrees of strength or passivity.

Greys in captivity clearly demonstrate this as well. Perhaps one of the most delightful qualities of the African Grey is his enjoyment of social contacts with his humans. Greys tend to keep a close eye on us when we’re around, watching what we do and where we go. They easily pick up on our moods. This all lends a welcome feeling of “intimacy” to our relationships with them. As humans, we are often distanced emotionally from others, while at the same time we yearn to be truly “known” by another. It is a gift to be seen and understood with such clarity by any creature, whether human or parrot.

This tendency, coupled with a frequently bossy demeanor, often results in delightful and spontaneous interactions with them. In fact, they can be downright manipulative. One Grey, when boarding with his owner’s friend, threw his food dish down from the top of the cage. He carefully observed the woman cleaning up the mess and asked her, “Well! What do you think of that?!”

Although African Greys are quite sensitive to their owners’ emotions, they are well able to survive the routine ups and down of human existence. However, Greys living in very stressful conditions will often demonstrate their distress in various ways. They thrive in happy, relaxed

households, and are best prepared for existence in captivity when their early beginnings are benevolent and nurturing and their first three years are spent in a stable, relaxed social climate. These facts relate directly back to the Greys' wild flocking behavior. Such a large, unified flock provides an element of safety that a lone parrot does not enjoy. Being a prey animal, the Grey's sense of security depends upon the presence and health, both emotional and physical, of his flock, whether wild or human. Thus, we can well understand our companion Grey's need to be around us, enjoying our company as often as possible.

African Greys are often described as "shy" parrots when living in captivity. Certainly, they can be less easy-going and congenial than parrots that originate from Central and South America. They can take a little longer to accept new faces and experiences. A partial explanation for this is found in the feeding habits of wild Greys. Dr. Pepperberg's students have observed that Grey parrots forage on the ground as well as in the forest canopy, thus making them more susceptible to predators that might come from above. It makes sense that a parrot who has lived with this awareness would likely be more shy and reserved, as well as sometimes more wary. Thus, success in introducing new things to a companion Grey often lies with doing so gradually, allowing the parrot to get used to new things or experiences slowly.

### **Choosing a Young Grey**

Due to their popularity and ease with which they are bred, it is quite easy to locate a young African Grey when wishing to do so. However, the prospective owner is well-advised to choose carefully, for the manner in which a young Grey is reared and weaned can have a lasting impact on its success as a human companion.

Since they tend to internalize anxiety, a young Grey should be allowed to wean at its own pace. When one species flocks together in large numbers, the young have an opportunity to receive extended care from not only their parents, but also other flock members. Since this is true of Greys in the wild, in captivity they should not be rushed into weaning. Further, they thrive best when given ample opportunity to explore social relationships with other Greys, as well as humans, prior to going to their new homes.

Sadly, many hand-reared young Greys are weaned and sent home at the age of 12 weeks. In the wild Greys fledge, leaving the nest, at approximately ten weeks of age, as they also do when allowed this experience in captivity. They then spend weeks learning their flight skills while still being fed by their parents. Thus, they could not possibly be weaned at the age of 12 weeks in the wild, and in captivity are diminished by this forced early weaning. They benefit greatly from continued feeding until they are 16 to 18 weeks old.

The ability to fledge and fly, developing a full set of flight skills, is also critical to the success of the Grey as a companion. The benefits gained from this experience are long lasting, and will help to guarantee that the Grey companion is neither "clumsy" or "nervous"... words often used to describe young Greys deprived of the fledging experience. Further, social skills are not developed until the Grey has some freedom of movement. In the wild, of course, this occurs after the young Grey leaves the nest. Greys who are allowed by their breeders to gain a full complement of flight skills before being gradually clipped back will be more confident, more coordinated, and have better social skills than those that are not.

As breeder and avian behavior analyst Phoebe Linden writes, “Through fledging, African Greys gain the physical coordination that leads to athleticism and confidence. After only a few days of practice, properly developed fledgling Greys navigate turns in mid-air, land on supple perches, and come on command. Through flight, they learn to calculate distance, angles and direction. Amazingly adept, Greys are strong flyers who demonstrate confidence, decision-making skills and athleticism. They are noticeably delighted when we praise them for the many successes they achieve during the fledging process. A proper fledging experience for Greys includes expanded social contact with humans and other well-mannered psittacine flock members so that social skills are augmented along with fledglings’ physical skills. Like young wild Greys, our domestically situated Greys benefit from fledging when they experience a kindly and competent society in which each member is dedicated to the common goals of physically competent, psychologically confident and socially adept flock life.”

Since initially completing this article in 2001, I have since stopped breeding African Greys. I continue to share my home with several of them, however, and they continue to represent a significant percentage of the parrot population about which I am asked to consult. During my years as a breeder, I found that young greys benefited from longer and longer fledging experiences, which I provided until I decided not to clip wings at all before sending them home. While it can be a challenge for inexperienced owners to adopt a fully-flighted young grey, the skills needed to maintain compliant behavior can be easily learned. The young grey who has been allowed to maintain flight capability will be a far more rewarding and secure human companion.

### **Congo or Timneh?**

Another choice when purchasing a Grey concerns which sub-species might best fit the owner’s own lifestyle and personality. It is often written that Timneh Greys are less “nervous” than Congo Greys, and I find that buyers frequently contact me in order to obtain a Timneh as an “insurance policy” against the problems they perceive they might have with a Congo. As reflected by their very different regions of origin, I have found Timnehs to be quite different from Congo Greys in many ways. While I do believe it is true that they may have fewer startle responses as they mature, they also tend to be more sedate on the whole, and perhaps less closely aligned with their owners on the emotional plane.

Well-raised, healthy Congos are frequently outrageously demonstrative and amusing in their speech and actions, while the majority of Timnehs are more reserved, especially when mature. I often awaken to one of my male Congos, Rollo, yelling, “Let me go!” while my Timneh male mutters quietly under his cage cover.

Congos love to make their owners laugh, and they love to do so by using a certain element of surprise. They seem more in tune with their owners and focus closely upon our reactions to their own behavior. Timnehs are delightful companions and display equal talent in learning to talk, but are quite different than Congos in terms of personality and should be chosen for their own charms, which are many.

## **Caring for the Young Grey**

Once the young Grey goes to its new home, learning continues as a “genetically programmed” activity. He should receive abundant instruction from the owner about which behaviors are desirable. New owners should get into the habit of catching the young parrot “in the act of being good.” It is important to watch and reinforce any desirable behaviors with enthusiastic praise and small food rewards. Whenever the young parrot is eating independently, amusing himself by playing or shredding appropriate materials, bathing or preening, he should receive our attention and lots of reinforcement. By doing so, we will raise a confident, relaxed and compliant Grey companion.

Living among hundreds of others of its own species in the wild allows a young parrot to have more time to develop behaviorally, receiving feedback from flock members over a longer period of time. Such species often demonstrate an extended period of development in captivity and I have found this to be true of young Greys. They benefit greatly when cared for by an owner cognizant of this fact, who provides ongoing, intentional instruction in all aspects of life, including showering, eating appropriate foods, and interacting with others.

Perhaps this lengthy period of development can explain the crisis a single bird often experiences when left during his first year when his owners go on vacation, especially if he is not well-prepared for this event. Such a sudden absence on the part of his trusted human companion often results in the onset of feather destructive behavior. It is now widely recognized among behavioral consultants that the owners of a young Grey should avoid any periods of absence, except for emergencies, during that critical first year when the bird is still dependent upon the proximity of its “flock” for a sense of safety.

Eventually, an owner will need to leave his Grey but the bird should be well prepared for this beforehand. Under no circumstances should any parrot, but especially an African Grey, be left at home alone with a caretaker merely arriving twice a day to provide food and temporary company. Dr. Pepperberg’s work with her African Grey Alex has allowed her to state confidently that these parrots possess the emotional and intellectual capacity of very young children. Thus, to leave a parrot under such circumstances can be compared to leaving a two-year-old child at home alone, with only twice daily feeding by a stranger. We would not think of doing this, but many parrots are left in this manner by owners not aware of the emotional stress this creates for the bird.

When an owner’s absence is eventually necessary, someone should be found who can house-sit and care for the bird while the owner is away, or who can take the bird to their home for this period. Then, a couple of “trial runs” should be made, leaving the bird with this person for a few hours, and then overnight, prior to departing for a longer period. In this way, the young bird learns that the owner intends to return.

## **Rehabilitating the Older Grey**

Adopting an older African Grey can be a tremendously gratifying experience, providing one has the patience to allow a bond to grow gradually before demanding much from the bird. I have rehabilitated several older Greys, both wild-caught and domestically raised, and have found that

it can take as long as two full years for an older bird to form a solid bond of trust and be fully converted into the ways of our household. Given the Grey nature, it is appropriate to go slowly with an older bird, allowing him to make lots of choices.

I have, however, found that the presence of other older Greys can hasten this progress. If we look again at their wild behavior, we will recognize a phenomenon known as *social facilitation*, as author Lester Short points out in *The Lives of Birds*. Common to species living as a large flock, this means simply that the behavior of one parrot can bring out in another bird the same behavior. Another way to put this is that Greys learn more easily from other Greys. Although an older bird can be slow to change eating habits and accept new foods, this is more easily accomplished when other Greys already performing the desired behavior are present.

### **Diet and Nutrition**

Since little is known about the diet of Greys in the wild, we remain uncertain as to the best diet for them in captivity. However, we can learn something of their nutritional needs by examining the behavior and health problems we see in older Greys. Feather abusive behavior, seizure activity, blindness and cataracts are common. Veterinarians frequently see calcium deficiencies and low vitamin A levels. Many adult Greys do not display the vibrant red tails, shiny black beaks, and gray feathers with sheen to them that are all characteristic of a healthy African Grey. Many of these problems are a result of inadequate nutrition and suggest that many Greys are not receiving adequate levels of vitamins D3 and A, calcium, and the essential fatty acids (EFAs).

In the last few years, an increased awareness of the benefits of full spectrum lighting has grown, primarily because it allows parrots to manufacture vitamin D. However, there is also some confusion about whether full spectrum lighting is really necessary for parrots receiving vitamin D3 in their diets. If they are, they may not need full spectrum lighting. However, this line of reasoning assumes that most species can successfully absorb vitamin D from food.

Tammy Jenkins, DVM, once brought up an interesting point while lecturing. Greys have evolved a dark coloring to their feathers, which is responsible for screening out much of the UV light that hits them, and would appear to indicate long hours spent in the sun. The hypothesis is that Greys have evolved in such a way that they do not have to be as effective in absorbing vitamin D from their diets because they manufacture adequate amounts from their exposure to the sunlight. In other words, they may depend upon exposure to sunlight for their source of this vitamin.

This could perhaps partially explain the number of Greys who manifest normal serum levels of calcium in blood samples, but who demonstrate symptoms of low blood calcium. Vitamin D is involved in calcium absorption, as are several other nutrients. In view of the fact that many Greys are found to have low levels of calcium, I am beginning to wonder if inadequate lighting is contributing to this. I believe it essential that African Grey owners make some provision for either full spectrum lighting or exposure to natural sunlight on a regular basis.

Mature African Greys are often deficient in Vitamin A. Tail color can give some indication of such a deficiency. With the exception of the Timneh, Greys should have bright red tails. It is the carotenoids in vitamin A rich foods that provide for the vibrant red that is natural to Grey tails. Greys should be provided with a diet rich in this nutrient. The best dietary sources of vitamin A

carotenes are dark green leafy vegetables, such as collard greens and kale, and yellow-orange vegetables and fruits such as carrots, yams, sweet potatoes, apricots, mangoes, chili peppers, and winter squash.

Further, wild Greys feed extensively on the fruits of the oil palm. Numerous references to this can be found in avicultural literature. According to aviculturist David Poole, these fruits contain 90% oil and are available throughout the year. They are high in vitamin A and essential fatty acids (EFAs). In captivity, African Greys appear to be better able to cope with slightly higher levels of fat in the diet than most parrots and in fact, such levels appear to be beneficial at times. There are numerous anecdotal reports that some Greys who feather pick have been helped when their diets were modified to provide them with increased amounts of EFAs. EFAs are “essential” for normal growth and development, and must come from the diet.

Good dietary sources of EFAs include seeds (in limited quantity), walnuts, Brazil nuts, pumpkin seeds, dark green leafy vegetables, salmon, tuna, flax seeds, canola oil, legumes, and oats. If additional supplementation is deemed advisable, very small amounts of a high quality oil blend, the sort sold as a nutritional supplement, or African palm oil, can be given. This can be put on a small square of toast or other absorbent treat.

Older Greys frequently demonstrate symptoms of calcium deficiency, or simply test low for this nutrient in blood tests. It is still being argued as to whether Greys have a greater need for calcium than other species, or whether they simply are more sensitive to inadequate levels of calcium. The informed owner will make sure that a variety of calcium rich foods are provided to his Grey parrot. Good sources of calcium are tofu, kale, turnip greens, and other green leafy vegetables.

### **Behavior and Behavioral Problems**

Generally speaking, African Greys are extremely successful as human companions and this is reflected by their relatively low numbers in rescue and adoption programs in the United States. If a Grey does exhibit behavior problems, they usually fall into one of three categories: aggression, fearfulness, or feather destructive behavior.

Although living among hundreds of others in a flock has numerous advantages, birds that evolve to live in this manner also tend to become more aware and watchful of their distance to another bird. Living within a large flock can be stressful, in that the proximity of others can be bothersome. The behavior of some older male Greys, who can be quite moody, reflects this. The African Grey in captivity likes his autonomy and appreciates being allowed some choice in terms of the length and timing of his interactions with us. Any aggression demonstrated by a Grey usually communicates this need.

Many of the typical methods advocated for dealing with certain behavior problems do not work with Greys, for this reason. It is a mistake to ever get into a power struggle with or try to dominate an African Grey. Instead, they respond to gentler and subtler methods, and will be most likely to comply when the human/parrot bond is a strong one. We have the greatest success with the companion Grey when we treat him with respect and a cheerful attitude. Patience and persistence are useful tools when dealing with this species.

Greys can have problems with stress and anxiety. This often occurs when kept as a single parrot companion by one or two individuals, especially when the owner tends to suffer chronic stress and anxiety himself. Perhaps, having evolved the instincts most suited to life in a large, boisterous flock, a single Grey may carry a “burden of watchfulness” in a stressful environment. As previously mentioned, phobic behavior is sometimes demonstrated by Greys, and is usually triggered in birds that already had high anxiety levels for some time. However, even phobic behavior can be resolved in consultation with a good behavioral consultant.

Feather destructive behavior is a common problem, for which there are many underlying causes. Usually, several factors combine to create the problem; thus the solution lies with the identification and resolution of these. The best medicine is prevention, which is exercised by purchasing a well-socialized hand-fed baby, providing adequate diet and nutrition, serving as teacher and mentor as the young bird grows to maturity, and having regular veterinary check-ups.

### **Final Words**

African Greys are complex birds. The gifts they have to share are exceptional, but will be received in full measure only when we ourselves are exceptional in our relationships with them. We must honor their innate timetables for development, allow them to develop physically into the incredible creatures they have evolved to be, and honor their sensitivities in our care practices. When we do, there is no greater gift than sharing life with a healthy, happy African Grey.

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