

Hormonal Behavior: Is Your Parrot A Victim? By Pamela Clark, CVT

“Oh just ignore him, he’s just hormonal!” We hear statements like this all the time, but what does such an exclamation really mean? What is “hormonal behavior” any way? There are as many different definitions of this behavior as there are ways to perch a cage. Moreover, this label of “hormonal behavior” doesn’t tell us much about the behavior itself and leaves us nowhere to go, in terms of finding solutions.

It is true, though, that there are many problem behaviors in companion parrots that either stem directly from or are aggravated by increased production of reproductive hormones. Moreover, these behaviors frequently go unrecognized for what they are. From my perspective as a behavior consultant, it is a serious problem. In almost every single consultation I do increased hormone production is a factor that is contributing to the problem.

Specifically, the problem behaviors in companions parrots that stem directly from increased production of reproductive hormones include: the formation of an intense pair bond with one member of the family, constant paper shredding, cavity seeking, loud vocalizations, feather destructive behavior and fierce territoriality.

In some individuals, these occur just seasonally, but in others the condition progresses until it occurs year round. In these cases, problems such as chronic egg-laying, egg binding, cloacal prolapse and self-mutilation can occur. Obviously, many of these not only threaten the parrot’s physical health, but also its ability to remain in the home.

I believe that caregivers often get caught unawares in terms of this issue. They adopt a young parrot who demonstrates an affectionate nature, curiosity, and playfulness. Over time, the parrot changes into a mature adult whose behavior often bears no relation to that he once demonstrated. Some of the new behaviors he displays cause us surprise and laughter. We think it’s cute when he jumps into the sock drawer or wants to hang out in the closet. It’s funny when he regurgitates for his favorite toy.

Unfortunately, nothing has prepared us to recognize these behaviors for what they are and we don’t grasp the potential for harm that can come from encouraging them. Not only do we think that they are cute, but also there are many people who, recognizing these as sexual behaviors, feel obligated to facilitate these because they believe that parrots need a sex life and will be frustrated if they don’t somehow provide for this.

The truth, however, is that wild parrots have evolved a physiologic mechanism to control reproduction. They remain “turned off” sexually for the majority of the year. Their sexual organs actually become inactive and atrophied, which further serves to minimize weight so that flight is easier. Only when conditions for breeding are favorable do the ovary and testes become active.

So, it appears as parrot caregivers that we have failed to recognize two key issues. First, parrots are normally “turned off” or reproductively inactive in nature during most of the year. Second, and most importantly, the conditions that we provide for them in captivity often result in a constant triggering of reproductive hormones.

When living in the wild, parrots are triggered into becoming reproductive active by the presence of changing photoperiod, either substantial or sporadic (seasonal) rainfall, the availability of a suitable nest cavity, adequate food and water, and a pair bond with another parrot.

In captivity, we unwittingly provide conditions that trigger reproductive activity. As we might imagine, they are very similar: changing photoperiod, the presence of a perceived nest cavity, a strong pair bond, and an appropriately nutrient-dense diet. We must remember that our parrots are not domesticated and are driven to a large extent by instinct. Since we are

not able to safely neuter parrots at present, they bring these instincts to reproduce with them into our homes. And, unfortunately, our parrots are remarkably good at teaching us to provide them with the very conditions that will facilitate this. Let's first examine how to set the stage for problems. If we can see this easily, then the solution will be clearer as well.

One of the strongest triggers for increased hormone production is the presence of an intense pair bond. We, as caregivers, often promote this intense bonding because it makes *us* happy - it meets our own emotional needs. This type of pair bond forms when we spend lots of time physically close to the parrot, having him on our shoulder or lap for extended periods. Cuddling also contributes to this problem, as does stroking a parrot down his back or under his wings.

As happy as this type of contact might make us, we must realize how unnatural this is for a parrot. As Dr. Fern VanSant states in her article "*Hormonal Behavior, "...Physical contact is important in the nest and lavished on young birds. As young adults join the flock, most are driven by a need to sharpen foraging and flying skills. Most flocks are characterized by a discipline that maintains a critical distance between individuals while flying, feeding and roosting. In most cases, physical contact is reserved for courting and breeding."* Parrots in the wild who are not breeding enjoy each other's company, but this type of bond is maintained through parallel activities and brief, playful interactions, not physical closeness.

The second area in which we go wrong is in providing a diet that is too high in carbohydrates and fats. Carbohydrates and fats are two categories of nutrients that are used for energy production. They serve the parrot well in the wild, where energy expenditures are great. In captivity, eating such a diet contributes not only to increased hormone production, but to louder, more excitable behavior. Foods that contribute to the problem include: seed mixes, nuts, dried fruit, pasta, white rice, snack foods, and some table food.

The third most significant trigger for increased hormone production is the ability for the parrot to spend time in perceived nesting spots. This is the area in which we can see the amazing flexibility demonstrated by our companion parrots. As you assess your own parrot's behavior in order to see if he searches out such places, remember that, if it has three sides, it's likely to be deemed suitable. Typical favorites for companion parrots are closets, drawers, brown paper bags or cardboard boxes, playing under the covers, crawling down the owner's shirt, small bathrooms, the area under the couch, sleeping huts in the cage, etc.

When these environmental triggers are present in our homes with our parrots, we are likely to find ourselves living with at least one of several behavior problems. Many parrots engage in resource guarding behavior when hormonally triggered. This means that the parrot may become extremely aggressive if anyone gets near to a perceived nest site. One African Grey male that I know is a perfect gentleman until he gets down and spends time under the couch, whereupon he turns into a demon near whom you had better not come. He becomes extremely aggressive as he defends what he perceives is a potential nest site.

If such a territorial parrot also has pair bond with someone in the home, he may become extremely aggressive toward anyone who comes near that individual. These can be very dangerous, both for the "intruder" and for the favored person, who may be bitten in a misguided attempt to drive the bonded person away from the intruder.

Hormonal parrots who are allowed to hang out in small, dark places or other perceived nesting sites can do a huge amount of damage to your home as well. One female Grey who was obsessed with getting into the laundry room chewed up huge sections of the floor covering.

In the majority of cases of feather destructive behavior with which I deal, increased hormone production is usually a partial cause. In extreme cases, self-mutilation can result. Along with this potentially life-threatening problem, we can add chronic egg-laying and cloacal prolapse.

If you recognize some of the signs listed above, there is no need to despair. Just as we can trigger increased hormone production, we can also change environmental provisions to decrease hormone production to the extent that this is possible.

With many species, it is possible to manipulate photoperiod. This appears most effective with cockatiels, Amazons, macaws, Pionus and many of the other New World parrots. This requires that you provide at least 12 to 14 hours of complete darkness. Simply covering the cage is not likely to be effective, if light can creep under the cover. The most effective way to do this is to set up a sleeping cage in a separate bedroom or office, and to place black-out shades on the windows. This will not be however effective with African Greys or Eclectus, who breed year round and often go to nest in the fall and winter.

Next, remove access to “small, dark places.” Remove the sleeping hut from the cage, if the parrot spends time in there during the day as well. Don’t allow your parrot to crawl down your shirt or up your shirt sleeve. Don’t allow him to crawl under the bed, couch or ottoman. Don’t allow him to burrow into the couch cushions. Don’t let him jump into your drawers or hang out in the closet. If you have an African Grey, you may need to bar him access to the bathroom or laundry room.

Perhaps most importantly, remove the mate from the picture. With any parrot, it is best to limit cuddling, confining your petting to the head only. Believe it or not, a hands-off approach is really the best. (Remember: parrots don’t pet each other in the wild.) Further, you must limit the time you allow the parrot to sit on your shoulder or on your lap to no more than 5 to 10 minutes once or twice a day. If you currently spend a much longer time physically close to the parrot currently, then you can decrease the amount of time spent gradually.

Lastly, don’t encourage regurgitation or masturbation. If your parrot begins to show you attention of this sort, simply tell him cheerfully, “Thanks, but no thanks!” and then put him down immediately. You don’t want to, of course, punish this behavior, but neither do you want to encourage it. Similarly, if the parrot has a particular toy that he masturbates on, then you should remove that particular item. At all times, ignore this behavior and instead give the parrot attention for more productive behaviors.

If the parrot has a pair bond with another parrot, consider caging them separately. The best set-up in these situations is when the two parrots have separate cages, but a playstand in between so that they can still enjoy some interaction when they are out of their cages. If the pair bond exists with your partner or another person in the home, then this is the time to have a serious conversation about this information.

Next, provide an optimal diet. This would include a good quality, organic, formulated diet. This can then be supplemented with abundant vegetables and low-sugar fruits, with perhaps some whole grains and cooked or sprouted legumes. Seed mixes and snack foods should be eliminated, but can be reserved for use as training treats.

If your parrot currently eats a seed mix as a staple in the diet, it is critical that you gradually transition him to eating a better diet. Not only are seed mixes low in nutrients necessary to good health, but they are so high in fat that they lead to debilitating diseases, such as fatty liver disease. Please consult with your avian veterinarian or an experienced behavior consultant who can guide you to success in this endeavor. It can be difficult to transition a parrot off of a seed mix and onto a better diet, but this can easily be done with the right information. Diet is merely a training issue.

When beginning to improve the diet, a valuable rule is to eliminate absolutely any foods containing sugar, or any form of sugar, in the first five ingredients, any food that is not 100% whole grain, and any food that contains hydrogenated or trans fats.

Another aspect of the environment that serves to foster increased hormone production is a degree of sameness to the environment. Therefore, a valuable strategy for reducing hormone

production is to provide challenging and new experiences. Ideas include rides in the car, trips to visit friends, the introduction of new toys or cage furnishings, increased exercise, new foraging opportunities, and the ability to learn new things.

Positive reinforcement training has gained great popularity in recent years. This is simply the process of teaching a parrot to perform new behaviors through the use of small rewards. You might teach a cute trick, such as turning around on cue, or a core behavior like going into a carrier on cue. No matter what you teach, this process is perhaps the very best way to evolve a pair bond with a human into a healthier relationship. The truth is that parrots will always offer behavior that makes the most sense within the context of the bond that they have with you. If you have a pair bond with a parrot, that bird will offer you a lot of regurgitation, physical closeness, attempts at masturbation, etc. If you evolve that bond through training, the parrot will then begin to offer behaviors that make sense within the context of a “teacher/student” bond.

We must remember what Jamie McLeod of The Menagerie said so eloquently, “Parrots are what we make of them.” The environmental provisions and the diet we construct for them has the power to dictate the type of parrot with which we live. We can create a parrot who screams when we leave the room, who bites anyone who comes near us, and who constantly climbs down off of the cage to seek out small, dark places. Or, we create a calm parrot who interacts with his toys up on his cage, readily interacts with foraging opportunities, who loves his training sessions and who is, all around, a good citizen in our homes.