

Working with Traumatized Birds: Building a Foundation

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Members of the general public are often surprised to learn that birds can have PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder). But we know that if our birds do not feel safe, are neglected, deprived of enrichment, are made fun of or abused, lose a beloved human or avian companion, or do not have a stable home - they are deeply affected.

Parrot family birds, from the tiniest budgies to the biggest macaw, are complex, intelligent, emotional beings that are geared to form loving bonds within a flock. As wild birds they are master athletes, active, curious, playful, and good at problem solving. They have choices about what happens in their lives. When faced with a threat, a wild bird can decide to fly away. Captivity deprives them of most or all of those opportunities and options. A combination of fear and frustration leads to a bird that can be aggressive and/or withdrawn - classic signs of trauma.

In rescue, it is our privilege and challenge to allow them to slowly shed their fear, mistrust and often aggression.

Hopefully we can become a safe place, so they can open up, drop their defenses, and find joy and friendship. When this happens, it is deeply rewarding. It is the heart and soul of sanctuary.

WARNING - earning a bird's trust takes lots of patience on our part. We have to be prepared to let the process take as long as it takes, understanding that this is unlikely to be on our timetable. The bird may have a lot of healing to do; the last thing it needs is pressure. Become a close observer of signs of stress - eyes pinning, moving away from us, arching forward with head down, head feathers up, tail spread – the ways the bird is telling us "*I feel threatened, BACK OFF*". Personally, I have had the most success by letting the bird tell me what the pace should be. Instead of imposing expectations, learn to notice the small victories.

Easy to say!! But how do we make that happen? Here are some tools and strategies that can help build that all-important foundation for going forward.

WHAT DOES THE BIRD SEE WHEN IT FIRST COMES TO OUR HOME

First off, recognize and respect that coming to us was NOT the bird's decision. As far as they are concerned, they have been uprooted and kidnapped to a new place full of unknown threats. It has no idea what our intentions are. We are potential predators, as are any dogs or cats in the house.

If the bird were in the wild, it would immediately fly away or hide in dense foliage. Instead, it is trapped in a cage against its will in a place where it does not want to be, in full view of the "enemy".

RESPECT THE BIRD'S FEARS BY GIVING IT LOTS OF PRIVACY

RESIST THE NORMAL AND POWERFUL DESIRE TO SHOW THIS BIRD HOW MUCH WE WANT TO LOVE THEM! OFTEN THE BEST THING WE CAN DO IS TO BACK UP AND GIVE THAT BIRD PRIVACY.

Start by not interacting. Avoid direct eye contact. Open cage doors and reach inside as little as possible. Speak softly, and not at all if it makes the bird nervous. It is too easy to overwhelm and panic a new bird with emotion and attention, causing the bird to retreat, completely defeating what we are trying to do. It is very helpful if the cage has food and water doors on the side, so we can service the cage without putting hands inside (which scares the bird and invites a bite).

If possible, cover a third to half of the cage with a blanket, even during the day, so the bird can hide from view. When the bird feels safe, it can decide to peek around the blanket and observe, then duck out of sight again. If the cage cannot be easily covered, hang a large vision-obscuring toy that the bird can step behind.

When we do this, we are letting the bird be the one to decide when the “enemy” will see it. The more the bird can control these aspects of its basic safety, the more confidence it will have about being in our home.

Chacco is an 8-year-old male Rose-Breasted Cockatoo who mutilated himself so badly, both wings were amputated to save his life. When I brought him home, he would scream and roll and thrash for extended periods in a frenzy of seizure-like rage and terror. I initially housed him in a cat kennel where he could look out the front if he felt courageous, but then hide in the back the rest of the time. The sight of toys scared him, so none were in his enclosure.



When **Prince Raja** came to me, he was very aggressive because he was so afraid. People in his past had tried to force him to step up and come out, which he hated. He had been hit by a car, resulting in significant pain issues that were not adequately treated until shortly before I adopted him. I would stop a few feet from his cage 20+ times a day with my eyes down, and without looking at him I would softly sing “Happy Birthday”, whisper “I love you”, and walk away. I did this over and over and over - for weeks. At first he regarded me with great suspicion from the far corner of the cage. When he lunged at me, I stepped even further away from the cage to let him know that I respected his fear and his right to define the safe zone around his cage. As the days and weeks went by, and I did not stare at him or try to make him do anything, he decided I was a benign nut job (true) and came closer.



SMALL VICTORY – the bird is allowing its humans to get closer without panic or hostility. NOTICE what is an OK “personal space” around the cage, and respect that space, which will grow smaller over time.

CREATE FUN BABY STEPS TOWARD FORMING A RELATIONSHIP

As we go about our business in the general vicinity of the bird’s cage, become a fun and non-threatening point of visual and auditory interest. Move things around in the room where the cage is. Fluff up the sofa cushions, water the plants, and put flowers in a vase. Sing a little happy song. If the bird is starting to feel confident about being there, it will come out to watch what you are doing.

This is a good time to start “contact calls”. Wild birds use contact calls to keep track of where the flock is located in the tree canopy, or on the ground foraging, etc. In a human home, they are cheerful little words acknowledging that we are both here staying connected in our habitat – in response to vocalization from the bird, or to encourage the bird to communicate with us. Try “Hi babe”, “Whatcha doing?”, “Good bird!!” at least several feet from the cage, inviting the bird to vocally respond if it so chooses. The goal here is for the bird to begin to associate us with being a flock member in a non-threatening way. Don’t push it. If the bird withdraws or is not interested, stop after a few minutes and try again later.

SMALL VICTORY - Notice any willingness to communicate. Respond with another brief contact call, then “Good bird!” or “Thank you!” - then stop. Better to have the session be short and end on an up-beat than to go on too long.

START TO OFFER TREATS THROUGH THE BARS OF THE CAGE

Once the bird lets us closer to the cage, we can offer small narrow long treats (carrot or almond slices for example) through the bars of the cage with a code word like “Easy, easy”. If this is an aggressive bird, hold

that little treat carefully so fingers are not in range for a bite. If there is any lunge toward the treat, turn quietly and walk away, taking the precious treat with us. No comment, just walk away. Come back later and try again. Eventually the bird will realize that the only way to get that bit of treat (along with copious but low-key praise and thanks) is to take it gently.

Notice if the bird is now lowering its head to invite a head scratch. Be very careful about this and go slow - be prepared for the bird to offer its head for a minute, then panic and pull away or try to bite. If indeed the bird allows the skritch, this is a big deal!

SMALL VICTORY - The treat is offered, and bird does not pin eyes, lean forward with tail spread and/or head feathers raised (all signs of over-excitement which may signal discomfort and hostility, a clear signal to the human to back off). It is a big deal when the treat is accepted gently, an even bigger step if a head scratch is allowed. Offer maybe one more treat, thank the bird, and go away. **Don't "overstay your welcome"**. Come back later in the day instead. Try to end any session on an upbeat.

BITING

I view biting as a language, a kind of vocabulary, that the bird will resort to due to fear or annoyance that we are not "getting it", trying to go too fast, violating personal space. Bites cause us to be fearful around the bird, and make them fearful of us, all of which is counterproductive. I believe it is my job to structure interactions so that I am seeing the warning signs, or just doing things in a way that keeps my hands out of reach so biting does not become part of our vocabulary

As any experienced bird owner knows, this is not a perfect process, for us or for them! All of us get it wrong at times, or it seems like a bite comes without warning - but the goal is for the overall communication trajectory to be positive and trust-building.

Observe the little things closely. For example, does the bird bite if I give three head skritches? That is important information - it means I only give 2 skritches, stop, thank the bird and step back - thus showing the bird that "I respect your boundaries". Being cage-protective is very common in traumatized birds. If the bird will not step up in the cage, don't push it. One option is to put a playstand very close to the open door of the cage, put some food and toys on the playstand, then walk away. Let the bird decide when, or IF it wants to come out today. If it does, roll the playstand a few inches from the cage and observe. If the bird becomes anxious, gently push the playstand back. Maybe tomorrow you can push it further away. No rush. No need for the bird to bite.



Another option, if you have to get the bird out of the cage for whatever reason - if the bird will launch at you, observe its trajectory, and hold a heavy bath towel or a big twisted rope perch (with a thick towel over the hands to protect them) in its flight path where the bird will land on it. You have distance between your hands and that killer beak now, giving you time to move the bird quickly to where you need it to go. Give lots of praise for landing on the towel or twisted perch. Over time this can become a little game where you can swing the bird on the towel or perch and get it to flap - again with copious praise - giving the bird some much needed fun and exercise.

As **Chacco** became more confident, I put him on the floor and let him decide how much interaction he wanted by way of coming to me for pets and head skritches. Besides the steps described above, Chacco has greatly benefited from getting CBD Oil (prescribed by our avian vet). His feathers are scruffy because he still throws himself into the air, lands on his back and rolls around if he is startled - but his confidence level is vastly improved. He now lives in a large ExoTerra terrarium loaded with hanging toys he has fun playing with.

SMALL VICTORY - Every time I deliver the “correct, bird approved” number of head skritches or perform a towel transport, without eliciting a bite response, is a victory, a building block, another small but vital step in becoming a trusted companion instead of a threat.

GIVING MEDICATIONS

Sometimes we have to medicate the new bird, which is not ideal but has to be done. Ideally there is some favorite food on which the bird will eat the medications. If not, you have to get the bird out of the cage in a towel.

Your friend here is going to be speed. Get everything you are going to need ready - all doses drawn up, so there is no fumbling around when you have the bird out. Have some favored treats ready to put in the cage as soon as you have the bird securely out. If the bird is not stepping up, use the towel/twisted perch trajectory method, quickly lower the bird to the floor, and scoop it up in that or another towel. Give the medication quickly and quietly, taking care that the bird is swallowing and not aspirating - then put it right back in the cage where it feels safe, and where you have put some treats out in an obvious “welcome home” location. Use lots of reassuring words here - I try to always thank the bird for being so brave!

CONCLUSION

Parrots are not “instant pets” - even less so if they have been traumatized. But they can be fabulous and rewarding if given a chance. Hopefully you can use some of the techniques described above to help your bird form a lasting healing bond with you.

It is important to recognize there are some birds that really do not want to be “pets’ - they now and forever much prefer the company of other birds. You are not a failure if you cannot persuade them to change their minds; much better to try and find a situation where they can be a “bird’s bird” in an aviary or other situation where they are housed with others of their kind.

I think that Aretha Franklin best summed up what a traumatized bird asks of us, which is the foundation for a wonderful friendship going forward:

All I’m asking is for a little respect when you get home (just a little bit)
All I want you to do for me
Is give it to me when you get home
R-E-S-P-E-C-T
Find out what it means to me
R-E-S-P-E-C-T”