



SCREAMING AND THE COMPANION PARROT

Screaming is a common complaint of the owners of companion parrots. It is one of the biggest reasons that parrots are rehomed or euthanized, and unfortunately, it is not one of the easier problems to solve. Some screaming is a normal and necessary part of parrot behavior and must be accepted. Excessive or controlling screaming is a manifestation of a deeper problem. The challenge is to discover why the bird screams and then to modify the behavior. Vocalization is normal and healthy in parrots, and in sane species, the degree of normal vocalization may be excessive for a given owner or housing situation. Some species and individuals are louder than others. Some people have less tolerance for noise than others, and it is important to be clear about what is normal and abnormal vocalization.

In the wild, birds call to their flock mates in order to communicate at distances or when out of sight. Some birds, amazons for instance, may be more vocal when they are hormonally active. Most birds have a vocal period in the morning and toward dusk. This is a normal behavior pattern. At the most, parrots are just a few generations removed from the wild, we must teach them how to be pets and how to live with us. If parent birds and flock mates are unavailable, humans must provide guidance, teaching the parrot which behaviors are acceptable and how to interact with humans. We must acknowledge the bird's innate need and instinct to communicate and to be in touch with the flock. Birds do not scream for any reason, they may be hungry, lonely, frightened, bored or ill. Before it can be said that a bird is screaming for behavioral reasons, medical conditions must be considered. Unapparent illness can easily cause behavioral problems.

When dealing with a screaming bird, keep in mind the following points:

- Accept normal screaming: every bird has a “noisy time”. Trying to suppress normal behavior will worsen the situation, and possibly lead to other problems.
- The behavior may initially worsen as the bird tries to maintain control. Only patience, persistence and consistency will work.
- Wild parrots live in flocks of varying sizes. When parrots meet, they greet each other. They are in constant auditory communication with their flock mates when they are out of visual range. This is necessary for security, finding food, finding mates, chicks, and so forth. So, since your parrot perceives himself as part of your household flock, it is important to provide this social interaction.
- When you enter a room, acknowledge the bird, make eye contact, and say “hello”. If you have been gone for some time, make it a longer greeting, and perhaps offer a tickle, or a treat. Say “hello” even if he is screaming. When you leave a room tell him that you are going, and when you will return. For instance, “I’ll be right back”, if going to another room, “Good bye, I’m going to work, if you will be gone for some time. When such phrases are used consistently, the bird will learn to understand that although you have gone, you will return. This is crucial. Remember that a wild bird left by his flock mates, with no expectation of their return, will most likely die. This is especially true of young parrots.



- When at home, try to include the bird in your routine, as much as possible. T-stands can be moved about the house. Otherwise, make sure that your bird has plenty to do in his cage, and reassure him with contact calls. Many parrots will readily learn whistles or other calls to duet or exchange with owners who are out of their visual range. Teach your bird something acceptable to both of you, and use it to communicate when out of sight. Do not return to the room when your bird screams. This will reinforce the pattern. Instead, use acceptable contact calls to reassure him and to stay in communication.
- Learn to recognize contact calls.
- Teach your bird quiet, interesting sounds, such as whistles and whispers. Try to maintain a relaxed atmosphere and attitude around the bird. Loud music or voices, shouting or having the television volume turned up will only increase the bird's volume.
- Do not respond, positively or negatively, when the bird screams. Do not shout, scream back or fuss, even walking quietly to the cage to cover it, by bringing you to the bird may, in his mind constitute a reward for his behavior. If you do try covering the cage as a deterrent (and it works well with sane birds), then do so consistently. Cover the cage for not more than ten minutes, and consider using a timer, which when it rings, lets the bird know that the covering has come to an end. It is important not to use the cage as a place of punishment.
- Try to distract your bird with an indirect response to his screaming. While you continue to ignore the screaming, hum, sing or whisper.
- Never spray with water, beak flick or otherwise threaten your bird. Punishment and violence do not work and may seriously damage the trust between you and your pet.
- Do not make a fuss over your bird when he is quiet, or is making pleasant sounds.
- Try to teach your bird an acceptable way of asking for attention. For example, try to oblige when he is behaving and quiet, and asks for a tickle. This will reward good behavior, and build the bird's confidence in his relationship with you.

Birds may scream when their owners are eating in front of them. Foraging and eating together is an important social activity for parrots, and wild birds excluded from feeding with the flock are unlikely to survive. Your bird must have food when you eat. If you are eating something appropriate, give the bird a portion, or offer him a healthy treat. Young birds, especially if they have experienced a rushed or traumatic weaning, will often call repeatedly. This is not screaming. These birds are babies, and they vocalize because they need something.

Try to break the screaming pattern. If the bird screams at predictable times, covering the cage before he screams may work. Get the bird out of the cage, or give him a treat or interesting toy before he has the chance to scream. Anticipate the problem.



Although he should be able to cope with changes, there needs to be sane routine in your bird's life. He needs to know when he gets up in the morning, when he goes to bed, when he eats and when he spends time with you. Try to interact with the bird on three levels every day. First, use contact calls to communicate throughout the day when the bird may be in his cage or you may be in another room. Second, spend time with the bird, perhaps as you read or watch television, when although he is with you, there is little direct interaction. He might be on a perch or on your knee. Finally, there must be time every day when the bird receives your undivided attention. This time should include training, playing, preening and being affectionate. Birds who can depend on receiving attention are less likely to scream for it.

All companion parrots should learn rules. Start with “up”, “down” (on and off the hand), “no”, and “ok”. It may be necessary to initiate or reinforce this control away from the cage, in a neutral room, where you are the most familiar thing. Parrots will always try to be in charge, and rules establish the owner in a position of dominance. Rules must also provide guidance, teaching a parrot how to live compatibly with humans.

Keep a screaming diary. When does the bird scream? What else is happening at the time? Have you changed the amount of time you spend with your bird? How do you feel? Parrots are extremely receptive to the moods of those around them. Their sensitivity to tension, aggression or unhappiness cannot be underestimated. Don't try to deal with your parrot when you are upset or frustrated. Try to understand why your bird screams; he is trying to tell you something. Make sure that his psychological and environmental needs are satisfied. Your bird may be insecure, he may be unsure of your whereabouts, or he may want to know what you are doing and whether or not you will come back to him. He may be hungry; he may be bored or lonely. He may lack routine or affection in his life. Without rules and being sure of his place in the flock, he may be in charge of his life and not doing a very good job of it. Establish patterns and rules, tell him when you are leaving, and greet him on your return. Never punish him other than by expressing your disapproval with a quiet, firm “no”, and a stern look. Praise and reward his good behavior.