Behavior Compatibility:

Living In Harmony With Companion Parrots

By Sam Foster and Jane Hallander

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During the 1950s BF Skinner, a prominent psychologist, became the model for animal trainers, who adapted their mostly domesticated charges to Skinner's rules of behavior modification. Successful with many animal species, Skinner's principles have extended into present-day animal behavior theories. Many well-known animal, including avian, behavioral consultants still advocate Skinner's basic premises of conditioned response and patterning. Some even refer to themselves as behaviorists, a term that more aptly suits human psychologists and doctorates who follow Skinner's rules.

However, some animal species fit the principles of behavior modification much less than others. Parrots, for instance, are not domesticated animals. They are still very much the wild animals originally taken from jungles and rain forests around the globe. Even those who are bred domestically are still subject to their inherent wild bird genetic patterning, since they are only a generation or two from their wild ancestors.

For that reason, parrots react instinctively to many situations they experience in their roles as companion animals. This instinctive reaction sometimes conflicts with their human companions' world. In the past, many people referred to these natural, parrots doing what parrots do, reactions as behavioral problems. A common approach was to identify the problem and offer 'behavioral modifications' to change the bird and solve the problem. As we all know, these solutions don't always work, because we still have far too many parrots plucking feathers, self-mutilating, screaming, or becoming phobic. Fortunately, some behavior consultants do stand up for the parrots' rights with advice, such as -- they are social animals and need plenty of focused attention, just as they would get in their wild flock habitat.

Still, the term behavioral modification is loosely tossed around, with some people mistakenly believing that we can re-pattern our companion parrots to our individual lifestyles. In this article we intend to change the terminology, and hence the meaning, from behavior modification to behavior compatibility. Although it applies to all species, using African greys and cockatoos as our models, we will show you how to live with your parrots with understanding of their nature and motivations. By understanding this concept changes can be made that compliment both parrots and their humans. The result is true lasting friendship and companionship.

In working closely together over the past year to study various similarities between cockatoos and African greys, we feel very strongly that the key to ultimately solving behavior problems in companion parrots lies in prevention. Several months ago we were speaking with a mutual client, and friend, about his two pet birds, an umbrella cockatoo and African grey. This gentleman is a human psychologist, and during the course of our conversations the phrase behavior compatibility surfaced. After further discussions and analogies, we agreed that these two words accurately interpret our philosophy concerning the methodology of this approach.

So, just what do we mean by behavior compatibility? Very simply, the theory behind the term is easily determined by the common definitions... the capacity to live together in harmony. That is the premise that surely most companion parrot owners believe, at least initially, when they purchase a pet bird. Unfortunately, problems do often arise when the behavior of the parrot is not compatible with the owner. While the roots of this incompatibility can be varied, it may be due to unrealistic expectations on the part of the human, and the result of lack of knowledge or, even worse, misinformation about responding to the intellectual and emotional needs of the bird.

How often have we heard, or asked, questions such as: "Why is my bird behaving this way?", "How can I get him to stop?", "Is this 'normal'?", "I know my bird isn't happy...what have I done wrong?" Think how pleasant it would be not only for us, but also for our avian friends, if we knew the answers to these, and other, questions. Unfortunately, that in itself is no guarantee that there would never be a problem in the relationship. However, if we as the caretakers and guardians of these intelligent creatures can make a concentrated effort from the very beginning to learn, and understand, the possible reasons for various avian behaviors, many potential problems can be avoided and these initial hopes of living in harmony with our feathered companions become much more achievable.

As an example, some of the most frequent topics I am asked to address concerning cockatoos include screaming, constant whining or crying, aggression, and eating habits. While there are certainly other important issues that are, unfortunately, fairly common, I'd like to focus on those I mentioned and how behavior compatibility can be applied to cockatoos. Jane is addressing additional subjects that relate to our relationships with African greys. Yet, the same concepts also apply to cockatoos.

Screaming and Vocalizing:

There was a time, and not so long ago, when the most common advice for dealing with a consistently screaming bird included, "just ignore it and it will stop eventually", or "cover the cage until the screaming ends". Many people still feel that these are effective methods of resolving this behavior. It is certainly true that there can be numerous causes for calling or screaming, including various environmental influences and even, in some cases, a physical illness. However, what frequently happens with some species, such as many of the cockatoos, is that the owners or caretakers may not fully understand some very basic emotional and intellectual needs. By not recognizing, therefore in essence ignoring, these needs, the behavior that is considered unacceptable is not only not improving, it is actually being reinforced.

There was a comment on one of the Internet lists recently from someone who has been in the industry for many years stating, "All (avian) behavior is the collection of habits". While a great deal of the behavior our birds exhibit is learned, just as it is learned in the wild, we have to disagree with this basic generalization concerning pets in a domestic setting. This type of blanket statement, made without a great deal of clarification, may mislead some companion parrot owners to think that we are ultimately and completely responsible for every action or reaction shown by our avian companions. In fact, much of what our parrots do is based on unmodifiable behavior or instinct.

Lester Short in his definitive book of avian behavior. Titled The Lives Of Birds: Birds of the World and Their Behavior, in the chapter titled: How Birds Learn says, "Instinctive or unmodifiable behavior is responsible for much of what a bird does. Learning, on the other hand, is the process whereby behavior is changed."

Are we, as humans, equipped to provide all of the essential modifiable or learned behavior that parent birds teach their young? Probably not, since we are not parrots and thereby have a very different perspective of the world than our feathered charges. We can, however, through understanding prevent many situations that might lead to the many serious behavior problems we see today with our domestically bred and raised parrots.

If we look at how cockatoos react in the wild, most (with a few exceptions) live in flocks of various sizes for their entire lives. Even when they mature and find a mate they often remain members of the flock, except when nesting. There are even a few cockatoos, such as Rose-breasted's, who frequently nest in close proximity to one another, intentionally, for safety and early flock socialization of the young.

In the wild, cockatoos engage in flock calling during a good part of the day. All of the time they are flying, various members are calling to each other, keeping in close contact and telling each other pertinent information, such as where they are going; if an abundant food source is spotted; where mates and other family members are in relation to the flock; if danger is approaching; etc. Even while resting in the trees, there are brief and periodic calls as if just to reaffirm that all is well and everyone is close by. This type of communication is very natural, and important, to cockatoos in the wild.

(Note: The calling behavior exhibited by some cockatoos referred to as sentinels, is detailed further in the article "The Three 'F's of Cockatoo Defense").

So, why do we think that the reasoning behind various calls and vocalizations would be any different in a domestic environment?

This is where the avian/human conflict may arise. For instance, parrots often imitate noises they hear in their daily interactions with us because they interpret them as contact calls. African greys are notorious for their microwave beeps and telephone ringing noises. Why those particular sounds?

Perhaps because our greys see us answering the phone or microwave by going to them. To us, we're taking dinner out of the oven or answering the phone, but to our greys we may be responding to the microwave or telephone's contact call. If it works for the microwave, it might just work as a contact call for the grey to bring us to him.

With behavior compatibility, if we recognize the reason behind the call we may prevent future lack of attention behavior problems, such as screaming, by simply acknowledging the contact call. If we do not understand our parrots' thought processes and ignore these attempts at getting our attention, the next step for the parrot might be something louder and harsher sounding, until it becomes an intolerable screaming behavior.

Something I am pursuing with African grey contact calls is an oft-repeated generalization about greys that they are closet talkers. In other words, they talk and vocalize when their human companions are out of the room, then shut up as soon as we come into the room. However, I know of numerous greys, including my own Timneh, Jing, who chatter and vocalize whether or not people are in the same room. Can it be that greys who live in another room, often called the bird room are contact calling their human flock members to come into their area? Then when we get there the birds stop, because the flock has responded to their call. I ran an Internet survey that showed a large majority of parrots who spent most of their time in separate bird rooms talked only when the humans were out of the bird room, while those parrots who lived in family rooms and participated in family activities vocalized just as much when their people were present.

According to Doctor Irene Pepperberg, African greys that live in areas heavily frequented by their human flock, such as a family or living room, have learned the human flock's language and communicate to us in our language. Those who spend much of their time away from us in a separate room have not had the same opportunity to learn our language and only mimic our words. According to her, greys who spend plenty of time with us are more apt to use speech cognitively. Dr Pepperberg's studies suggest that greys do not learn speech from video or audio tapes, but must be exposed to and interact with humans, much the same as they do with other birds in their natural flocks, to learn the flock's dialect. Perhaps the generalization that some birds talk, while others never talk is due more to our not recognizing the greys' natural flocking behaviors, than to individual bird's abilities.

When cockatoos are not taught from a very early age, during the weaning and socialization process, to be self confident, to play independently and to respect their 'position' in the flock, persistent screaming may result at some later date. The structure of most wild cockatoos is such that the young remain in family groups for some time (for years in a few cases) learning important lessons in survival, foraging for food, flock interaction and establishing their role within the hierarchy. These first years are also a very crucial point of development for young birds in a domestic setting, and the lessons they learn during that time are the behavior building blocks for the remainder of their lives.

Weaning Trauma:

The Pet Bird Report has published many wonderful articles about weaning and socialization, along with successful methods for accomplishing both. Unfortunately, not all companion parrot owners read the PBR. I am amazed at the number of people who are not able to recognize the signs of weaning trauma and stress in their young, weaned, cockatoos (as well as other species).

The persistent and continuing whining (often described by owners as similar to air being released from a balloon) and swaying back and forth, sometimes accompanied by nippiness, can be the result of several things. The most common cause is trauma related to improper weaning, and may be physical or emotional -- frequently a combination of both. Sadly, there are far too many cases where bird owners who, although having the best intentions, have struggled long term with these problems, convinced that it could not possibly be related to weaning trauma.

Eating & Foraging:

The ultimate goal shared by most of us is to raise a physically healthy and food independent happy who has been emotionally nurtured and is happy, well adjusted and self-confident. Yet this is not always the case. How do we successfully impress upon people the importance of this phase of development and the tragic ramifications that can result if this process is not accomplished successfully? Again, perhaps by better analyzing and understanding what happens in the relationship between parent birds and their developing chicks, we might draw a clearer picture.

In the wild, cockatoos are exposed to many climatic changes and they are not all tropical birds. Some of these birds live primarily in forest and woodland areas (i.e. Umbrella, Palm and Moluccan Cockatoos), others in scrub forest and agricultural regions (several of the Black Cockatoos and Corella's), and a few species have the amazing ability to survive in semi-arid and desert regions (such as Major Mitchell's). There are also those who have adapted to a wide variety of climates and environments, such as the Greater Sulphur-crested Cockatoo and the Galah.

No matter what their natural habitat...regions of Australia, Indonesia, the Solomon Islands, New Guinea, the Philippines, or islands of the Java Sea, mother nature plays a primary role in their eating habits and ultimately their survival. Without the innate willingness and ability to adapt as necessary to varied food supplies, as they are available, the fate of these birds would uncertain at best.

We were able to closely observe the behavior, breeding and eating habits of large flocks of Greater Sulphur-crested, Red-tailed Black and Rose-breasted cockatoos over the years. I always laugh when I hear people refer to the cockatoos as wasteful (taking one bite of something and then dropping it, or flinging food from the bowl). I'm convinced that they really are not trying to be wasteful, although we may sometimes wonder if perhaps it isn't just an attention getting exercise...they are just being cockatoos. In their natural habitat when there is an abundance of food, quite often one bite is taken from a passion fruit, mango, pawpaw, or from a small cluster of fresh eucalyptus blossoms, and the rest falls to the ground and is forgotten.

During our years there we encountered two extremely wet seasons which included cyclones. During much of the rainy season of these particular years, the numbers of birds we saw daily decreased dramatically. Yet when we drove 30-40 miles west to a more semi-arid environment, there were once again the huge flocks we had become accustomed to seeing. Obviously the food supply was very different, but the birds were eating and healthy and would typically once again return to their normal habitat when the wet season was over.

Alternately, there were years when the wet season produced only minimal rainfall and the normal abundance of fruits and flowering trees were limited. What we saw during these times was not a migration, but an adaptation to totally different eating habits from other years during the same months. They would eat more eucalyptus blossoms and other natural vegetation and grass seeds (while of course raiding the sugar cane and wheat crops for some diversity).

It was a real treat for us each year when starting around the month of May, flocks of Red-tailed Black (Banksian) Cockatoos would literally fly right over our rooftop to feed in the region, lush with a fresh food supply after the summer rains. These birds would typically stay in the area for several months, always departing before the beginning of the rainy season, returning westward toward the Great Dividing Range where again the natural vegetation and food supply would be different.

Often, they (and other species) would have their recently fledged babies and we were able to watch as they were taught foraging and eating techniques. Sometimes the parent birds would leave the young (begging loudly) in one of the large trees on our property while they went in search of a tasty morsel. It was obvious that these successfully fledged birds were also food independent as we watched them during various times, accompanying their parents and eating on their own. Yet, when they did not, and remained behind crying and whining, swaying back and forth on the branch, the parents would always return within a few minutes to feed them and acknowledge that they were indeed close by.

Considering these natural instincts and the wide variety of foods cockatoos eat in the wild (very often out of necessity due to climate and environment), my feeling is that genetic influences are still very strong in our birds and will continue to play a significant role in many aspects of their behavior, including diet. So, if our cockatoos suddenly ignore their previously to die for piece of corn on the cob, thumb their beaks at the normally relished bowl of fresh fruit, or act as if that dish of cooked sweet potato that they typically run toward, is now most certainly going to kill them, let's all just take a deep breath, make sure there is an abundance of other nutritious food available, and vow to be persistent in offering a wide variety each day. I can almost guarantee that the morning will come when these same birds take one look at that corn on the cob, and glare at us as if to say, "And just where have you been keeping this for the past three months?"

Dominance:

An important premise of behavior compatibility is that not all parrot species behave the same or respond to the same treatment. For instance, people often make the blanket statement that all parrots respond to dominant handling and you must make your bird do what you want. If you don't, your parrot will assume it is the flock leader and make your life miserable.

Unfortunately, if this bit of advice is accepted and believed to work for 'all birds', 'all the time', there are instances where otherwise avoidable physical injury may occur to an unsuspecting bird owner, and where most certainly the relationship is damaged due to a break down of trust by both parties. Some sexually mature (or maturing) male cockatoos may attempt to exert their dominance in an extremely aggressive manner, testing the patience and skill of their human caretakers to the very limits. In many such cases, the most proven method of success is not forcing the bird into submission, but working calmly and consistently to maintain, or in many such cases to rebuild, the relationship with a recognized social structure that is accepted, and most importantly respected, by the cockatoo.

However, not all species are equally aggressive. For instance, African greys live in flocks consisting only of African greys, unlike many South American species where flocks are comprised of more than one species, such as macaws, amazons and conures. Where there are several different species competing for food and nest holes, there may be a much higher degree of aggression between birds than the within a flock consisting of only one species, many of whom come from the same family groups.

Instinctively, multi-species flocks will probably have developed a greater aggression level toward other birds than the flock of greys. Therefore, human dominance tactics may not as adversely affect those other parrot species as they can African greys. Try looking a phobic grey directly in the eyes and demand it step up onto your hand if you want to see a classic example of the dominance theory backfire and set the grey even further back into its fear of humans. I believe greys are not a sensitive species, as some claim, but are less aggressive than certain other parrot species and should be treated accordingly and with consideration for their true nature. This lack of understanding of their natural behavior patterns may well be one of the reasons we see so many feather plucking and phobia greys.

Closing:

Learning how to achieve, and maintain, a compatible relationship with our pet birds begins by having a respect for who and what they are, a willingness to accept the responsibility for both their emotional and physical well being, and making every effort possible to understand the reasons and influences behind their instinctive behaviors. If these basic foundations are laid by all of us from the very start, beginning with the breeder, then our endeavors to establish and enjoy behavior compatibility with our companion parrots become much more focused, and hopefully successful.