

Parrot Fights

When, why birds fight and how to prevent fights and beak injuries

By Rebecca Sweat

“Beak injuries due to bird-to-bird scuffles are quite common,” said Larry Nemetz, DVM, a birds-only veterinarian in Santa Ana, California. They can be anything from a minor dent, chipped beak tip, puncture or crush wound, to large fractures in the mandible or upper beak. In some cases, avulsion occurs, meaning the entire beak is torn off the bird’s face.

Why would one pet bird bite and hurt another? “Nobody knows for sure,” replied avian veterinarian Gregory Burkett, DVM, of Durham, North Carolina. “Maybe space is a problem, maybe overzealous breeding and courting behaviors or perhaps territoriality aggression.” When another bird comes into a pet bird’s space (which is often a cage or playgym), the bird may see the other bird as an intruder and try to protect its turf by biting. If a bird thinks the human in the household is its mate, it may see other birds in the household as competitors for that person’s attention and attack them whenever they come near.

More often than not when scuffles occur, it’s between birds of widely different sizes. “A lot of times, the smaller bird is the one instigating the problem,” Nemetz said. “The little bird may keep testing the big bird, and finally the larger bird just can’t take it anymore and he bites the other bird.” Because the big bird has the larger beak, the small bird is the one that gets hurt.

The two birds may be known enemies or the birds may have always gotten along well in the past and then “out of the blue” start fighting with each other.

Keeping birds in the same space, either in the same cage or on the same play space, can certainly up the odds of scuffles. “If two birds are confined together in the same cage, sooner or later they’re going to get mad at each other,” Welle said. When that happens, the smaller bird usually has to just sit there and take it because it’s stuck in the same cage with the big bird and can’t escape. In contrast, when birds in the wild get into frays, if it’s between a larger species and a smaller bird, the smaller bird can fly away and get out of the big bird’s space — and probably never be caught by the bigger bird, which probably can’t fly as fast.

Go To An Avian Vet

In all but minor injuries, beak altercations are emergency situations. The only times a beak injury would not be an emergency, according to Welle, is if it is just a puncture wound or dent, and the beak is still intact, and if the bird can still eat. Still, he added, “it’s a good idea to take your bird in for a veterinary exam within a few days of the accident just to make sure your bird is okay.”

Injuries more serious than a dent or small puncture are generally emergencies. That includes situations where the bleeding lasts more than five minutes, if the beak is fractured or just hanging by a fragment (in which case the beak would wiggle if you touch it), if the outer horn layer of the beak is ripped away from the bone underneath or if the bird stops eating. A bird exhibiting any of these signs should immediately be taken to an avian veterinarian or to an after-hours emergency clinic.

If it’s late at night and no emergency clinics are open and the bird’s bleeding has stopped, it may be okay to wait until morning to take your bird in to see an avian veterinarian, but don’t wait any more than a day, advised Nemetz.

“If there’s a fracture or anything that disrupts the integrity of the beak, those need to be repaired within 24 hours of the injury,” he said. There is bone in both the upper and lower beak. If the horn layer is torn off or the bone fractures, the bone becomes exposed to the air. “Bone that becomes exposed to the air dries out and dies,” Nemetz said. This can happen after 24 hours of exposure to the air. Once bone becomes dried out, it dies and either falls off or will need to be amputated.

Of course, even if just the tip of the beak has been broken off, those situations are still serious and should be addressed within a day. “Beak injuries are very painful,” Welle said. “The beak has nerve endings, and pain or the displacement of the beak may make eating difficult or impossible. If the beak tip is broken off, the bird may refuse to eat because its beak is

extremely sore.” According to Welle, the sooner the tip of the beak is repaired, the sooner the bird will start eating again.

Beak Repairs

Beak injuries are repaired several different ways, depending on the severity of the injury. If it's just a puncture or the tip of the beak has been broken off, those are cleaned out with an antibiotic and then the gaps are filled in with dental acrylics or light-cured composites.

“The composite material is like a very hard bandage,” Nemetz said. “It creates a patch until the beak grows out. Once it's on, food and bacteria can't get in there, which cuts down the odds of infection.”

If the tip of the beak is what's being repaired, most birds will feel like eating again within four to five hours of getting the tip filled in with the composite material, Nemetz said. Analgesics may also be administered, to help ease the pain.

If the bird has sustained a fracture but there's still a good blood supply to the part of the beak that's been fractured, the beak will be pinned and/or wired together, and then the area will be covered with dental composite to protect it. The composite “cast” will be shaped like a beak and stay in place until new tissue grows in. During the first few days or weeks after the cast is on, the bird may need to be fed via a feeding tube into the esophagus, so it doesn't have to open and close its beak. This would be done at the bird hospital.

Prevent An Altercation

Beak scuffles are typically unexpected emergencies. They happen in seconds — the moment you turn your head or leave the room. In most cases, however, these are injuries that could have been prevented. It's just a matter of taking some common sense steps: Don't overcrowd birds. If you house them in the same cage or flight, make sure there is plenty of space so that the birds each have their own territory. Never allow birds to be in contact with other pets, even for a couple minutes, unless supervised. Don't leave birds of different sizes or that you know don't like each other out of their cages at the same time. Let them have their own “out” times at different times during the day. Don't allow your birds to climb on each other's cages. One bird could be out and the other bird locked up, and they can grab onto each other's beaks through the cage bars. Understand bird body language so that you know when they are irritated with each other. For instance, if your Amazon's eyes are pinning and its tail is fanned out, you need to quickly remove your quaker parakeet from the situation. (Note: Protect your hands when you do this, so you don't get attacked as well.) If one bird is a bully to all your other birds, consider trimming its wing feathers, and allow the other birds flight so they can get away if a scuffle occurs. Birds, like people, can get in bad moods. Even two birds that have always been buddies can suddenly turn on each other. Always assume that the potential for a beak brawl is there, and take whatever steps you can to make sure that doesn't happen.