

Help End Excessive Pet Bird Screaming

Check out these tips to help quiet a screaming parrot

By Lis Wilson, CVT, CPBC

Birds are naturally loud, but if your pet bird is screaming excessively, it is a problem.

- 1) Understand that parrots are not supposed to be quiet animals, so allow for normal noisy periods.
- 2) Do not reward excessive screaming with attention and drama.
- 3) Teach the parrot a contradictory sound, such as whistling or whispering.
- 4) Always reinforce good noises with lavish praise and attention.
- 5) Always ignore the sounds that you don't like, such as excessive screaming.
- 6) Look for patterns in screaming episodes, then look for ways to prevent the pattern from starting.
- 7) Teach the bird a redirected activity, such as foraging for treats.
- 8) Reward your family — and yourself — for their patience!

Bird owners use the term “quiet” rather loosely when describing their pets' qualities. The degree of quiet might depend more on a particular person's tolerance level for noise than how loud the bird actually sounds. A reputed “quiet” bird might only mean that it is quieter than species that are considered really loud, such as cockatoos and macaws.

The first question to ask is what is excessive noise for your species? I consider it normal for a certain species, such as Aratinga parrots, to produce short bursts of piercing noise on and off throughout the day. The fact that we may dislike the racket does not automatically make it abnormal or excessive. After all, we're describing parrots, not mice. If your parrot screams almost constantly it would then fall into the excessive screaming category.

Behaviors continue because they work for the bird. Without a positive outcome directly related to the screaming, your parrot would not continue with the racket. To stop the negative behavior, figure out how you're rewarding the bird for it.

If you carefully examine what happens immediately before your parrot screams, you can identify the stimulus or trigger (a.k.a., antecedent) for the behavior. For example, if she screams when you leave the room, your leaving stimulates the noise. The reward or consequence follows immediately after her undesirable behavior. You leave the room, she screams, and you return and yell at her to hush up (consequence). Voilà! Her screaming got you to return and pay attention to her. So there is the A, B & C of behavior analysis — antecedent, behavior and consequence. Remember that a behavior won't go away if you continue to reward it.

Behavior Modification For Your Screaming Pet Bird

For behavior modification to work, you must reward the behaviors you want and ignore those that you do not. You'll need to completely ignore your parrot's screaming — not an easy task. Do not return to the room when she starts to screech. Do not pick her up when the family's had enough. Go for a walk, close the door — do whatever you have to in order to ignore this undesirable behavior.

As you work to eliminate the screaming, you'll need to teach your parrot that a different — more desirable — behavior will now work better to gain your attention. Reinforce a sound she makes that you enjoy, such as talking or whistling. When she makes those noises, lavish her with attention and praise.

For example, if she whistles when you leave the room, immediately return and praise her, demonstrating that her whistle will get her the attention she craves. Take this a step further; teach her to whistle in response to your whistle or whisper when you whisper. If she starts screaming, whistle or whisper at her to encourage a similar response from her. With these methods, you are teaching her a “contradictory behavior” that will replace the old, less liked behavior. She can't shriek and whistle at the same time, so she'll need to choose the one that best gets your attention, hopefully the whistle.

The amount of time that this retraining will take depends on two things. First, how long has the behavior been rewarded? Weeks? Years? Second, how consistent can you and your family be in enforcing the new rules? Remember, she's already learned that screaming gets her what she wants, so now you have to teach her that it no longer works.

Keep Track When Your Pet Bird Acts Out

Diaries can help identify when and how problems arise. Have everyone in the household jot down basic information whenever your parrot acts out, noting such things as time of day, what is going on at the time and the apparent moods of everyone present, including the bird. After a couple of weeks of data collection, compare notes and look for patterns.

If patterns emerge, you'll be able to make efforts to change the circumstances that are creating negative behavior.

Many birds make more noise in the evening when everyone returns home. If this happens with your parrot, try giving her a long, exuberant bath before people start showing up. This should predispose her to quiet preening instead of shrieking.

I often hear people recommend a "time-out" for excessive screamers, but if your timing isn't correct, the time-out will be useless. If you move a screaming bird to a separate cage for a time-out, the bird might make the connection with being picked up prior to being moved rather than with the intended punishment of being alone in another room.

The only time-out that I've found effective is a simple one. Whenever your parrot shrieks, turn your back on her. The moment she stops, turn to face her, then smile and praise her. If her shrieking continues, leave the room and don't return until she stops for a second.

Sometimes, making an abrupt noise while standing out of sight, such as clapping your hands, will cause her to stop long enough for you to return with praise for her.

Colleague Mattie Sue Athan considers excessive noise evidence of a lack of independence, and I agree. Your parrot needs to learn to entertain herself rather than cling to you.

Foraging opportunities often help redirect negative behavior. Hide favorite foods in her food bowl, around the cage or in foraging toys. Choose foods that she does not receive in her regular diet. She'll be engaged in this activity rather than clamoring for your attention.

Don't forget to reward your family for their patience while you retrain your parrot. Parrots are wonderful but aggravating creatures, even for those of us who love being around them.