

Bird Noises

A look at how birds vocalize to communicate

By Rebecca Sweat

Cockatoos are known as one of the more vocal bird species.
Courtesy Janice Williams, Mass.

Squawk, squawk, squawk! Screech, screech! Chirp, chirp, chirp! Whistle, whistle! Tweet, tweet, twe-e-e-e-e-t! Anyone who lives with birds knows they sure can be noisy at times. On some days it may seem like your feathered friend is never going to stop jabbering. The chatter might start at dawn and not stop until you turn off the lights in the evening. Or maybe your parrot mutters quietly to itself in a low-key way most of the day, but then gets really raucous for about an hour in the morning and an hour each evening.

Of course some birds vocalize more than others. “The species that are more geared toward a social setting are going to be more vocal because they communicate a lot with their buddies,” noted Larry Nemetz, DVM, an exotics-only veterinarian in Santa Ana, California. “The birds that are flying around in pairs or just fours aren’t usually as vocal. They already told their buddy, ‘Hey, let’s go fly over there.’ They told them once, they don’t have to say it over and over. But the birds that are traveling together in large flocks have to do a lot more vocalizing because there’s a lot more birds to communicate things to.”

Birds that are more communal — and travel together in large flocks — include cockatoos, cockatiels, budgerigars, lorries, African greys, Meyer’s and Senegal parrots, and lovebirds. All of these tend to be chattier in the wild and in captivity. Amazons and other South American parrots, on the other hand, tend to fly in very small flocks most of the year, and only congregate into large flocks during breeding season. “The Amazons are really only noisy when they’re flying, which is when they’re foraging for food. They don’t make a lot of noise when they’re just hanging out in the trees,” Nemetz said.

There’s also some variation in the types of sounds different pet birds make. Budgies and lovebirds often chirp when they’re happy, whereas African greys typically whistle or repeat favorite phrases when they feel good. A male canary sings when it feels confident and macho, but a macaw might simply squawk loudly. Amazon parrots make a “machine-gunning” sound when threatened, while African greys will growl like dogs when they’re scared or nervous. A lot of parrots make a soft purring or “churr-churr” sound when they’re relaxed and content, but finches usually just make a soft “peep-peep.” And then individual birds have their own “trademark” or unique sounds that they like to make as well.

One thing’s for sure though, vocalization is an important part of being a bird.

“Vocalizations, including some screaming, is normal for parrots and should be expected,” said Cathy Johnson-Delaney, an avian veterinarian in Seattle, Washington. “If you’re going to have a bird, you’re going to have noise. If you don’t want noise, buy a hamster and keep the wheel oiled.”