

## Is Your Bird Teasing Or Playing

**Find out if your bird is fighting or playing with you**

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Learn to read your bird's body language to avoid causing stress and anxiety.  
Courtesy Kevin S, Mississippi

**Q:** My grandmother has a lovebird named Sweetie. Every time you take a stick and tap it on the floor of her cage, she comes over, scoots down and puts her wings up and flaps them. She only does this in the cage. She also has several "babies" — three bells and two wooden eggs. Is she trying to protect her babies?

**A:** You are to be commended for realizing that this game you are playing with your grandmother's lovebird is likely not a game to her at all. Since birds are so different from us, it can be difficult at times to recognize the meaning of a parrot's body language. When we enjoy watching animals do something, it often does not occur to us that the animal might not be having fun at all.

I suspect from your description that Sweetie's wings-up and flapping behavior is a territorial display, and if you press the issue, she is likely to get quite angry. It sounds like she thinks you are threatening the safety of her home and her "babies," and she is telling you that she is willing to fight you to protect them. This is not a game to her. Indeed, from her perspective, this is likely a life-and-death issue. There is a huge difference between playing with a parrot and teasing a parrot.

A classic example of people inadvertently causing a parrot anxiety is the common mistake that inexperienced people often make with cockatoos. Many people get a kick out of seeing a cockatoo raise its crest, so they might intentionally do things to cause this to happen. A cockatoo's raised crest, however, often means it is alarmed by something. As a result, one of the easiest ways to get a cockatoo to raise its crest is to repeatedly frighten it. I cannot count how many times I have seen this happen with perfectly nice, non-abusive people who have no idea that they are stressing that parrot out. They simply do not understand what the body language means or how upset the cockatoo is becoming.

### Crossed Signals

Not understanding body language can sometimes get us into serious trouble with parrots, even those that usually enjoy our company. Several years ago, a colleague told an interesting story about an incident between a friend and her parrot. The parrot was very fond of this person and always enjoyed her visits. However, on this particular day, their relationship took a dramatic turn for the worst.

The parrot was eating when the friend arrived, and, because (like many parrot species) it tended to be extremely food protective, the bird reacted belligerently when the friend approached to greet it. Switching into an aggressive display, the parrot flexed its wings, fluffed out its feathers, pinned its eyes and swayed back and forth while making a guttural noise.

Unfortunately, the friend totally misunderstood the meaning of the posturing, and, in the spirit of fun, she mirrored the bird's movements as best as she could. Holding her elbows out and swaying, she mimicked his growling sounds. Because she truly thought she and the little parrot were playing together, one can only imagine her stunned horror when the bird launched itself at her and bit her quite badly.

As a result of this sad incident, the parrot-person relationship was irreparably damaged. The person did not realize she was mimicking an antagonistic display, and could not understand why the parrot didn't realize she meant no harm. From the parrot's perspective, however, the woman was unspeakably rude. As far as the parrot seemed to think, there was nothing more to understand. She had made an offensive gesture, equivalent perhaps, to the South Philadelphia "Yo' Mama," and that was that.

The person took this quite personally — her feelings were badly hurt. Instead of trying to repair the damage (which she could have done, with patience), their friendship ended, which was sad for both of them. How often do friendships between humans end abruptly thanks to a communication breakdown? If we humans so often do not understand what other humans mean, it's certainly not surprising that the same thing happens between such divergent species as humans and birds.

With this in mind, it becomes more obvious that you are teasing Sweetie and that she is not enjoying the interaction. If this

continues, she will learn to dread your approach to her cage, and she is likely to learn to dislike you. This is understandable, considering how staunchly female lovebirds guard their territory.

If you would like to have an enjoyable relationship with this little bird, you need to cease teasing her. Instead, show respect for her territory and her devotion to her “babies.” Each time you approach her cage, do so politely, and offer a tiny piece of something special like millet. For this to be an exciting treat, millet cannot be given at any other time.

Without the cage tapping, you may find her attitude gradually softens toward you. After all, you are no longer being rude to her. Better yet, good things happen when you draw near the cage. This is the parrot’s equivalent of bringing a girl flowers to mollify her feelings, and, as we know from experience, this definitely works!