

My Bird Doesn't Like To Be Petted

Find out how to work with your parrot to change its reaction to petting

By Liz Wilson, CVT, CPBC

You must first earn respect and trust from a bird that doesn't like to be petted. Courtesy Leann Casillas, California

Why doesn't my parrot like to be petted? This is a common question, and the answer can be quite complex. Most people have experience with dogs, and most dogs love to be petted. Every canine I've ever known has valued petting secondarily only to eating, and, if offered the chance, would've happily lain around for hours and hours of stroking and loving. Indeed, all of them were quite blatant in their belief that they never received sufficient petting.

Dog bites, however, are quite common, and the most frequent biting scenario involves a person trying to pet a strange dog. Petting generally involves reaching for an animal's blind spot at the back of its head. When viewed from that perspective, it is obvious that it takes a very trusting dog to allow that behavior from someone it doesn't know. What might be perceived as an aggressive behavior from a canine is instead a justifiably defensive one.

Cat owners can attest that not all companion animals like to be stroked. Cats enjoy physical affection, but only on their terms. Humans learn quickly not to force cats to submit to petting when felines are not in the mood.

Despite information to the contrary, it is still a commonly held belief that all animals should want to be petted by humans and that there is something wrong with an animal that doesn't feel this way. Nothing could be further from the truth, however, and this misconception frequently leads to problems.

Earn Respect Before You Pet

If you have a parrot that does not like to be petted, this does not mean the bird cannot learn to enjoy it. Teaching it will take time, patience and a lot of respect for the bird's feelings.

To maximize the potential for success, one needs to identify the ideal time of day. If parrots have a preferred time for physical affection, it is likely the evening. Accordingly, set aside some quiet time in the evening for a petting lesson.

Like those afore-mentioned dogs that snap, many parrots prefer not to allow a human's hand to go into that blind spot behind their heads, so keep your hands where the bird can see them. Many birds enjoy having their beaks rubbed, which can be done with the thumb and forefinger. Try rubbing the beak for a few seconds at a time, slowly working up to longer periods as the bird learns to enjoy the sensation.

Once a parrot has learned to enjoy beak rubbing, start gently moving your fingers off the hard surface of the beak, onto the incredibly soft skin right at the junction of the top and bottom beaks and the bird's face. The touch must be delicate and light, accompanied by lots of soft murmurings and whisperings. Evidence that the bird is enjoying your touch is if it raises its small cheek feathers, and birds that really enjoy this will frequently close their eyes — proof of absolute trust.

As the bird becomes confident that you won't hurt it, slowly and gently expand the area of your caresses, working your way back to the bird's ears — a favorite spot for many. Incidentally, if you'd never noticed, your parrot does indeed have ears. (After all, how else could they learn to talk, right?) Birds lack the sound-catching funnel (or pinna) that mammals have, as this would screw up their aerodynamics. They do, however, have every other structure related to hearing. A parrot's ears are where you would expect them to be — back behind their eyes — but they are simply holes in the side of their heads that are covered with tiny feathers.

From my experience, human fingers tend to be quite awkward and bumbling as they learn the subtleties of petting a parrot, so substitutions might help. Aviculturist E.B. Cravens advocates using a feather for stroking a bird that is unused to human hands.