

Parrot Reflection Obsession

Many parrots enjoy their reflection, and this behavior is usually harmless — unless it turns into a reflection obsession

By Liz Wilson, CVT, CPBC

Observe a bird's behavior concerning its reflection in the mirror. Down the road it could turn into a reflection obsession.
Courtney Marsha Rawlings

Q: I have a 4-year-old conure that is obsessed with anything shiny; a spoon, mirrors, a metal table — anything in which he can see his reflection. He will sit in front of the object, making kissy faces to his “friend” in the mirror until I remove him from the area. Is this bad? Should I discourage this behavior?

A: You know, I have a friend like that, and she has mirrors all over her home!

Seriously, parrots clearly know how dazzling they are, and many parrots are strongly attracted to their reflection in any type of shiny surfaces. Male cockatiels tend to compose elegant whistled symphonies for their reflections; a friend's cockatiel, BoyBoy, truly found Nirvana when he encountered his larger-than-life image in my magnifying mirror.

My blue-and-gold macaw, Sam, loves to flash her eyes seductively at her image in my reflective closet door, sweetly tapping her beak ad nauseam on the glass of the mirror. Aviculturist Phoebe Linden has a wonderful photo of her Eleanora cockatoo enjoying the wonders of her reflection distorted like a fun house mirror in a curved pot lid.

So the short answer is no, there is no problem with your conure's narcissistic tendencies. Unless, of course, problems develop! If your conure continues to be polite to you when you attempt to remove him from his reflected friend in the mirror, that is wonderful, and I would not be concerned about it. However, things may not stay so benign, so be aware and prepared to deal with difficulties as they arise in the future.

When Crushes Go Bad

Many parrots will get crushes on things, including their reflections in the mirror, and some parrots can then become a tad obsessive about the whole thing. In some circumstances, some parrots become aggressively protective. I loved a photo someone sent me of a budgerigar (parakeet) that adored his reflection in their shiny silver toaster. The only problem was that no one was allowed near the toaster when he was out of the cage, because he began to fanatically protect his reflection-buddy.

In another situation, a Moluccan cockatoo became totally fixated on his reflection in the owner's oven door. He had his humans in stitches watching his antics as he danced, strutted and postured in front of his image. However, his amusing behavior gradually evolved into aggressive guarding of that area of the kitchen, and human toes became seriously endangered. Recognizing that this problem could get a great deal worse in the future, his people intervened by no longer allowing him access to the floor by the oven.

Some parrots become so infatuated with their image that they apparently perceive their reflection as “The Love of Their Life.” As a result, these birds might get totally obsessed with feeding their Beloved, even to the extent of weight loss. Male budgies are famous for this type of behavior, spackling their mirrors over with deliciously romantic offerings of regurgitated food. In circumstances such as these, keep close track of the bird's normal weight, and remove mirrors if the bird becomes compulsive. Sometimes offering the mirror for limited periods (such as 30 minutes once a week) can provide a viable compromise.

There is an old story about parrots and mirrors that still resurfaces periodically. Years ago, when all the parrots in the pet trade were wild-caught imports that had to be tamed, many so-called experts continually warned parrot owners against giving their parrots mirrors.

As far as I can gather, this was based on the assumption that a social flock animal like a parrot would tame easier if it were lonely. Consequently, it was thought that giving such a bird a mirror would slow the taming process, since the bird would have its reflection for company and not be so interested in human companionship. Whether this old saying was true or not, I cannot say. However, it certainly has no applicability with the domestic-bred parrot, because the companionship of a human can provide much more than a reflection in a mirror.

If a parrot is allowed limited access to its reflection, this reflection obsession can be a useful tool under certain

circumstances, even if the bird might respond aggressively around it. For instance, you have an important dinner party planned, and you really, really do not want your beloved parrot to drown out conversation with its less than melodic vocalizations. Right before the guests are due to arrive, you can move him away from the festivities, and give him something shiny (but totally safe) with which to play.

Remember, of course, that glass mirrors are not only breakable but they are also often backed with metallic compounds that can be toxic if ingested. Use common sense in this endeavor, and do not give the powerful nut-cracking beak of a parrot anything it can shatter.

In this manner, your feathered friend will be intently occupied prior to your guests' arrival, and he is more likely to stay quietly amused while company is in your home. In this manner, reflective surfaces can be a wonderful tool for temporarily deflecting problems.

So on the positive end of the behavioral spectrum, the parrot propensity toward narcissism can be an amusing thing, and, under certain circumstances, it can be a useful tool for redirecting other more negative behaviors. On the negative end of the spectrum, it can lead to obsessive territoriality combined with aggression. Parrot people need to be aware of the possibilities when parrots fall madly in love with their reflections. Being prepared can forestall any problems.