

Parrot Behavior Toward Phones

A parrot behaviorist addresses the motivations behind parrots' reactions to telephones

By Liz Wilson, CVT, CPBC

Courtesy of Nikki Sorensen, California
Not all birds have the same reaction toward the telephone.

Years ago, when I still had an active parrot boarding business in my home, I was tickled by the birds' varied reactions when the phone rang.

The range of mimicking abilities meant that several "answering machines" would respond to the phone all at once: "Hello. You have reached the home of ...", complete with the appropriate beeps and boops. Some birds chimed in with a variety of human voices answering and conversing on the phone: "Hello? Oh, hi. How are you? Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh. Really? OK, good-bye." In the decade I boarded birds, there was never a time when a ringing phone was ignored by the visiting parrots.

Karen Webster of the Alaska chapter of the Parrot Education and Adoption Center (PEAC) reports that this "round-robin phone game" is particularly hilarious in a multi-bird household. Her lesser Jardine's parrot makes the ringing sound of a phone, "Ring ... ring," and then the African grey parrot answers (in Karen's voice), "Hello?" Her timneh African grey parrot holds the actual conversation (also in Karen's voice) and ends the call, complete with the sound of the line being disconnected: "Hi, uh-huh, OK, OK then. Bye-bye. Click."

So what is with the parrot fascination with telephones? It is a safe assumption that, unlike genetically predisposed behaviors such as food-throwing messiness, ear-splitting vocalizations and total destruction, phone responses are not "hard-wired" in a parrot's psyche. Perhaps parrots are fascinated by phones because of our fascination with them.

Americans certainly seem obsessed with telephones, as exemplified by the cell phone conversations going on everywhere we go – in grocery store lines, airport lounges, public bathroom stalls, restaurants and even as the feature film runs at the movie theater. So it isn't at all surprising that parrots have a passionate reaction to phones.

Parrots are not the only companion pets that respond to telephones. Despite sleeping soundly in my lap, both of my cats instantly leap up and dash around the room when the phone rings.

Back in the good ol' days, when mothers were chained to the length of that diabolical curly phone cord, children learned that they had a precious few moments in which to get into hideous trouble without interruption. My young nephew demonstrated this when he quietly unrolled 200 yards of fishing line in full view – but just out of arm's reach – of his telephone-connected and frustrated grandmother.

Handle A Bird's Aggressive Behavior To Phones

Some parrots show a negative and aggressive behavior toward phones in the home. [More>>](#)

Why Do They Do That?

People often ask me why their parrot hates their phone, as evidenced by a parrot's determined attack on the implement whenever it is within reach. The reason for this is likely two-fold. First, many people drop everything (including the bird, in a figurative sense) when the phone rings. Ignoring the parrot, the human rushes to answer it, puts the phone on his or her shoulder and pays a loathsome 100 percent of his or her attention to it. Viewed from that angle, I suppose it is surprising that there are parrots that do not appear to hate the phone.

The destruction of phones by hookbills is likely a combination of three motivations.

Motivation 1: There is the fascination of all those cool little buttons that a busy beak can remove, and we all know just how mechanical a parrot's tongue and beak can be, especially when it comes to demolition.

Motivation 2: The phone is something we obviously value, so the parrot is likely to be drawn to it as a result.

Motivation 3: The drama reward a parrot typically receives when it destroys yet another telephone is tremendous incentive. (Incidentally, the same obliteration also happens frequently with television remotes, probably for the same

reasons.)

Of course we all recognize that we must accept responsibility when parrots destroy something we value, because the most common way this occurs is when we leave them unsupervised out of their cages. Not a clever thing to do, but a mistake we have likely all made at one time or another.

Many years ago, I left the room briefly to answer the doorbell while my blue-and-gold macaw, Sam, was out of her cage. She meticulously disassembled the watch I had foolishly left lying on the table. I was truly impressed with the fastidiousness of her work when I returned to find it in seven pieces, not counting the watchband. She had painstakingly removed the crystal, the stem, the hands, and several of the numbers before I intervened. Total, absolute annihilation! Fortunately for me, it was a \$10 Timex™ and cheaply replaced.