

Peaceful Solutions To Negative Bird Behavior

Before you travel, take time to prepare your bird for your absence.

By Chris Davis

Summer is here – a time when many of us travel more frequently. It's time to prepare our birds for our absence. Some birds accept the change and are thrilled when we return. Other birds, seem to want to punish us for being away from home. Although that can be the cause of a lot of emotional drama, most birds, like children, respond well to having clear behavioral guidelines set for them as consequences for both desirable and undesirable behaviors. When lovingly delivered without negative emotion, the bird is allowed to choose the behavior that will result in a positive outcome for it and its family. As the following letter shows, a feathered "brother" or "sister" with good behavior can be a strong motivator.

Courtesy Robbyn & Andrew Foster, California

Some birds may react negatively toward an owner after a few days absence.

I have a hawk-headed parrot, Aruba. We've had her since she was a baby. She loves me, but she is in love with my husband. When we leave town and then return from traveling, she starts attacking me. At first I was shocked and consulted a bird behaviorist. Now I expect the negative behavior to happen, so my husband and I developed a strategy.

When we come home after an absence, I am the only one who interacts with her. She will get on a stick, so I move her from the aviary to the cage with this stick. She usually is not locked up, but when she is misbehaving, she has to stay in the cage, covered or partially covered. Then our regular routine resumes.

We also have an African grey, Jimbo. I get the birds up, we shower, and then we eat. Of course, Aruba can't do all this though, because she's exhibited misbehavior. She watches, and she starts missing the food or other activities. Eventually she calms down and starts talking sweetly again. The temper tantrum is over. She gets access to my husband after that, and life is back to normal.

The first time this happened after an absence, I was distraught. It lasted almost a month. Now I don't get upset, and it lasts only a day or two.

I am delighted that you were able to work things out peacefully. I enjoy devising behavior modification techniques that are specific to the pet bird, its people and its environment. By doing this, you realize that if any one of the elements you described was changed, it could alter the entire outcome.

By getting Aruba on a stick and not allowing yourself to be bitten and then allowing her to watch Jimbo having all the fun, you allow her to decide to behave in an acceptable manner. This type of routine is very important to create a permanent change in behavior. Congratulations on working out this problem behavior.

You can prepare your pet birds for your absence by explaining the particulars of your trip. Do this the day before traveling and on the day you leave. Get your birds' attention, and then explain slowly and clearly that you will be leaving. Tell them who will be leaving, who will be looking after them while you are away and how many days you will be gone. Count out the days on your fingers while the birds can see you clearly.

Although some people may laugh about this, I receive numerous calls and e-mails telling me how well this works!

When you return, talk to your birds first thing, but do not handle them right away if they seem aggressive or a little wacky. Sometimes, a favorite treat, given through the cage bars, allows them to calm down a bit before you let them out. I travel frequently and have used this technique successfully with my feathered family for more than 30 years.