

Bird Behavior - Constant Bird Screaming

Find out what to do if your bird is excessively screaming.

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Do not reinforce your bird's screaming by responding to it.
Courtesy Donna Whiteside, Ohio

Most often the vocalizations that drive bird owners buggy are not the "normal" sounds, but the excessive or nonstop screaming. Often these kinds of vocalizations are the result of what the human "flock" has inadvertently taught or motivated the parrot to do.

The classic case would be the parrot that starts screaming as soon as its owner comes home from work in the evening and continues squawking until its owner lets it out of the cage. "Usually these birds have been improperly socialized as chicks, and don't know how to amuse themselves. Or else the owners have responded inappropriately to the bird, thus reinforcing the bad behavior," said Gayle Soucek, a pet trade consultant in Illinois, and author of *The Parrot Breeder's Answer Book*.

It usually starts out with the bird screaming one day for attention, and the owner responding by running over to the bird and giving it a food treat or letting it out of the cage. "The bird learns that screaming is the way to get attention," said Tia Greenberg, DVM, a veterinarian in Westminster, California. Even if the owners respond to the bird by yelling at it, that still serves to "reward" the bird for screaming and teaches it to yell out its demands again in the future. "To a bird, any attention — even being yelled at — is better than no attention," Greenberg said.

What should you do if your bird starts screaming out its demands for attention? Soucek suggests you immediately walk out of the room or turn out the lights for a few minutes. Once your parrot settles down, then go back, give it a toy, take it out for playtime, or otherwise reward it.

"The key is to take away the link between the unwanted action and the reward, but give the reward for good behavior," Soucek said. This is where a lot of people make a critical mistake.

For example, the bird screams because it's lonely, so the owners turn out the lights and leave the room. After a few minutes, the bird settles down. Most people will not go back and reward it for the good (quiet) behavior. They'll think "Hey, it's quiet; leave well enough alone." In the meantime, the bird is even more lonely, and starts to scream again (or bite, or feather-pluck) out of frustration. "To effect behavioral changes, it's important to reward the good. Otherwise, you just get into a negative spiral of punishment, frustration, and more rebellious (bad) behavior," Soucek said.

Ignore your parrot if it is screaming out excessive demands and do not give it any attention. This can be difficult to do, especially if your bird is both loud and persistent. Larry Nemetz, DVM, an exotics-only veterinarian in Santa Ana, California, has had clients with cockatoos that have literally gone on screaming for six hours nonstop. In those situations, he recommends pet owners purchase headsets (one for every member of the household) like you use at firing ranges.

"Next time your bird starts screaming, put the headsets on and sit in the same room as the bird and let him scream," Nemetz said. "Eventually your bird will give up the screaming because he's no longer being rewarded with attention." This is not an overnight fix. If your bird's been a problem screamer for a couple years, it may take several weeks or months of ignoring it before you are able to break the cycle.