

Building A Macaw's Confidence

Reassure a frightened bird by slowly introducing new objects and additional stimuli to build trust

By Liz Wilson, CVT, CPBC

Dagger is a young blue-and-gold macaw that would flip his wings and beg obsessively when his owners ate. When they fed him, he'd eat so fast that he would almost choke. He was also terribly frightened, and anything from foot toys to tiny insects would make him and scream. He was also always nippy.

Sounds like Dagger is going through the "Terrible Twos." The old label of the "Terrible Twos" applies to a stage of parrot development that parallels that stage in children. It connotes an attitude, not a chronological age. A small bird like a sun conure might encounter a stubbornly independent phase around 6 to 8 months, whereas a blue & gold might go through it at 12 to 18 months or not at all. Variables abound, as always.

Dagger needs to develop a sense of safety and self-confidence. Frightened birds — especially youngsters — tend to lash out, and

Dagger suffers from fear-based aggression. His fears need to be soothed so he feels less defensive. Working diligently, consistently and patiently to teach him he is safe and wonderful is key.

Aviculturist Phoebe Linden has written about this repeatedly and suggests lots of warm, lavish praise for anything he does. For example, "You did such a good job at shredding that branch, you wonderful bird." Encourage his playing, preening and eating.

As the bird becomes more confident, very gently push the envelope to introduce him to additional stimuli, constantly reassuring him that he is completely safe and very brave. Take him on your hand, and show him things in the cabinets, discuss each object, and heap praise on him for being bold enough to touch something new.

Parrot behavior consultant Sally Blanchard talks about playing real estate agent with a shy bird — taking it slowly around the house, introducing it to different environments in a controlled, reassuring and nonthreatening manner. The objective is not to frighten the bird but to teach it, in tiny increments, that new things can be truly wonderful, not dangerous.

When a bird is more comfortable in its own skin, start introducing other people into its life. If you're dealing with a large macaw, work first with people who are comfortable with large macaws, as they tend to lunge at new people. This is often a bluff but, understandably, this behavior tends to frighten the uninitiated, causing them to jerk away. This only scares the macaw more, making it even more defensive, and a vicious cycle ensues. Do not allow that to happen.

If the bird has food issues, teach it to take warm, wet food from clean fingers to assure the bird that it is safe. Make certain it goes to bed with a crop full of warm, nutritious food. Only use the warm foods until the bird settles down about eating (perhaps a few months), then gradually phase them out.

If a newly adopted bird is still seriously frightened after a few months of patient and gentle help from you, seek the advice of an experienced parrot behavior consultant to assist you both.