

Light, Darkness & Your Pet Bird

Let your pet bird see the lightness of day – and the color of night.

By Rebecca Sweat

Birds need exposure to natural light and enough sleep to stay healthy.

“I was told he was very aggressive and that nobody could touch him,” said Illinois-based bird behavior consultant Michelle Karras, referring to the blue-and-gold macaw she adopted from a bird rescue. It didn’t take her long to get to the root of the problem. “The previous owners were up late every night, and they kept the lights on in the bird’s room until they went to bed,” she related. “The bird was only getting about six hours of sleep a night and that was making him really cranky.”

For Karras, the solution was simple. She got the bird a separate cage for sleeping in and placed it in a special “bird room” where the bird could go to sleep early. “He’s a different bird now,” Karras said. “He is a lot easier to handle and seems much happier.”

Bird owner Eric Lehman of Arizona has a similar story, but relating to the opposite side of the coin. He had been concerned that his African grey parrot, Scooter, was sick. “Scooter wouldn’t play with his toy, and he rarely made a sound,” Lehman recalled. He took Scooter to his veterinarian who, after doing a full medical workup, found nothing wrong. That’s when the veterinarian asked Lehman how much exposure Scooter had to natural light, and Lehman replied “None.”

“My veterinarian then suggested I put Scooter in his cage outdoors for a few hours every day,” Lehman said. “I took my veterinarian’s advice and after just two weeks, Scooter seems much more active, he’s more talkative, and his feathers looked brighter too.”

These two examples illustrate an important point: Exposure to natural or full-spectrum light and enough darkness each day are critical components in the health of pet birds, both physically and emotionally.

“Natural sunlight helps birds in that it allows for the activation of vitamin D by the bird, and this in turn allows proper calcium absorption. It also promotes a healthy appetite, improves feather quality and color and stimulates molting on a regular schedule,” noted Don Harris, DVM, an avian veterinarian in Florida.

Additionally, exposure to natural light can also perk up a bird’s disposition and make it feel more cheerful. “Spending time out in the sunshine can make a pet bird feel good, just as it does for people,” Harris said. “On the other hand, prolonged absence from natural light can cause a bird to feel sluggish and depressed.”

Time To Go Night-Night

Exposure to enough darkness each night ensures pet birds get the sleep they need. “In the wild, parrots don’t want to nap in the afternoons because they are watching out for predators all day. This is something that is built into their thinking,” Karras said. “Your pet bird does not understand that a predator can’t come through your ceiling. So when it’s light in your house, your parrot is not going to be able to get good restful sleep because even though he’s in your house, he’s still on the lookout for predators.” Parrots need darkness in order to sleep well, she said. The nighttime hours are when most of the parrots’ predators in the wild go to sleep, and so that’s when a pet parrot instinctively wants to sleep as well.

Lack of sleep can depress a bird’s immune system, making it more susceptible to illness. “Birds in the family room or den that are kept up until midnight or 1am every night while their owners watch television or study for exams and then have their sleep cut short in the morning because the sun rises early may be receiving only five to six hours of sleep a night — and that is not enough,” Harris said. At first, these birds will just be fatigued and less energetic, he said. “Then they’ll start getting ill because of chronic fatigue, and they’ll pick up anything from gastrointestinal disturbances to respiratory infections.”

Furthermore, sleep-deprived birds can become stressed or irritable and develop behavior problems such as feather-picking, excessive screaming and biting — all of which are precipitated by anxiety that stems from them not getting enough rest. “When birds don’t get enough sleep, they become tired and grumpy, and they’re not going to feel like interacting with anyone,” said Ann Vann, longtime bird owner and co-owner of Vann’s of Louisiana.

Go Lightly

Long periods of daylight (photoperiod) can also stimulate some species of birds to go into breeding mode. "Genetically, birds are programmed that when the days get longer, summer is approaching and it is time to get ready to breed and produce young," noted Jerry Jennings, a longtime aviculturist in Southern California.

The indoor pet bird may experience several hours of extra "daylight" every evening when its owners turn on their lamps and ceiling lights after sunset. As a result, the bird may start to think it's spring and summer (breeding season) all the time because the days are always long and there are never the shorter days of fall and winter, Jennings said.

Certain species, such as cockatiels and lovebirds, are prone to chronic egg laying, and this can be a direct result of the birds thinking it's always breeding season. Other groups of psittacines, such as cockatoos and Amazon parrots, can become "hormonally charged" during the spring and summer months, and become more aggressive or start feather-plucking, simply because their reproductive hormones have been "turned on."

Practical Considerations

Unfortunately, a lot of pet birds do not get the right amounts of natural light and darkness like they should, and as a result, exhibit many of the health and behavior problems just mentioned. From Harris' perspective, "Our country is plagued with an over-diagnosis of calcium problems (hypocalcemia) in African greys. But when I see it, I don't call it a calcium deficiency; I call it a light deficiency. It has nothing to do with calcium. It has everything to do with these birds not getting exposure to full-spectrum light."

Natural and full-spectrum light activates calcium metabolism, which is necessary for optimum health. In his 20 years of practicing avian medicine in Florida, Harris has never seen a case of hypocalcemia in an outdoor African grey. But he has seen it in a couple of indoor greys that never got outside. "All of them were cured by getting them outdoors for periods of time," Harris said.

Harris believes that a lot of pet birds also suffer from sleep deprivation. "Many people today are sleep-deprived, and they're imposing their schedules on their birds and not letting them sleep either," he said. "The owners think their birds can just conform to their schedules and stay up all night, but that's absolutely wrong. The fact is birds generally need more sleep than people do. So while sleep deprivation is certainly not good for people, it may be even harder on our birds."

Karras figures that with about 75 percent of the behavior calls she goes on, the birds are not getting enough sleep. "A lot of times the birds are biting or they're yanking out their feathers, and one of the first things I'll ask the owners is 'How late are you keeping your parrot up?' And nine times out of 10 they're keeping the parrot up until they go to bed, which may be 11 o'clock or later," she said. In many cases, simply providing the parrot with a few extra hours of darkness each night is just what it takes to turn the situation around, Karras said.