

Is Your Bird Bored Stiff?

If your bird loses interest in its toys and other activities, it may be sick

By Liz Wilson, CVT, CPBC

Learn how your bird normally plays so that you can tell when its bored or sick. Courtesy Daniela Slanina, California

Several years ago, a woman called the avian veterinary office where I worked and wanted information about toys for an Amazon. Something about the question seemed odd to me, so I asked why. Her veterinarian told her that her Amazon was bored and suggested toys as the cure. How could she tell the bird was bored? It was leaning against the cage bars with its eyes closed.

I explained that she was describing a potentially very sick bird and that she needed to bring him in right away. She responded, "Oh no, my vet said birds weren't sick until they were down on the bottom of the cage." Bad advice.

Bored or Sick?

Sick birds are often quieter than normal; they don't play like they normally do and their eating habits may change. Check their droppings for unusual patterns that can't be explained by anything they have consumed. They might be fluffed up and shivering when the room isn't cold, sleep at odd times or more than normal. They might seem unusually clumsy or lose interest in things they normally enjoy.

In other words, parrots that are sick often change behaviors in multiple, tiny ways. The changes can happen very slowly, making them harder to identify.

Because parrots are prey animals, they disguise the signs of illness as a survival tool. In the wild, if they don't look healthy enough to escape a predator's attack, they might as well be wearing a sign that says, "Eat me!" Other flock members might chase a sick-looking bird away, to avoid drawing predators to their midst.

I have found that normally excellent owners tend to become panicky at the thought that no matter what, they won't be able to tell if their parrots are sick. This often leads to lots of well-meaning, loving people spending a lot of time hovering over their parrots, stressing the birds with their fears. This is not a positive thing.

In the years that I nursed birds, an important function was to educate clients who brought in seriously ill birds, in the hopes they would learn to respond sooner in the future. When I started talking to the owners about tiny changes they might have seen over the last couple of weeks, we would get into what I came to call "The Come-To-Think-Of-Its." "Come to think of it, the parrot hasn't been screaming as much lately." Or, "Come to think of it, the bird hasn't been interested in millet, and it normally loves millet."

Once the owners recognized the importance of those minuscule changes, they did not make that mistake again. (Learning the hard way has the advantage of sticking in your memory forever!)

My favorite analogy is the difference between a sick dog and a sick cat. Dogs are blatant about it. Cats, however, can be much more restrained in their behavior, and if you expect a sick cat to act like a sick dog, you might entirely miss the signs. Signs of illness in birds can be even more subtle than cats, but minute changes might exist that can provide an early warning of problems developing.

Many years ago, my own blue-and-gold macaw taught me a priceless lesson. It was nesting season, so she was behaving differently because she was awash in reproductive hormones. I knew to watch her carefully during these periods, because I was concerned I might miss something notable in the midst of her normal hormone mediated changes. Consequently, I immediately recognized when she became different. We had been together a decade by then, so I knew her pretty well and she seemed different.

Truly Bored Bird, Now What?

Follow these tips to perk up a droopy parrot. [Click Here>>](#)

In a panic, I rushed her off to my avian veterinarian. She did a careful physical exam and said she thought Sam was a normal hen who was awash in hormones; she saw nothing abnormal. I was not mollified. There was something out of the

ordinary going on, and I was worried. I insisted that my vet do some testing, and she obliged. Three days later, results came back within normal ranges, but that did not surprise me. That morning, Sam had laid her very first egg.

If you are an inexperienced bird person, you might need to make frequent trips to your avian veterinarian, seeking assistance whenever you suspect a problem. You will be wrong sometimes, as I was with Sam. This shouldn't embarrass you because that is how we learn. That is much better than not getting help when you should.

Conversely, if you are an experienced bird person who really knows your animal and observe everything carefully, the odds increase exponentially that you will suspect a problem is developing long before the situation becomes acute. You will be correct some of the time. You and your avian veterinarian are a team when it comes to your bird's health, and you have to work together. If you are unsure if your parrot is bored instead of ill, let your avian veterinarian decide.