

Companion Parrots Need Sleep

Birds need their sleep – but you can adjust both you and your bird’s schedules to allow for more one-on-one interaction.

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Q: My wife and I both work (no kids), so we have limited time with our 12-year-old scarlet macaw in the morning, and then he is alone for 10 hours with a TV. He is out of his cage from the time we get home until bedtime (5 p.m. to midnight). We don’t want to spend less time with him but wonder if he needs more sleep than the seven hours he’s getting. More sleep means less interaction with us. Which is best?

Courtesy Cheri Michael

Sleep deprivation is a common component in problem behaviors that appear in companion birds.

A: Enabling a parrot to get sufficient sleep frequently poses problems for those who work long hours outside the home, but there are tricks that can assist with this. Let’s discuss the issue of parrot sleep deprivation first.

Most companion parrot species originated within 15 degrees north or south of the Equator, and day lengths in those locales do not vary as they do in North America. The equator has 12 hours of light and dark year-round, and at 15 degrees north or south, the day length varies only slightly. Does this mean that companion parrots need 10 to 11 hours of sleep? Not at all.

Statistically, humans need eight hours of sleep every night, but individual requirements vary widely. I need six to seven hours per night, while Albert Einstein evidently only needed four. Children typically need more than eight.

Sleep deprivation is a common component in problem behaviors that appear in companion birds. Excessive screaming, aggression, neurotic fear behaviors (often called phobic behaviors), and feather destruction are commonly associated with bird sleep deprivation. I gather that your scarlet macaw exhibits none of these problems. If so, do you need to change anything in your macaw’s life? Not necessarily.

It might be interesting to see, however, if your macaw’s behavior becomes even better if he receives nine to 10 hours of uninterrupted sleep at night. After all, you have nothing to lose except some interaction time, correct?

Balance Play & Sleep Needs

According to your letter, you have seven hours each night with him, which is a lot of time. How much out-of-cage time do parrots need? I think the answer depends on several variables. Is the cage large enough? Does it contain plenty of toys, rotated frequently to maintain interest?

I view a parrot’s cage not as a prison, but as its own room, which is how my blue-and-gold macaw views hers. She frequently climbs the stairs to put herself away before I am inclined to, so being caged doesn’t cause any deprivation. As she has aged, she puts herself to bed around 5 or 6 p.m., choosing to get 12 hours of sleep every night.

If your macaw were a young child, would you feel your time together was more important than the child getting sufficient sleep? I doubt it. Copious research tells us that sufficient sleep is mandatory for a child’s healthy psychological and physical development, and I think the same applies to companion parrots.

Parrot behavior consultant Mattie Sue Athan commented recently that she believed the No. 1 source of behavior problems in companion parrots was a lack of independence, and I agree.

I also agree with parrot behavior consultant Sally Blanchard’s recommendation that parrots spend time inside their cages when their humans are home. We don’t want to establish patterns that become problematic later.

One woman patterned her Amazon parrot to be with her whenever she was home. This was fine for many years, until she went back to school and found that an Amazon parrot in the midst of her textbooks made studying difficult. She started locking the bird out of her office, infuriating the Amazon parrot, which then screamed outside the door. The woman considered rehoming him, but, instead, we worked to establish new patterns of independent play, and the Amazon parrot kept his home.

But what about workaholics or those who have long commutes, leaving home at 7 a.m. and returning at 8:30 p.m.? Should they only spend 30 minutes with their feathered friends? Surely, that can't be healthy for the birds.

Establish A New Routine

A "sleep cage" provides an alternative if the windows in the bird's sleep room are covered with blackout shades. Then lights, a radio and/or TV can be set on timers. Humans arise at their usual early hour, uncover the cage if it's covered, but don't open the window shades. Their moving around awakens the parrot, but after they leave, the bird – still in darkness – goes back to sleep. After getting the ideal 10-plus hours of deep sleep, the timers start turning on lights, radios and televisions. The day begins later for the bird, so that it can comfortably stay up later at night. However, if the parrot spends daylight hours in its sleep cage, then it must be much larger than a cage that is only used overnight.

Consider rearranging your life a little to offer your macaw more sleep at night, and see if it makes a difference. You can always return to old patterns if it does not work out. It is possible to balance our working lives with our parrots' needs, so we can enjoy our years together. All it takes is a little forethought, planning and creativity.