

## How Aggressive Handling Effects Bird Behavior

### Some parrots can become severely stressed by aggressive handling techniques

By Liz Wilson, CVT, CPBC

Courtesy Sean & Tammy Smith, Texas

Using a kinder, gentler nonaggressive technique to towel your bird can help to avoid stress or fear-induced behavior.

**Q:** The last time I had my African grey parrot's wing feathers trimmed, he was so stressed I was afraid he would die. He was also very skittish for several days after the appointment, which is unusual for him. Is this a normal reaction to being groomed?

**A:** This is a healthy bird with no medical problems, correct? If so, then what you describe is a parrot's common reaction to unnecessarily aggressive handling. Because parrots are prey animals, they are seriously stressed by aggressive handling, as if convinced they are about to be killed and eaten by a horrible predator. What a terrifying experience that must be for them! In his presentation to the Association of Avian Veterinarians in 2001, Dr. Brian Speer stated that aggressive handling is a major cause of what he described as "fear-induced behavioral disease," such as feather destruction, phobic-type behavior or aggression.

#### Frightening Your Bird

Unfortunately, many veterinarians and pet store employees continue to use horrifically aggressive toweling techniques, despite the plethora of information published that warns against its use.

Parrot behavior consultant Sally Blanchard was the first to disparage the use of what she called the "Harpy Eagle Catch," the old capture technique that entailed suddenly swooping down like a deadly predator to grab a parrot from behind with a towel. Believing that domestic-bred parrots did not necessitate aggressive capture, she criticized the use of such a technique more than 15 years ago.

As a veterinary technician specializing in birds and exotics, I was dismayed by Sally's words, because I had been using the "Harpy Eagle Catch" technique for many years. Originally designed to quickly capture wild parrots in order to prevent injury to bird or handler, I'd continued to use it as domestic-bred parrots appeared in the early 80s, without considering what such an aggressive handling technique might do to a tame bird.

#### Nonaggressive Handling

Once I realized the potential for harm, I began, 10 years ago, to develop a different toweling technique. Instead of a predatory grab from behind, I now talk quietly while I gently wrap a parrot from the front with a towel. It is amazing how quickly parrots relax after restraint, if they are not terrorized by the capture.

In the intervening years, some avian veterinarians have developed several non-aggressive techniques for toweling parrots, such as Ken Welle's approach of bringing a tame bird close to his chest, then gently bringing a towel up over its head from behind. This technique is especially effective on small birds.

A parrot's response to overly aggressive handling was clearly illustrated by my experience with an African grey parrot I'd groomed for years. Herbert, an 8-year-old male, always made me laugh as he comically launched himself backward into my grooming towel, babbling happily to me while I wrapped him up. Understandably, Herbert was one of my favorite birds to groom. Consequently, I was appalled, when two years ago, Herbert screamed horribly and ran away when I approached with a towel. This was a dramatic change and the owner admitted that he'd had Herbert groomed once at the local bird store when I was out of town.

I was familiar with their aggressive handling technique and was dismayed to see the damage they had done with just one session. Thanks to this terrifying experience, Herbert screamed and fought so wildly during my grooming that I had to stop several times to let him calm down. It then took me two years of gentle handling to get Herbert back to his cavalier attitude about being toweled, but I'm proud to say he is back to his old self, now.

#### Find A Gentle Groomer

Gone are the days, in my opinion, when pet store and veterinary personnel were justified in assuming a parrot might bite, automatically acting aggressively to prevent such behavior. In my opinion, this is like assuming that all children should be strapped down, in case they might hit someone. It is simply unjustified violence.

Please begin searching immediately for someone who restrains your African grey parrot in a gentler manner. If your current groomer is competent but insists on aggressive capture, this is because he or she is afraid of being bitten. If so, teach your grey to accept being toweled by you. Then you can gently wrap him up, and hand the towel-wrapped bundle to the groomer. This avoids that terrifying capture and will go a long way to decreasing the stress of restraint.

You are your parrot's protector and advocate. It is your responsibility to be proactive in that role, and please do not tolerate his being mishandled again.