

Bird-Safe Holiday Planning

Keep your pet bird safe this holiday season with these tips and tricks.

By Chris Davis

Prepare your bird for busy holidays by moving it to different parts of your home. Courtesy Brian Bellor, Arizona

Every holiday season, people ask me about how to handle difficult visitors. Since you are enthusiastic and loving bird owners who do everything possible to make your pet birds' lives better, you have become teachers for new bird owners and may be asked the same question. I hope that sharing the following information will lead to a wonderful holiday season experience.

Holidays are a time for gathering with family and friends and should be a pleasant experience of love, warmth and sharing. Hopefully, we will enjoy all of our visitors; however, there may be those whose company we enjoy less — people who have little regard for the rights or feelings of others but who, for some reason or another, we believe should be part of our celebrations. Although we may choose to share time with those individuals, that decision can be very difficult for our animal friends, especially pet birds.

Difficult Guests

Be realistic when dealing with difficult people. They will not magically change and will not be any better this year than the years before. Toxic individuals simply are who they are. They have selfishly decided to behave in a manner that gets them whatever it is they want.

Toxic people often try to force birds and other animals, including people, to behave in a particular manner and, when they don't, may retaliate by teasing or bullying them. What can be done in those situations?

The ultimate act of independence and compassion — for us and our bird friends — would be to eliminate all disrespectful, unruly or aggravating individuals from our lives. By holding toxic people accountable for their hostile actions, they may eventually make the effort to change the way they choose to behave.

However, what can be done by a bird lover who, for whatever reason, does not have that option? The most important thing is to protect the innocent ones that do not have a choice not to interact with difficult people. Some early planning can make the experience easier for them.

Over a couple of weeks, gradually accustom your bird friend to being in another part of the home, in another cage or perch or where you can easily wheel her regular cage.

Choose a room where you can close the door and she will not be disturbed by others. If necessary, put a lock on the door in advance and plan to keep it locked until the toxic person is gone. If that is not an option or if you know the person will continue to bully his or her wishes over others, arrange ahead of time with a friend who is not entertaining that day, or with a boarding facility, to keep your bird. The cost or inconvenience will far outweigh the trauma to your bird family member of being badgered in what should be the safety of her own home.

For those who do not have problem relatives, normal holiday precautions need to be addressed. If your bird is located near a path of heavy traffic, relocate her cage so that she can see everyone but her cage is not brushed by or bumped into. Partially cover her cage with a cloth or place a tall, bushy potted plant on the floor in front of one corner of her cage so she can choose to "leave" all the commotion at will.

Explain your "bird rules" to everyone. In the beginning, even if your bird enjoys being around people, forbid anyone handling her without your direct supervision. Set up a few minutes specifically for getting acquainted with her, so you can watch those who interact with her and teach them some guidelines for her comfort.

When children are present, it is imperative that they also respect the bird's rights. They should only handle or feed your bird if you are supervising the interaction. If this cannot be guaranteed, follow the "difficult people" recommendations.

If your bird is unaccustomed to visitors or if, during festivities, you notice her beginning to become tired or upset, remove her to the other room with some favorite toys and food goodies. If she enjoys television or music, leave something on for her. Close the door so she can relax. Offer to take her out again later, if you wish; however, if she refuses to come back

out, let her have her way. The most important things are to keep your bird comfortable and to maintain your trustworthiness. In essence, you are telling her that you will not allow anything to jeopardize her safety or create fear or discomfort for your bird in her own environment.

Even the most sociable bird requires sleep and can be taken to the quiet room if festivities carry on too long. Some birds like to remain in the same room. If your bird is a social butterfly, at bedtime, cover most of the cage with a cloth, leaving a small, 6-inch or so opening or "peeking area" in the front, so she can choose either to doze or to walk over and monitor any interesting developments.

Remember people are in your home, and your bird is your bird — you know what is best for her and can set any rules you want! Because you are more aware of their needs, you are the one responsible for protecting the innocent family members in your home.

Feathered Frenzy

Carol wrote to share that she had an African grey parrot, Dusty, that had suddenly become phobic — thrashing and screaming whenever even his favorite people tried to interact with him. She tried everything, including working with a behavior consultant, to no avail. She said:

"The behavior went on for about three years. One day, someone gave my husband another African grey, Digger, because they were tired of him and he bit their little boy. As soon as the other bird came into our home the problem went away. The next day my bird snapped out of it, and we could handle him again — almost magically and as fast as he snapped the other way."

She theorized that African greys are so intelligent that they realize they are birds and, because of their flocking nature, may go through an insecure phase. Carol thought Dusty may have felt more secure knowing that he had another of the same species beside him.

Both birds are tame now, and almost anyone can handle them! As long as they are picked up from the floor and not from their cage, anyone can get them to Step up without a bite. They are both sweet and happy birds. I love them both and am glad that we kept Dusty and that we accepted Digger into our home. They seem happy here. They have been this way for about two years. By the way, they both turned out to be boys.

Although I seldom recommend getting another bird to solve problem behavior, phobia can be a puzzling and heartbreaking problem, and it does not reliably respond to any one behavior modification procedure. Obviously, the presence of another bird helped in Carol's situation. Although I would not use this as a primary option, I am interested in hearing from anyone who has had a similar experience.

Our bird friends occupy a large and integral part of our hearts and lives; however, those not touched by the unique and powerful magic of birds are often mystified by our depth of love and devotion. We are the lucky ones, those who have been touched by that incredible magic, and it is up to us to protect our feathered companions and to keep them comfortable in their own homes. If done properly and respectfully, we can also use those times when we have company to teach others of the special qualities of our avian friends and to, just maybe, open them to the possibility of a whole new and wonderful world.