



7826 NE Sandy Blvd., Portland, OR 97213-6467 P. 971-361-2209 F. 971-361-4359
www.avianexoticvetcare.com

Vocalization in Companion Parrots

Companion parrots, unlike cats and dogs, have the exact same genetic makeup as their wild counterparts. They often exhibit flock behavior, even in the absence of other birds. Of the many ways that parrots interact with their flockmates, as well as with other species, vocalization is one of the most important. It can also be one of the most problematic behaviors in companion birds. When trying to decrease unwanted vocalization in a companion parrot, it is crucial to first identify the underlying cause, which typically is rooted in normal flock behavior. Three main purposes of vocalization have been identified in wild and companion parrots alike. The first is to signal a scheduled event, such as sunrise or sunset, and it usually is very predictable. The second purpose is known as a "contact" call, and birds use it to locate a specific flockmate, which is usually a certain person in the case of domestic parrots. The third purpose is an "alarm" call; this typically occurs when a bird is frightened or anxious because of something in their environment. Observing your bird during periods of unwanted vocalization may help you categorize the underlying cause, so that treatment is more specific to the problem.

Vocalization at Certain Times

- Birds in the wild often vocalize to signal sunrise or sunset for the rest of the flock. If this is the case, it may be helpful to control these events using a dark cloth. At night, place a blanket over the cage to "turn out the lights" and signal sunset. You are now in control of when "sunrise" occurs by taking the cover off. The normal light pattern for birds is 12 hours of light followed by 12 hours of dark, so try to mimic this cycle as best you can.
- Some birds vocalize at other predictable times that are not related to the light cycle, such as when it is time to get fed, or when their owner returns home from work. In these cases, it is best to redirect the vocalization to another behavior. This time may be used to teach a new word or trick. If you can predict when your parrot is going to scream, try to distract the bird with a special treat or toy before it begins to scream. This is very powerful in fading out undesirable vocalizations. It is important to never reward your bird with treats or toys after it has already started vocalizing because this will simply reinforce the behavior. Always reward desired noise such as whistling or talking, so that your parrot is more likely to repeat these behaviors. Always ignore undesired vocalization. Any attention you give to your bird during this time, even screaming and shouting, can reinforce the behavior.

Vocalizing When Owner Leaves Room or House

- In many instances, especially when only one bird is present in the house, the bird will form a very strong bond to one person. It is thought that this bond stems from mating behavior and is redirected to a human in the absence of another bird. If a bird becomes very strongly bonded to one person, the bird may develop separation anxiety when "its human" is gone. This can be problematic if the bird ever has to be re-homed. Often, these birds develop a "contact" call for a particular person and exhibit this call when the person leaves the room

Information cited from:

Mayer, J and Donnelly, T., eds. Clinical Veterinary Advisor: Birds and Exotic
Pets. Elsevier, Philadelphia, PA. 2013. ISBN: 9781-4160-3969-3

or leaves the house. In cases where the bird has developed separation anxiety, the vocalization may start off as a contact call and may progress to distressed or anxious calls. The best way to deter this behavior is to decrease the bird's dependence on the selected person. Interactions with its person should be limited, should not include a lot of physical contact such as petting, and should involve structure, using positive reinforcement training techniques such as clicker training or foraging activities.

- It is important to provide the bird with alternatives to interacting with humans. Adding another bird into the environment is the ideal distraction. You may keep the birds in the same cage or in different cages in the same room. Be aware that the birds should be introduced gradually and at first should be kept in separate cages. Instead of calling out to its person, the bird can engage in natural vocalization with the other bird. The addition of a second bird is not always feasible. Therefore, enrichment toys, television, or a radio may be used as distractions.
- Another strategy is to maintain auditory contact with the bird while you are still in the house. You may do this by whistling or talking to the bird from another room. It is important to begin as soon as you leave the room and before the bird starts to vocalize. Otherwise, you may reinforce the behavior with your attention.
- To prevent the development of separation anxiety, try to maintain consistency and structure in interactions with the bird. Spend a consistent amount of time daily with the bird instead of a lot of time on certain days. If you know that you are going to be out of town, try weaning down your attention with the bird in the days leading up to the event. Then, it is not so shocking to the bird when he/she gets less attention for a few days.

Vocalizing When Distressed

- The third scenario for unwanted vocalization is when your bird sounds an "alarm" call to signal distress. This call is usually very loud and has a frequency that carries, so the bird may alert the whole "flock" of possible danger. Almost always, a trigger stimulus is associated with this call, although it may be difficult to identify. Sometimes it is obvious, as when it is a dog, a cat, or a certain person. Other times, it is more difficult to discern because it may be an inanimate object such as a plant or even a toy in the cage. With some triggers such as cats and dogs, it is best to keep them separated from the bird. With other triggers such as a new toy or a certain person, the bird can be desensitized and counter-conditioned to the scary stimulus. To do this, distract the bird with high-value treats and gradually introduce the stimulus, whether it is an approaching person or a toy that is moving closer. When the bird displays fearful behavior or vocalization, increase the distance again. This is a gradual process, and you should avoid overwhelming the bird with the noxious trigger because this may exacerbate the problem. Keep sessions short, and train on a daily basis.
- No matter what the cause of the vocalization, there are certain things that you should never do. Although it may seem obvious, you should never attempt to physically punish the bird because you run the risk of inflicting serious injury and of causing fear and distress. In fact, ignoring all unwanted vocalization is usually indicated. Any attention from you at all, even yelling or using loud, affirmative commands, can reinforce a behavior. Sometimes, it is necessary to leave the room or even the house until the bird stops vocalizing. Never try to interrupt a screaming episode with treats or toys because this will reinforce the behavior.
- As with any unwanted behavior, prevention is always best. Be aware of what behaviors and sounds you reinforce with treats or attention. Discouraging unwanted vocalizations can be a challenging, gradual process. Be consistent and don't give up! Owning a happy, healthy companion parrot can be an exceptionally rewarding experience.

Information cited from:

Mayer, J and Donnelly, T., eds. Clinical Veterinary Advisor: Birds and Exotic Pets. Elsevier, Philadelphia, PA. 2013. ISBN: 9781-4160-3969-3

Further Resources

Books/DVDs by Barbara Heidenreich.

AUTHORS: Alexandra Moesta and Erika Elmore

Information cited from:

Mayer, J and Donnelly, T., eds. Clinical Veterinary Advisor: Birds and Exotic
Pets. Elsevier, Philadelphia, PA. 2013. ISBN: 9781-4160-3969-3