



## Parrot Bytes on Bites

### **Why do birds bite**

If we had a nickel for every time we have heard or read someone saying that their bird or someone else's bird bit them for no reason, we would not need to fundraise. Biting is not arbitrary for the parrot. It ranges from playful nips to much more severe fear bites that can cause you to have to go to hospital for stitches at best, nerve damage and/or disfigurement at worst. Society sees you as the victim of an unprovoked attack with a "wild animal". The parrot is regarded as a set of labels, but none of them are good. There is also an emotional response that goes with that viewpoint of being a victim. You may withhold attention, nurturing, freedom, and even fresh food, vetting, and grooming because you are now afraid of your bird. A year or so later, you call a rescue or put your bird up for "rehoming" on a bird board, craigslist, FB site, etc. because you are now emotionally detached from your bird. But this has been about you alone through this whole process. What about the bird? There was no judge or jury, no investigation to ascertain what went wrong, who was "guilty", etc. The bird can't get a fair shake in this scenario, because there is no one to speak for him; it is assumed that the bite itself is his only comment.

There are many different types of responses from birds. They speak their own language when talking to you, and they are doing it all the time, but you don't necessarily understand. Even if they can talk, they can't have a conversation with you for them to express their angst at something you are doing. "Hi.", "I love you.", "See you later!", "How are you?", "Is that good?", "I want some." are all words that they have learned have some value. They get you to smile and coo at them, give them treats, and give them attention and positive reinforcement. However, they have also learned that "bad bird!", "Ow!", "NO!", "No bite!" are reinforcements too. In their understanding, the meanings of the words are not contained by our simple definitions of those words. They associate actions with the words, but you may not realize the actions they are associating.

It is important to remember that from their viewpoint they are prey animals, and you are a potential predator. Prey animals have a very different set of reflexes and reactions than predators, such as cats and dogs. Prey animals are meant to be eaten so they have highly sensitive reflexes. They are constantly reading the world around them, estimating the risks and sensing the intentions of everyone nearby. The fear of being eaten is the driving force to how they respond to everything in and out of captivity.

## **Fight or Flight**

Birds in captivity who are not comfortable or feel threatened, will choose flight whenever able. However, we have often taken away that option for them. Either they are clipped and can't fly or they are in cages. The next thing they will do is back away from you. If they know you, they may just step away delicately. If they don't know you, it may be a major, pronounced *lean* away from your hand. If you were still the kind of predator that humans once were, you would probably recognize this behavior instinctively and react accordingly. Given our current world, however, we have mostly lost that kind of affinity with animal behavior, so you are likely to continue moving towards them. Your fight or flight response isn't screaming at you but theirs is. They have very few alternatives. They can thrash about in their cage while screaming or they can bite. Which is going to be more successful to get you to go away?

## **Prey?**

Yes, prey. Calling them prey doesn't mean they are weak; it simply acknowledges that centuries of evolution have programmed them in certain ways. They will protect their resources such as territory, perceived mates, desirable perches, food, etc. These interactions are generally limited to body language like the raising of the head feathers or a subtle look of the eye. Sometimes the posturing escalates to vocal displays such as growling or even more overt body language like thrusting the beak forward in a jousting fashion. In the wild, this body language is usually enough to deter an intruding bird and avoid negative physical contact. Humans don't acknowledge these movements in the same way however, since we not only don't speak "bird", but we are also free from the worries that another bird would have in the situation, which is that an injury would make us weaker and more at risk for being taken down by a predator. The point is that they will give you all kinds of subtle warnings all the way up to the point of biting. The bite is the end result of many unheeded warnings.

## **Types of Bites**

### **Playful Exploration**

We have been saying that birds lead with their beaks and children lead with their fingers. For parrots, this couldn't be more true. They explore the world with their beak and that includes you. They preen, they explore, they try to remove "things" that they are certain just don't belong there such as moles, skin tags, warts, bandages, earrings, or eyelashes!

We have a very young blue and gold macaw. She explores her world by holding onto toys, fingers, shirts, stands, cage bars, swings to play. She has grabbed me hard enough to be a bite but the pressure is different. The intent behind the bite is different. If you can't tell the difference, spend time playing with toys and their beaks. You can see how they adjust the pressure to be further back and more uniform. The older she gets, the better she gets on remembering that she can only apply so much pressure and she doesn't forget who she is playing with. Welcome to playtime!

### **Hormonal**

We often use this trying time of the parrot year as a catchall phrase to include all undesired behaviors, including biting. However, there is some merit to hormonal bites. They can be more prone to biting during a hormonal time if you don't read all that body language quickly enough. They may perhaps be less communicative.

## **Territorial**

Parrots have been well documented as being very territorial creatures. There are some migratory birds that will return to their very same nest each season. But to the captive parrot, territory also covers people, cage, food, toys, etc. They are protecting their resources. That may be you. While that may seem flattering that they only want you, you may be bitten to get you to move away from what he thinks is threatening. They may go after your significant other or children if the threat persists. Some birds are more prone to this than others (Amazons). When you see territorial behavior being demonstrated, it can wreak havoc in a home not equipped for a non-domesticated bird squaring off to protect an area and/or person.

## **Saying No**

Saying “no” through biting has been reinforced when we react by putting them down, keeping them out longer, putting them in their cage, or giving them something to give their beaks something to do other than bite us. This is a learned behavior. We have asked many bird owners how they let their bird say “no”. They often seem to not understand the question. But if they have to go to work and it is time to put the bird back in the cage, “no” is not the answer that is acceptable. It is crucial to teach the bird to work with you so that saying “no” by biting happens much less or not at all.

## **Fear**

Anxiety is a psychological, physiological, and behavioral state induced in animals and humans by a threat to well-being or survival, either actual or potential. It is characterized by increased arousal, expectancy, autonomic and neuroendocrine activation, and specific behavior patterns. The function of these changes is to facilitate coping with an adverse or unexpected situation. Make no mistake, this bite is meant to save themselves. The bird in an anxious state bites as a last resort, and bites to avoid perceived disaster.

If you don't know what fear looks like with a bird, you have no business touching them or being too close to them until you do. That bite should be avoided at all costs, because it can be the worst kind of bite. People may say they don't mind the bite, especially with the smaller birds, and they push forward with what they are doing. However, it will negatively affect the parrot to feel anxious all of the time, just as it would with a human. Continual fear changes their ability to learn, train, and have healthy relationships. So, while you are okay with a parakeet grabbing onto your finger because it isn't a cockatoo, that parakeet has been traumatized.

We will cover ways to prevent biting in our next article. Meanwhile, try observing closely and taking notes on your bird's behaviors to see if you can identify how many signs your bird gives you that it will bite if you proceed any closer.

Thank you. PRH