

Height Dominance

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Published in PsittaScene Magazine
Publication of the World Parrot Trust, August 2001

As companion bird owners search for answers to complicated behavioral issues the term Height Dominance often surfaces. What is it about Height Dominance that causes it to be touted as the source of so many parrot behavioral problems? “Don’t let your bird get above eye level or he will feel dominant over you and bite.” What is it about this concept that works for people? Does it also work for parrots?

My perspective on Height Dominance is a bit different from others, probably because my experience is different from others who promote it. I have studied and trained parrots for over 40 years. For more than 25 years I have been a professional bird trainer. One of the most important things I have learned over the years is to ask good questions. The two most empowering questions I have learned to ask are “what’s the motivation” and “how does it apply to the behavior of the species in the wild?” These questions provide great insight into what a bird is thinking and takes the interpretation away from the anthropomorphic point of view that is so easy for people to use.

So, what would the motivation be for a parrot to want to dominate a person? What does he have to gain? Is he trying to dominate you to force you to do something for him? Is he trying to teach you a lesson or punish you for something? Why would a parrot want to be dominant over you?

That leads me to my next question: How does it apply to the behavior of the species in the wild? Some have said that is it “natural” for a parrot to want to be dominant. Many people have talked about, and even described in great detail, hierarchies in flocks of wild parrots. Some even go as far as to state that you can tell the rank a parrot holds in the hierarchy by its height in a tree. The higher the perch in a tree the more dominant the parrot is over the others. I am fortunate in that I have had many opportunities to observe several species of parrots in the wild. I have never seen anything that even remotely resembles a hierarchy in wild parrots.

But, don’t take my word for it. I have also talked to many parrot field researchers (at least six) whose profession is studying parrots in the wild. None of these experts could recall ever seeing any form of hierarchy in wild parrots. Plus, the description of ranking the dominance position by the height a bird takes in a tree brought puzzled looks, laughter, cynicism and worse from almost every expert I spoke with. All of these experts talk about the aggression they see in parrots on a daily basis. These aggressive acts are generally associated with the acquisition or protection of resources. They relate that the winner of one confrontation may just as easily lose the next confrontation with the same bird later. There is no consistently dominant bird in a group of wild parrots. Also, none of the experts could recall ever seeing aggression for the sake of establishing dominance. And, none of them have ever seen any form of hierarchy related to the way parrots position themselves in a tree.

To put it bluntly, Height Dominance does not exist in parrots. It is most likely just a projection of someone’s personal beliefs that for some seem to make sense when applied to parrots. Naïve bird owners searching for easy answers to complicated problems readily buy into the concept that a parrot will feel dominant over a person when held above eye level and that the bird will express this dominance through aggression. The accompanying myth about wild parrots forming hierarchies that are coordinated with the position a bird takes in a tree is equally inaccurate. Parrot behavior is far more complicated than this.

Why then do so many people subscribe to the height dominance theory? To begin with, hierarchies are common in human societies. When people were young it was the taller people who were dominant over them (height

dominance?). Even as adults, most people experience relationships with other people that are hierarchal in nature. These relationships are more associated with social relationships than with physical relationships such as height. Some people are successful using physical force and aggression in a dominance-based relationship with their pet dog (which the dog inherently understands, but don't try it with a cat). Also, it is not uncommon to see dominance hierarchies in groups of captive pet parrots. Unnatural environments encourage unnatural behavior. Groups of parrots confined in small environments will most likely work out dominance hierarchies as a matter of survival. However, this hierarchy is established through the relationship the birds have formed and not by the height of the position a bird takes in the cage. Also, if these same birds were in the wild they would not be forced into these close relationships and they would avoid aggressive encounters with the other birds, eliminating the desire to establish a hierarchy.

It is easy for some parrot owners to misinterpret aggression as a parrot's desire to dominate. Aggression for the purpose of establishing dominance is common in many mammal species, including humans, however, it does not occur in parrots. Parrots have no natural inclination to form dominance-based hierarchies with other parrots in the wild, or with humans in captivity. Parrots may be moved to show aggression for many different reasons when they are higher than human eye level. However, the desire to dominate should not be considered as one of those reasons.

Take the case of a parrot on top of a cage that bites its owner when he or she attempts to pick it up. Is the bird trying to establish dominance over the person? Think about what usually happens just after a parrot's owner takes it off the cage. The person puts the bird in the cage, closes the door and locks it away for a period of time. It seems to me that this is a much better explanation for why the bird bites the person. It doesn't want to go back into the cage, simple as that! Plus, it has probably learned that biting is an effective way to communicate with humans.

Before a bird bites, it has usually used up a vast array of body language and other forms of natural communications in an attempt to express his desire to stay on top of the cage. Few people have the insights and empathy to read this body language. Most people blindly continue to force themselves upon the bird even when the bird is displaying aggressive body language. As a last resort, or final attempt to communicate its discontent, the bird lashes out and bites the person. Then, the person pulls their hand away and stops, even momentarily, trying to get the bird on their hand. Sometimes the person will stop long enough to go get a perch or dowel to step the bird onto. The act of biting is reinforced, or encouraged to occur again, the moment the person stops chasing the bird. Consequently, the bird learns that biting is an effective way to communicate with people.

Simply stated, parrots like being in high places. Their survival instincts tell them to be up high where they are less vulnerable to predators, get a better view of their surroundings, can make quicker escapes, etc. Companion parrots may also learn that being on a person's shoulder, or even their head, is desirable. Some like the shoulder because they like to be near their owner's face. Others may enjoy sitting on the relatively stable perch a shoulder affords. And some like being on the shoulder because they are away from the person's hands that they may have had some negative associations with in the past. For whatever reason, shoulders, curtains, tops of cages, etc., are all desirable perches for most parrots.

Obviously, most people can't leave the bird on its cage all the time. So, how do you get a bird back into its cage? Again, ask yourself "what's the motivation?" Why should the parrot want to go back into the cage? "He's supposed to" may work for your dog, but it will never work for your parrot. "He has to" can work if you force him with a stick, gloves, or perseverance and maybe some blood-letting. But, it is far better to create an environment where "He wants to" go back into his cage.

Positive reinforcement is a teaching tool that can revolutionize your relationship with your parrot. It is a procedure where an action is immediately followed by something your individual bird finds really rewarding. For companion parrots, the reinforcer can be anything really desirable, such as verbal praise, a scratch on the head, or a favorite

food treat that is not part of his usual diet. The result of such a positive consequence is that your bird will more readily repeat the action that preceded the reward. Negative reinforcement, on the other hand, is also a procedure that can be used to encourage an action but it works by removing something the bird doesn't like immediately after it responds. For companion parrots, negative reinforcement is at work when we force a bird to do something he doesn't want to do. For example, many birds decide to give up and go into their cages just to avoid being chased by your hand or stick. Positive reinforcement teaches you bird what to do; negative reinforcement teaches you bird what to avoid. That's why it is unfortunate and unnecessary when people use negative reinforcement more often than positive reinforcement with companion parrots.

With positive reinforcement, you can teach your bird to respond to your request for him to go into his cage in only a couple days (often a few minutes). He can quickly learn to climb down the side of the cage and wait patiently inside as you get up out of your easy chair and walk over to close the cage door; all this on a simple verbal cue like, "time to go to bed."

Start by putting a peanut, a few sunflower seeds or another one of his favorite treats in the food cup and see if your bird will walk into the cage on his own. You may have to go sit in a chair or leave the room before he will perform the behavior because he may be afraid you will lock him inside. Do not close the door the first few times he goes in. Let the bird realize that he is just going in to get a treat and can come out if he likes. Each time you put the treat in the cage present the cue (any word, phrase, or hand gesture you like) and wait for him to go into the cage to get the treat. Soon he will associate the cue with the action of going into the cage to get the treat. Once he is performing the behavior without hesitation, give him the cue before you put the treat in the cage and see if he will go in. If he does, tell him "good" and go directly over to reinforce the behavior with a nice big treat. If he does not go in on cue, back up a step and give him more experience associating the cue with the reinforcement and the act of going into the cage. At this stage you can also begin closing the door for a short time when he goes in the cage to get the treat. Open the door to let him out when he is finished eating the treat to help him understand he is not getting locked in each time he goes into the cage. When you finally need to close the door and leave him inside give him a large reinforcement or special treat that will take him a while to eat before he realizes the door is locked. He will soon learn that going into the cage is a positive, not a negative experience.

Dominance, in all societies, is based on much more than a few inches of height. Dominance is about relationships, history, and genetics. Many species are predisposed to establish hierarchies to establish social order in their community. Parrots, however, do not establish fixed hierarchies in the wild, especially ones related to height. Explaining away something as complicated as dominance hierarchies with something as simple as a few inches is very misleading and does not provide a clear understanding of a bird's behavior. It is best to avoid anthropomorphic interpretations and let natural behavior be your guide when evaluating parrot behavior. Ask empowering questions and find ways that will encourage a bird to do what you want rather than force a bird to do what you want. In your bird's eyes, you will never be his master, the best you can be is his friend and partner.