

**Biting, It's Not For The Birds**  
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“Biting is just part of having a parrot as a pet.” Does that sound familiar? It should. It is a very common attitude associated with companion parrot ownership. However, I feel the opposite is true. A parrot owner should strive to never get bit. That is a pretty bold statement for such a common problem. The fact is that biting is something parrots learn to do in captivity and not something that is normally seen in the wild. That’s right, they don’t bite each other in the wild, at least not hard enough to make another parrot bleed.

In the past 15 years or so, I have interviewed many parrot field researchers (personal communications: Brice, February, 1994, Munn, July 1998, Gilardi, February, 1999, English, November, 2000, May, May 15, 2001) about biting and dominance. With a combined total of over 35 years of field research, only two of these researchers have ever seen or heard of a parrot biting another parrot hard enough to make it bleed. Both of these incidences were associated with nest holes. One incident involved two birds fighting over a nest cavity and the other involved a parrot attacking a young bird in the nest in an attempt to take over the nest.

Parrots very rarely bite each other in the wild. However, they often show aggression to protect resources like territory, mates, desirable perches, food items, 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 aggression 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 with the resource holder.

So, why do parrots bite in captivity? First, if you put an animal in an unnatural environment you can expect some unnatural behavior. Second, all behavior is a product of instinct or experience. A bite from a parrot falls into one of these two categories. Some biting incidents are innate and some are learned. Many parrots have been forced to bite out of fear, or self-defense. Humans tend to be aggressive in the manner in which they approach and pick up their parrots. This bold, aggressive action may cause a bird to bite out of fear. Most parrots do not have the option to fly away like their wild counterparts and are sometimes pushed to the point that biting is the only way they know to defend themselves or express their displeasure.

Before biting, most captive parrots display various body language and vocalizations to express their feelings, just like wild parrots. However, few people ever notice the slight glance of an eye or the almost imperceptible tightening of the feathers on the parrot’s head that holds so much information about its thoughts and feelings. After all, human communication is generally very bold and obvious, and has evolved to put much more emphasis on verbal communication, than body language. Many, if not most, parrot owners are oblivious to their parrot’s subtle attempts at communication. They fail to notice the slick feathers, or quick head movements, as the nervous bird instinctively looks for an escape path, a common avoidance behavior. Often, the first signs of nervousness most parrot owners notice are the obvious escape attempts or the growls and other vocal displays of discomfort and fear. By this time, they have already missed the myriad of signals that have preceded this most obvious show of discomfort and have pushed the bird to the brink of aggression.

Another important point to consider is most of the information available to parrot owners today does not encourage sensitivity. In fact, some of the most common teachings today encourage dominance and aggression when working with a parrot. It is common to hear and read things like “make sure he knows you’re the boss,” and “don’t let him get away with that,” etc. The popular trend is to dominate pet parrots rather than build partnerships.

This aggressive approach only encourages more biting incidents as birds are forced to bite to express themselves to their confident but insensitive owners.

Parrots bite for the following main reasons:

**Play;** It is a hard wired, or instinctive behavior for parrots to investigate a person's finger or other body part with their strong beak. This is the way nature provides information to the young bird about its environment. It is the responsibility of the owner to tell the bird just how hard it is allowed to "investigate" fingers and other objects. A loud and sharp "NO" is similar in effect to the vocalization that an adult parrot would use in the wild to communicate to a youngster that it has exceeded its bounds.

**Territorial Aggression;** Parrots instinctively protect territories both in the wild and in captivity. In the wild a parrot bonds with one individual and will protect their nesting territory from intruders. Captive parrots also bond with one individual, often a human. When this happens, they can aggressively defend a territory from intruders. They can easily learn that biting is the only, or at least the best, way to drive human intruders away from their territory.

**Fear Aggression;** As mentioned earlier, many parrots have bitten out of fear of a human forcing himself or herself on the nervous bird. This is also an instinctive reaction that is closely associated with survival. If the bird were in the wild it would simply fly away. However, most captive birds are denied the ability to escape and are left with biting as their last resort.

**Learned Aggression;** Some parrots learn to bite for a desired response. This learned aggression is displayed in many ways. One bird could learn that a light bite to the arm of its owner when he or she is eating a donut may result in a piece of the tasty treat being offered to stop the annoying nibbling. Another bird may learn that a bite to the finger will cause a person to leave it alone on top of the cage or on a person's shoulder, even if it is for just long enough for the person to go get a dowel or perch to pick the bird up with. Once a parrot bites a person for the first time, it may be on its way to learning that this is a valid way to communicate with humans. Any behavior that is reinforced is likely to be repeated.

To avoid being bitten, start by developing a positive relationship with the bird. Try to avoid forcing the bird to do anything it doesn't want to do. This is a very difficult concept for many parrot owners to understand, especially when the information available to parrot owners suggests dominating the bird. Plus, many humans have a fairly good reinforcement history associated with dominating other animals, such as dogs, and even other humans. It is a communication strategy that seems, at least to them, to work fairly well. Going against this natural tendency and working to establish a relationship with the bird that is built on positive interactions is the first step toward a partner relationship with a parrot.

Next, the bird owner should develop sensitivities to the bird's communication. He or she should learn how to read its body language and listen to what it tells them. Then, they should care about what it says and allow the bird to be a partner in the relationship instead of an object. They should learn to ask the bird to do things and avoid telling it. After all, rarely does anything, except a predator, ever force a parrot in the wild to do something it doesn't want to do.

One more thing that will enhance a parrot owner's relationship with their parrot: taking responsibility for each time the bird bites them. Parrot owners should understand that biting is something that they have either forced a bird to do or taught it to do. When they accept this responsibility they will begin to see that their scars are signs of insensitivity and not badges of courage. They will also begin to lay the foundation for a more rewarding partnership with their companion bird.