

## **Oh, The Abuse**

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Published in PsittaScene Magazine  
Publication of the World Parrot Trust, October 2002

I heard someone say the other day that they had rescued an abused parrot. In the past, these words inspired feelings of sadness and compassion in me. But, today they are met with apathy and reservation. I have not lost my passion for parrots; I still care deeply about their welfare and treatment. But, over time the words “abuse” and “rescue” have lost their significance. Maybe it is because these words are so often tossed around carelessly with little regard for the indictment they suggest.

I can hardly visit a parrot internet list, read an article, or speak to a group of parrot enthusiasts, without hearing the term “abuse” in association with companion parrots. However, I rarely hear the details of the so-called abuse. I know there are many horror stories about parrots being hit, ignored in dark basements, being fed diets sorely lacking in adequate nutrition, etc. These examples of mistreatment, of course, deserve to be included on the list of “parrot abuses.” There are worse stories as well, many too painful to consider and beyond the scope of this article. What I am talking about here are the other cases of abuse; the ones where the interpretation of the mistreatment is poorly defined and left to the discretion of the storyteller.

I have never seen a definition of the word “abuse” as it applies to parrots. There are no standards for the care and management of pet parrots. Only the subjective judgment of parrot owners dictates what is best and what is right for companion parrots. One person’s idea of proper care or housing for a parrot can easily be another person’s idea of abuse. One person’s purchase at a pet shop may be another person’s “rescue.”

My dictionary defines abuse as: the physical or psychological maltreatment of a person or animal. This definition leaves open the question of from whose perspective is the abuse determined? Is only the human perspective important to consider? If so, are all humans qualified to judge the physical and psychological state of a parrot? Or, is it possible to consider the perspective of the parrot when evaluating abuse? Can you really evaluate what an animal is thinking, or feeling? Is it appropriate to consider the bird’s perspective or is it enough to justify people’s actions with their good intentions? Where is the line drawn? Who draws the line? What is the consequence when a person steps over the line? There are simply too many questions that cannot be answered. Maybe that is why the words “abuse” and “rescue” have become so vague.

Since it is so difficult to define parrot abuse from a human perspective, I suggest abuse be considered from the bird’s perspective. A parrot’s physical and mental health should be good indicators of abuse. An avian veterinarian is best qualified to determine physical health in parrots. Many parrot owners have also developed observational skills that allow them to spot physical signs of illness and stress in their birds. A bird’s body language can provide great insights into its mental health and current state of mind. Body language can be used to determine levels of stress, anxiety, apathy, fear, etc. High levels of signs, such as stress, may suggest abuse. For instance, if a parrot is growling, screaming, hissing, and frantically trying to flee, abuse is very possibly at work.

I understand this idea is new and will be difficult for some people to accept. For this idea to take root many people will have to change their attitude and practices when working with parrots. Some people will have to adopt new, more positive methods to work with their birds to avoid creating levels of stress in their birds. The result of these positive methods will most likely lead to better relationships with companion parrots. The practice of dominating

a parrot will not survive in this new era of positive relationships. Past relationships built on negative interactions will give way to positive reinforcement of good behavior which will in turn lead to more enjoyable and fulfilling relationships between bird and human.

If parrots are allowed a voice, people will be forced to evaluate their relationship with their parrot using new criteria. For instance, a woman wrote on an Internet list recently that she had just rescued an abused parrot from a pet shop and would now like to know how to care for it, as this is her first and only parrot. This new parrot owner will be encouraged to evaluate from the parrot's perspective what is more comfortable; life at the pet shop or life in her home? For many people, keeping a parrot alone in a cage while they are at work is normal. For a parrot, this is a very unnatural living environment. A wild parrot is virtually never alone its entire life, unless it is a female sitting on eggs. However, few people would consider this bird "rescued" from the pet shop an abuse case because the intentions of the owner were morally sound. She provided a loving home, a great diet, and companionship... for about four or five hours a day. It's a different perspective when you consider Nature has set the bird up to have all these things 24 hours a day. If you were to consider the situation from the parrot's perspective, it is possible the bird would choose life in the pet shop with other noisy birds over the daily confinement and isolation in a person's home.

In this new era where parrots are given a say in their care and management, people will be encouraged to evaluate the way they handle and form relationships with their birds. I read on another Internet list of a parrot that loves the woman of the house and dislikes the husband. The husband was seriously bitten by the bird a few times before he finally decided he would quit handling the bird. The people on the list found this unacceptable. They wrote things like: "How can he stop handling the parrot, denying the bird the interaction and companionship it deserves?" Another person wrote, "This is abusive treatment and you should force your husband to put up with the bites and show the bird how much he cares." One after another they encouraged, no demanded, that the husband work with the bird. No one took into account the parrot's point of view. It occurred to me that the parrot was simply following its natural instincts and reacting as nature had intended. It was probably bonded with the woman and protecting its territory from an intruder ... an intruder who kept trying to force himself on the bird with demands to "step up." From the bird's perspective the man surely must have been an abuser. I suspect the husband may have also felt a bit abused by the relentless pressure to continue to work with the bird, and by the frequent and predictable attacks by the parrot.

In the new, more positive era of companion parrot ownership, people will be more sensitive to their birds' body language. They will not force them to do things they don't want to do or go places they don't want to go. I saw a man at a parrot club a while back parading a frightened parrot around the room. The bird would occasionally fly part way across the room, crashing to the floor after exhausting its clipped wings. The man would dutifully go pick the bird up and return to his seat. It was obvious to me and many others in the room that this poor bird was scared half to death by all the commotion in this new environment. The repeated attempts at flight and hard crashes to the ground were even more difficult for me to accept when the man made the excuse to the group that the bird is nervous because "he was abused." How true, I thought.

For some, the term "abuse" is little more than an excuse to hide behind. I have heard many people say things like, "my bird doesn't talk, he was abused." Or, "he bites me all the time, he must have been abused." I cannot deny that many parrots have suffered at the hands of humans. Often these people are misinformed, well-meaning people who just don't know any better. Sadly, other times they are people who simply don't care. However, no matter what the past has dealt a parrot, it can still enjoy a comfortable and fulfilling life, provided it receives proper care and treatment. The problem is there are so many opinions as to what is proper and what is not.

The best way I know to decide what strategy is best when working with a parrot is to allow the animal to be part of the decision. Start by learning to recognize the negative signs of stress, fear and anxiety in your bird. Also learn to recognize the positive signs of comfort, happiness, and play in your bird. To choose the best strategy for working

with your bird always pull from your bag of positive approaches and avoid the negative approaches. For many people, this may be more difficult than it seems.

Humans have a long history of using negative approaches to get their way. People have grown up using heavy-handed techniques to shape and modify behavior. This culture is innate to us and difficult to change. To complicate the issue, a negative approach sometimes gives the illusion of success to a parrot owner. Most anyone can force themselves on a parrot, especially one with clipped wings, and realize some level of perceived success. However, the behavioral fall-out from this approach may be far reaching. Sure, the bird can learn to perform dutiful behaviors to avoid negative interactions, but at what price? We may never know the psychological affects negative interactions have on parrots. But, is it really worth the risk? Isn't it better to use positive methods to "allow" birds to perform desirable behaviors rather than force them to comply with demands? Certainly a reward of a favorite treat, a scratch on the head, or verbal praise is better than forcing a parrot to perform an action out of fear or discomfort. Plus, the positive approach creates an environment where the bird wants to perform, creates more lasting results, and promotes a better relationship between bird and human. For any behavior or action you want your bird to perform positive reinforcement works better than negative approaches. It's as simple as that.

Though it may happen on rare occasions, it is difficult for me to believe that anyone would purposely abuse or mistreat a parrot. The vast majority of parrot owners are responsible, caring people who want only to do what is right for their birds. Too often, they are confused by the myriad of conflicting information available to parrot owners. One source says force your parrot to comply with your commands and don't let him get away with anything, while another says use positive reinforcement to create the best relationship possible with your bird. Both methods produce results. However, positive methods will never be associated with the word "abuse."

The past does not equal the future. A bird's history is important, but not nearly as important as the present. The events of today shape the rest of a bird's life. Today is the perfect day to give your bird a voice through its body language and let it have a say in its care and treatment. Today is the day you can decrease the frustrations and increase the rewards for both you and your companion parrot.