



Managing Reproductive Drive in Companion Birds

Behavioural and medical disorders relating to excessive reproductive drive are some of the most common problems we encounter in both female AND male pet parrots. Often owners are completely unaware that their pet is experiencing excessive reproductive drive until it becomes a life-threatening emergency or results in serious problematic behaviours. ***The information contained in this handout is therefore important for ALL parrot owners, not just those with a pet being treated for a reproductive problem.***

Generally, parrots are not domesticated animals and are therefore have very strong reproductive instincts. Unfortunately, many of the ideal conditions for breeding are very easily (and inadvertently) provided in captivity. Inappropriate hand rearing practices are rife in the pet bird industry and as a result many pet birds probably self-identify as human. This further adds to the problems faced with reproductive drive as pet birds often have expectations of their owners that simply cannot be fulfilled!

Here is a list of just some of the problems we see associated with excessive reproductive drive:

Physical:

- Egg binding
- Chronic egg laying
- Oviduct impaction
- Internal ovulation
- Prolapse (in both males and female)

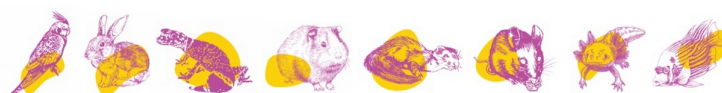
Behavioural:

- Feather damaging behaviour and self-mutilation
- Aggression (often at dangerous levels of severity)
- Separation anxiety
- Screaming
- Chronic masturbation



Many parrot owners may look at this list and think “My bird doesn’t have any of these problems, I don’t need to be concerned.” To this we say, prevention is better than cure. Parrots can go years without displaying these problems before, seemingly out of the blue, becoming egg-bound or hyper-aggressive, for example. Sadly, aggression (which often occurs in conjunction with excessive reproductive drive) is one of the most common reasons that pet birds get rehomed or relinquished to shelters.

Put very simply, parrots receive certain stimuli that stimulate the brain to start a hormone cascade that results in activation of the ovary (most female birds only have one ovary) or testicles. As a result, the level of estrogen or testosterone produced by these organs rises to facilitate

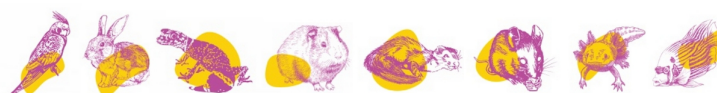




reproduction. In the captive setting this can have many unwanted consequences, as listed above. Therefore, if a parrot is not being bred (and we ONLY recommend breeding by those with extensive knowledge and experience) it is in our best interest AND the parrots' best interest to reduce the stimulation on the ovary or testicles.

So, how do we do that? The table below categorises the various reproductive stimuli into four main groups (environmental, nutritional, social and genetic), explains how they work and then provides recommendations to combat the stimulus in the captive environment.

Stimulus	Explanation	Management
Environmental Factors		
Presence of a nest site	Presence and maintenance of a secure nest site in the wild helps stimulate reproductive drive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not provide a nest box or happy hut. These could be replaced with a sea grass door mat cut to size and rolled into a tube for the bird to sleep in. Deny access to drawers, behind couch cushions or other hidey-holes. If your bird goes under the paper on the bottom of the cage, move the paper under the grid, rather than on top of it.
Presence of nest material		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If your bird shreds paper to use a nest material consider denying access to this.
Maintenance of a territory		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frequently rearranging perches and cage furniture can help create some (gentle) environmental instability.
Long day length	For certain species, increasing day length signals the approach of the breeding season.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure your bird gets at least 12 hours of uninterrupted sleep. Ideally your bird sleeps in a room that no one uses after the bird goes to bed (ie not the lounge room).
Rain	For certain species, rain indicates that food is about to become abundant, which is ideal for reproduction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can't control the rain, but you can limit the amount of shower time or misting your bird receives.
Loss of eggs	Females of certain species will attempt to replace eggs that are lost from a clutch.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Once a hen has started laying a clutch, allow her to brood the clutch for 3 weeks (instead of removing the eggs from her immediately).





Stimulus	Explanation	Management
Nutritional Factors		
High energy diet	A high energy diet facilitates egg production and chick rearing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Birds fed a seed-only or a predominantly seed diet should be converted to a pellet-based diet with low energy vegetables and only a small amount of fruit, seed and nuts. Please note that specific dietary recommendations depend on the species and you should consult your avian vet before making dietary changes.
Easily accessible food	Easily accessible food makes feeding a partner or chicks much easier. Birds spend 80% of their time foraging for food in the wild but most birds in captivity can meet their nutritional requirements in less than 20 minutes over the course of the day.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Birds should be required to work (forage) for their food, rather than receive it freely. Dry food can be mixed with recycled paper cat litter and fruit and vegetables can be wrapped in paper and cardboard to increase difficulty of procurement. Various foraging toys are available for purchase. Your avian vet can provide further recommendations for encouraging foraging. Please note that a seed stick or 'forage mix' does not constitute foraging.

Stimulus	Explanation	Management
Genetic Factors		
Genetic	Some species or individuals within species are more prone to excessive reproductive drive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research a species thoroughly or consult your avian vet before purchasing a new bird.





Stimulus	Explanation	Management
Social Factors		
<p>Interactions with a real or perceived mate</p>	<p>In the wild, courtship behaviour between a bonded pair is a strong driver for nest building and reproduction. In captivity a bird may pair-bond with another bird, a human or an inanimate object.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the bird is bonded to another bird, denying visual and auditory contact with that bird may reduce reproductive drive in the long term BUT is likely to cause significant distress (which can be detrimental in other ways) and therefore is generally NOT recommended. This simply highlights the importance of managing all of the other reproductive drivers. • If the bird is bonded to a person, reduce the reproductive behaviours (intentionally or inadvertently) performed by that person. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Keep all physical contact to the head; stroking down the back or under the wings is a strong reproductive driver. ◦ Do not share food with the bird or feed the bird directly from your mouth. ◦ Do not allow the bird to masturbate (rub its bottom) on you. ◦ Fostering platonic interactions, such as training, is a great alternative to "sexual" interactions. Experienced avian behavioralists, such as Parrot Life, can help with this. • Recommendations for different species vary, but generally we recommend keeping birds with a same sex member of the same or similar species. It is worth consulting your avian vet before purchasing a second bird. • If the bird is bonded to an object, consider removing that object but be wary of inducing excessive levels of stress. • Do not purchase un-weaned baby birds! These birds are more likely to grow up and develop reproductive problems.

Sometimes, even when your manipulation of the environmental, nutritional, social and genetic factors is appropriate, a companion parrot may still develop reproductive problems. In these cases, we often use medications to help block the hormone cascade that is involved in reproductive. Although these medications are generally very safe, we prefer to manage what can be managed in husbandry, rather than just relying on the medication. The medications also tend to work better when paired with appropriate husbandry changes.

