

Spring Has Sprung for the Birds

By Tiffany Margolin, DVM, Dipl ABVP-Avian

Ah yes, the lovely smells of spring. The flowers, the trees, the birds, the bees...Uh oh. The birds and the bees. Ok, so it's that time again.

There are a number of things that might be occurring with your pet bird as we "spring" into the next season. They are most often noticeable with hookbill, or parrot types ranging from budgies to macaws. But small passerines also suffer from springtime issues, though not usually the behavioral ones.

All the cute head bobbing, wing flipping, cuddling up to you and calling to you, dilating of the eyes and new vocalizations -- these might appear "cute," but they are not intended that way by your pet. There may be more aggression, nippiness, "teenage" rebellious behavior. These are all hormonal signs. Although they may at first seem endearing or entertaining, they are BIG red flags. The issues they precede need to be addressed before things get totally out of control. This is especially true if you own a FEMALE bird. The reason for this is that the females in captivity--ranging in all sizes and including finches and canaries, frequently become egg-bound or experience dystocia (life-threatening egg-laying problems). There are several causes for this.

The captive females often get into trouble because they have been eating a very nutrient-poor diet. Seed is not the appropriate diet for birds. The only birds that eat seeds in the wild are the softbill finches and canaries. They still supplement with proteins (small insects) and fiber (plant material). Seed, which is most often fed to your pet birds, actually ABSORBS the critical nutrient, vitamin A, and is also very fattening. Birds need at least 14 hours of OUTDOOR sunshine per week to form vitamin D in their body. This means no window or screen. If they are vitamin D deficient (as MOST indoor pet birds are), they cannot absorb calcium, so even if you give your female, egg-producing or hormonal birds calcium supplements, they will not have a way to absorb them due to lack of outdoor sun, all of which can lead to life-threatening and egg-laying issues.

To correct the diet of passerines, add a flat paper plate of stripped/grated kale, carrots and bell peppers. You can hang fresh parsley or cilantro every day-no seed treats or millet. For the larger species, the details are beyond the scope of this article, but remember they are omnivores. This means they need protein and vegetable matter, with a small amount of fruit, daily. NO SEED. If your bird is acclimated to seed, it may take a while to convert him. Be patient; it can take from three months to one year. At EACC we can do the conversion for you within 7-10 days. We recommend Harrison's brand bird food as the organic base dry diet. Roudybush crumble is also excellent for those darn stubborn cockatiels. Mix CHEERIOS (plain) into any dry new diet and sprinkle their own seed in as well. You must change this food daily. Do not leave large amounts of dry food in the cage-there is no way to monitor their intake that way. It is also CRITICAL that you have a gram scale in order to weigh your bird, especially during times of illness or dietary conversion. A few grams lost steadily can be a big problem and you should immediately get your bird in to the vet. In addition, if your female bird is actually laying it is best to get a liquid calcium glubionate syrup to put in the water. It is much better absorbed and utilized than most cuttlebone or powdered forms.

Ok, now let's talk about behavior, hormones and modification. If you have a hormonal female bird or a hormonal and aggressive male, there are some options to sweeten them up. This is important because if left unchecked, physical problems for your bird can occur or bite wound injuries to family members are possible.

First and foremost, you and any other family members have to STOP all "mate type" behaviors of your own. That means (I know you don't want to hear this) NO petting and scratching under wings, NO rubbing over any part of the back of your birdie, and NO regular hand feeding. These are all interpreted as courting, or "foreplay" activities by your feathered friend. They can only lead to more issues. So what CAN you do? Since petting is limited, it is best to allow your bird to pal around with you on a more platonic level. They can play games with you (you can find fun ideas at goodbirdinc.com). They can travel on your finger or forearm. Do not EVER put a bird on your shoulder as this is a very dominant and territorial position, and will encourage biting, aggression and injuries to nearby ears, eyes and lips.

Second, you should create a foraging type feeding program for your pet. Foraging is a natural behavior in the wild and is one of the best ways to redirect your feathered friend's hormonal chaos. You will remove any large dry food bowl and instead use numerous small bowls or mix them up with toys that can hold some food. These can be found online and at large bird expos like the Bird Mart in Pomona. You then put small amounts of food in different areas inside the cage or in any area where your bird spends time. This innovative technique will distract your bird away from mating and reproductive behaviors, into the normal activity of looking for food. This is what they do during the day in the wild, and is one of the reasons undomesticated birds do not suffer from problems with egg binding and the like. It takes some creativity and patience, but it can be fun and it is well worth it.

Last, if the above ideas still don't curtail hormones enough, then you may need to consider hormone therapy. There is a very safe hormone called Luprolide acetate that will counteract both male and female hormonal aggression and sexual behaviors. Although it will not work if behavioral issues are not addressed, it is very effective in combination and can help to avoid serious, life-threatening issues and expensive, dangerous surgeries.

Please be aware that if you have multiple birds in your household, the problems will also be multiplied. Birds respond intensely to visual and auditory stimuli, meaning other birds calls and displays will stimulate mating and sexual hormonal activity. So though it may seem to be an uphill battle if this is your situation at home, don't give up hope! If all are foraging, then they all have something to do besides dreaming of mating!

If you have questions, always feel free to call us at EACC (626) 405-1777.