

## SUGGESTIONS FOR SURVIVING REPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOR

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It's spring! Hormones are pumping—your bird is screaming, biting, and being absolutely obnoxious. What do you do? We're fighting Mother Nature here, and "She" generally wins. Medically speaking, there are Lupron injections, which may or may not work, Deslorelin implants which may or may not work, and if the bird is constantly laying, one might consider a salpingohysterectomy. With this surgery, only the lowest part of the oviduct, the "uterus," is removed, simply because the surgeon cannot safely go any higher into the oviduct. Because the bird still has her ovary (birds only have one ovary), her body will continue to put out the hormones, so the reproductive behavior and temperamental difficulties that accompany it will continue. They exhibit mating behavior, constant contact calls, attempts to copulate, and they seek nest spots wherever they can find them.

Some intact hens will begin to lay eggs during this time, and there does not need to be a male or even another bird in the picture. If the eggs are not fertile, what do you do? Do you leave the eggs in there? Pull them? My avian veterinarian suggests leaving the eggs there for at least two weeks; if she sees they are gone, she will continue to lay until she has a clutch, which for most small birds is 4-5 eggs. (Large birds lay fewer, often only one or two.) So if they are pulled, the hen could continue laying indefinitely, thus threatening her health and even her life. If she doesn't lay any more after that, and ignores the one she lays, he advises pulling them after two weeks. Most of the time she gets bored with the whole thing because no chicks have hatched, and she loses interest. If the eggs are damaged, one can purchase "dummy" eggs which look the same and are the same size as the natural egg. Be sure to get the right size for the bird, though, or she will ignore them. The wrong-sized eggs will not deter her from continuing to lay.

On ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, so the saying goes. There are a few things that owners can do to help keep the hormone levels down, but these need to be started at the first sign of hormonal behavior. The levels increase quickly, and so does the breeding behavior. For birds kept in a constant environment, year-round, breeding season can happen anytime. Spring and fall are typically the more intense times, but birds can become hormonal at any time.

There are certain triggers that alert the birds that it is time to start preparing a nest, finding a mate, and laying eggs. You can cut down on the triggers by making some changes in their environment and daily routines:

- Change the bird's cage around frequently. Change the position and placing of the cage; move the cage to a different room or different place in the room. Keep the male in a different cage, and move his cage away from the female's. change the perches, toys, and food cup placement in the cage; take out any snuggle huts—anything to keep her from feeling safe in her environment. Change things around often; they will not lay if they don't think they have a constant, safe environment.
- You may have to place the two birds in separate rooms; sometimes they get so intense with the contact calls that they gets the others engaged in it, and this stimulates the females to display reproductive behavior. The female will back into a corner, lift her tail,

separate her feet, and make little chortling sounds. Stop this immediately by distracting her; otherwise, this will lead to egg-laying. I have even had to move the male to the second floor, close all the doors in-between, and put a radio on—and they can still hear each other! Keep the male out of the female's cage. If you see him chasing her around, return him to his cage to calm down.

- Cut light hours down to eight a day by putting the bird on a schedule: up at 8, down for a 2-3-hour nap at noon, bedtime at 7. It works. Light is the most important trigger because it controls circadian rhythms. Cover the cage, darken the room, and put on soft music to encourage sleep—and don't interrupt the nap. I even turn off the phone. Schedule noisy activities around this arrangement. Provide a strict 8 hours of daylight per day for a period recommended by your avian veterinarian, usually for two to three weeks. A drastic reduction in photoperiod is often helpful, particularly in the cockatiel. Adherence to this short photoperiod must be strict. If extra light exposure occurs during this time, such as through a window or under a door crack, halting of egg laying will not occur.
- Give the bird fewer and shorter showers. The advent of spring rains is another huge trigger for birds. It means there will soon be an abundance of food in the area—perfect for feeding babies. One shower a week is plenty during this time.
- Take away anything that can be considered nesting material. Paper towels or newspaper on the bottom of the cage are the perfect material—you will see her chew them up and bundle them in the corner. You may have to put the paper towels under the grid for a while, in the tray. If she insists on staying on the bottom of the cage, get her out more often and try to keep her off the bottom.
- Keep towels and fabrics out of reach. Don't let them chew on towels, paper, cloth—anything that she can tear up and make into nest material, or hurt herself with. This is natural, nest-building behavior. Birds will ingest these fibers, and crop stasis and bacterial infections result.
- Cut back on soft foods, especially things like scrambled eggs and anything mashed. They look for these types of foods to feed their babies with when they regurgitate.
- Increase the bird's activity. Get him/her out of the cage and running around on the floor or flying around the house. Play ball with the bird. Provide new toys they can destroy, both in and out of the cage, and change the toys often. Get the bird outside for walkabouts on nice days. This keeps the birds busy and distracts them throughout this time.
- Make sure the bird has plenty of wood to chew and destroy. For the smaller birds, there are many balsa toys out there you can purchase, and places like Hobby Lobby have it in bulk and in packages. You can put holes in small pieces and tie them to the side of the cage with twist ties. You can also put holes in them and string them on thick string. For the larger bird, you can purchase white wood or pine at places like Home Depot. Get 1"x4"x6 feet or whatever length they have. They will make one cut for free so you can get it in your car. Then cut it into 3" pieces. The bird can chew this on a chair or floor, and

you can drill holes in the pieces and string them with 100% cotton rope. You can drill small holes in the wood and press pine nuts into them. Cockatoos love this.

- Be careful when handling the birds. In general, handle them less, and when you do, only touch the head area. Petting the back, belly or tail is stimulating to both males and females. It simulates copulatory behavior. If you see the male mounting the female, stop it immediately. Avoid interacting with your pet in ways that may stimulate reproductive activity, such as rubbing over the back, under the wings, or around the vent as these areas are sexually charged places in birds. Also, avoid encircling the body or playfully wrestling with the beak.
- Some people may not think it's necessary or even helpful, but doing some extra grooming during this time does have its advantages. Make sure nails are trimmed and wings are given a trim—not severe, just so you are not having to chase them around the house for hours at a time. Trim back the first two primaries on both sides and see how they fly. Trim under the coverts, please, and be careful not to trim blood feathers back too far. See the article and video in the files on wing-trimming.) Trim one more on each side until the bird can coast down without crashing. It's amazing how they calm down after losing some of that power. Ask your vet or a trusted bird person to do this if you don't feel comfortable with it. Better yet, have the person show you how to do it properly. Don't let anyone do a straight-across cut on them, cutting across the primaries and secondaries. That's the worst kind of cut. And remember, they do grow back! Hopefully, by that time breeding season has passed.
- Birds who are in reproductive mode will allopreen and allofeed. This means preening each other and feeding each other. Stop that behavior and return one of the birds to its cage.
- Remove any object, dish, etc. that the birds are using to masturbate on. (See the paper in the files on masturbation.) Males in particular will do this to the point they can injure themselves.
- Reduce the amount of time the favorite person spends with the bird. That person is his "mate" and stands in the place of a bird mate for only birds or birds without mates. Lower the voice and don't speak in "baby talk," that high-pitched voice owners use. Avoid eye-contact. When we do these things the birds are confused; they can't understand why the person is teasing them. On the one hand, he is encouraging a close bond and mating behavior, then he pushes the bird away. The bird is very frustrated. This leads to nasty bites and aggressive behavior from the bird out of sexual frustration. Remember, these are wild animals.
- Do not place your bird (male or female) on your shoulders during reproductive or broody periods. Any urges to protect its mate or its territory may result in acts of aggression, and a bird placed on a shoulder has great access to the face.

- Consider getting the birds (either or both) a Lupron/progesterone injection. It usually works, at least for a short time. This shuts down the hormone production. There are also Deslorelin implants. These are very expensive and sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. The Lupron may or may not work, too, but it isn't nearly as expensive.

You need to know your bird well enough to discover quickly what works and what doesn't and to try something else. No matter what you do, there will still be rough days, but you can minimize these times with some planning and preparation. At the very least, you will be able to make this difficult time more tolerable. Happy Spring!

***For more information, read "Reproductive Complications in Companion Birds" in the files***