

Frequently Occurring Pet Bird Accidents and how to Evade One

By EB Cravens

Most of our pet birds have a long and happy lifespan to look forward to. Given the basic requirements of proper cleanliness, nutrition, sleep, and exercise, even the smaller species of hookbills can live for decades. That is, provided their observant owners watch out for deadly accident possibilities.

Truly, captive psittacines live in a world fraught with dangers. Unexpected and sudden accidents are a major cause of avian loss in household pets. The more imprinted and trusting the baby birds we raise, the less “wild savvy” these chicks retain to warn and protect them from injury and life-threatening situations.

Here then are our most frequent mishaps and some ways to avoid them, based upon 20 years experience in aviculture and the retail bird realm:

Dogs, Cats and Predators

Outside and inside the house, dogs can be instant killers. A neighbor’s dog came into the yard. The porch screen door was left ajar by a repairman, and the baby Sun Conure was exploring on his bird room floor. Oops...

A free-flying Lesser Sulfur Crested Cockatoo owned by an expert birdkeeper swooped low over a nearby fence for the umpteenth time and was plucked from the air by a new German shepherd. Oops...

Dogs are quick biters and therefore more dangerous than cats which may quickly harm small fluttering pets, but will engage in longer pitched battles with a squawking, clawing, biting parrot that rolls onto its back for self defense. Beware of any dog nearby when you have your parrot on the shoulder Remember that parrots living in a home with a trained dog are less able to distinguish a dangerous canine. “Bad doggie” (“grrrowl”) is one of the first words I teach my fledglings. Often smaller nervous dogs such as dachunds or cocker spaniels are more dangerous than larger dobermans, Labradors, or collies. Malamutes and breeds with inbred wildness like Basenjis are difficult to train around birds. These are only guidelines of course, not strict rules. Puppies and kittens brought up around parrots are often trainable—yet unsupervised time is a risk!

One of the most common results of a bird/cat confrontation is a claw or tooth prick inflicted upon the avian pet. Cats are known for these painful, festering scratches. Even a medium sized parrot may become sick overnight from such a wound; proper medical attention immediately can save your bird’s life. Remember, such wounds may not be visible, so get veterinarian help.

Other predator dangers include raptors (African Grey plucked from a patio perch), raccoons (opened the birds cage and entered), mongoose, owls, feral cats, and snakes (entered the nursery and attacked a baby conure in the feeding tub).

If you have a psittacine who spends time outside with you in the yard, he will be safer and more secure on a perch or tree with lots of natural foliage to hid in. Placing birds in an outdoor setting is marvelous for their health and well being ONLY if you watch them closely or train them to watch themselves. Still it is risky. This is advanced Birdkeeping.

Flying Away/Lost

There are two types of lost bird situations: birds kept indoors who escape and disappear, and birds taken outside who bolt or wander off and disappear. As often as we encounter this, it seems neither mishap is 100% preventable in today's aviculture. Our choice therefore, is to try to train for this possibility. We teach them correct landing and flying skills before any wing trim. It is amazing how many times a pet will fly off in a beeline away from home simply because he is terrified and that is the only kind of flight he can manage. He has no skills to hover or fly slowly, no skill to turn sharply, no practice to keep from gaining altitude, no braking skills, no landing skills. Keeping a pet without these teachings when he is young and in the house is an invitation to lose him if her ever gets out and cannot fly back to you.

Our second lesson is to place the bird's cage outside when we are gardening, etc. (be sure to put a branch on top for shelter) so he can familiarize himself with our home environment—sights like panorama and horizon, sounds, lighting, wind patterns, etc. We immediately notice an increased attentiveness, observation and caution in our fledglings—an awareness of greenery, clouds, insects, wild birds, traffic noise. When a pet with outside cage experience escapes we often find it perched in a familiar spot. One day our five-month baby Cape Parrot picked the lock on his cage and escaped. We found him in the back yard, calmly sitting on "his" picnic table!

Remember, pets who see an environment from only one viewpoint will not necessarily recognize as familiar a tree or cage or clothesline from another angle. Place your pet's cage in three or four spots around the yard to give her a full spectrum of knowing the area.

Stepping On Bird/Slamming Door

A vast number of our pets are raised feeling safe wandering about the floors of their home. Folks who have this kind of situation in their house had better learn to tread lightly! Too many times will a pet psittacine creep up silently behind a set of human heels seeking attention or treats. One wrong step is all it takes to seriously injure a bird. Guests in the home are even more dangerous. We cage any parrots when there is a gathering of friends in their accustomed floor space. It also helps to have an oriental "shoes off in the house" policy; unshod feet are more sensitive and less dangerous to feathered pedestrians. Slow-moving, clumsy or severely clipped are more vulnerable because they cannot flap and hop and move quickly to avoid heavy footfalls.

Hand-in-hand with psittacines free in the hose is the very real threat of having a door closed on them. Automatic and spring doors, bathroom doors, car doors, all may be abruptly shut on an unsuspecting bird. We have even known flying pets who were injured in a door when their keeper was leaving a room and the parrot took off to follow. Our hookbills loved to perch on tops of doors in favorite rooms, we had to be constantly aware of both floor level and ceiling level hazards!

Entanglement

With the new generation of popular rope toys, the need for caution here is stronger than ever. Parrots love to chew, fray and burrow in ropes, twine, old socks, fabric and fibers. I truly support the makers of fine rope toys for the preening and chewing habits they encourage in our domestic psittacines. It is up to the pet owner to be aware that aged and severely frayed rope and cloth playthings are a danger to our feathered friends. Monitor carefully, trimming overlong or tangled thread pockets on your bird's playthings. It only takes one sharp toenail becoming entangled in a binding thread to start a twisting motion which can trap your pet's leg, neck and torso in the fabric. If there is any doubt about safety, discard the toy! Our parrots may sleep in cardboard boxes with cloth liners. We use pillowcases and t-shirts to avoid nasty towel frays—especially with chewing species such as *Poicephalus*, quakers, conures, etc. Remember, any thread nesting material for lovebirds, canaries, finches must be short to evade dangers for these breeders.

Rolling Onto Pet During Sleep

It takes a truly light sleeper to share a bed with a bird pet. Tis absolutely essential that a bird be protected against crawling in too closely against its owner and being suffocated. I have slept with certain baby or ill psittacines over the years, but I am a very light sleeper with one ear open for sounds of predators near the aviaries. My pets are kept in a sleeping box on the bedside table with a large towel over the box to prevent escape. There is just as much joy having your bird in a cage nearby when you wake up without the chance of a sorrowful accident. Even persons who snuggle with their pets for an afternoon siesta must be aware that a drowsy keeper lying with an avian companion presents a threat to the bird.

Drowning

Another accident common to smaller pet birds is drowning. Any standing water in the house from the bathroom toilet to the birds own water bowl may present danger. Dishwater left in the kitchen sink is an attraction that can offer fatal consequences for a budgeriger, cockatiel, lovebird or other small pet. Remember, any steep sided vessel with water deeper than the bird's legs may signify a drowning situation. Soaking wet birds are heavy, helpless and prone to exhaustion and catching colds. Many cases have been reported of psittacines flapping unexpectedly into an ocean, river or swimming pool. When owners were not holding the bird. Another serious danger is bubbling water on a

kitchen stove—should your conure or other dish bathing species decide to jump off the shoulder for a bath!!! Take care; feathers and water do not mix well.

Toxic Chewing/Electrocution

Gnawing hookbills in an unsupervised home are in constant danger from toxic lead, zinc, styrofoam, paint, poison plants and electric wires. The easiest way to keep a bird from chewing on household objects is to provide it with a variety of interesting natural chew materials in its own environment. No painted kitchen cabinet offers the variety of chewing pleasure that can a fresh apple bough! Be aware of the textures your pet prefers, if she loves shoe laces don't try to force her to chew on 2" x 4"s. We grow potted plants such as geraniums and spider plants so that our birds have safe chewing materials. Avoid fertilizers, unsafe potting mixes and plant sprays.

One must watch out for sudden appearance of gnawing in normally benign species during breeding season. If a psittacine insists on going to a certain spot to chew on woodwork, consider building it a safe, chewable branch and a board at that site to satisfy its needs. In our experience, there is almost no teaching hookbills not to chew on electric and phone cords if they are so inclined. The best remedy is to encase or eliminate open wires, childproof outlets, and keep birds away from rooms where they can engage in such behavior. Once again seek diversions of natural chewing materials. Larger intelligent psittacines such as cockatoos are too easily bored to accept the same toys and chewing things week in and out. It takes imagination and thought to "outsmart" these pets and keep them from being destructive or in danger.

Flying Into Glass Windows

It is quite common for pet birds flying inside to crash into clear glass windows and doors with startling force, causing temporary unconsciousness, injury, or death. There are various ways to avoid such an accident with your pet birds. The most obvious is to keep your birds wings trimmed. But for those birdkeepers who still maintain flying hookbills, etc., it is essential to train your fledglings about windows and glass when they are young. All our chicks spend time playing in the window bays of the bird room—we will gently push their beaks and faces against the glass to show them what this clear barrier is about. Most of our bird room windows are left slightly dirty to increase the visibility of the glass to the bird. Stickers or paste-ups can do the same (and help protect outdoor wild birds who occasionally crash into windows.) Perches, plants, branches, hung toys and other landing paraphernalia will increase the safety of your windows more than just a bare sill. In some cases, wire mesh or nylon netting can serve as protection for birds who have trouble learning about glass. In our experience, smaller, less intelligent parrots are more difficult to train about this danger than the larger birds from Australia, Africa and the Amazon.

Bird Killing Bird

Keepers of more than one avian pet can relate dozens of tragic encounters between two or more birds. Whenever we decide our pets are compatible enough to exist without supervision, we assume responsibility for the consequences. Perhaps the most common mishap results when owners go out to purchase a companion for a cockatiel budgie or finch, etc. The bird is brought home, plopped into the “lonely” bird’s cage and left. Possessive of its cage space, the first bird keeps the newcomer away from the food and water dish resulting in rapid starvation! Pet stores around the world could prevent hundreds of useless deaths by advising customers to place an extra food and water dish on the floor of the cage when introducing two prospective avian buddies—at least until the two are seen eating from the same feeder.

The greater the size difference between two parrots sharing space, the greater the chance of the smaller bird being injured. Easily excitable hookbills such as lorries, amazons and cockatoos must be carefully watched if let free amongst other birds. Large cockatoos especially may exhibit near carnivorous behavior when housed near a cage of fluttering budgies, canaries or “crying” baby parrots. Lorries, conures and caiques kept in twos or more may show pack behavior towards single psittacines of other species. Be careful of any handicapped or ill or wet-from-bath parrots; they can become immediate victims of normal birds when left in an unattended bird room. All such behaviors are more unpredictable in the summer and breeding seasons. We’ve seen Alexandrine Parrots attacked by amazons, amazons attacked by Meyer’s, plumheads attacked by quakers, and nearly anything attacked by lorries.

Beware when mixing parrot species of dramatically different color or sound. Take special precautions when housing any cageful of species in threes, fives, etc. You may not notice the ever-present pecking order until it is too late. Any novice pet owner contemplating another bird should consult experienced sources before purchase. Inter-genus is a new and complicated branch of domestic aviculture. The happiest multi-avian homes are kept by owners who did their homework and spent their money wisely on compatible pets.

And finally, if you are a hobby breeder, be exceedingly careful when pairing up psittacines for reproduction. Time of year, age of two birds, differences in upbringing, volatile mate-killer species, environments, strength of each bird in flight and sundry other factors must all be taken into account BEFORE introduction day!

Your Birds In Someone Else’s Care

This category of pet bird accident in effect includes all the others we have discussed. Few persons love and care for a feathered friend like the owner, hence the danger of mishap often increases when your pet is left at home or boarded while you are away. Add to the previous list starvation, neglect, and inadvertent stress and you have quite a list of dangers during “birdsitting” Choose carefully the boarding facility or house sitter who looks after your pet. Inquire about their familiarity with bird illness signals, their ability to handle large psittacines and their veterinarian choices, (especially on days when

offices might be closed). Think not about the cost but about the care. Leave concise written instructions and back up phone numbers in case there are questions.

Parrots which “go crazy” cooped up in their cage must be let out; Those which cause trouble when freed, must be locked up or supervised. Trust your instincts. If you feel in doubt, consider taking the pet along with you. Savvy adult birds often adapt well when away with their owners when they have been raised with experience. Sometimes a pet parrot is safer with his owner in a strange place than with a stranger in his own home. If out-boarding at a quality pet shoppe or vet office, look carefully at the quarantine setup so that your bird is not unduly exposed to foreign organisms from other birds. Exacting foresight may make the difference in a happy holiday return!

Conclusions

It can be seen that domestic pet birds live a life laced with peril. In order for them to last their full life expectancy, it takes good fortune and keepers who foresee the dangers in everyday environments. In fact, this sharpened awareness of hazards awakened in us when we keep birds as pets is perhaps the greatest lesson our winged friends have to teach. The longer we share our homes with them, the more “birdlike” WE become—quick to notice change, adept at sensing risk, instantaneous in our warnings, and decisive in our reactions. Maybe those wild skills we unlearned so long ago are precisely the ones we are reacquiring through association with our parrots...

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