

Biting is often a result of abuse, fear, lack of sleep, noise and confusion in the environment, improper handling, or the failure of the owner to read the bird's body language. Some parrots' alternately enlarge and retract their eye pupils just prior to biting. This is called "flashing" or "pinning." Others flare their tails, raise the feathers on the neck or spread their wings as if to frighten an enemy.

Has your bird ever bitten you when you put your hand inside its cage? This is **territorial biting**. Your bird is programmed by nature to protect its cage and belongings from invaders. Avoid territorial bites by removing your bird from its cage before cleaning and replenishing food. Refrain from making eye contact with your pet at this time, as it may be perceived as a sign of aggression, causing your bird to act even more defensively. Teach your pet to step onto a proffered stick when it wants to come out of the cage. Raise the far end of the stick slightly, and the bird will seek the higher end, safely out of biting range of your hand.

Has your bird ever bitten you at the approach of another human? This is **displacement biting** and even occurs among birds themselves. A bird, trying to protect its mate, may first nip at the mate, then attempt to drive the intruders away. Never permit a bird prone to biting to sit on your shoulder. Don't encourage biting by teasing your bird or jabbing fingers through cage bars. The Guide to Companion Parrot Behavior by Mattie Sue Athan will give you more insight into biting and other avian behavior issues.

Remember that your bird is an individual with a strong personality and natural instincts. The reasons for biting are numerous. Some of the more common situations are:

Displacement Biting

Has your bird ever suddenly bitten you at the approach of another human? This disturbing behavior is like a short circuit in your bird's protective instincts. It's called displacement biting, and can even occur among birds themselves.

A bird, trying to protect its mate, may first nip at the mate to encourage it to fly away to safety, then attempt to drive off an intruder. Encouraging other family members to handle your bird and to share responsibility for his bird's care may help correct this behavior. Never permit a bird prone to displacement biting to sit on your shoulder.

Exploratory Biting

Many young hookbills have a tendency to be "beaky." They explore with their beaks, sometimes chewing on fingers and other human body parts during these explorations. This can be painful, but it doesn't mean your pet doesn't like you. It's just part of being an adolescent bird. Young birds usually outgrow this behavior as they mature and gain confidence.

Sometimes this "beaky" behavior is just the bird's way of testing objects to be sure that they're substantial enough to stand on. Discourage this type of biting by making your pet feel as secure as possible. Remain calm when the bird is climbing around on you. A stern "No!" or substituting a toy for your hand may be sufficient to distract a nippy parrot. If the behavior persists, some cage time may be in order.

Territorial Biting

Territorial biting sometimes occurs when you put your hand in your bird's cage. Birds are genetically programmed to protect their nests from intruders. Psittacine birds can be quite territorial, especially when their hormones are active during breeding season.

Peabody, a half-moon conure becomes frenzied; screeching and dive-bombing anyone daring to touch his yellow food dish! His human companion keeps several sets of dishes, and replaces the empty yellow dish with a full one in a split second!

Avoid territorial bites by taking your bird out of its cage before cleaning and replenishing food. It is often preferable to allow the bird to climb out on its own, rather than to put your hand inside to bring the bird out. Socialize with your little buddy in neutral territory, away from the cage. Refrain from making eye contact with a territorial bird as this may be perceived as a sign of aggression.

Teach your pet to step onto a proffered perch when it wants to come out of the cage. Raise the far end of the stick slightly, and the bird will seek the higher altitude, safely out of biting range of your hand or arm. Don't encourage biting by teasing your bird or jabbing fingers through cage bars.

Fear Biting

Fear of unfamiliar situations or people may precipitate biting. Such scenarios may include taking your pet to the vet or groomer, having a crowd of people at your home for the holidays, moving to a new home or even bringing in a new piece of furniture.

Does your bird nip you whenever the family dog enters the room? Is something in its line of vision frightening it? The sight of a kite hung up in power lines more than a block away once spooked my Amazons. I didn't even notice it, but they sure did! Once I lowered the window shade so they could no longer see the flapping kite, they settled down. Get down on your bird's level and look around. You may be surprised at what you notice!

Some birds have been abused in previous homes and biting was their only defense. In his previous home, my red-lored Amazon, Bogart was lured up a flight of stairs and kicked down the steps once he reached the top. Twenty-two years later, Bogart is still nippy, possibly as a result of this maltreatment. He doesn't bite if I handle him when I'm alone, but another person in the room sets him off. He's stick trained, so I just tote him around on a stick when other people are present.

Deal with fear biting by removing the source of the fear when possible, stick training your bird, learning which situations trigger biting episodes and avoiding the beak at those times.

Further reading: *The Beak Book* by Sally Blanchard.