

DISCOURAGING BREEDING BEHAVIOR IN PET BIRDS

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Parrots in the wild do not lay eggs unless they have a mate and a suitable nesting site. In captivity, however, some parrots will lay eggs or exhibit breeding behaviors despite the absence of a mate. Egg production is stressful for birds; it depletes their nutritional stores, and predisposes birds to malnutrition, osteoporosis, and reproductive problems. Behaviors that are normal for breeding birds, such as increased aggression, can be unwelcome when the bird is a pet. In situations where birds are being intentionally bred, these risks are an inherent part of the breeding process. For pet birds that are not being used for breeding, however, egg laying poses serious health risks without offering any benefits.

The pattern of egg laying varies widely among parrot species and among individual birds. Some birds will lay from a young age, others not until they are much older. Some will lay year round with no correlation to the seasons; others will lay only in the springtime. Some birds run into difficulties from the very first time they try to lay eggs. Other birds can lay for years before problems arise. In either situation, however, reproductive problems can lead to egg-binding, oviductal prolapse, peritonitis, and death.

Unfortunately, due to differences in anatomy, birds cannot be spayed in the same way as a dog or cat can. Without the option of a permanent surgical solution, the most effective way to stop egg laying often involves making changes in the bird's environment. When environmental change is not a sufficient deterrent to egg laying, hormone-blocking medications can be used to turn off the reproductive cycle.

How to stop your bird from laying unwanted eggs: 9 rules to follow

Put your bird to bed early.

A long day length is one of the most important environmental cues triggering egg laying in birds. By allowing your bird to stay up late, you are mimicking the long days of spring/summer, making your bird think it's time to breed. An early bedtime will help to turn off her breeding hormones. She will need complete darkness and quiet for this to be effective, and covering the cage while the radio or TV is on is often not adequate.

Keep your bird away from dark, enclosed spaces.

Most parrots are cavity nesters, and look for dark, enclosed spaces in which to lay their eggs. In order to stop your bird from laying eggs it is essential that she is kept away from such areas. Nest boxes, if available, should be promptly removed. Birds should be closely supervised when out of

the cage, and not allowed in dark spaces such as under a couch, behind a microwave, or in a cabinet.

Keep your bird away from other birds to which she is bonded.

Having a mate is a strong sexual stimulus for your bird. This mate may be a bird opposite sex, or a bird of the same sex. If your bird is bonded to another bird in the household, a temporary separation will help turn off her hormones. Ideally, she should not be able to see or hear the other bird during the separation period.

Do not allow your bird to engage in mating behaviors with you.

Some birds will display breeding behaviors with their favorite person, such as vent-rubbing, tail lifting, or regurgitating food. Discourage these behaviors by putting your bird back in her cage for a òtime outö whenever she displays them. Don't pet your bird on her back or under her tail, as this can be sexually stimulating. Restrict petting to the head and chest.

Remove your bird's "love-toys".

Some single birds will display mating behaviors with objects in their environment, such as food cups, toys, perches, or mirrors. Mating behaviors include regurgitating food, vent rubbing, and tail lifting. If your bird engages in these behaviors with an inanimate object, that object should be permanently removed from her environment.

Rearrange the cage interior and change the cage location.

Your bird is more likely to lay eggs in a cage that hasn't changed in a while. Putting your bird in a different cage and/or changing the cage location can help discourage laying. Changing the arrangement or types of toys, dishes, and perches in the cage can also be very helpful.

Give your bird optimal nutrition.

Producing and laying eggs robs your bird of the vitamins, proteins, and calcium she needs to stay healthy. It is especially crucial during the breeding season that she is on a complete and balanced diet, which in most cases will be a pelleted diet. A seed diet supplemented with vitamins is not adequate. Ask your veterinarian to recommend the best diet for your bird.

Avoid removing the eggs which your bird has already laid.

Sometimes the easiest way to turn off the egg-laying cycle is to allow your bird to sit on her eggs. If your bird lays a few eggs and then sits on them, leave the eggs in the cage for 21 days or until she loses interest.

Ask your veterinarian about hormone injections.

If the above changes do not stop your bird from laying eggs, your veterinarian may recommend hormone injections or implants. Hormones that turn off the reproductive cycle can be very helpful in reducing unwanted egg laying.