

The Human-Avian Bond

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by Patricia K. Anderson

According to the [2015-2016 American Pet Products Association survey](#), 6.1 million American households own an estimated 14.3 million birds, making birds the fourth most common pet following dogs, cats, and fish. Despite the popularity of birds as pets, there have been relatively few studies of the human-companion parrot relationship.^[1]

The bond between people and their parrots can be quite profound, something that I had little experience with until a parrot entered my life by chance in 1998. Although my family kept cats, dogs, donkeys, ponies, and horses during my childhood, I had little knowledge of birds beyond the sadly short-lived budgies that my mother and aunt kept when I was a small child.

One fateful day an acquaintance told me that she needed to rehome her parrot, and I naively said I would take him sight unseen. Otis, a male Quaker parrot, came to me in a small rusty black cage with boxes of cheap birdseed and grit, an inappropriate diet for his species according to my veterinarian. He screamed incessantly, and bit—drawing blood—but I was absolutely spellbound by his intelligence and his attempts to interact with me. I realized that I knew nothing about birds, not even what to feed him. So I began reading everything I could find on parrots. I watched Otis and decided that his initial aggression toward people was based on fear and that his screaming was based on boredom and frustration. It took me about a year to gain his trust, and his previous owner, who had never been able to touch him, didn't believe he was the same bird when I showed her photos of him perched on my knee. This small, brilliant green, gray and cobalt feathered dynamo forever changed my life. I was in the throes of completing my doctoral dissertation, and he was my constant companion, cheerfully vocalizing while perched next to me as I typed on my computer.

I was so intrigued by Otis and his fascinating behaviors that when I began my first full-time university job teaching anthropology one exasperated colleague told me that I should, to paraphrase, quit talking about the [bleep!] bird and do something scholarly with my new passion. Thus began my inquiry into the human-avian bond, my discovery of the young field of anthrozoology (the study of human-animal relationships), the development of a new university course on that topic, and my long path to behavior science.

The human-avian bond

[People have been interacting with parrots for thousands of years.](#) Despite the antiquity of this relationship, there are relatively few scholarly studies of the human-avian bond, with most anthrozoological research focusing on dogs and cats. Existing studies suggest that the human-avian bond can be both profound and complex. My research is based on a brief ethnographic study of a veterinary clinic specializing in avian and exotic medicine, the results of two electronic surveys of parrot owners, literature review, observations of human behavior at bird fairs, and of discussions on Internet lists and social media. Although the partial results are published elsewhere ([here](#) and [here](#)), I will summarize and include additional information below with an emphasis on behavior and how human-companion parrot relationships may benefit from meeting with parrot behavior consultants.

Research suggests that [people tend to have the same types of pets as children and later in adulthood.](#) In their study, [Kidd, Kelley, and Kidd](#) found that this pattern tends to hold true for horse, turtle, and snake owners, but not for bird owners. About half (47 percent) of participants in my survey had owned birds as children, but 43 percent had not. Of those who did not own birds as children, 10 percent had been exposed to positive experiences of bird ownership through family or friends. Thus other factors seem to affect at what point in their lives people acquire parrots.

As in other human-companion animal relationships, people tend to relate to their birds as family. In fact, [some owners refer to their parrots as “fids,”](#) a conflation of “feathered kids.” As family members, birds may be included in celebrations of hatch or acquisition days, as well as family holidays, and they may travel with their families on vacations. When they die, their owners are likely to attribute to them a soul or immortal spirit who will one day be reunited with their humans at the metaphorical Rainbow Bridge. [When parrot owners die, their birds may be mentioned in their obituaries.](#) The death of a pet may be equated to the loss of a human family member, a loss that is often disenfranchised by a society that unfortunately [does not recognize it as valid.](#)

Some parrot owners consider the bond with their parrots to be superior to that shared with [other pets](#), and even [human family](#). According to [Kidd and Kidd](#), “human-avian interaction can often be more warm and caring than human interactions with dog, cat, or horse.” Parrot owners surveyed by [Bennett and O'Hara](#) consider parrots to be equal to or better than dogs as companions. Four participants in [my survey](#) described their bond with their parrots as “superior,” and eight described it as “qualitatively different” from that with other pets. One even mentioned, “Don't tell my human kids, but I actually love my birds more!”

Why does the human-avian bond tend to be so intense? [Kidd and Kidd](#) suggest that it may be due to the capacity for parrots to imitate human speech and speak cognitively. In addition, the potential longevity of many of the larger species of parrots, barring accidents, improper care, or poor genetics, is an important factor. A person may have the same companion bird as a young child well into adulthood or even old age. However, there are important welfare concerns when parrots outlive their owners, or when the bond is never established or goes sour.

Anthropomorphizing parrots

Anthropomorphism has been defined as “the attribution of human characteristics or behavior to a god, animal, or object.” As humans, we tend to assume that others see the world as we do and that animals may have similar motives behind their behavior. [Serpell](#) observes that anthropomorphism can be deleterious to the welfare of companion animals. [Bradshaw and Casey](#) note that how owners treat their pets is strongly influenced by the owner's belief that their pets see the world as they do. Fisher refers to “[situational anthropomorphism](#)” as occurring when owners “misinterpret an animal's behavior in ways that correctly apply to that animal, but which do not apply in the situation in question.” Although there may be overlap, animals have a different sensory experience of the world compared to humans—as in the keen olfactory sense of canines or the [ability to see in ultraviolet](#) noted for parrots. Consequently, parrots may see and hear things beyond the human range of perception and react to them, leaving the owner with the mistaken

conclusion that a birds' behavior is unpredictable.

As mentioned above, parrot people, like many other pet owners, tend to relate to their birds as feathered children. Although this may accord them potentially better treatment and a higher social status as cherished family members, it may also lead to the anthropomorphizing and misunderstanding of behavior. Parrots are particularly vulnerable to being anthropomorphized for the same reason the human-parrot bond is so intense: their intelligence, capacity to mimic human speech, social nature, and tendency to form deep bonds with their human caretakers, as well as their potential longevity.

Some key areas where anthropomorphizing parrots can be damaging to the human-parrot relationship and avian welfare include diet and behavior. Most parrot owners know that [certain foods or beverages are considered toxic for parrots](#) including chocolate, avocado, and alcohol. However, some owners may share inappropriate foods or drinks with their birds anyway. The quantity of food is another issue. Parrots are much smaller than people and much less active than their wild kin, so they may easily be overfed by their well-meaning owners. Rock and Babinec note that [many pets are developing morbid obesity and type 2 diabetes along with their owners](#). In fact, Tufts University has recently opened [a clinic](#) to treat obesity in companion animals.

The human-avian bond: myths and misinformation

A serious concern is that many parrots may lose their homes and end up in shelters or be euthanized for a variety of reasons. According to the [Kaytee Avian Foundation Parrot Relinquishment Survey](#) (2010) and [research by avian veterinarians](#), behaviors labeled as aggressive are one of the most common issues owners list for giving up their birds. Many of the reasons given for relinquishing parrots are issues that could be addressed by working with parrot owners and educating them on how to best interact with their parrots before behavioral issues become problematic, or working with them to change established undesired behaviors. Parrot behavior consultants can teach clients how to understand parrot behavior and shape cooperative behaviors to avoid misunderstanding and the use of coercion.

Unfortunately, there is a plethora of bad advice that has been published by self-proclaimed parrot "behavior professionals," and others who have no background in behavior science. Following their advice can severely damage the human-avian bond and result in even more parrots losing their homes. Some of these ill-advised strategies include establishing yourself as the "flock leader," "laddering" your parrot to make it submit, avoiding "height dominance," trimming wing feathers to "adjust the bird's attitude," forcing a bird into a towel to "tame" it, giving your parrot the "evil eye," and others. Most of this advice involves the use of coercion and suggests the problem is inherent in the parrot, instead of the attitude and behavior of the owner.

The idea of "flock leader," which unfortunately is being perpetuated through social media and other sources, appears to come from the dog training world and popular television programs that use coercion and force. Asserting oneself as "flock leader" would likely make an already fearful bird more afraid, and thus further damage the relationship.

Height dominance is the mistaken idea that your parrot should not be allowed above your head, or it will attempt to "dominate" you. This perspective may also come from the dog training world and a misunderstanding of dog and wolf behavior. Owners are cautioned to cut the legs off cages, and at all costs keep their parrots below their own heads to avoid this alleged height dominance. In reality, if a bird is above your head, it is likely because they find it reinforcing up there, and you have not established a solid recall through positive reinforcement. Parrots in professional free flight shows can fly far above their handlers' heads or simply fly away, yet will usually recall when cued because the birds choose to return to a handler with whom they have a positive history of trust and reinforcement.

Wing trimming is advised by authors of many popular parrot care books, which works against the natural adaptation of birds for flight. By trimming parrots' wings, you are depriving them of the chance to escape stress. This can lead to flooding and is likely to put them into a state of learned helplessness. If a bird cannot fly away from perceived or real danger, in the wild that bird would soon be dead. Even more behavior problems are likely to result from wing trimming, including increased aggression, and potentially feather-destructive behaviors. However, birds that are flighted are in danger of flying into walls, mirrors, cooking pots, open toilets, and other hazards. They must be carefully supervised, and most of all must be trained. One of the first behaviors to be trained is a reliable recall to hand or arm. Flight is empowering for birds and important for physical and mental wellbeing. However, many parrot owners lack the knowledge of how to successfully work with flighted birds, and wing trimming may be the best option for certain circumstances.

Another myth is that when a parrot bites or displays other undesirable behavior you must assert your dominance by "laddering it" or forcing it into a towel, to show it "who is boss." In "laddering," the parrot is forced to step from one hand to the other repeatedly until it relents. In reality, this use of coercion is more likely to violate the trust between bird and owner and result in further biting as the parrot attempts to protect itself. Owners are also often advised to "just take the bite" to show the parrot you are the boss.



Scale training is one of many husbandry

behaviors one can teach a parrot. It is important to record weight to detect any significant gain or loss that may indicate underlying health concerns.

Parrot owners have also been urged to “give your bird the evil eye” to show it has done wrong. This has no value and may even cause the owner to perceive that their bird is scheming to outwit or dominate them by willfully ignoring what the owner has been reassured is a good strategy. It can also cause fear and more aggression if an intense stare is perceived as stalking.

Many parrot owners may label their birds' behavior with anthropomorphic concepts that are highly inaccurate. One example is that of the belief that parrots “punish” their owners when the owner returns from a vacation without them. I have often heard parrot owners refer to their parrots “needing to bite them” when they return, so they might as well just take their bite and get on with it. Without witnessing the antecedents and actual interaction, it is difficult to definitively say what causes the aggression, but I suspect it relates to a self-fulfilling prophecy. If a person is expecting to be bitten, the hand they extend to a parrot for stepping up may be shaky or quickly withdrawn, thus throwing the bird off balance, violating trust, and creating a situation where the parrot is likely to bite. Alternatively, the owner may be so excited to be reunited with the bird that they overwhelm it, and the parrot may bite out of fear.

Scale training is one of many husbandry behaviors one can teach a parrot. It is important to record weight to detect any significant gain or loss that may indicate underlying health concerns. The best way to build a positive bond with a parrot is through operant conditioning and positive reinforcement. Many cooperative behaviors can be shaped to make life in captivity easier, and more enjoyable and enriching, for parrots and their people. Recall training, target training, crate training, syringe training, scale training, and a foot target for nail grooming are all important husbandry behaviors to be taught. In addition, parrots can learn color and shape discrimination, and other concepts. Training builds a positive bond between parrot and owner and should be fun for both.

Touching parrots



Soliciting a head rub. This parrot has a lowered head with relaxed feathers and has already begun to scratch his own head (in case the person missed the first cue!).

Touch is an important part of most pet-human relationships. It might be assumed that touch would be less important to the human-avian bond as parrots are often kept in cages, but that is untrue. Kidd and Kidd note, “One particular similarity between birds and humans not usually noted in the literature is affectionate behavior.” While interviewing parrot owners at pet stores, the authors observed birds flying to their owners or even to visitors or customers with whom the birds obviously felt comfortable. I observed affectionate behavior between both male and female parrot owners and their birds when observing in the veterinary clinic. A male respondent to my 2014 survey mentioned that, “my cockatiel loves to snuggle under my chin and have his head rubbed.” Physical contact was the ninth most common characteristics of parrot owning noted by participants in my first survey of parrot owners based on a qualitative analysis of essays.

Touch is an important part of pair bonding and reproduction in conspecific avian relationships. Unlike cats and dogs, who are often neutered, most parrots are reproductively intact. Although petting may be an important part of bonding with one's parrot, inappropriate touching of parrots can lead to reproductive issues including aggression and even cloacal prolapse, especially in Umbrella and Moluccan cockatoos, and parrot owners are cautioned against touching the back, under the wings, and under the tail of their parrot as these areas can be sexually stimulating.



Proper way to rub a parrot's head: against the feathers.

Aggression may also result when owners insist on interacting with parrots who do not wish to be touched. Even those who usually welcome interaction may not want to be petted all the time, and that is where behavior problems can occur. If one forces their attentions on a parrot they are likely to be bitten. I encourage parrot owners to ask before touching, and to respect their parrot's communications. By pairing a verbal (e.g., "Touch?") or visual cue (e.g., a hand gesture) with the moment a parrot solicits a head rub, the owner can shape the behavior to the point where the owner can offer the cue, and the parrot responds with body behavior that indicates, "Yes, I want a head rub," or "No."

Body language indicating the parrot welcomes this type of interaction includes a lowered head, relaxed head feathers, and leaning toward the human.

Body language in a parrot rejecting a head rub might include looking and leaning away, moving away, holding their head high, their feathers being slicked back (addressed to the head and body), or holding feathers erect with the pupils of their eyes rapidly expanding and contracting, and their mouth open. If the human persists in the face of these signals, they are likely to be bitten.

See Barbara Heidenreich's "[The Parrot Problem-Solver](#)" for a discussion of aggression and avian body language. Alternate positive ways for pet owners to interact with their parrots include training husbandry and other behaviors like waving or circling.

Defining the human-animal bond



Parrot rejects touch. She is pulling back from the hand. Note feathers are not relaxed but in position to make parrot look larger. If the person persists they are likely to be bitten.

One of the most intriguing questions about human behavior to me as an anthrozoologist and a student of behavior science is, "Why do we tend to affiliate with other species?" Various models have been proposed to explain the phenomenon of pet keeping and include the [deficiency argument](#), the [biophilia hypothesis](#), the [dominance argument](#), and the [social support hypothesis](#).

According to the deficiency argument, people keep pets because they are unable to sustain normal relationships with fellow human beings. This argument is contradicted by research that indicates that [pets are more likely to be found in households with families with children](#), and that pets may even enhance interaction with our fellow humans by acting as "[social facilitators](#)." Further, the majority of people who participated in my human-avian bond surveys were married.

The biophilia hypothesis assumes that there is an innate genetic need for humans to affiliate with nature and other species. However, [the biophilia hypothesis falls apart under scrutiny](#), due to the fact that humans tend to relate to animals in very different ways, depending on cultural and historical contexts. Leslie Irvine notes that for most of human history we have anthropocentrically attempted to manage, control, and destroy nature and other animals, and that [conservation is a relatively new idea](#).

Yi-fu Tuan argues that humans keep pets out of [a need to dominate others](#) and impose hierarchy. Part of this domination includes

“sanitizing” animals by modifying their bodies (neutering cats and dogs, for example) to make them more tractable and convenient to manage. Irvine, on the other hand, notes that the “relationships between humans and animals are too varied and too fluid to attribute to a single causal factor.” Further, positive changes in physiologic states (including lowered heart and blood pressure rates, release of oxytocin) have been documented in positive human-pet interactions.

The social support model appears to be the best supported for explaining the human-animal bond. Proponents argue that the pet relationship benefits humans mentally and physically. Rather than being surrogates for humans, pets provide a type of relationship that fellow humans do not. Serpell adds, “Pets do not just substitute for human relationships. They complement and augment them. They add a new and unique dimension to human social life.”

The social support model also makes the most sense from an anthropological perspective. Studies of kinship and organizations in human societies demonstrate that humans tend to develop structures of fictive kinship that help expand the bonds of support and mutual obligation for individuals beyond the consanguineal (blood) or affinal (related by marriage) family. Age sets, age grades, special interest clubs, fraternities, sororities, the military, and adoption of unrelated “fictive kin” help to expand these networks of support. The pet, as an honorary (albeit non-human) family member, also may serve in this capacity of providing important social support to their owners. Indeed, pets have become such an important part of many human families that anthropologists have developed a symbol for pets—the diamond—to include in kinship charts demonstrating family relationships.

My own studies (<http://www.animalsandsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/anderson.pdf> and <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2752/175303714X13903827488006>) of the human-avian bond also appear to support the social support model. The people who participated in my survey noted that their parrots help them cope with the pain, stigma, and isolation of chronic illness, and the depression and stress of their occupations and everyday life. Some parrot owners find the bonds with their parrots to be more profound than those sustained with other animals, even including some humans. Parrots provide routine to life by demanding to be cared for, including with social interaction. Like other animals, they are non-judgmental, and they appear to have empathy for their humans. It is hardly surprising that bird owners, like many other pet owners, tend to relate to their birds as feathered children—as a form of fictive kin.

Conclusion

Parrots may be considered cherished family members, providing much emotional support, joy, and routine for their human family. Some parrot owners consider birds to be superior to cats and dogs as companions. However, there are welfare concerns when owners misinterpret parrot behavior and feed inappropriate diets, or when parrots outlive their owners. There is much misinformation in popular literature and social media about how to interact with parrots, which is likely to damage the human-avian bond. The most humane and least intrusive approach is to use operant conditioning and positive reinforcement to shape cooperative behaviors, build confidence and trust, and enrich and empower the lives of parrots and their owners. The human-avian bond remains a rich area for future investigation.

[1] In this article I am speaking primarily of relationships with parrots, and the terms bird and parrot are used interchangeably, although many species of birds have been kept as companions.

Patricia K. Anderson, PhD, is an associate professor of Anthropology at Western Illinois University where she teaches anthropology, archaeology, and anthrozoology. Her research interests include ancient Maya civilization, the prehistory of North America, the human-avian bond, and bird behavior and modification using applied behavior analysis.

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