



Paws, Claws & Wings

Physical and Behavioral Rehabilitation for Animals



Fagan

Fagan is a 4 year old male blue Indian Ringneck who has begun to show aggression towards both his owner and her boyfriend. He has also begun to masturbate and regurgitate.

Fagan was bought as a weaned baby from a pet shop at about 2 months of age. He has a slight deformity of one wing which was diagnosed while he was immature, he has adapted well to this and it does not cause any problems. Fagan also has an intermittent limp. Fagan's wings are clipped but he still can fly a little. He spends his time out of his cage when his owner is there, and roams the house, he sometimes chews on wires, but the house is mainly 'bird proof'. He won't eat pellets and vegetables, he only eats sunflower. This diet is lacking in nutrients and can cause serious health problems due to the lack of Vitamin A, C, B, calcium and most essential vitamins and minerals, due to the almost exclusive fat contained in sunflower seeds. He has a nice large cage with lots of toys. Fagan's favourite toys are bells and he has 2 special bells and some special Tupperware in his cage. He also has a cat scratch post and box of toys (human children toys, coke lids ect), that are all relatively safe for birds. He has a very close and affectionate relationship with his owner and seems to love her boyfriend as well. The owner is planning to move in with her boyfriend and to take Fagan with. They will be moving from a small cluster to a free-standing house with a large garden and he Fagan will be able to have a large outside aviary for use during the day. Fagan does know the owners boyfriends house as he often spends weekends there with the couple, he has his own cage there.

Fagan has become very aggressive, he won't let the owner's boyfriend touch him and even sometimes bites the owner, especially if he is on her shoulder and her boyfriend comes near. He doesn't want to come out of his cage and will attack if anyone tries to take him out. He also masturbates and regurgitates on his 'special' toys. The owner is very upset by this sudden change in personality and wants to know what she has done wrong to make her loving, cuddly bird hate her. She is also upset by his embarrassing masturbating behaviour and finds the regurgitation disgusting. All of these problems seem to be getting worse.

Discussion:

Seasonal sexual behaviour: Most Eurasian parakeets especially Indian Ringnecks display a very pronounced breeding behaviour. Most birds will become a little moody and their behaviour will change slightly over the breeding season as soon as they become sexually mature. The birds that this change is seen most commonly are the Amazon, Ringneck and Cockatoo species. These birds will become aggressive, begin displaying and become very sexually frustrated if not permitted to mate. Many male Cockatoos will kill sexually immature or unreceptive females during this season. Seasonal sexual behaviour means that as Fagan has reached sexual maturity, when it becomes the time of year to breed (in South Africa and for Ringnecks, this is usually spring, around August to November), he will begin to act like a breeding bird, he will look for a mate and try to

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breed. This behaviour will usually go away once the breeding season is over but on a whole he will be more perceptive to sexual advances and slightly more aggressive to perceived threats. Fagan is also exhibiting slight frustration aggression as the action he 'needs' to perform is being blocked and his frustration and not being able to reach this goal is building up and finally will exhibit as aggression and 'strange or unusual' behaviour. This is why it is very important to know your bird and be able to read its body language, so you can anticipate any aggressive acts.

Territorial aggression: A bird's cage is his nest and his safe place. Most birds, if they have a good bond with their human family, will happily tolerate having hands and arms in their cage / territory but when a bird is feeling unsettled or frustrated, they may not tolerate this. The definition of aggression is an offensive or defensive behavioural response to any aversive stimuli. In a bird this may include lunging, growling, biting and displays of very subtle body language.

Solutions:

Fagan's aggressive behaviour is a normal part of a bird's maturation. Fagan has reached the age where he is becoming sexually mature and he now has sexual and breeding needs and urges. Unfortunately it is a part of a bird that is often unacceptable to the owner, but perfectly natural, so we must work on making these stages of his as comfortable for both of you as we can. It is a sexual response and in the wild this is when he would start finding a mate and breeding with her, as he has reached sexual maturity. In regards to his toys (especially his bells and containers), he sees them as his mate in a more sexual way, hence the regurgitation and the way that he becomes very protective over them. Some people recommend removing the items that he is overly attached to and may see as a mate (the items he is regurgitating and masturbating on), but I do not agree with this as I believe he needs to act out his urges. As for yourself, you are also a mate, which is one of the reasons he bites you when unprovoked. He is not being malicious, this is his way of saying 'hey, pay attention to me, I am your mate, listen to me!' When he bites you when your boyfriend is around, he is trying to make you move away from him as Fagan sees your boyfriend as a threat (in nature, if you were a bird, you would not be hurt as you would be covered in feathers). During Fagan's aggressive periods (especially during the breeding season) you need to be able to give him his space and put a bit of distance between you and him, this may be distressing for you but try not to be hurt by his behaviour, this is a necessary action for both of you, as it will release frustration for both you and Fagan.

Unfortunately, in regards to his masturbation and regurgitation, this is a sexual behaviour that is normal for males; he will need to do this to prevent him becoming increasingly sexually frustrated and therefore more aggressive as he will have no other outlet for his frustration. These are behaviours that you are going to have to live with. His cage can be covered for short periods of time if this is really embarrassing for you, but remember to Fagan, covering his cage is a punishment so only do this if absolutely necessary. Touching and stroking Fagan in certain ways and areas on his body (along his chest, abdomen and flanks especially) may stimulate arousal (this is similar to the areas

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and ways that a birds partner would preen him before mating) and this may cause him to regurgitate or masturbate. Be aware of where you touch him, especially during breeding season, and take careful note of his reactions as you may be inadvertently stimulating him sexually. Remember Fagan is a very intelligent bird, but he is also emotionally sensitive so work gently with him, reward him (food, voice, touch or attention) a lot and never shout at or physically punish him.

During his aggressive periods I would prefer if he is not allowed to kiss you or be on your shoulder, the risk of him having such easy access to your face can have very unpleasant consequences. Just always remember, he is not biting because you have done something wrong, it is a natural part of being a bird and the only problem is that we are not fellow flock members, so we can't understand him as well as another bird would. Never have Fagan on your shoulder or kiss him or allow him access to your face when there is even the slightest chance he may bite.

As Fagan is now becoming sexually mature, he will be more inclined to protect his territory, in this case, his cage. If you are trying to get Fagan out of his cage and he begins to show signs that he may become aggressive or attack, leave him alone. I would prefer that you do not reach into Fagan's cage to get him out. In this way you are inviting him to protect his territory and he must not be given the opportunity to bite you and therefore 'win' as you will not be able to get him out. This will only teach him that if he doesn't want to come out, all he has to do is bite and you will leave him alone. This is reinforcing his biting and attacking behaviour. To get him to accept having hands in his cage again, every time you walk past his cage, open it and place a treat inside, do not attempt to touch him and then shut the cage and walk off. This will teach him that you entering his territory doesn't mean that he will be made to do something he doesn't want to do; nice things also happen if your hands are in his cage and he will begin to accept you in his territory again. If you want Fagan to come out of his cage rather leave the cage open and do something interesting (that he will want to investigate) so that he has to leave his cage to see what you are doing.

Fagan biting you may just be an 'isolated' problem, as he has never bitten in an aggressive way before, he only usually beaks (explores objects using his beak - this may involve some pressure as for a bird, their beak is the equivalent of fingers and they will use it to investigate their environment), and he just needs to be reminded that biting will not be tolerated at all. When he bites your hands, try not to draw your hand away, stand up (even if he falls to the floor), pick him up immediately and put him in his cage for a 'time out'. Do not speak to him at this point; maybe just tell him oow, bad bird or no (he will understand from the tone of your voice that he has displeased you). His time outs can start for 5 minutes, where he is alone and ignored in his cage, and can extend to periods of up to 15 minutes with recurring offences. If after a 15 minute time out, he is still biting, then cover the cage up, and when you let him out again, he must not be allowed to climb onto the couch until you feel it is safe again and he has gotten over the biting episode. If this plan is followed consistently he will realise that biting is not a good way to get your attention, being a good bird (playing, talking, singing, being calm, interacting with you on a safe level) is much better as then he is rewarded by being able to be a part of the flock / family and not being put into isolation (where he feels

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very left out). Try to teach Fagan that sitting quietly with you will result in petting and treats but trying to bite will result in being ignored. Each time you catch Fagan doing something that you approve of (eg: playing nicely with his toys), reward him but when you catch him doing something you disapprove of (eg: masturbation) ignore him. The main point is to avoid placing Fagan in a situation where you know that he will react. In this case this would be trying to forcibly remove him from his cage. Physical punishment and force will never work with a bird, birds are very headstrong and can be stubborn and if you ignore a birds warning signs and continue to attempt to force them to do what you want, they will retaliate, and you will have reinforced their behaviour. You may feel the need to interrupt his behaviour, for this you can use a water pistol to startle him. Don't spray him, just spray close to him to interrupt the behaviour, but always remember to reward him for acceptable replacement behaviour.

As Fagan is a ringneck (known for moodiness and intelligence), changing his behaviour is going to take time, consistency and a lot of persistence. He will keep testing you and if he is allowed to get away with biting just once, you will be starting from the beginning again. Please don't be discouraged though, it may seem as if he is just not responding but suddenly one day you will see a light at the end of the tunnel. If you are feeling as if you are just not getting anywhere, please let me know, as we have more weapons in our arsenal than Fagan does, and if need be we can begin using other methods (castration, pairing him up with a mate, making him an outside cage bird ect.). I always prefer to begin gently but if his biting continues to be a problem we can move on to more stringent techniques.

Prognosis:

It will take time, and consistency but you will definitely be able resolve this problem so that both of you are happier and more secure in your relationship. You will find that every year Fagan's personality will change during breeding season but with consistent handling of the situation, you can make this period much less difficult for both of you to cope with. Just remember that Fagan is not to blame, he is just performing a natural, instinctive behaviour. As Fagan ages, his breeding behaviour should decrease and there will come a time when you will barely notice the changes in seasons due to his behaviour. As long as you treat his biting immediately and never allow him to 'get away with it' or reinforce the biting, this behaviour will dissipate over time as he learns better replacement behaviours.

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