

THE NATURE OF GREYS

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Ask a room full of parrot owners to describe the personalities of their beloved African Grey parrots and you will hear nearly every adjective in the dictionary. The fact is, describing the typical *Psittacus erithacus* is like describing the average *Homo sapiens*. For every generalization, there are many exceptions. Still, for those of you who are thinking about owning a Grey, and those of you who have never thought about owning a Grey (yet), there is one trait you can count on: Greys are sensitive to our most private feelings and reflect back to us our most poignant emotions. It is their nature.

Though better known for their talking ability, it is this deeply empathic nature that makes African Greys so beloved. Noah, Annette Hodge's Grey, sensitively reflects her feelings and a few secrets too: "Noah can tell if I'm in a bad mood before I even realize it myself! He doesn't want to come to me if I'm not happy. When he repeats something I've said, he uses the exact same tone of voice. Everyone who hears him can tell if I've been upset or excited."

This empathic nature is so widespread among African Greys that many believe it is a genetic trait. In their natural habitat of tropical Africa, Greys are prey animals who increase their chance of survival by sensing the environment around them. Although the genetic pathways for such behavior remains a mystery, the Grey's ability to share our deepest feelings gives them a special and unique place among companion parrots, indeed among all pets.

Species

African Grey Parrots belong to the genus *Psittacus* which has one species, *erithacus*. *P. erithacus* comprises two subspecies: First is *P. e. erithacus*, commonly known as the Congo African Grey; and second is *P. e. timneh*, the Timneh African Grey. At one time it was thought that there was a third subspecies, *P. e. princeps*, but this bird is now thought to belong to the nominate species.

The Timneh's natural habitat includes southern Guinea, Liberia, the western region of the Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone. Congo African Greys occupy the broad equatorial band from central Africa to the western coast. As explained by Jean "The African Queen" Pattison, many people refer to Congo African Greys by their region of origin. These names have become a sort of common street lingo to describe Greys but are not recognized subspecies. These "street names" can be quite misleading when the birds' region of origin is not the same as the country from which they were exported. For example, what some people refer to as Cameroon Greys, distinguished by their large size

and silver color, are really from the Congo (formerly Zaire). But, Pattison says, “When all is said and done, they are the same subspecies: *P. e. erithacus*.”

Physical Characteristics

In a beauty contest between Congos and Timnehs there would surely be two winners. Both subspecies have inquisitive black eyes until five or six months of age. At that time a very gradual and variable change in eye color begins including gradations of light gray, yellow-white and yellow. After two or three years, depending on the individual, the final adult color emerges, typically a penetrating shade of pale yellow.

Both Congos (generally about 475 grams) and Timnehs (around 300 grams) qualify as medium sized birds but, as with most characteristics, there are huge variations around the average description. For instance, there are petite Congos and monster Timnehs, but lately there have been a lot more monster Congos. This is most likely a result of improved breeding and nutrition practices of some breeders and owners. Scott Lewis, a breeder from Texas, has a Grey breeding male aptly named Big Boy who weighs well over 600 grams. Len Charette, a breeder from Pennsylvania, recently reported the weight of a 9 ½-week-old baby Grey at 600 grams. It may be time to name a third subspecies after all: *P. e. elephanthacus*!

Both Congos and Timnehs have black feet and a bare white facial patch around each eye. Congos have smooth, solid black beaks and body plumage that varies from dark slate to light silver gray. Their head and neck feathers are delicately edged with white-gray, giving a lovely, lacey look. Young Congos have dark red tail feathers with brown-black margins. These feathers won't be replaced with the striking red feathers of an adult bird until the completion of the first molt, which occurs gradually over the course of the first two years.

Aside from their smaller size, Timnehs are easily distinguished from Congos by their beak and plumage color. Their beaks gradually change from a solid brownish black to the typical bi-color starting at around ten weeks of age. Adults have peach to reddish beaks that are tipped with black and black mandibles. The Timneh's feathers are generally dark slate gray with a subtle hint of taupe. The abdomen and rump are various shades of light gray with some darker edging. The babies' tail feathers are typically maroon-brown but can be very dark gray with no hint of maroon, or light gray tinged with the adult shades of dark red wine.

African Grey Myths

Many myths surround this intelligent companion bird. Some of these myths have assumed the status of fact by virtue of repetition, but repetition does not make them true. One common myth is that Greys are clumsy birds. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Greys are innately graceful birds in the wild and there is absolutely no reason to believe that this characteristic has disappeared in our domestically bred birds. Clumsiness

is typically the result of three common practices: premature trimming of baby birds' flight feathers; excessive wing trimming; and severe toenail clipping.

The routine features of even the safest homes, such as mirrors, windows, open toilets and spaghetti pots present life threatening hazards to flighted birds. However, trimming babies' wing feathers before they have learned to fly can have profound negative impacts on the bird's physical and psychological well being. The process of learning to fly is nature's kindergarten. It provides the essential experience from which babies learn lifelong body awareness, control and confidence. Body awareness and control prevent clumsiness. Confidence averts uncertainty and distrust. Once learned, this knowledge is never forgotten and is critical to the personality development of a well-adjusted companion Grey. Given that their other needs are well met, the confidence and agility gained from mastering flight will inform and support our properly trimmed companion birds for the rest of their lives.

A second major cause for clumsiness in Greys is incorrect wing-feather trimming. Even birds that have mastered flying can be seriously injured and traumatized as a result of a severe or improper clip. An appropriate clip allows birds to land on their feet by gliding gracefully to the floor with balance and control. Custom clipping is necessary to adjust for the strength and determination of each individual bird. If too many feathers are clipped, a bird will have no lift and will hit the floor like a brick. Clip one feather at a time on each wing until a fifteen-foot glide path, with no gain in altitude, is achieved.

Improper toenail clips also contribute to a perception that Greys are clumsy. When one examines the foot size of birds with similar weights, it is apparent that Greys have smaller feet and more slender toes. To compensate for this, pet Greys should be allowed to have slightly longer toenails than other species. Only the very tips of the nails should be clipped. Toenails that are too short hamper Greys' natural balance and footing when perching and climbing.

Another common myth is that African Greys are one-person birds. However, in the wild, Greys have many relationships and many different kinds of relationships. Any given individual bird may be a mate, a parent, a sibling, a fellow juvenile, a clutch mate or a flock member. Likewise, Greys have the capacity to coexist peaceably with the various relationships within their human flock. This is not to say that Greys don't play favorites. There is a favored person in the lives of many pets. However, favoritism to the total exclusion of all others is the very opposite of flock behavior and results in a tragically narrow life. Surely, Greys that relate well to only one individual have been unwittingly taught to do so by their human flock.

Typically, Greys do not enjoy a huge range of human interaction styles. They interact best with people who make them feel safe and secure at all times. With an African Grey, trust is something that is learned and earned. People who are usually well received by Greys are consistently gentle (slow, steady hands and a quiet, soothing voice), accepting (expect the behavior of a bird and not a dog, cat or gerbil) and patient (recognize and

respect the pace set by the bird). If there is more than one person in your home who possesses these qualities, your Grey will not be a one-person bird.

A favored person should not squander this honored status (even though it does prove this person is the most lovable, trustworthy and humble person in the house...maybe the universe). The favored person bears the primary responsibility for facilitating a happy, secure, well-behaved bird--this includes facilitating rewarding relationships with others in the home. The favored person may need to examine his own motives for wanting a one-person bird if his Grey does not have the confidence to interact politely with other family members.

The wider the circle of acquaintances a Grey has the better. If possible, a companion bird should be exposed to friends and neighbors. This allows the bird to learn from experience that humans are kind and gentle allies. We must remember that Greys can live a very long time and may have more than one home in their lifetimes. Trusting, confident, well-behaved birds will have an easy time adjusting to new homes and will have no problem finding someone to love them back.

Accommodations

There are many things to consider when housing a companion parrot in your home, and a handful of special considerations for African Greys in particular. Bird behaviorist Layne Dicker¹ forewarns in his book, "A \$1,000 budget does not buy a \$1,000 bird. It buys a \$500 bird, \$250 cage, \$150 in toys, bowls, perches, food and accessories, and a \$100 vet visit." These figures may underestimate actual costs, depending on where you live.

A good cage for a Grey is rectangular in shape and at least 3 feet wide and 2 feet deep. Avoid cages with converging bars and scrollwork that can trap toes or feet. Overall cage height is not a critical consideration; there are few dominance issues with Greys. One-inch spacing, measured as the free space between bars, is best for Congos and Timnehs.

Take special care to investigate the materials used in cages manufactured outside the U.S. where lead is still used in paints because lead is toxic to birds when ingested. Never use a cage (or anything...toys, bells, links) with zinc in the metal or paint because zinc is toxic when certain levels are ingested. Insist that cage manufactures provide detailed information about cage materials. Together, we can make zinc poisoning a threat of the past. Modern inks are non-toxic and will not hurt your bird if ingested. Newspaper is the safest bedding for the bottom of your bird's cage.

The best location for the cage is against a wall. This allows your bird to see when someone is approaching and provides a sense of security. Try to find a spot with a long-range view of the household activities where your Grey can choose to actively watch the goings-on or fade into the background for a quiet moment. Typically, Greys need more quiet time than other species of birds and the cage location should allow for this. The cage should not be placed beside an exterior or interior door, drafty window, or heating or air-conditioning vent.

The more variety in perching surfaces and sizes the better. The perches, depending on the size of the bird's foot, should vary from 1½ inches in diameter to approximately 2½ inches. These larger diameters are more comfortable for Greys' long, slender toes.

Avoid smooth, slippery manzanita for young Greys. Injuries occur from falling off slippery perches, especially in the dark, and stability is important to maintaining the emotional confidence of a Grey. Cement, seashell and sand perches are helpful for blunting sharp toenails but should not be the perch where the bird sleeps. Always supervise your bird's access to fabric perches as sharp toenails can become dangerously entangled. All in all, natural branches are the best choice as they safely afford necessary traction, irregular surfaces for foot and toe exercise and a soft perch for chewing. Some bird-safe woods include citrus, ash, magnolia, willow, apple, crabapple, elm, dogwood, madrona, guava, birch and sassafras. Make sure that any perch given to your bird is clean and free from any sprays or insecticides.

Playtime

As with all parrots, playtime is crucial to the physical and emotional health of African Greys. Play stimulates thinking and coordination, and provides a productive energy outlet. With assorted toys and varied perch locations, you can encourage your Greys to experience the full range of bird behaviors that are their birthright. Provide activities that stimulate flapping, climbing, chewing, tossing, holding, preening, singing and talking. In addition to colorful hanging toys, include foot toys for chewing and manipulating, and puzzle toys for problem solving.

Take care to select toys that are made of safe materials and are well constructed. Also, consider the manner in which toys are attached to cages and possible ways in which an active bird could become perilously entangled. No loops and no snap hooks! Use only short, thick rawhide strips or short chains with safe links to avoid trapping heads, necks, wings, beaks and toes. Above all remember that toys should be used, abused and destroyed. Keep a good selection on hand and rotate them often to make the most of playtime.

The Grey Gourmet

Diet profoundly affects Greys' health, disposition and longevity. As new information is uncovered regarding both general parrot and species-specific nutritional requirements, we are faced with many decisions about how to best feed our companion birds. Currently, the best way to provide an interesting, healthful diet is to offer a wide variety of foods. Greys seem to do best with a diet that is one half pellets and one half soft foods. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Greys may be sensitive to high protein levels in their diet. So, until more information is available, try to keep their protein consumption to around 15 percent of their total diet.

Favorite foods to offer daily include Bobbi's Birdie Bread (see side bar), sprouts or soaked seeds, yellow-orange and dark green vegetables (see sidebar), brown rice, beans

and pasta. These foods can be mixed or served separately. Squeezing fresh orange juice over the soft foods will keep them fresh for many hours. Fruits should be considered treat foods because they contain so much sugar. As with all birds, never feed avocado, chocolate, caffeine in any form, alcohol or excess sugar, salt or fat. While we're in the kitchen, heed this warning: Products with a nonstick coating release PTFE fumes when heated above 530 degrees Fahrenheit or are used for an extended period of time. These fumes are toxic to birds. Non-stick coatings are everywhere including space heaters, irons, ironing board covers, bread machines, ovens and oven racks.

Water Works

Daily bathing is fundamental to maintaining a healthy African Grey. Unfortunately, people often overlook or underestimate this need. Greys must have frequent opportunities to hydrate their feathers especially during heavy molts and when you are heating or air conditioning your home. Truly, when it comes to bathing, more is better. Most Greys learn to enjoy bath time with consistent, gentle persuasion especially if the breeder has offered baths from a very early age. For older birds, it's a matter of discovering which method they prefer. Some birds prefer cool water, while others prefer warm. Creative approaches may be needed to entice birds to bathe. Successful strategies include spray misting, showering with a favorite person or placing floating toys, ice cubes or leaves in a shallow pan of water. Some Greys respond to bathing with characteristic caution or utter disgust. As always, do not move faster than your Grey is willing to go. Remain patient, but don't give up.

Meaningful Time

Similar to children, both quality and quantity time matter when a trusting, loving relationship is the goal. Dicker² developed an excellent model for managing time with our birds based on three kinds of attention: direct, shared, and ambient. Direct attention is "one to one" time with lots of eye contact and touching and no distractions. Indirect attention is the shared time when you're playing with the bird but you're also reading, watching TV or talking on the phone. Ambient attention is when the bird is out of his cage in the midst of the family hubbub. At a minimum, birds need 30 to 45 minutes each day of combined direct and indirect attention, and about 3 hours per day of ambient attention.

Mentoring Greys

Grey birds respond eagerly to facilitation and do not respond well to domination. Facilitation refers to a teaching style that eases the bird into the positive behaviors necessary for living with humans. If the goal is a well adjusted, loving pet, there will be little success with power strategies. Forcing birds to do what they don't want to may result in the desired behavior but it will not produce the relationship you hoped to have when you acquired them. Trust is the basis of a loving, healthy relationship with a Grey. Therefore, anything that threatens a Grey's trust in you or others must be avoided. A Grey cannot trust a person who shouts, glares, sprays, isolates, shakes, ladders, hits, beak

taps, drops or cage slaps. A Grey must feel safe and secure at all times. Positive behavior is easily facilitated when you have a trusting relationship with your Grey.

A good way to start building a trusting relationship with your Greys is to teach your birds to step up and down when asked to do so. Up and down are easy behaviors to teach a young bird and once mastered, they are tangible displays of communication and mutual respect. A reliable up/down response can be also used to facilitate compliance with other requests. In this way, it is a “learning to learn” behavior, a gateway behavior that gives access to positive interactions and increased freedom in your shared home.

Whenever your birds comply with your request, enthusiastically and lavishly praise them. By stepping up, they are demonstrating that they understand what you want and that they want to give it to you. This is a very positive process that affirms communication and promotes a trusting relationship.

There are two other important benefits to teaching your birds to respond automatically to the up/down prompt. First, your birds will always have something they can do to please you, something they can do right. This is a powerful strategy for relationship building. No bird needs to be sent to the proverbial “dog house” and no interaction needs to be left unsuccessful when a well-timed “Up” request results in immediate compliance.

Second, with a well-developed up/down response, you will have an effective tool to redirect any negative behavior your bird may exhibit into a positive interaction. Whatever the misbehavior, a cheerful "Up" request triggers a positive chain of events: The bird complies and you respond with smiles and praise. You and your bird are now “facing the right direction” and can continue to interact positively from there. This is called behavioral momentum. You break the negative momentum with a request that the bird can do easily and automatically to facilitate a new, positive momentum.

This perspective is very different from the popular “flock leader” theory in which the up/down response is used to assert dominance over your bird. This notion has no place in the raising of Greys. With either approach, facilitating or dominating, your bird will likely learn the up/down response. However, when facilitation is used, it offers a requesting, respectful, appreciative tone--in other words, it sets the stage for relationship building. When domination is used, the tone is commanding, challenging and insistent. These are very negative, adversarial tones that are picked up by birds and are likely to make them fearful and suspicious. The desired short-term outcome is the same--the bird steps up--but one way fosters a trusting relationship between you and your bird, the other way threatens to diminish it.

It is mutually beneficial to birds and their people to adapt to one another. Greys have long memories, and their personalities are deeply influenced by their experiences. Each and every interaction between a bird and a human is a lesson that teaches something to the bird about people. Each lesson either builds or diminishes trust. Thus, you must arrange all your interactions to be peaceful, respectful, patient and understanding. Trust is the

basis for all successful relationships between Greys and their people. To build a lifelong relationship based on trust, begin by imposing yourself less and facilitating more.

Raising a well-behaved companion bird is a commitment to a life-long role of teacher, supervisor and patient guide—a mentor. It is your job to generalize the gentle techniques discussed above in new ways and to new situations to facilitate well-adapted behavior in your Grey. But always remember: Your Greys are wild creatures whose inward-directed eye and instincts are in conflict with their dependence on us. Above all else, their struggle must be viewed with kindness, compassion and patience. The willingness of Greys to press the curve of their beaks against our cheeks and lower their heads for our human touch is not owed us; it is an extraordinary gift to be treasured.

1, 2 Dicker, Layne David, Parrots...Parrots...Parrots!, 1999 Edition.

Bobbi Brinker, author of For the Love of Greys, has been breeding and raising exotic birds for over 10 years. Her empathy for African Grey Parrots evolved into a theory of management based on gentle, unimposing guidance and acceptance. She is committed to ongoing education as the key to improving the lives of companion birds and is the site owner of <http://www.ParrotTalk.com>, The Grey Connection, and co-owner of Bird911. Her articles are widely distributed nationally and internationally.

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