

Parrots: A Lifetime Commitment

By Sharon St. Joan

Many parrots who are given up by their people have very severe behavior problems. They may scream incessantly or bite severely. They may pluck their feathers until they are completely bald. These problems arise from a multitude of causes, but probably the basic cause is that parrots were only very recently domesticated. They still have wild instincts, and inside every parrot is a wild parrot, expecting to be living in the jungle.



And, while feather plucking is not normal, well-adjusted behavior for a bird in the wild, screaming and biting are perfectly normal. In the tropics, parrots call to each other from great distances. Screaming is their version of the telephone! Also, as prey animals, they have little to defend themselves other than their strong beaks.

To further complicate matters, many people are very unfamiliar with the behavior and the requirements of taking care of parrots. A significant daily investment of your time and attention is needed to keep a parrot healthy and happy. Also, parrots have an intelligence level comparable to that of a three- or four-year-old child. You can begin to see how problems might develop with an animal as complex as this.

But, behavior problems are not the only thing that can cause someone to give up a beloved parrot. Here's Louie's story:

Louie's Story

Louie is a Hahn's macaw. Normally we think of macaws as giant parrots, with large imposing beaks, but a Hahn's macaw is a mini-macaw, which are quite small, not as large as an Amazon.

At the time that our story begins, Louie was six years old, well-behaved, polite, charming, talkative but not loud. He was a perfect gentleman – unlike many parrots, who easily develop what people consider to be behavior problems. Jim had had Louie for all of his six years and they had lived together very happily. Before getting a parrot, Jim had taken the time to learn a great deal about parrots and their care – about caging, diet, health concerns, training and behavior, toys and entertainment. Louie got lots of attention, and the two were great friends.

Then love intervened – human love, that is. A girlfriend arrived, who soon became a wife. Louie had not been expecting a wife; his best friend now had to be shared with someone else. The new wife and Louie did their best to get along with each other. The wife tried to be friendly; Louie was polite and only a little distant.

Then something went really wrong. A baby was about to arrive. The household changed in subtle ways. There were strained conversations that Louie overheard about parrots being dangerous to babies. The meaning of the words wasn't crystal clear to Louie, but the tone was unmistakable.

Louie became an object of fear and suspicion, of discord between husband and wife. Louie began to feel afraid and stressed, unsure of what was happening. He began to pluck his feathers and he squawked sometimes. Louie and Jim's wife became short-tempered with each other.

No one was happy, and finally, a phone call was made; Louie was bundled into his travel cage and was taken to Best Friends. Jim sadly said goodbye to his good friend.

Soon after, Louie was adopted into an adults-only home with a middle-aged couple who already had several other parrots. They both loved parrots, and all animals, and they had had a great deal of experience in knowing just what parrots need and how to relate to them.

Louie was exceptionally fortunate. While many homes can accommodate a cage and the right food, there are not a lot of really good homes for parrots. Louie was lucky that there was an opening at Best Friends when Jim made the phone call. Most parrot sanctuaries, including Feathered Friends, the bird department of Best Friends, are usually filled to the brim with unwanted birds and are only able to accept a new arrival when there is an opening.

What could Jim have done to keep his parrot? Well, it's true that, as a general rule, babies and parrots are not the best combination, since they can be a danger to each other. Parrots do naturally bite, and small children do naturally want to play with everything and have no idea that they may be causing harm to a living being.

However, there are exceptions to this general rule, and there are certainly homes that do provide wonderful care for both babies (or small children) and parrots. Jim's wife had been doing her best to relate well to Louie, and in time they could have become good friends.

Louie probably did not need to be given up. A good first step toward resolving the problem would have been for them to have a calm talk – with Jim attempting to understand his wife's fears, and with his wife understanding Jim's love for Louie.

Then, if they had contacted a good parrot behaviorist or a parrot rescue organization and asked for help, they might have been able to work things out. It might have involved some extra effort and some adjustments, such as not leaving Louie outside his cage alone with the baby. (A parrot's time outside his cage ought to be supervised anyway.) Being given away is always traumatic for a parrot, and when a parrot has a good caring home, every effort should be made so that he can stay in the home he already has.

Jim was not in any way unkind to Louie. He took very good care of Louie, and he loved

him. Jim had only made one significant mistake, and it was a mistake that most of us make at one time or another: He had not considered the future. He hadn't considered possible changes in his lifestyle. How many of us do? Yet, considering the possibility of change may avoid heartbreak both for a bird (or any companion animal) and for us.

Before adopting a parrot, some self-reflection is in order. You can help yourself, as well as the bird you're thinking of adopting, if you spend a little time considering what lies ahead – marriage, divorce, children, grandchildren, lots of travel, a career change, a home abroad?

You may not know the answers to these questions, and none of us can predict every twist and turn our lives may take. But, if you do sense inside yourself that you can't make the commitment required, it's best to be honest with yourself and not adopt a parrot.

On the other hand, you may feel certain that a parrot will always be a loved and valued part of your own life and your family's life, and that you will make whatever adjustments may be required.

Considering your future life with a parrot is important for several other reasons. As mentioned above, parrots are very complex companion animals, so it is very difficult to find good new homes for them. Sadly, many parrots are simply passed around from home to home. A second reason is that parrots are very long-lived. Smaller species of parrots may live 20 to 40 years. Medium or large species may live 60 to 80 years, or even longer. You need to take into account the long life of the bird and plan ahead.

So, don't rush out to get a parrot (or any other animal, for that matter) on an impulse. Spend several months reading, reflecting, and also learning directly from those who know about parrots, so you'll be prepared for the lifetime commitment you're about to make. If you put in the time, thought, knowledge, understanding and dedication that are needed, a companion parrot may be your best friend for life!

Sharon St. Joan established Feathered Friends at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary and has cared for birds and wildlife for over 15 years. She now devotes her time to writing about birds and wildlife-related issues.

See also: [Before Adopting a Parrot](#)