

How to Touch a Parrot

By Barbara Heidenreich

Isn't it fun to pet your dog or your cat? Most of our pets usually liked to be stroked from the top of their heads down towards their tails. Have you ever tried that with a parrot? If you have, you may have noticed the experience was not quite the same. Your dog or cat may respond by cuddling up closer, rolling over for a belly rub or relaxing and falling asleep. Usually when we touch a parrot in this manner the bird either tries to escape, bite or just tolerates our touch.

Does this mean we can't touch our parrots? Fortunately for us, parrots usually do like to be touched. But the way they liked to be touched is just a bit different from the other pets in our home. The next time you have the opportunity to touch a parrot try the following tips.

Touch on the Head

Try to avoid touching your parrot on the back, wings or tail. Most parrots prefer to be touched on the head. This is similar to how many parrots interact with each other in the wild. Because parrots can't reach to preen the feathers on their own heads, they often appreciate the help of a friend for this job. When touching your bird's head you may encounter something that feels like a little plastic tube. This is a new feather. When the feather is still growing it can be sensitive to touch. But once it has finished growing the last step is for the keratin wrapping to come off. You can help by pinching this "pin feather" in between your nails or fingertips. This will cause the wrapping to break away and expose the new feather. If the feather is still growing and not ready to be unwrapped, your parrot will let you know with a little squawk.

Stroke Head Feathers towards the Beak

Instead of petting from the beak towards the back of the bird, use your fingers to stroke the feathers towards the beak. A parrot who is really enjoying this will fluff up all his head feathers. Many times the bird will tuck his beak into his chest and close his eyes. When you see this body language you will know your parrot is really enjoying being touched.

Move Slowly

Bring your hand up to your bird's head slowly. This will give you time to look at how he is responding. If he is moving away from your hand, he may not be in the mood to be touched. Come back and try again later when he is more receptive.

Look for a Relaxed Parrot

Many parrots are very receptive to touch right before they are ready to take a nap or go to sleep. Slowly move your hand towards his head and offer a nice head scratch when your parrot looks ready for a snooze.

Teach a Signal that Means Touch

Teach your parrot a signal that means you would like to touch him. An easy way to do this is to wiggle your fingers a little bit right before you reach to touch his head. Your bird will quickly learn that wiggling fingers means the opportunity exists to get a head scratch. Over time your parrot will lower his head and fluff his feathers when he sees you wiggle your fingers. That will be his way of saying to you “Yes! I would like a head scratch. Thank you for offering.”

Once your bird realizes you know the right way to touch a parrot, you may find your bird is open to being touched on other parts of his body. This can make it easier to train your bird to allow you to trim his toenails, stretch out his wings and even train him to wear a harness. It can be a very wonderful feeling when your bird trusts you enough to let you touch him. Try these tips with the parrots you meet and you will find you will have many new bird friends.

Barbara Heidenreich has been a professional animal trainer since 1990. Her company Good Bird Inc (www.GoodBirdInc.com) provides parrot training DVDs, books and workshops. She has been a featured speaker in twenty countries and has been published in nine languages. Barbara also consults on animal training in zoos.

Barbara Heidenreich

For more information on how to train your parrot visit Good Bird Inc

Barbara's Force Free Animal Training www.BarbarasFFAT.com

Copyright 2014 First appears in Fledglings Magazine by The Parrot Society of Australia