

## About That Egg in Your Cage

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor  
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### Some healthy solutions for your hormonal bird

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Recently a friend of mine put out an SOS on Facebook: For the first time, her 15-year-old African grey parrot began to lay eggs and the owner had no idea what to do. Should she remove them right away? I didn't know what to tell her, so I turned to experts for an answer.

Local bird gurus agreed that eggs should be taken out of a mate-less bird's cage -- that is, if you can get into that cage without losing a finger. Unlike chickens that produce ad infinitum as you remove the eggs, female parrots will likely lay one egg every other day for seven days until the next laying session. Most lay eggs once they come of age; beyond that, captives face issues very different from their free-bird cousins.

If birds aren't being bred -- and most captives aren't having sex -- potentially serious health risks can surround the egg-laying process. Stress is the biggest danger: it can rob their bodies of essential nutrients like calcium and protein, which can lead to malnutrition and osteoporosis. Egg-binding -- when the egg isn't in the best position to be easily passed -- can occur, causing prolapse and fatal yeast infection. Symptoms to look for are straining, panting, ruffled feathers, and staying at the bottom of the cage.

This is *not* an endorsement for breeding, although because of year-round warm weather, Miami is a hot spot for what could be termed a "professional captive avian advancement." Neutering isn't a viable remedy either, unless your bird gets continually egg-bound. So, as my friend asked, what can one do?

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According to “bird whisperers” like Mary Tanguay of North Miami pet store Mary’s LB, you can get through an egg-laying season more safely by taking certain measures, and you can even subdue egg-laying activity through changes of the environment and modification of your bird-handling behavior.

She suggests that a diet with extra calcium and protein will keep nutrition levels balanced for the egg-producing parrot. Broccoli, beans, protein powder, and cuttlebones can replenish what is lost in the process. Ironically, putting eggs back into her system (scrambled with the shell) is another recommended approach to keeping a female healthy during this time. Wheat germ oil is essential to help prevent birds from getting egg-bound, as is ample exercise. Sunlight is important, too, as it is needed to metabolize calcium.

“Leaving eggs with a mate-less bird creates a situation where she isn’t eating properly, says Tanguay: “In the wild, the male would bring food to the female. Without a mate, she has nobody to bring her food, so she’s sitting there guarding the eggs and doesn’t get off of them to eat. After 14 or 15 days, she loses appetite, gets stressed.... This could cause death because she’s not eating right.”

What about the pet owner’s own agony? Hormones cause all sorts of crazy things to happen. While hormonal behaviors are normal, owners may have to put up with biting, screaming, regurgitation, possessiveness, pacing, and feather plucking. Yikes! Luckily, there are steps to take that could lessen hormonal changes -- even egg-laying:

- If you provide a different cage or cage location, or simply rearrange the “furniture” inside the cage, it can put a damper on laying.
- Don’t allow your bird to become a night owl. Birds are preprogrammed to breed when days grow longer in the spring, but captives have long days year round. Cover the cage, turn off the noise, and say nighty-night by 5:00 p.m.
- Keep her away from potential dark nesting sites.

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- Toys and food dishes can become objects of your parrot's affection and should be removed if mating behavior is displayed with them.
  
- Refrain from stroking feathers on back, sides, and tail.

Tanguay offers other ways to turn off the tap. Remember the scrambled eggs trick? Take a tip from wild bird behavior by "renourishing her body with her own nutrients and hormones." This should stop the laying process for a while and discourage regurgitation. "Also, make sure you hold your bird," says Tanguay. "Talk to her -- the more she's out with you, the more she's discouraged from laying eggs. She'll have more to do than just sit in a corner and lay eggs."

In the end, my friend decided to let her African grey sit on those four eggs until she lost interest in them (not one egg broke). Everybody got through it with sanity and oviducts intact. She *did* get bitten on the lip and was concerned about her bird's lack of singing and interaction, as well as her fluffed-up-ness, but overall there wasn't too much drama.

But simply waiting for normal parrot behavior to return makes Tanguay wince. "If you see something wrong," she warns, "there's something wrong. React."

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