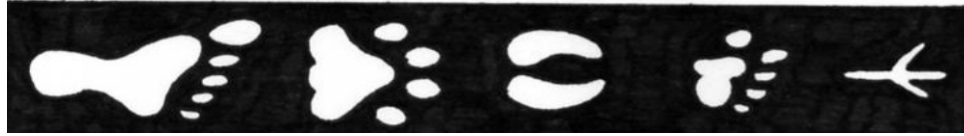


# SWAVA



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## Dear Members

Hello all! I hope this summer is treating you well. We are having a heat wave here. Of course I hear that it's affecting pretty much most of the U.S.! The animals of IEAS are taking advantage of their pools and the mister systems to keep cool. I have included an article about one of our tiger residents and the milestone she achieved this year. We also have a unique article provided by Three Ring Ranch Exotic Animal Sanctuary. Thank you very much Ann Goody for providing me with this article. You have been a big help. I hope you all enjoy the articles. As always, if there is anything you would like to see SWAVA do or in the next newsletter, let me know! I enjoy your feedback.

Sincerely,

Christi Gilbreth  
SWAVA co-founder

## Avian Masturbation aka Venting Your Frustration

*Ann Goody PhD, Samantha Loeber, Andrew Peng*

Avian masturbation is real. It happens and while it can provide for some embarrassing and awkward moments, it is a bird's normal response to its own body's need for sexual stimulation, especially for birds housed alone. Bird owners often observe their pet developing an intimate relationship with a favorite toy or stick and do not know how to react or minimize this behavior.

Allowing the bird access to its favorite object and responding to this normal behavior should be based on an owner's knowledge rather than

human perception or moral beliefs. Problems occur when the owner overreacts and becomes upset at the bird's sexual behavior. This common concern often leads to re-homing. The point of reference for this article is from a sanctuary, which receives numerous calls a year from bird owners seeking advise. Being better informed about avian masturbation will enable owners to more successfully understand and cope with this behavior.



^In contrast to wild birds, hand reared birds have a lack of avian role models causing their behavior and actions to be ruled more by hormonal impulses than learned flock behavior (nature versus nurture). By hand rearing a bird, we have taken them from a situation where their avian role models would train them on appropriate behavior for their species. Humans perceive a companion relationship with their “cuddly” bird while the bird initially views its owner as a parent figure. Once the bird hits puberty however, it begins to view its owner as a mate. We’ve created monsters! This is not to say that pet owners who cherish their birds are bad, what it means is that we must learn to understand how the bird perceives our actions and we can best do this by expanding our understanding of avian reproductive physiology.

The hours of daylight play an important role in birds that reproduce seasonally including psittacines. The lighting cycle in our homes differs greatly from the annual changes in length and exposure to sunlight that occurs in the wild. In addition to daylight, companion birds enjoy a manmade environment complete with light fixtures in the evening. The birds’ day is artificially lengthened to mimic a summer breeding season.

Light and other factors stimulate the avian brain into producing luteinizing hormones, triggering reproductive behavior. Companion birds receive a seemingly never-ending supply of high-protein and high-fat foods, which is uncommon outside of the natural breeding season. Inadvertently, well-intentioned owners create ideal reproductive conditions. Well-maintained cages and aviaries provide safe, secure nesting sites for their offspring, providing all a bird needs for year-long reproduction. In the long run, chronic hypersexual stimulation can cause detrimental health problems along with undesired behaviors.

Giving a companion bird some control over its own environment helps keep them in our homes. To minimize chronic hypersexual stimulation, a healthy balance needs to be achieved between the bird’s sexual frustration and owner’s comfort level. Do not actively punish or discourage the bird from masturbating, because this could make the bird very anxious. When handling, do not stimulate the back or rear of a bird as this touch implies courtship. In the wild, these areas of the body are only stimulated by a mate seeking to begin reproduction. Should a bird attempt to masturbate while being handled quietly return it to the cage and walk away providing a time out and a chance for the bird to return to a less stimulated condition. Our pets must view our touch as instructional as opposed to sexual. There are numerous terrific training guides that provide “alternative” stimulation for our intelligent psittacine friends.

Suggestions we have found helpful include:

1. Providing enrichment and increased busy behavior such as foraging, music, a large variety of toys, and human interaction along with rewarding the bird for favored behaviors.
2. Offer two or three meals daily instead of all-day feeding.



3. Refrain from providing nesting material to the bird.
4. Provide a distinct quiet time in a dark, isolated area.
5. A more complete environment may include a partner which can be same or opposite sex if you are willing to deal with possible offspring. Birds living in a pair do not masturbate. Giving the bird a partner will not make it less of a pet, just less frustrated and less likely to have extreme vocalizations, pluck feathers, or bite.

Case study: A fourteen-year old female sulfur-crested cockatoo. Tango was purchased as a 6 year-old by a couple, prior history unknown, who kept her nine years. She bonded immediately with the man (who did not have time for her past the honeymoon phase) but was cared for by the woman.

Since age ten, Tango laid eggs every other year and was more vocal and demanding in the springtime. She was otherwise healthy, a good eater, and had a good diet. She first bit the female owner at age eleven after an egg. The owners responded well but the bird continued to be more demanding. At age thirteen, there was a significant bite during an egg laying period. She exhibited daily masturbation or mating behavior with rope toy on top of play area. 3RR was then called in and evaluated the bird in the home. We suggested that the bird be moved to a more central place rather than the current "out of the way" location. A decreased protein and varied diet along with quiet time in a timeout and a night room were recommended. When the owner tried some of these suggestions, Tango calmed down and her behavior was acceptable to the owner.



At this time an avian vet was also questioned at the annual physical about Tango's masturbation. The vet felt differently from us and suggested that all "sex" toys be removed. This caused increased vocalization and more demanding behavior. The owner in frustration then returned the toy during an out of cage play session. The toy was picked up and Tango attacked the owner causing multiple, severe bites. The owner was considered euthanasia out of fear of the bird and did not want to put a dangerous animal in anyone else's hands. We suggested care options including training and behavior modification. The avian vet suggested herbal remedies but the owner was only interested in placement.

Ninety days of training and rehabilitation later at 3RR, Tango was placed in a lifetime home with a single man. She has multiple toys and is being fed a varied diet including a ration of safflower seed mix. She has both a cage with a cover that is used each night and a play area that is used several hours a day. Seven months into this, the bird has no aggressive behavior. Masturbation is allowed but not reinforced, however this is now only reported as a very rare occurrence. The bird is in a stable environment, which allows her a degree of control over her normal daily activities and comfort with her own natural hormonal changes. The new owner is very aware of her prior history and is doing all possible to minimize potential for sexual frustration.

We strongly feel bird owners should have a good understanding of a birds physical attributes and perception of it's self as a bird, including it's need for relief of sexual frustration. Through this knowledge we can become better caretakers of our avian companions.

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## Zippy's Big Accomplishment

By: Christi Gilbreth, IEAS Curator/Asst. Behaviorist

Almost anyone and everyone know that tigers love the water. They are one of the few felines to do so. In my seven years at IEAS, I have enjoyed watching our tigers play and cool off in their pools. Two years ago, however, we rescued a female Bengal tiger who just didn't like the water very much. Honestly, who could blame here.

Zippy is a female Bengal tiger who was rescued after hurricane Ike. She was rescued from what was called a make-shift home zoo in Crystal Beach, TX. This 400-pound tiger was abandoned as Hurricane Ike tore through the area. She was left in a locked enclosure with nowhere to go and no choice but to attempt to ride out the storm. She was forced to tread water until help arrived. Amazingly, Zippy survived the devastating storm.

