

Biting

With young birds, there is often a "teething stage" encountered where the youngsters will "beak" almost everything it comes in contact with. A bird's beak is filled with encapsulated nerve endings, and is used to experience sensation, texture, taste, resilience of objects, etc. In these instances, the "beaking" cannot be considered as biting but as experimentation. "Beaking" of human fingers, which may lead to biting later, can be gently discouraged by redirecting the bird to an appropriate toy or other approved chewable item.

With older birds, biting is obviously the most definitive form of showing displeasure. Biting birds do so for a reason. The bird may be feeling threatened, frightened or startled. Birds will bite during display; to protect their nest; or when the owner is doing something the bird disproves of. Birds may also bite their mate or beloved human in an attempt to protect them. A bird's instinct is to flee when faced with an intruder, and in an attempt to encourage his "mate" to flee, may bite at the owner as a way of encouraging this. Biting can also be caused by displaced aggression; when unable to bite the desired object, your bird will bite the closest thing at hand. When encouraging a bird to step up onto your hand, do not misunderstand an open beak aimed at your hand as an attempt to bite. Birds almost always "test" a perch before stepping onto it to ensure its stability, and will touch his beak to your hand before stepping onto it.

Q. My Cockatiel bites me when I put him back in his cage, what can I do to stop the biting?

A. If your Cockatiel only bites when he is being put back in the cage have you considered using a perch to put him back in when it's time? When you do this, make sure you have a favorite treat to give him as soon as he gets back inside. Whistle and tell him what a "good boy" he is when he goes back in. Is he on a pelleted diet? If so, a piece of millet spray will be a very welcomed treat for good behavior going into the cage. If he is currently on a seed based diet please read the articles on proper nutrition in our Resources section to get ideas on changing his diet to a healthier one. One of the many benefits of the pelleted diet is that birds can be rewarded with seeds and it is a true reward since they aren't used to getting them on a daily basis.

Don't rush any diet changes, though, and remember diet changes must happen gradually and carefully (birds can and will starve themselves if they don't like the food they are offered). You must take one thing at a time. If you decide to change his diet, you will have to probably hold off on the major training until you make some headway on the diet change. If your bird is on a seed based diet and you wish to work with the behavior change before working on the diet, try to find something he really likes (millet, popcorn, cereal, Nutriberries, wheat bread) and use that as a reward every time he goes back into the cage. If you can make "going home" a pleasant trip for him, he will be less likely to be grouchy when put back.

Once you notice that he is becoming more pleasant about going home, you can gradually start putting him back with your hands rather than using the perch. Also, if he likes mirrors, you could try putting him back while holding a small mirror in front of him to keep him distracted. Let him have the mirror for the first few minutes inside the cage and then remove it (if you find it makes him unsocial or aggressive which happens a lot when birds have unlimited access to mirrors in their cage).

If the bird bites you while he is on your hand, you can try the "earthquake" technique. What this means is that you gently jerk your hand (not enough to knock the bird off) so that the bird loses his balance immediately at the time you feel the bite. This, hopefully, will cause the bird to associate the losing balance feeling (which they don't like) with the biting and, over time, cause him to stop biting. Another thing you can try is to gently blow in the bird's face when he bites. They generally don't like this and, again, it must be done immediately at the time of the bite for the bird to associate it with the biting action. These things can work but must be done quickly and over a period of time.

Never, ever hit a bird or even gently tap at him since this will cause him to become even more afraid of hands. Also, never use water to spray a misbehaving bird. Water should be an enjoyable experience and bathing is something we want to encourage birds to do. The bottom line is to try to make going home a pleasant experience.

A good source for information on bird behavior and biting is this [Good Bird, Inc.](#) site, which has Barbara Heidenreich's books and newsletters.