

RECENT POSTS

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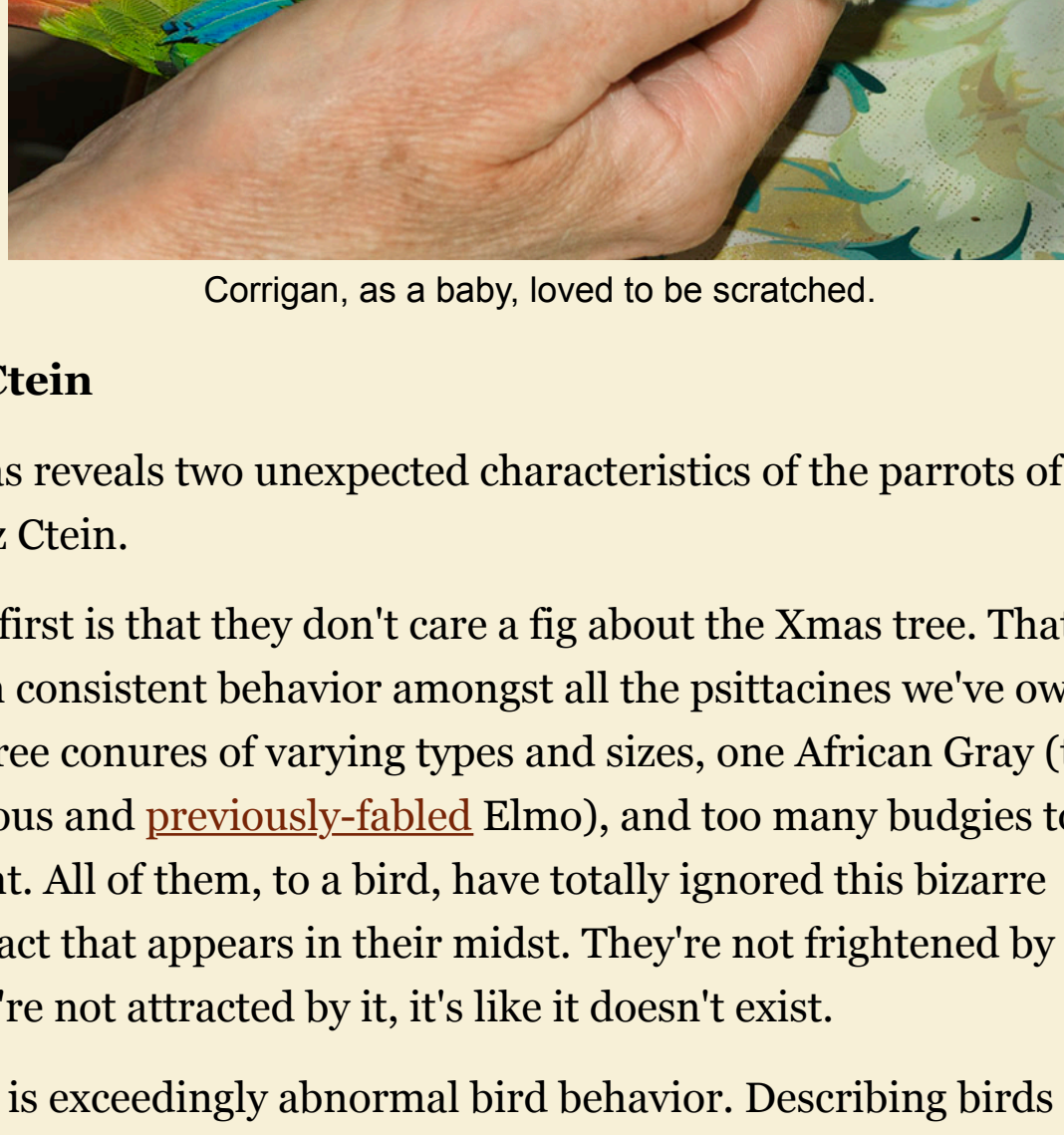
Publisher's Statement

Contact

« The Ctein Corollary | Main | The Consider/Dismiss Binary Switch »

Wednesday, 07 March 2012

OT: Xmas and Parrots



Corrigan, as a baby, loved to be scratched.

By Ctein

Xmas reveals two unexpected characteristics of the parrots of Chez Ctein.

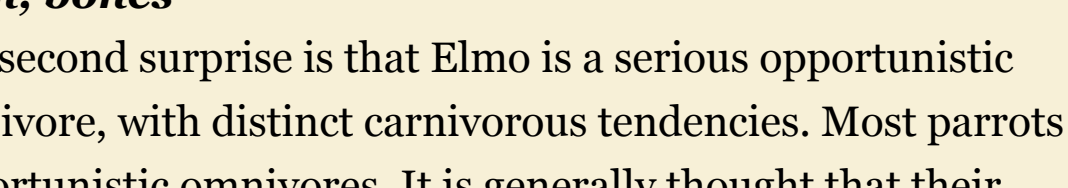
The first is that they don't care a fig about the Xmas tree. That's been consistent behavior amongst all the psittacines we've owned —three cœurs of varying types and sizes, one African Gray (the famous and [previously-fabled](#) Elmo), and too many budgies to count. All of them, to a bird, have totally ignored this bizarre artifact that appears in their midst. They're not frightened by it, they're not attracted by it, it's like it doesn't exist.

This is exceedingly abnormal bird behavior. Describing birds as "high-strung" is understatement. Their little nervous systems are stretched C-above-high-C taut; they are ever on the lookout for anomalies that could indicate danger (or opportunity). A sudden unexpected noise, a motion caught out of the corner of their eye, something in our hands when we approach the cages that they don't expect to see, even a piece of paper, any of these things can cause a panic reaction. There are old parrots and there are bold parrots; there are few old, bold parrots.

This is true even of Elmo, who has to be the most mellow, chilled-out African Gray I've ever known. It's most assuredly true of Corrigan, our yellow-side green cheek cœure, who Paula and I are firmly convinced freaks out at dust motes. Screeches and alarm calls issue from her aperiodically for no reason that we can discern. Whatever danger she's frequently alerting us to is invisible to us.

Objects above birds have major threat potential. A strange object at ground level may be a prowling or slithering predator, but a strange object overhead is assuredly bad news.

So, come Xmas Eve, there are Paula and I hauling the Xmas tree into the living room, carrying it high over our heads so it won't bump into furniture or objets d'art, abruptly setting it upright barely a foot or so from Corrigan's cage (and only a few feet from the other cages), where it towers to the ceiling, and covering it with bright and shiny objects.



A typical Ctein household Xmas tree, with Corrigan's cage to the upper right. Elmo's is on the left. Why the birds should find it totally ignorable is beyond me.

There's no reaction from the birds whatsoever. They act as if it isn't even there. Elmo may be accustomed to Xmas trees, as we don't know the habits of his previous owner. The other birds have never seen one before. They are not repulsed by it, nor are they attracted to it once it's decorated. It is covered with all sorts of shinies, which are normally like catnip to a parrot—but it doesn't exist. Apparently an Xmas tree is too utterly alien for their avian brains to even register. It's the strangest thing.

Yum, bones

The second surprise is that Elmo is a serious opportunistic omnivore, with distinct carnivorous tendencies. Most parrots are opportunistic omnivores. It is generally thought that their carnivorous inclinations lean towards bugs and grubs and maybe the occasional mollusk, which are, to them, like modestly mobile small fruits and nuts. I have doubts.

Like many folks, I have the tradition of cooking a big turkey Xmas dinner with all the fixings, and then we eat it for the rest of the week until we're finally sick of it. This is Elmo's most favorite meal. The cranberry sauce, yams, wild rice, succotash, it all rocks. But without question his absolute favorite is a turkey (or chicken) thigh or wing bone.

Elmo digs into bones with gusto. He doesn't care so much about any meat on it. Instead, he goes for the joints and end caps, which he devours. Lots of fat and calcium, I suppose. Then it's onto the main course. Skillfully, he cracks the bone, peels away chunks of it and eats out the marrow inside. He works his way down it, cracking and peeling off chunks, eating out the marrow, until finally it's done. Then he requests another one.

I can tell from watching that this is instinctive behavior. There are ways that he acts around eating artificial foods that make it clear that he is adapting natural behaviors to novel edibles. This doesn't look like that. He knows exactly what to do with the medium-sized bone and dispatches it efficiently. I am quite convinced this is normal, wild behavior for him.

So what do African Grays eat in their natural environment? I don't know. Lizards? Rodents? Smaller birds? Do they scavenge the kill of other animals? None of my books have anything to say on the subject, but I am inclined to think that when we have jokingly referred to him as our "little feathered velociraptor," there may have been more truth in that than we knew.

Ctein

Strange objects appear in the air above us on Wednesdays.

Featured Comment by **James B:** "Ctein, I am glad to see you are still with us—Mike's post of yesterday entitled 'Ctein's Corollary' had me panicked for a moment, as I glanced and mistook the word for 'coronary.'

"By strange coincidence, the BBC today published something [on a fossilised velociraptor's last meal](#), which was, I'm sure you have guessed, a pterosaur's wing and bones. Perhaps Elmo is merely reverting to the call of the wild?"

"An old Jack Russell dog, owned by a good friend of mine certainly did react to Christmas trees. In his first year while being house-trained he was taught to go outside and do his business under a tree in the garden. You can imagine the pup's confusion when a tree was brought into the house and placed on a grass-green carpet. He thought he was doing the right thing...."

Posted on Wednesday, 07 March 2012 at 12:37 PM in [Ctein](#), [Off-topic posts](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Comments

Maybe there's a genetically wired model of "tree" in their tiny brains, since trees would seem fairly critical to birds...much in the way that there may be a genetically wired nipple in dog brains that causes them to look for one after birth.

And say, speaking of parrots, what about that new iPad display as a vehicle for reviewing photographs?

Posted by: John Camp | Wednesday, 07 March 2012 at 12:58 PM

Didn't read the column; hope it's a good one. Will read Ctein again if and when he gets back to photography. Next week would be my first choice.

Posted by: Marc Rochkind | Wednesday, 07 March 2012 at 02:05 PM

As far as I know and in my experience, uncooked bones are much tougher than the ones described above, so unless the african grey can also fix a hot meal, I have some doubts about the naturality.

Posted by: noam | Wednesday, 07 March 2012 at 02:45 PM

Maybe the tree is so awesome that the birds are thunderstruck and have nothing to say about it.

Many parrots are opportunistic, bored, and charming moochers in captivity, eating pizza, drinking beer, and generally sharing in their owner's bad habits.

But, mostly what this highlights is that animal behavior often doesn't fit neatly into stereotypical human suppositions. Probably wild African Greys sample all sorts of items that they don't identify as being on their personal lists as harmful.

Organisms, both plants and animals, can be amazingly adaptable.

Posted by: Harvey Bernstein | Wednesday, 07 March 2012 at 03:05 PM

I have seen African greys picking over carrion in their native range in DRC, but only rarely - the carcasses were always small-medium sized, dry and old. My guess is that this is because anything larger is too hard to get into, and fresher ones usually have hazardous mammalian and large avian scavengers hanging around them. Carcasses like this are rare, since all it takes is for one large mammalian carnivore to find such a carcass and - gulp! - it's gone.

Several minerals are very scarce in that part of the world - there are places where elephants eat mud to get trace elements - this is probably a natural adaptation to limited nutrient availability.

Voltz

Posted by: V.J. Voltz | Wednesday, 07 March 2012 at 03:44 PM

My daughter loves exotic pets. Yes, we have a bird—a cockatiel. I do not like it. I do not like green eggs and ham either. We currently have a young hedgehog and are mourning the loss of our old hedgehog, Quentin, and our chameleon, Cha Cha. More on the life cycles of exotic pets: [goo.gl/FHJov](#)

Posted by: Bob Rodinsky | Wednesday, 07 March 2012 at 04:03 PM

I've seen wild parrots eat smaller birds here. Usually there is something wrong with the victim and there is a lack of other food available.

Posted by: Paul Amysen | Wednesday, 07 March 2012 at 06:23 PM

Dear James,
Hah! I misread the headline the same way, first time. Startling news to me.

~~~~~  
Dear Marc,  
Save your breath. Six out of seven readers disagree with you. Your "no" vote is duly noted, but it shifts the percentage against you from 85% to 84.96% (no joke).

~~~~~  
Dear John,
Clever segue on your part!
I'm going to check out (and likely buy) an iPad3 the first chance I get, but I refuse to discuss it until then. I have zero interest in "spec speculation."

Once I've worked hands on with one, I'll write a column about it. Until then, I got nuttin'.
pax / Ctein

Posted by: ctein | Wednesday, 07 March 2012 at 07:33 PM

That is absolutely fascinating they ignore this flashing bright, scented behemoth in their space. Keep watching, there must be something interesting there.

Posted by: Dave Fultz | Wednesday, 07 March 2012 at 08:53 PM

Ctein: you mentioned the iPad ... Have you looked into iPhoto for iOS ? ... Looks real sharp on the iPod (2nd Gen) [that's the new proper Apple talk] ... but there is perhaps something in the RAW file handling ... to quote directly from the in app help: "NOTE: If you import RAW photos into your device, you can view them in iPhoto, but only the embedded JPEG file in each RAW file is displayed. The resolution of the embedded JPEG file depends on your camera. In iPhoto, RAW-format photos have a RAW label." ... Talk about something which needs to be digested !!!!!!!

Oh ... And ... Thanks for another interesting Post ... Non Photographic Posts are of varying interest as are other parts of life

Posted by: Santasimage | Thursday, 08 March 2012 at 07:17 AM

Do you keep an eye on Elmo during the night? I mean....well for crying out loud man. What if he gets peckish in the night and you have unvisely left your toes sticking out from beneath the covers?

Posted by: John Robinson | Thursday, 08 March 2012 at 10:20 AM

Noam:
Please forgive me if you're familiar enough with parrots to know this, but the power of their beaks is really quite remarkable. They would have no trouble opening small bones, especially those of other avians, even in an un-cooked state. Whether or not this is instinctive behavior, I couldn't say, but it wouldn't be for lack of ability.

We used to keep birds (small parrots and finches) and as with everything I do, when I started, I obsessed about it. After learning about what they were capable of, I've always been quite astounded that we don't read a headline along the lines of "Fed-Up Parrot in Pet Store Bites Unbearable Brat's Finger Clean Off" about once a week or so. Because they'd have no trouble at all.

Posted by: MarcW | Friday, 09 March 2012 at 08:07 AM

I love that your grey loves Turkey. The African grey I use to have previous to turning her over to a breeder as she was at that age and giving off the signs of wanting to breed. She use to love Chicken and one of her favorite meals was BBQ'd steak. She would chase me through the house to get the first bit. Answering your question about some natural dietary foods. They typical look for washed up fish on shorelines. They also look for clam and oyster shells which they get their calcium from. My grey use to love to eat cereal but she actually loved the milk much more. Even though all the books say they are lactose intolerant, if they are, she powered through it to eat cheese, milk and other dairy products as the greys do need a lot of calcium in their diets as the dander they give off is mainly them losing this naturally. In fact, I have yet to find a breed that doesn't love string cheese or a mild cheddar. Good luck and happy birding.

Posted by: Brian Naccarato and "Buttons" the Green Winged Owner of the house. | Friday, 09 March 2012 at 11:06 PM

How does Ctein know that six out of seven readers want posts about parrots? Does he not mean six out seven readers who expressed a preference? Totally different demographic.

NB I only dropped in here because I noticed how few comments had been left

Posted by: Richard | Sunday, 11 March 2012 at 03:40 AM

"How does Ctein know that six out of seven readers want posts about parrots? Does he not mean six out seven readers who expressed a preference? Totally different demographic."

Richard,
Because we ran a poll, and 80% of readers said they wanted Ctein to write off-topic posts occasionally (he does so roughly one time out of four). As for the respondents self-selecting, well, so does the audience at large...which means, if you don't like a post, skip it—it's a blog; you're allowed to skip, and something new will be along before you know it. [g]

Mike

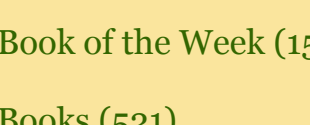
Posted by: Mike Johnston | Sunday, 11 March 2012 at 11:49 AM

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CATEGORIES

- Around the Web (220)
- Baker's Dozen (50)
- Blog Notes (566)
- Bon Mots (10)
- Book of the Week (15)
- Books (521)
- Camera Reviews (138)
- Cameras, new (779)
- Cameras, old (285)
- Carl Weese (23)
- Collecting (53)
- Computers (91)
- Ctein (370)
- Digital Techniques (72)
- Eamon Hickey (2)
- Editing and Portfolios (76)
- Exhibits (84)
- Film and Darkroom (128)
- Followups (47)
- From the Archives (58)
- Geoff Witting (2)
- Gordon Lewis (15)
- Interviews (7)
- Jim Hughes (31)
- John Camp (8)
- John Kennerdell (17)
- Ken Tanaka (11)
- Kirk Tuck (8)
- Legal and social issues (112)
- Lenses (316)
- Mini-Portfolios (5)
- Morning Coffee (32)
- Music Notes (106)
- News and Occasions (475)
- Obituaries (82)
- Off-topic posts (490)
- Open Mike (337)
- Oren Grad (1)
- Past Blasts (23)
- Peter Turnley (66)
- Photo equipment (344)
- Photo industry (169)
- Photo-tech (221)
- Photographers, current (240)
- Photographers, historical (64)
- Photographic aesthetics (219)
- Photography businesses (26)
- Photojournalism (85)
- Polls (16)
- Print Offers (262)
- Printers and Printing (169)
- Quote o' the Day (95)
- Random Excellence (246)
- Random Snaps (123)
- Reader Prints (7)
- Recommended Cameras (14)
- Reflections (198)
- Reruns (24)
- Roger Overall (2)
- Sarge (1)
- Satire Alert! (25)
- Shooting Skills and Camera Handling (6)
- Shooting techniques (157)
- Software (75)
- Sunday Support Group (73)
- TOP contests (6)
- TOP's Own Books (10)
- Visual Culture (270)
- Websites and links (141)
- Weekend Exercises (5)
- Workshops (19)
- Your Turn (9)

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