

Today I would like to discuss one of the more common misconceptions concerning our fine feathered companions, the birds. It seems that birds as companions have developed a reputation as delicate little creatures that are very weak and frail and easily overcome by disease. I assure you nothing could be further from the truth.

Birds are not truly a domesticated species though there are many species that are bred in captivity for the companion bird business. These birds are just a step or two away from their wild counterparts and as a result share many of the same instincts and abilities. It is one of these instincts that both demonstrates their “toughness” and at the same time greatly contributes to their reputation as weak and frail creatures. It is their instinct to hide their symptoms when they are battling disease.

Why would birds do such a thing? Birds are most often flock creatures spending their time in groups of like species. This type of lifestyle has many advantages, one of which is to thwart predators.

If an individual bird becomes ill and as a result shows signs of weakness, they become an easily spotted target within the flock, attracting entirely unwanted attention therein. The rest of the flock will then aggressively attack the weakened bird and try to eliminate its presence within the group, thus eliminating the added unwanted attention from the predator. It is for this reason that an individual bird fighting disease or injury will do all it can to mask any symptoms.

Companion birds will present this exact same behavior when challenged with disease. Unfortunately as a result, caretakers are ignorant of the fact that their bird is ill and these birds can become severely ill before they finally are unable to hide their symptoms. Even when symptoms begin to appear, they can be subtle and thus not easily recognized. Oftentimes by this point, these patients are a step away from dying and are presented to me with a verbal description that might include, “I just noticed him down on the bottom of the cage this morning.” While this is oftentimes entirely true, the bird may have been ill for weeks.

The best advice I can give people who are lucky enough to have birds as companions is to pay very close attention to them. Learn their behaviors and routines as you interact with them. Learn their vocalizations as they respond to the noises and sights in their environments. Armed with this information, realize then when anything encompassing your bird's lifestyle changes, there is always a reason. That reason needs to be discovered as it may be a sign of illness. Toward the goal of preventing problems before they happen with our bird companions, it is very important, as it is with all species we take care of, to have them routinely examined and especially with birds, tested to make sure there are no underlying issues that might lead to illness. The testing I like to recommend for birds includes blood testing, respiratory bacterial cultures and identification of gastrointestinal bacterial populations. With normal results

especially in a bird that is on an excellent diet regimen, we can be confident the bird is in excellent health.