

## One Popular Pet to Never Adopt Unless You're Fully Prepared

These pets are highly intelligent but they're also high-maintenance, and many owners bring one home without realizing that. That can translate into a long list of behavior problems, health concerns and unhappiness for both creature and owner.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- African Grey parrots are popular pets, but unfortunately, many develop behavior problems in captivity
- Greys are highly intelligent, high-maintenance birds, and many owners are not prepared or equipped to properly care for them for their vast lifespan
- Two barebones basics in keeping a Grey as a pet are access to an avian veterinarian, and a minimum of four hours each day spent in human-bird interaction
- Other essentials in caring for a Grey include a bird budget of around \$100/month (or more), a cage that is the right size, properly accessorized, and well-maintained and a healthy diet
- If you're committed to owning a Grey, it's better to visit an animal sanctuary and adopt one

***Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published September 28, 2017.***

In a recent edition of Clinician's Brief, a veterinary journal, was a heartbreaking image of an African Grey parrot. The **poor little guy was nearly bald**, having pulled out most of his feather coat.

The author of the article, Dr. Anthony Pilny, an avian veterinarian, observes that "African grey parrots are commonly presented [at veterinary clinics] for feather-destructive behavior, aggression, inappropriate noise making and/or excessive vocalization, and other behavior problems – usually more so than for medical illnesses."<sup>1</sup>

Sadly, this is indeed the situation for many African Greys. These brilliant birds aren't well suited for captivity, and are often owned by people who simply aren't equipped to care for their substantial needs. The combination of highly intelligent birds and inexperienced owners often results in a long list of behavior problems, health concerns and unhappiness for both parrot and owner.

### Key Suggestions for Proper Care of an African Grey

As Pilny accurately states about Greys:

*"This intelligent, complex, and social species is prone to developing abnormal behaviors in captivity. These issues are likely multifactorial in etiology. Clinicians must consider personality, wild ecology, environment, captive care, hormonal influences, and the potential for medical illness as they each relate to treating and preventing behavior problems in African grey parrots."*

Pilny offers five key suggestions for properly caring for a Grey to prevent behavior problems:

1. Number one is to insure that an avian veterinarian is involved in your bird's care. Parrots aren't chickens or small mammals. They have a unique physiology that exotic animal vets are well-versed in navigating.

Avian veterinarians are better equipped than general small animal vets to diagnose exotics like the Grey, as well as to understand and interpret behavior problems and recommend appropriate treatment, enrichment methods and behavior counseling. Even better is an integrative exotic animal practitioner who will start with nontoxic treatment options whenever possible.

2. The second suggestion is for owners and potential owners of Greys to be thoroughly educated by avian veterinarians and other knowledgeable sources about the parrots' needs so they know what to expect and how to meet the birds' requirements in captivity.

This is a very important step if you're considering a Grey as a pet. Many potential owners mistakenly believe parrots are easier to care for than other types of pets because they live in cages. Nothing could be further from the truth when it comes to exotic birds, and especially the African Grey.

3. Pilny's third point is that the first step in dealing with a Grey's feather-destructive behavior is a thorough veterinary evaluation, including appropriate blood tests, screening for viruses and possibly, skin biopsies. This is one of the reasons it's so important to have access to an avian vet, preferably one who has extensive training with African Greys.
4. His fourth suggestion is that potential owners of Greys should be ready, willing and able to commit at least four hours a day to human-bird contact. This should probably be the first suggestion, not the fourth, because it will disqualify many potential owners immediately.

The minimum four-hour requirement is NOT an exaggeration. It is an absolute necessity for maintaining an African Grey in good physical and mental condition. Parrots in the wild spend much of their awake time (around 14 hours a day) socializing, so the four-hour minimum is obviously much less interaction than your bird would get in the wild. Every hour over the four-hour minimum you can spend with your pet, the better.

5. Pilny's final suggestion is that the "high cognitive ability of African Grey parrots should be considered in their captive husbandry as a contributing factor for developing behavior concerns." More simply stated, if you're considering a Grey as a pet, you should be prepared to spend almost the same amount and quality of time with your bird as you would a highly interactive, bright and inquisitive preschooler.

At the risk of sounding melodramatic, imagine the physical and emotional stress and behavior issues that would result in a 4-year-old child who was locked in her room alone for several hours every day, and you have some idea of what happens to captive African Grey parrots who aren't properly cared for.

Pilny references a recent article published in the *Journal of Veterinary Behavior* on the prevention and reduction of abnormal behavior in companion African Grey parrots. You can read the full article [here](#).

## **Adopting an African Grey**

If you think you're up to the challenge of owning a Grey and are prepared to make a substantial and lifelong commitment to it, it's highly recommended you contact your local animal shelter and exotic bird sanctuaries in your area.

The importance of understanding what you're getting into when you take on an exotic bird like the Grey cannot be stressed enough. They are not simply colorful, entertaining cage decorations. They are high-maintenance pets — expensive, messy, noisy, time-consuming, unpredictable and sometimes aggressive.

However, these birds can make wonderful companions for knowledgeable, dedicated owners who have the time and other resources required to insure the best possible quality of life for their pets.

## Five Absolute Essentials in Caring for an African Grey Parrot

1. An appropriately sized cage that is cozy and located in a safe, low-stress but social area. Your bird's cage should be big enough for her to spread her wings and flap vigorously without contacting anything. It should have a variety of natural branch perches (not dowels) and contain several shred-able toys, for example, balsa wood, woven mat toys, paper-stuffed toys, nontoxic colored blocks and organic hemp rope chewing.

Organic, all natural, chemical-free toys are critical, as parrots' mouths are used as a third hand, and providing safe, nontoxic, yet readily destructible chew toys is a must. Replace them twice a week.

The cage should be cleaned daily with a nontoxic cleaner. One recommendation is diluted vinegar. Many bird owners wear a surgical mask and gloves to reduce the chance of inhaling a pathogen. The cage floor should be lined with newspaper that is discarded daily.

All loose material (feathers, leftover feed, bird poop) should be carefully disposed of before disinfecting cage surfaces. Birds should be removed from the area during the disinfecting process to protect them from fumes.

2. Generally speaking, it's best to feed a high-quality diet of species-appropriate fresh foods including fruits, veggies, sprouted seeds, whole nuts and sprouted grains. Organic, dye-free commercial pelleted food (not poor-quality sunflower seed mix, which is the equivalent of junk food for most exotic birds) can also be offered.

African Greys are designed by nature to live a long, long time — the better their nutrition, the healthier and longer they'll live. If you're a novice Grey owner or have encountered a problem with feeding (e.g., you've inherited a seed junky), you should talk with an avian veterinarian or another exotic bird specialist about how to proceed.

Providing adequate, appropriate nutrition for each individual bird can be a complex process, so it's best to seek the advice of an expert. Weaning parrots onto a sound nutrition program takes work, but the effort is well worth it.

3. Birds do get dirty, so bathing is often necessary. Many Greys love baths — some will splash around in a tub of shallow water, others will join their owners in the shower, still others enjoy a gentle spray mist from a plant mister. Use filtered water, free from heavy metals and contaminants, and consider adding a flower essence if your bird is stressed.
4. Beyond the initial expense of acquiring an African Grey, owners should plan to spend around \$100 a month for wholesome fresh food, destructible toys and other supplies.
5. As already mentioned, just because birds live in cages doesn't mean they are easy pets to care for. You can't just pop your Grey into his cage and ignore him except at feeding time. African Grey parrots are extremely intelligent creatures, and their owners must be prepared to spend a great deal of time interacting with them.

Greys thrive on human attention and develop emotional and behavioral issues when they don't receive adequate mental stimulation. Experts recommend that parrots be allowed out of the cage to interact with their human family members for several hours every day. It's recommended that birds spend their days outside their cages and use their cages primarily for sleeping.

## Three Additional Tips for Living in Harmony with an African Grey

1. To nurture a good relationship your Grey, keep her at mid-chest level. Birds in the wild sit in trees according to a specific pecking order, with the more dominant members of the flock in the upper branches. At home, a bird held at waist level will be prone to feel insecure and nervous; holding her at or above shoulder level will likely make her feel she's the boss.
2. To quiet a noisy bird, isolate her if possible and cover her cage. Raising your voice or scolding a chatty bird will only entertain her and encourage her to match you shriek for shriek, until she's shrieking all the time.
3. Reward your bird often for good behavior with healthy treats and conversation.

Additional resources for a better understanding of African Greys:

- **[Birds N Ways](#)**
- **[The Grey Play Roundtable](#)**
- **[Parrot Breeding and Keeping: The Impact of Capture and Captivity](#)**
- Join Dr. Jason Crean's **[Facebook page for raw fed parrots](#)**

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [Clinician's Brief](#)

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