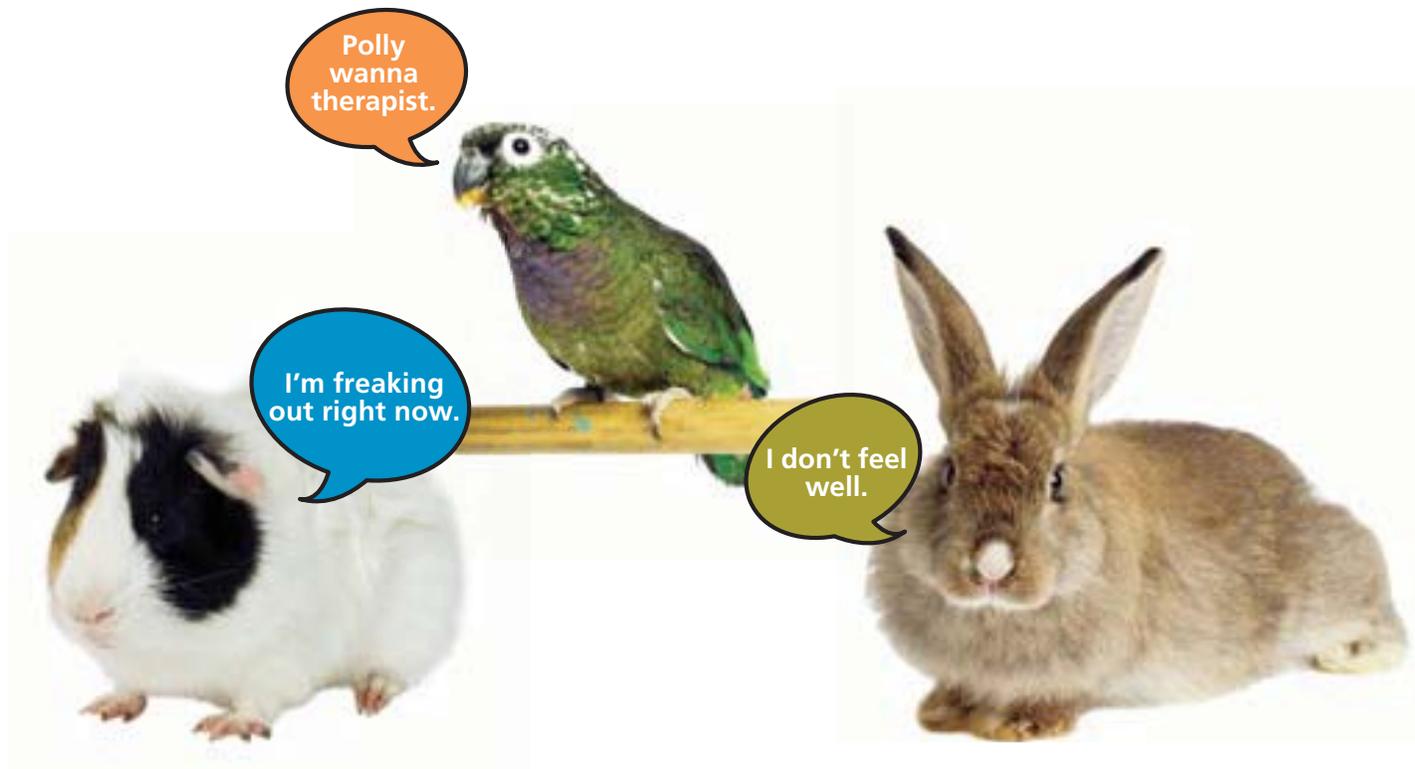


A Beginner's Guide to Stress Across Species

Recognizing, preventing, and reducing stress in birds and small mammals

BY ADAM GOLDFARB



Stress is everywhere in the animal shelter: It's in the kennels, the lobby, the executive offices. There's no getting away from it. Dogs spin, cats get sick, people quit.

Shelters have come a long way in identifying and preventing stress in dogs and cats—and many have developed good people-care programs, too. But how many shelter workers can recognize stress in a parakeet? Who knows how to keep a ferret from freaking out? Are your rabbits' disapproving glances a cause for concern?

Many shelters break up their intake statistics into three groups: dogs, cats, and "other." But those "other" animals represent a huge variety of species. There are rabbits, guinea pigs, ferrets, chinchillas, hamsters, gerbils, mice, rats, and dozens of species of

birds. While some of these creatures share certain similarities, others are vastly different, and it's essential that all species receive appropriate individualized care. More than anything else, proper, species-specific care can go a long way to prevent stress—which in turn leads to improved health, and to better chances for adoption.

Helping Bewildered Birds

Many species of birds are kept as pets, but cockatiels and parakeets are the most popular—and thus most likely to fly into your shelter.

Birds in a new situation are likely to be on high alert. Keep them in a quiet, secluded area, and be sure to keep them warm, says Eileen McCarthy, president/CEO of the Midwest

Avian Adoption and Rescue Society (MAARS). A room with a temperature in the 70s is appropriate, and in dry climates, a humidifier can be helpful, too. Most of these species hail from tropical climates, and the warm temperature will allow them to conserve energy.

Be sure to factor in their status as prey animals when considering their care, including housing type, housing location in the shelter, and handling. McCarthy recommends that birds not be housed within sight of reptiles, ferrets, or other predators. She also encourages covering parts of a bird cage with towels or blankets to limit the birds' view, and housing multiple birds of the same species together when possible. "Housing with other birds will make them feel more comfortable—safety in numbers," she says.

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In addition to feeling safer, birds generally enjoy the company of their own kind. Never separate a bonded pair who comes into the shelter together (with the exception of pairs who split and fight due to the stress of the new environment). When housing three or more birds in one enclosure, be sure that they all have individual perches, multiple food and water bowls as needed, and ample space to completely stretch their wings.

Though placing birds in the shelter lobby can help get them noticed by potential adopters, the noise and high traffic can really stress birds out. Some birds may be comfortable in the hustle and bustle of a lobby for a few hours each day, but new birds and those who continue to show signs of stress will be happier in a quieter locale.

Working at the front desk and dealing with annoyed clients has given many shelter employees firsthand knowledge of the relationship between stress and aggression! Keep your own experiences in mind when considering the personalities of birds—McCarthy believes that many birds are mistakenly labeled as aggressive biters when they're actually just stressed and scared from being in a new situation. She recommends that shelter workers help their birds get comfortable by utilizing cage systems that allow food and water bowls to slide in and out without giving the birds access to frightening (and nippable) fingers.

As in other animals, stress and illness in birds are closely related. Stress can activate or exacerbate dormant viruses or bacteria, making a previously healthy bird sick. Look for signs such as fluffing up feathers; ocular, nasal, or oral discharge; food stuck to their beak; or a poopy vent. A bird who is stressed or ill may not maintain normal grooming. Behaviors such as thrashing in the cage, intense squawking, not moving, not perching, and lying on the floor of the cage are all signs of trouble.

Solving Rodent Riddles

The rodents who come to your shelter most frequently will probably be hamsters and guinea pigs, though you may also see gerbils, chinchillas, rats, and mice. Most of these guys are the cast-off playthings of bored children, and they may have become accustomed to rough handling, poor diets, and Lego-littered living spaces.



Ideal ferret housing provides a large, multi-level space, with ramps connecting the different levels. The space within the cage should include a litter pan and a hammock or blanket for napping.



Prey animals need a place to hide; it can be stressful for them to be out in the open. For guinea pigs housed in a small cage, you can make a hiding area by using cable ties to attach a cardboard canned pet food tray to the bars.

From the moment that a rodent enters your shelter, keep in mind how small these animals are. Between the disorienting car ride, the jiggy jaunt from the car to your building, and the new smells and sounds of a shelter, it's a crazy experience. "Their whole world is moving," notes Suzanne D'Alonzo, education and training manager for the Animal Welfare League of Alexandria

Outside experts

Staff who are knowledgeable about birds, small animals, and exotics may be hard to come by in the shelter. D'Alonzo recommends training other staff on care and behavior of little critters and birds, so your organization doesn't have to rely on just one person. After all, that one person may be out sick or on vacation on a day that their expertise is needed.

McCarthy encourages shelters to get to know experts in the community, such as exotics' veterinarians, bird clubs, and fanciers. Even though these groups may have some philosophical differences with your shelter, they're often happy to help and can be very useful in unusual or large-scale seizure situations.

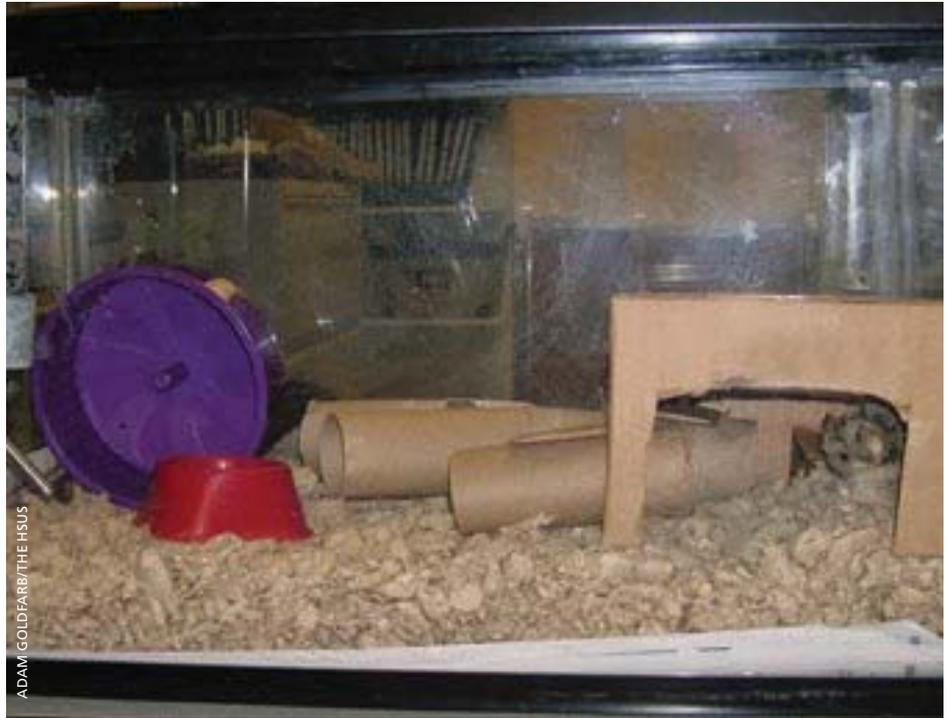
hands to obtain a more neutral odor before trying to pick them up. She also advises luring rodents into your hand with treats—chinchillas, she says, are especially easy to bribe. When you need to handle an animal who's sleeping, gently try to rouse them first and give them time to wake up and get their motors running before picking them up. If you're having trouble catching one of your critters, stop and take a break; extended periods of chasing can be very stressful for these prey animals. Avoid picking up animals by their tails.

Stress can be a little harder to notice in tiny rodents, partly because they are so small—an itty-bitty critter will have itty-bitty body language! It can also be hard to tell the difference between stress-related behaviors and normal prey animal behaviors. In guinea pigs, look for wide eyes (aka “whale eyes”), as well as vocalizations that are louder or higher pitched than their normal squeals. Hamsters and gerbils may flip over as a prefighting or prebiting gesture. Also, running around their enclosure to the point that they're careening into walls is a sign of stress in any little rodent.

Prey animals need a place to hide; it can be stressful for them to be out in the open. A great, cheap, easy-to-make lair is a bottomless cardboard box with a hole cut in one side as a door. For rodents housed in aquariums, pull off one side of the box and place the box up against the glass wall. This way, the animal will feel safe, but potential adopters will still be able to see how cute they are, even when they're hiding. For guinea pigs housed in a small cage, you can make a hiding area by using cable ties to attach a cardboard canned pet food tray to the bars.

Finessing Freaked-Out Ferrets

Ferrets are taxonomically placed in the order *Carnivora* and are in the family *Mustelidae*, making them relatives of skunks, weasels, and otters. They're predators who can be very playful, enjoying complex habitats and toys. Where prey animals are fearful of so much of the world, ferrets “tend to go into life with a sense of adventure and humor,” according to D'Alonzo. Whereas many rodents will be pleased to have a quiet, sleepy space in your shelter, ferrets typically want some action and will get stressed out when bored.



A cheap, easy-to-make lair for mice, hamsters, and rats is a bottomless cardboard box with a hole cut in one side as a door. For rodents housed in aquariums, pull off one side of the box, and place the box up against the glass wall. The animals will feel safe, but potential adopters will still be able to see how cute they are—even when they're hiding.

You can keep ferrets happy and relaxed by providing them with toys, games, and plenty of human interaction. While some shelter dogs can benefit from some quiet, one-on-one downtime, D'Alonzo suggests one-on-one “uptime” for ferrets, giving them a chance to really go wild. An empty adoption room can be a great place to let your ferrets run loose. You can set up some toys, or even just use an old pair of jeans—they love to run through the pant legs. (Make sure other staff members know you're in there, so they don't open the door and release the beast!)

While they are much more social than many rodents, you shouldn't overdo it on the playtime. Ferrets need some space to retreat, as well—within their cages, you can provide them a cubby space that's dark and private, a natural soother for a burrowing animal.

Terrified ferrets will vocalize, though this is a pretty rare sound. If you're not sure about the friendliness of a ferret in your care, D'Alonzo recommends treating them like you'd treat a feral kitten.

Reassuring Rabbits

Rabbits are often mistakenly labeled as rodents, but they're actually lagomorphs, a

group made up of rabbits, hares, and pikas (look them up; they're adorable!). But like guinea pigs and other rodents, rabbits are prey animals and are susceptible to similar stressors.

Stress is such a problem for rabbits that it can actually lead to serious illness or even death, according to Mary Cotter, president of the New York City-based Rabbit Rescue & Rehab and vice president of the international House Rabbit Society. Many stress signs—such as extremely rapid breathing and a tense, alert body posture—are fear-based. Rabbits may also be exhibiting depression when they squeeze themselves face first into a corner of their cages. Keep a close eye on your rabbits' appetites—a rabbit who stops eating can develop gut stasis (a stoppage of the digestive system) and die soon after.

So much rabbit stress in the shelter comes from handling and housing problems, and the two are often related, especially when rabbits are removed from their cages or when their cages are cleaned. Cotter says that cages that have small, front-center opening doors are problematic because they require people to really reach in to pick up a rabbit. Rabbits don't have great vision up close or in front of

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them, and when you approach, all they see is a big blur coming at them.

"You know those bus signs, 'If you can't see my mirror, I can't see you'? Rabbits are like that," said Cotter, who recommends moving slowly to let rabbits see your hands clearly and approaching them from the side.

Cotter also advises switching to a caging system with much bigger doors, such as large dog crates that allow an entire cage-side to swing open. She also recommends removing a rabbit from his cage before cleaning it and placing the rabbit in a neutral space. Rabbits—especially unspayed females—can be very territorial. If you try to clean a cage while a rabbit is still inside, you're inviting yourself to a round of rabbit grunting, boxing, and possibly biting. And considering that many shelter rabbits come from homes where they weren't properly handled, your rabbit may be quite experienced in these behaviors.

Finally, keep in mind that rabbits' big ears enhance their hearing, but also cause

Junk Food

There's no shortage of awful pet food on the market. Many popular brands of food for birds and small animals are designed to appeal to the people buying them: They're fancy, colorful, and chock full of high-calorie, high-fat items that we believe our animals will like. (And they will, because these things are delicious, even if they're not ideally a part of a pet's diet.)

It's OK to initially give animals food like this while they're at the shelter. It's a short-term situation, and you want to make sure these animals keep eating. "It's like a slumber party—it's pizza for dinner, ice cream for breakfast, then you'll be OK at the end of the weekend," says D'Alonzo.

Of course, many little critters may be at the shelter for a longer period of time, and this type of diet shouldn't be permanent. You can transition them off the junk food by gradually mixing in more nutritious items while reducing the fatty, high-calorie stuff until it's only a tiny portion of their diet. Also, don't forget that rabbits, guinea pigs, and chinchillas should always have an unlimited supply of timothy hay, regardless of whatever else they're eating.

sensitivity to loud noises. The most obvious loud noise in an average shelter is dog barking, so it's best to house rabbits in a quieter area, away from dogs. Also, Cotter suggests gentleness when opening and closing cage doors; most rabbits won't appreciate the

metal-on-metal clanging noises that these cage doors make when opened carelessly. **AS**

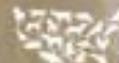
Adam Goldfarb, a rabbit aficionado himself, is the director of the Pets at Risk program at The Humane Society of the United States.

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