

# Pyrrhura Conures... Flocking Feathered Gems in the Home

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Flocking pyrrhura conures in our homes—hmmm. What a concept. Having feathered gems flying all over the living area in the evenings—colorful, social butterfly-birds that don't know how small they are—is my idea of a “homey” environment!

Am I crazy, or what? Flying poopers? Voracious termites? Head buzzers? Hair snarlers? Human enslavers? All of these terms have crossed my mind and are generally applicable and endearing terms, kind of like calling kids “rug rats.”



## Why a Flock?

### Is it Critical for Conure Mental Health?

Most parrots, and certainly pyrrhura conures, affectionately known as “pys,” are by nature flocking creatures. Whether their flock is human, other birds, or both is a decision best made based on the bird's personality, the home environment, and the needs and abilities to serve of their human caretakers.

### *Human/conure flocking*

A solitary py that has an enriched home environment and attentive human flock members can be quite content most of the time. Birds are wonderfully adaptable and accept humans as flock members, even though we look like monster mostly-water octopus-beings—it's amazing how unprejudiced as to looks birds are.

### *Feathered buddies*

Would your py be happier with another feathered buddy? That depends on the buddy and how “joined at the hip” your conure is to you. Pys tend to accept new conure flock-mates with little protest, so long as you don't just put a stranger in their home-sweet-home cage right off the bat. Introducing them in neutral territory is wise and considerate. If you're thinking about a species that is not a conure, or not the same size as a py, you need to be doubly careful. Differences in species sizes and temperaments are significant in some cases.

### *Non-bird animals*

Would another animal in the room be enough? That depends on how your py friend views other animals. If it's a natural predator, e.g., dog or cat, the py may be stressed a good bit of the time if you're gone and there's a fair amount of staring while licking chops going on. Would the py be intrigued enough to watch aquarium life swimming around? Probably not for long. Would it like to look out the window during the day and see other animals? Maybe, if the activities are varied and far enough away not to appear threatening to a caged bird. Probably not if it's a hawk, or a cat hanging onto the screen trying to get in.



## What are the Dynamics of a Multiple Pyrrhura Conure Flock?

Observation and interaction of the py flock in the home reveal some interesting dynamics which help in understanding why pys behave as they do. This should help a human of average intelligence be able to communicate and interact better with their pys.

### ***Mutual allo-preening – comfort and cuddling***

Conures in general are frequently in bodily contact with each other, whether it's just sitting close on a perch during naptime, beak-ying for a choice morsel, snuggling to sleep at night, or actively preening each other's feathers. Birds are by nature clean freaks when it comes to their own bodies. Obviously they don't care about decorating the cage bottoms with debris and poop, but personally, they groom themselves and each other meticulously. Ever notice how focused one of them can get on removing a mole on your neck or arm? They are grooming you, as they would with any other flock member.

### ***“Gang” territories***

Py gangs, affectionately referred to as “mongel hordes,” seems to be hard-wired when it comes to territorial displays and “claiming” flock areas. Either in groups or individually, they will vie for preferred play areas—and heaven help the py who lands on someone else's cage while the cage-dweller is locked inside! Cage-shark activity, including chomping toes, will soon let the interloper know to “move on.”

Certain groups of pys will be tolerant of each other and move around in twos and threes. In some areas, others will be allowed, so long as they move aside on preferred playgrounds. Newcomers to py-land, however, are usually subjected to posturing and chattering, as the established gang attempts to intimidate and drive out the interlopers.

### ***Getting into trouble together***

Don't be under the illusion that because they have toys to play with when they are out, pys will not get into *your* “stuff.” Wooden picture and door frames are not excluded, nor is wallpaper behind the picture frames! Py-proofing includes having no glasses of liquid, no sinks of sudsy water, no toxic houseplants, and no electrical cords within py-reach. Supervision is like with small children—constantly necessary.

### ***Putting themselves to bed at night***

Pys are creatures of routine. If lights are on dimmers and gradually lower, and the py knows where their cage is, they will usually go to that cage—unless they prefer someone else's cage! In counting noses, one can sometimes find the youngsters all piled into one sleeping box or tent (if it's big enough), even lying on top of on another in a mass of feathered bodies.

### ***Foraging and feeding stations***

There have been many studies, particularly in recent years, about the importance of foraging to parrots. Pys dearly love to find treats in strange places. Little bowls and cups here and there around the room keep them moving and hunting. Because they are high energy, pys will snack a good part of the day, in their cages or out on their playscapes.

### ***Toys and play areas***

Pys like hanging, swinging, jingling, tinkling, rolling toys—so anything that is size appropriate might become their favorite within the territorial playground. Having hanging items dispersed around the area will encourage them to fly around, checking out various playscapes, much like children at a public playground. If one py is obviously enjoying a toy, others may decide to check it out too, and then the game of “top py” may begin.

Pys adore foot toys, like little whiffle balls with plastic beads in them, and other foot-sized, lightweight toys. They will grab a ball and throw it, or push it across a cage bottom, chasing it with playful concentration. Plastic chain provides a wonderful “jungle rope” for pys. They will grab midway down with both feet and flap themselves into a spinning



circle. Hanging, colorful, multi-shaped toy clusters become chewing or battling focuses for py imagination.

### ***Bathing in the sink***

Running water brings them flying. A shallow dish placed under a low-spray shower will attract the group, who will then vie for “first shower” rights, which may include wild flailing in the water, splattering everywhere, and drenching to the skin so that they have to really flap hard to fly very far.

## **Games Pys Play**

### ***Alarm calls – flock circling***

A game that pys play, I think as practice for “the real danger,” is precipitated by a py “bark” of alarm, and all flock members take to the air and circle a few times with whistling cries. Some even fly into other rooms, from which their human is supposed to rescue them, if their distraction with the alarm exercise makes them unaware of the route home. When adult py flock members do this and there are youngsters newly into the flock, the human has to watch out for the babies because they may not understand the “mock danger” nature of the exercise, and may truly be alarmed and fly into things (walls, mirrors, cage bars). Reassurance is sometimes called for here. They will learn—part of the nature of the flock is teaching every member the rules and how to interact socially and appropriately.

### ***“Top py”***

When new pys are allowed out with established “gangs,” the bluffing game is on. Along with puffing up and posturing like adders, menacing chattering, beak strikes, and body slams are utilized. Spiraling to the floor, feet locked, chattering threateningly are also maneuverings to determine who bests who. Age of the py isn’t necessarily a gauge of “top py”—that can vary depending on whether one male, for example, has decided a female is “his” in the flock, and another dares to approach her. Then it becomes who can bluff who!

### ***Digit chewing***

Fingers and hands, because they are the first physical contact by humans with baby pys, can become fascinating game pieces. Ever had a py dangle from your finger by its beak? Or grab a finger, chomp, and refuse to let go, like a little bulldog? When it’s in play, it may hurt some, but it rarely is bloody, unless the tip of the beak catches a cuticle—then ouch! Unlike some of the larger parrots, even a “serious” py will not maim or mutilate—you might lose a few drops of blood, but people can spare a few drops!

### ***Mobbing the mobile human flock member***

Py flocks explore their territory, including the mobile human flock member (MHFM) that is conveniently large and mobile, making for an interesting playscape for them. When one py visits the MHFM and is engrossed in interacting, other pys spy something interesting going on, and they certainly don’t want to be left out of the activities. They will vie for a spot on either shoulder, on the head, in the shirt, on an arm, or even on the body if they are not “top py” in the flock (that is, if another py is better at bluffing them out for top spot on the MHFM). Particularly, if the MHFM is moving around in the kitchen, such things as bathing under the faucet or getting a tidbit of food are of interest to the roving pys. If the MHFM becomes stationary (that is, sits in a chair to read or watch TV), the flock may get bored and move on, or they may mill around to stir up activity. That’s when chewing on clothes, glasses, hair, reading materials, toes, and neck moles become common activities.



### ***Buzzing and hair exploration***

Pys LOVE to buzz your head, or grab hair as they go by and then flap/squawk onto your head. They also like to burrow under hair at the nape of the neck, exploring little imperfections on the skin (like moles)—“cleaning” their human—ouch!

### **To Fly or Not to Fly—the Easy Answer?**

Do pyrrhura conures need their flight feathers trimmed? That depends. If the home environment is secure, and there are no uncovered windows or plate-glass doors or mirrors, no frequent indoor/outdoor trips, and plenty of time to put them up if they willfully refuse to go back to their cages when we are in a hurry and need to leave—then don't clip. Leave them natural and free-flying in the home, so long as they are supervised, so that they don't get into trouble in our bird-hazardous homes.

If you decide to trim wing-feathers, please educate yourself as to be best way to do this. For example, be aware that trimming feathers on only one wing (which used to be quite common) will cause your bird to spiral out of control to the floor, or into objects near floor-level—not dignified and rather sad, in my opinion. If you are vain about the beauty of your birds longest flight feathers and opt for a “show clip” (usually leaving the longest two flight feathers intact, but clipping the rest), be aware that a bird can land on those flight feathers, and with no supporting backup feathers, can break them. If they are “blood feathers” (recently grown in and still with a blood supply at the shaft where they grow from the wing), you may have a blood-spattered mess, and your bird might lose enough blood to put it into shock.



### ***Predators***

If there are predator-type animals in the home (dogs, cats, ferrets, etc.), one needs to be careful about clipping, as the py may not be able to easily escape an attack, or may be the recipient of retaliatory actions on the part of a predator which the bird first attacks! On the other hand, pys are notorious for not realizing how small they are, and they will tackle a creature many times their size and weight. Even a good-natured furry pet may object to ear-bites and retaliate with a crippling or fatal blow or bite.

### ***Children***

If there are a herd of children running in and out of the house all the time, it's a two-edged sword situation. A flighted bird can fly out the door in a second. An unflighted bird on the floor can be stepped on in a second.

### ***Potty-training***

If your py pooping at random places in the house bothers you, then controlling its area of influence may be important to you.

However, that same bird may be more difficult to potty-train and require your attentiveness to frequent intervals of relief-offering; whereas if it can fly, it can go to a favorite spot to relieve itself, and then return to you.



### **Independence and Pet Quality**

Pys that have been allowed full flight and flocking can be pretty full of themselves. They know they are birds, and they know that they can fly away (usually up high) if they want to avoid someone or going back into their cages. So how does this relate to differences between flocked (and flighted) pys versus unflocked (single, clipped) pys insofar as their quality as pets? It often means that their human caretakers must educate themselves on behavior dynamics and how to encourage pys to do what is asked. These pys are more independent and not as apt to behave as clingy “bird kittens” as those that have not fledged and have been kept more isolated (and not experienced the flocking environment). They may take a bit longer to adapt to a new home, but when they do, they are self-confident and full

of personality, and usually very affectionate. I feel that in the long run, they are usually more satisfactory pets for most people (who do not expect a clingy, dependent bird to stroke their ego).

If you value your py's self-determination on whether, where, and when to fly in their home territory, then their ability to fly will promote that. On the other hand, if you want more control on their whereabouts, you may want to consider a *modified* feather-trimming. I believe that in most cases, totally limiting the bird with a trim of all flight feathers is about control: mess, destruction, supervision—all issues which require your time and energy, but may not best serve the bird's interests. How much do you need to curb the joyful flitting back and forth between play/feed stations and your shoulder or head?



How quickly do you need to put your conure back in its cage? If your py is full-flighted and decides it's not ready to go back, what are behavioral or environmental alternatives to wing-trimming? Outsmarting the bird rather than chasing it down and grabbing it (encouraging a game or causing predator-fear—remember you are hundreds of times larger) will help you keep your py's trust and foster a good relationship much better.

Training and environmental set-up tips include:

- ü Training the bird to “come” (similar to that done with free-flying birds);
- ü Setting a routine and including positive reinforcement (a treat and/or extra cuddles with praise, for going into its cage); and
- ü Controlling the environment (limiting the size of the room or gradually dimming lights in the evening as a signal to bed-time).

I recommend the book, *Good Bird!* by Barbara Heidenreich, for positive training techniques towards developing a good companionship with your py.

## What about the “Living Arrangements?”

### *Same-sex buddies – play and sex*

Who says you have to have a girl and boy bird for them to have “fun?” Not only do pys play together, but they will practice mating behaviors, even if the same sex—or even if different species—very different. And who hasn't had a mature py whispering sweet nothings in one's ear while rubbing its vent area on one's neck?

### *Male and female “buddies” – environmental reproductive stimuli*

If you have a male and female, is it automatic that they will have babies? Not necessarily, but they sure will be trying at times. Pys are cavity nesters and they like sleeping quarters, so what do you do? Locating sleep boxes or tents so that they are light inside during the day will help discourage nesting activity. Limiting the amount of (full spectrum) lighting should also help—longer days with longer hours of light mean its reproduction time. Providing a good maintenance diet, but not a rich breeding diet, will also help in not stimulating nesting activity.

Sometimes, despite the best efforts at not providing a suitable nesting area, the female will lay eggs—off the perch, in a corner, wherever seems to her mind the best option available. In that case, it's best not to remove egg after egg, since it may trigger more laying, which can be damaging to her health if it continues on and on. You can talk with your vet—there are shots to stop laying. You can also let the female complete the cycle—let her sit on the clutch (in the bottom in a box) for 3 weeks. She will usually abandon the eggs at some point, and you can then remove them.



### ***How many is a crowd?***

This depends on time of year and personality of birds. I try to keep even numbers together, but if they are raised together, there's not usually an odd-man-out—except perhaps during breeding season. Even then, I've seen trios in a sleepbox. You really have to know your birds to allow this though, because when hormones flare, the odd-man may indeed be “out.”

### ***Sleeping Arrangements***

You decide where your py will sleep. Regardless of preference, however, ***do NOT let your py sleep with you!*** The size differential and probability for crushing/suffocating the tiny py are too great to take a chance. Few people can claim to be as sensitive as the princess to the pea!

I prefer at least two to a cage, and with a larger flight, four to a cage will give them their own “mini-flock” and provide you with amusement watching them snuggle, preen, jockey for position, and generally do what pys do in a flock microcosm.

### ***Should they be caged at all?***

There is a school of thought that says pys, or most parrots for that matter, should not be caged at all, or rarely. In my view, in the artificial environment of our homes, household hazards are just too dangerous, unless one can supervise them at all times—kind of like being a private nanny all day long to a flock of py kids. Most humans can't do that—they do have lives outside the py world! So we do the best we can, with cages as large as we can have them, lots of toys and other play-stimuli, and quality out-of-cage time for socialization and exercise. Our py are adaptable—they will fit into our households and our hearts if we will accommodate their “birdness” in our lives.



## **Reference Materials**

***Please note that I do not necessarily agree 100% with everything in these articles, but if one reads them and applies common sense to their own flock situation, many good insights can be assimilated and applied.***

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