

# Talking with Parrots: A Ten-Year Perspective

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A couple of years ago I dedicated my life to communicating with a talking bird and to better understand her behavior. My wife claims that I am bizarre. "You're obsessed with your bird," my brother said during a recent telephone conversation. Passion and dedication makes me bizarrely obsessed or, if one prefers, obsessively bizarre.

Preliminary efforts at interspecies communication began years ago using apes as study subjects, because humans are infatuated with primates with whom we share characteristics. After many efforts, the studies of simians using human language have proven disappointing. There are also studies demonstrating the ability of aquatic mammals to communicate with humans. It is interesting that little research has picked an obvious animal.

A kindergartner asked to name a speaking animal will likely smile and say: "A parrot!" It is surprising that scientists did not begin by investigating birds, because indications over centuries suggest that jays, crows (Savage 1995), magpies, ravens (Hurlbutt 1981), mynahs, and many species of parrot-like birds can learn speech.

Information from scientific literature has generally done little to inspire pet bird owners to improve the lives of their birds, to determine more about their birds, or to try to cultivate the language abilities of companion birds. I hope to change that situation.

My macaw and I accumulated experiences using speech and unknowingly substantiated several findings reported in scientific literature. During adventures we discovered new information about parrot abilities too (described below).

Can birds really understand English? My macaw seems to understand and appropriately use human language; this revelation has profound implication for owners of parrot-like birds. I do not ascribe special abilities

to my macaw, rather I infer that many pet birds have comparable abilities – unfortunately, many owners are inattentive to or unaware of their bird's talents. This is one reason, after ten years, to take stock of what Arielle has achieved and to prepare documentation.

She is not a trained animal in any conventional sense, as she does not often speak before strangers; however, she enjoys yakking by herself and periodically demonstrates her mastery of English while talking to me. It has taken several years to grasp the extent of Arielle's ability to use words; the delay was caused by Arielle's handicap of dwelling with a slow learning human.

My fascination with pet birds originated with a Budgie when I was a child. When my own children left home, my wife and I filled our "empty nest" with an African Grey parrot chick that we named Louie. Several months later, unidentified forces compelled me to purchase Arielle, a ten-month-old Blue & Gold macaw, due in part to our developing mutual affection. A beguiling thought is that Arielle selected me to live with from many people she encountered at the pet store.

Did the macaw come to live with me as a happy accident, or does she reside at my home because of some symbiotic relationship destined by cosmic force? For example, I credit Arielle with helping me to recover from a chronic back injury. She sparked my recovery by forcing me to take her outside daily for a walk. Strangers observing us sometimes comment upon our closeness which they judge to be remarkable. Arielle has become a cherished companion, and I am committed to teaching her and to caring for her. In fact, she has given much more to me than I have provided for her.

Her first creative vocal activity was to name me after a few short weeks of residing within our home; it is unlikely that she heard elsewhere the inventive

label she christened me: Abba. After a short adjustment to her new home, Arielle started using other words that I hadn't attempted to teach her (Dalton 1993). Within a couple of months I felt unsettled by her ability to communicate through sporadic, unexpected, English statements which the bird appeared to relish – one could tell by her exuberance and the twinkle of excitement in her eyes that she enjoyed my bewilderment caused by her unexpected speech.

As a businessman, I was able to take my pets to work with me. To the enchantment of customers, my birds visited at the electronics business over intervals for several years. While at the store, Arielle made a couple of her early unanticipated statements. At the end of one day, she watched as a coworker and I loaded my utility vehicle in preparation for returning home; she astonished us by saying "truck" as we re-entered to close the store. In evaluating the situation, we workers decided that Arielle had communicated her desire to go home in the vehicle.

Since I didn't originally intend to study Arielle's speech, I've been "catching-up" by reading the findings of other investigators. There are several books about the use of language by primates but there are only a couple of books about word use by birds. Most investigators seem reluctant to answer direct questions about their studies because, perhaps, I am not affiliated with an institution.

All inquiry of language by avian subjects leads to Irene Pepperberg, and she deserves much credit for her studies to increase the knowledge of the abilities of birds (Pepperberg 1983, 1990). Her African Grey parrot, "Alex," is a research subject who is taught vocabulary to answer questions for tests designed to reveal specific information about the parrot's mental abilities. Alex demonstrates his comprehension by using about two hundred words. Despite Pepperberg's notable research with Alex, there are few investigations by others and a scarcity of data concerning communicating with birds.

Only a few reports in hobbyist books document some of the unique,

free will, statements made with apparent understanding by "talking" birds (de Grahl 1987). However, I could not find any research conducted independently from universities. The logic behind this condition is something of a mystery; surely, many people living with pets are capable of contributing to our knowledge about animals.

Len Howard is my icon as an independent investigator of birds; some 20 years before more recent studies were conceived, Howard analyzed wild bird behavior and taught wild birds at her home in England. A musicologist by training, Howard observed bird behavior and bird song in the field; she also trained wild birds to count and respond to human speech (Howard 1953, 1956).

The evidence of bird abilities by Howard has inspired me to organize my long-term descriptive notes of events during which Arielle, my macaw, spoke. Tape recording is a method to demonstrate the language capabilities of a shy bird; my recordings are evidence for my assertions and a resource for study.

In training nonhuman animals to communicate, most are subjected to hundreds or thousands of instructional repetitions of words. These sessions promote mastery of words, and lessons extend over a period from months to years. In fairness to other researchers, who dedicate many hours to train creatures to perform exacting tasks, my inquiries look into speech of a different character from previous studies.

My approach differs markedly from academic and professional animal trainers. Arielle is studied as an "intellectual sponge" capable of naturally absorbing a variety of information. As a result she has become educated, and she has learned to use language in startling ways. Related in concept, years ago pet bird owners told me that their birds learned words or sentences after a single hearing, but nobody had evidence supporting recollections.

Imagine my amazement as I listened to a recording and discovered that Arielle exhibited that very attribute. She said a unique phrase that she had heard

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only once several weeks earlier. This newly documented ability may have been latent, or the characteristic may simply have been obscured while living with Arielle. Fortuitous discoveries often result from looking for something different, so it was with this finding.

In observing Arielle's behavior, I noticed that her play periodically induced comments. The perception that environmental factors can motivate speech was confirmed by a rare observation during which she organized a task using English. The quest is to analyze, in a wide variety of circumstances, whether one parrot understands her declarations. So far, she hasn't said anything irrational. Rather than using task training, my investigations concentrate on her voluntary word use.

Additional findings from my investigations include: birds can learn to understand the general meaning for their words. Like a child, Arielle sometimes speaks and, of her own volition, modifies the meaning for a word; an example is "cracker" which she uses to mean food. The correlation between pertinent events and her spoken words infers that she has a fundamental understanding of her statements. It is possible for a macaw to relate, through words, perceptions of her environment including intangible concepts such as temperature; parrot-like birds also can state their recognition for complexities such as picture representations for objects. In addition, I find Arielle's practice sessions to be peppered with revealing sequences, primitive rhymes, and even a subtle humorous repartee—reflecting her playful nature.

Skeptics will challenge my experiences as undocumented. The saving grace is that I scribbled dated notations about almost all of the events in which my birds participated. There are hundreds of written reports made over ten years concerning Arielle's use of language. Originally I could hear only a portion of her speech through the sliding glass doors that permit observation of her isolated activities. Recently, I started to tape record Arielle's vocal practice sessions; an outside microphone combined

with a cassette recorder documents the macaw's words. The results from the tapes are a revelation, as I discovered that she often speaks softly, and, unaided, I had previously heard only a fraction of her statements through the glass. Other observers have noted soft speech in the utterances of wild birds including crows. {<http://www.crows.net>}

From time-to-time, Arielle speaks with various irregularities which include: pace, pitch, inflection, and other defects. Her distorted statements result from either a physical limitation or because I never correct her pronunciation. Determining the meaning for some of her utterances can be challenging, and, as needed, I expend great effort to resolve what she communicates.

Because I control recording of Arielle manually, her taped statements represent a small portion of her vocal output. When Arielle vocalizes, she does not speak her lexicon of words from A to Z. Of her own volition, she speaks words, phrases, and sentences; these expressions cover a wide range of topics, ideas, and statements that she has heard, modified, or fabricated. On occasion she composes original monologues or dialogues. As I learn more about her proficiency with language, more questions emerge concerning her abilities and concerning the implications of her communications.

Over a period of ten years, Arielle's list of statements number thousands of variations of words, phrases, and sentences.

Arielle speaks both single words and sentences that occur spontaneously—potentially revealing information about her thoughts. Only a small portion of her vocalizing rises to direct communication, the highest level of bird speech, that I term "talking." This activity usually occurs when we go for our daily walk; some days Arielle initiates communication, for example, by saying "fruit" to direct my attention toward ripening citrus. She can ask questions too.

"We pet owners can have a profound role in understanding the abilities of parrot-like birds," I thought recently. The reason is that there are a great num-

ber of parrot owners, but few institutions researching parrot speech. Because birds can communicate, they represent an exceptional subject for examining information processing within an animal mind. If other parrots, like Arielle, comprehend words beyond the obvious ones, then such birds represent an extensive untapped, undervalued, source of information. What an opportunity for parrot owners—to be able to look into a bird's mind through the window of voluntary speech!

I don't comprehend the fine points of macawese; but Arielle, in partnership with me, seems to have developed an understanding for much of my language. In the end, we humans may have to view birds as the other land-based creatures with natural linguistic abilities. The author may be contacted at:

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