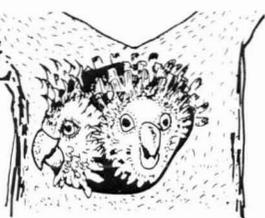


# THE NATURAL CHOICE

by Eb Cravens  
Santa Fe, N.M.



## Communicate With Your Parrot... On His Terms!

By far the most common question asked in our retail bird shop these days is, "Which parrots talk?" It seems nearly every pet owner would like to own a bird he or she can communicate with regularly.

The routine answer is to list African Grays, Amazon Parrots, cockatoos, some macaws and so on. Over the years, however, I have found myself replying to customers, "All psittacines communicate or talk; some are just easier to understand."

From the moment our handfed babies begin uttering little peeps and cries out of the feeding tub, their communication with human keepers

begins. "Peep," we imitate our chicks. Or "raawk," or "aayh, aayh."

"Raawk, raawk, raawk," the tiny hookbills understand and reply. Greetings, we're alive, bring food!

The earliest successful "conversation" with our baby parrots consists of imitating as closely as possible the sounds the birds make in order to encourage recognition and response. As with human babies, until a parrot chick learns to listen for specific sounds and vocalize a reply, it is not possible to move on to more meaningful words.

Quite often the earliest respond-and-reply noise I learn with my baby hookbills during those early weeks becomes an established call for the pet as it grows up. "Peeew, peeeow." I simulate their natural noise to my fledgling sun conures and receive an immediate answer from wherever they might be in the house!

Such early communication habits offer important safety benefits as the conure grows up. This natural sound tells me where he is at any time and acts as a call for help should he be in distress.

Every pet parrot in my collection has a specific whistle or noise used as a call and answer. The only real difficulty arises when one of my older parrots takes to mimicking my calls to a newer family member!

As weaning approaches, we begin by expanding our vocabulary of sounds taught our parrot fledglings. "Pssst," "tick," "cluck" and simple whistles are used along with basic words such as "hello," "hi" and "pretty bird." Though it is often weeks before a psittacine will actually speak these words, he will quickly come to recognize them — sometimes shaking his head and fluffing his feathers to indicate recognition.

At this point, communication becomes more command oriented. One of the first useful sounds we consider imperative for young parrots is a quiet smacking of lips akin to the noise parrots make when drinking. Follow this with a clear speaking of the word "water" whenever offering your pet a drink. Young birds may need their beak dipped into the water dish before they recognize the clear liquid. Weaning psittacines need to learn to replace the liquid nourishment which was supplied in their handfeeding formula. Especially in

drier climates, handfed babies should quickly be taught about drinking.

Most all of my baby parrots will gladly take a bedtime drink from a water cup if accompanied by the smacking sound and the word "water." Just like small children, fledgling hookbills are often too busy at bedtime to remember to drink. Even my 12-year-old Red-lored Amazon "Jossaloha" loves a bedtime drink — sometimes as many as 15 sips from his perch on the bathroom door!

An important outgrowth of this training is that a pet parrot taught to respond to the word "water" may be given a drink from nearly any strange container or someone's cupped hand if you find yourself in a situation where your pet is thirsty but is away from his normal cage and dish.

I find most of my birds also learn to recognize the special difference of the word "juice" after several months of training. In fact, "good juice" (pronounced "guuh jooth") was the first phrase my pet conure "Kiwani" learned to say.

Conures are not always classified as fine talking birds, but believe me they are smart as a whip and will learn to recognize dozens of phrases. A small voice center may make your Green-cheeked Conure's words come out "Rhuy rhuv rho" (I love you), or "kih peeth" (kiss please), but I call it talking just the same.

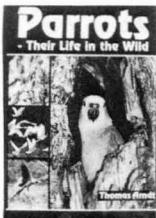
Creating a well-rounded intelligent pet parrot requires the development of a working vocabulary. If you wish your pet to enjoy a gentle scratch on his head, try scratching your own hairline with an index finger and repeating, "chicka, chicka, scratch your head." Even strangers should be able to touch him once he is accustomed to the phrase.

Having trouble touching a shy bird under his wings or on the body? Try reinforcing a gentle attempt to touch the parrot by saying, "tickle, tickle." We have learned that words before action are much less frightening to a psittacine than abrupt actions alone.

Certainly the working vocabulary for all my birds includes "doggie, ruff," "cat, pssst," "crow, caw-caw," "airplane, rreauww," "truck, roarrr," and "boom" for sudden noises. It is automatic if my bird is with me when a scary kite or balloon appears above that I call "airplane, rreauww." Recognition by my parrot is usually instan-

Thomas Arndt

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taneous. Airplane? Oh, I know airplane. Airplanes don't hurt me. What is more important, the parrot stays put and does not panic. As many of our pet clients are adamant about taking their pets out of the house occasionally, such communication and warnings are an important safety buffer against flying off!

Other workings words for your pet hookbill include "hot" for drinks and other fiery things, "spicy" for chili pepper foods, "ouch" for biting too hard, "poop" for potty training, and again, most importantly, "up" or "step up."

I make it a habit never to use the word "no" when training a parrot. The tendency is to use it in more than one situation, and some psittacines cannot comprehend when words are used in several different ways.

One of the easiest ways to get a pet bird to stop biting or playing too rough is to imitate the sharp cry that species of parrot makes if you startle or frighten it accidentally. Amazon babies are quick to respond to the mimicking of a loud "aarrgh" — the syllable they squawk when siblings are wrestling and one becomes too rough. It gains faster understanding of this than the phrase, "No, don't bite!"

Every item related to a parrot's daily routine is named for them during baby training. As all my fledglings up to Amazon and mini-macaw size are taught to sleep in cardboard "nest-boxes" while young and insecure, the words "box" and "Tia, where's your box?" are very familiar to them.

"Cage," "perch," "cracker" (for all foodstuffs), "tree," "bath," "car," "feather," "night, night" and "bad bird" (I use a loud "hey" as I would rather not teach my parrots to say "bad bird") are all taught to our young hookbills. Take the time to make a list of words you wish your parrot to understand and perhaps to learn. It is not unusual for a bird to learn to say "night, night" if it is his bedtime and he wishes to be put away. It is a natural progression to tricks like "roll over," "be an eagle," or "play dead" should you wish a performing psittacine.

Though my non-talking pets will not repeat after me, they will often utter an affirmative squeak or "urk" if I ask them, "Summer, want to go in the car?" or "Woody, want a peanut?"

Especially sensitive bird owners

note that nearly all the noises uttered by their pets indicate some meaning or emotional mood. True communication with a parrot involves training ourselves to notice these moods — whether it is the uncomfortable fidgeting of a shoulder bird who needs to go "potty," or the extreme nervousness of a pet who sees an aggressive flock of starlings outside the screened window.

I never cease to be amazed at the wondrous split-second awareness in

the psittacines I know who are brought up in healthy, active, natural homes. The communication level between the owners who know their parrots' every sound and the pets who know their keeper's voice inflection and spoken words is both caring and useful.

Such human-psittacine relationships teach important lessons to both parties — lessons which cannot help but be of benefit to the future of all the world's species. ●



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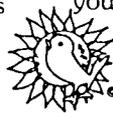
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