

# Taming Old Parrots

by  
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Author with two tame cockatiel hens, Snowy, and Betty.

Who wants to tame and train old parrots? I do, for several reasons. Parrots make good pets; they make great pets when they are tame and will interact with their master. "Old" breeders can have a whole new start in life. And, because I breed parrots (basically cockatiels) in my basement, I do not have much room for flight cages; therefore, when I split the sexes, I keep the cocks in my only large (by basement standards) flight and I keep the hens in smaller cages. I do this because I hand train the hens and, as such, I can let them get some controlled exercise outside of their small cages at least once each day. This, of course, not only keeps my hens in good physical shape, it lets me enjoy my birds fully. (By the way, the hens have no trouble switching roles between breeder and pet.) Anyway, to make a long enough story a bit shorter, there are many reasons why one may wish to teach old birds new tricks. I define "old" as: sexually mature (or just about) with at least a few good years left according to lifespan estimates; thus, again using a cockatiel example, my "old" bird experiences have ranged from individuals more than five years of age to those who only were a few months old.

"Hello." Snowy said this word a grand total of eight times and only once "talked" to a stranger, my nephew Garan, who approached the cockatiel's cage with a "hi" and received the "hello" reply. Snowy first said her word on January 19, 1979, about a month after her training began. Her last "hello" was on February 11, 1979. To my knowledge, she has stayed with

whistling and body language ever since. Thus, this great masterpiece is not about talking cockatiels. (Even though I once had a very talkative budgerigar, old mud mouth here certainly would not try to tell anyone about teaching anything, or anyone, how to talk or mimic.) As a sidelight, you may wonder how I remember dates (above) so well. I don't, but I keep good records on all my birds, pets and breeders, in order to develop timeframes for various behaviors (talking, molting, whatever), identify differences among the birdies (one hen always has a five egg clutch, another always lays four eggs, and so forth), and learn from my numerous mistakes or lucky achievements. With small numbers, these individual records are not a problem; if I had hundreds of birds (currently I have thirty), my non-breeding record keeping may have to slip to averages. However, I cannot over emphasize the importance of record keeping.

And, this article (and writer!) cannot address advanced training such as teaching your parrot to do the tricks that you enjoy on T.V. Instead, I refer you to: *How to Train Your Pet Like a Television Star*, by Ray Berwick (1977, Armstrong Publishing Company). It is an excellent and inexpensive book that includes topics on other animals such as dogs as well as birds. For some advanced training, the system outlined in the book has worked for me and should work for anyone interested in teaching their pets a variety of tricks.

Also, because the taming of young birds which hatch in your aviary is relatively simple (start them young with

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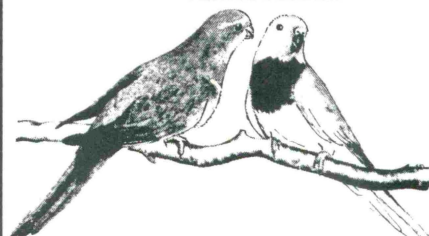
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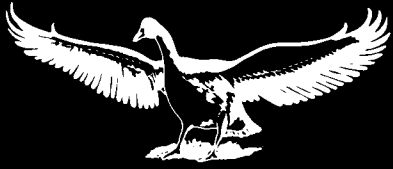
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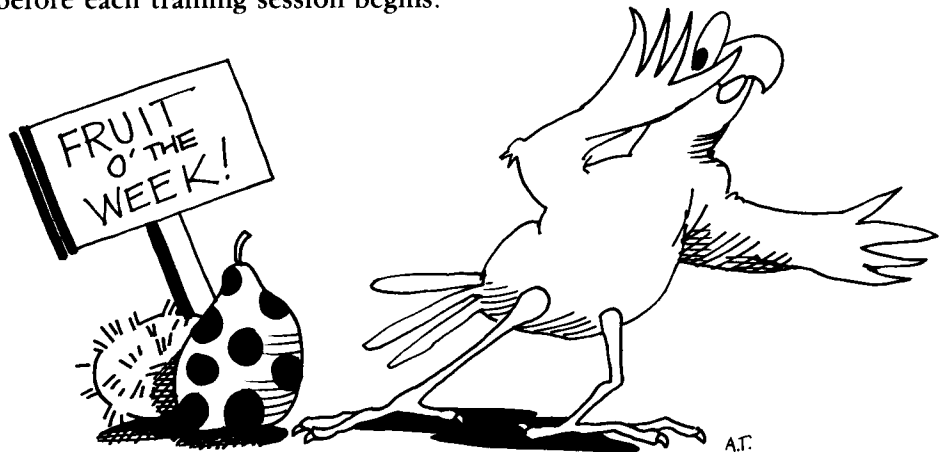
some handling, feeding, and head scratching), I will ignore the baby bird area. I will limit this manuscript to acquiring and taming a new, untamed parrot and to training an "old" friend, perhaps a retired breeder. To keep things simple, this article is written as if you just acquired your first parrot.

When you arrive home with your new critter and have provided the essential food, water, quiet cage location, grit, and whatever supplements please you, you and your avian wize are ready to start the adjustment process in this *one method* (there are many others) of taming and training. Your new addition should have his cage away from direct sunlight and household noise — the phone, the cat, the kids. Training — or taming — should not begin until your parrot is eating regularly, usually in two or three days. If possible, attempt to clean his cage and provide clean food and water around the same time each day — most parrots are most active in the morning and during the late afternoon hours, but this can vary significantly by individual species and bird. The regular schedule of feeding, awakening and good night times may help the bird (and you!) to adjust rapidly and tame rather easily.

If possible, the taming room should be his regular room or area. Be sure that all windows and doors are closed before each training session begins.

glass windows and mirrors to avoid distraction and not allow your bird-brain to fly into a window that he cannot see. With taming, a regular daily schedule will help as it did during the adjusting period.

The initial idea is to get your parrot to accept food from your bare hand, but if the individual has a history of biting, a glove is acceptable. If you wish to remove his food cups an hour or so before the taming sessions start, he may be a tad bit hungry and go for the hand-held food sooner. Hold some food in your hopefully steady hand inside his cage and coax him to eat it. This sometimes works immediately, but he may not take your offer until you have tried for two or three weeks. I recommend sunflower seeds with larger parrots and spray millet for smaller ones. Your offer must be large enough to hold, easy for the bird to see, something that he likes, or at least normally eats, and accessible without the bird actually touching you as he accepts. Avoid foods that he has not eaten recently. He should recognize one of the regular seeds, for example, but may not have any idea of what supermarket's fruit of the week is. Remember, your new "pet" is afraid of you. Anything new, different or distracting will prolong the process. If you can work with your pet two times a day, the taming process should pass more



Although it does not matter in the early stages, if you are not accustomed to handling parrots or if you live where doors and windows frequently are opened, you should have your vet or bird dealer clip back some of the primary flight (wing) feathers when you obtain your bird. (Your bird's relatively poor flying ability will prevent injury because he cannot gain the speed necessary to hurt himself in most instances; and, the clipped feathers will be replaced fully within a year, typically in a few months.) Also, cover all clear

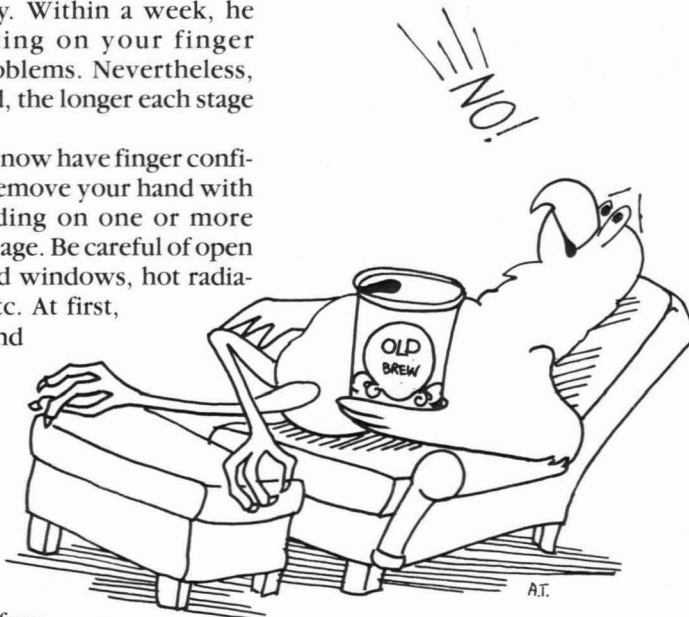
quickly. Again, because parrots usually are most active in the early morning hours and around dusk, either or both of these times are good taming periods. A little later in the evening also has worked well for me, especially after the hunger factor became more of a treat time. Forget late nights (and most mid-day — noon to 3:00 p.m. or so — periods) for species such as cockatiels, that almost always rest then. I believe that all birds need some mid-day quiet time to maintain their health. In any case, each taming session should be



more than ten minutes long (unless your bird really gets scared) but not longer than twenty-five minutes.

When your bird finally has taken food from your hand two or three days in a row, you should start to finger tame him. Gently push your finger as if it is a perch under his breast and slightly above his feet — don't move suddenly or knock him off balance! Although old Polly may react adversely, his actions probably are more from confusion than fear. Try another seed. Do not be afraid (too much) of his beak, which he uses as we use hands to climb a ladder. Be patient, but persistent. After three or four "finger stands," he will have understood what you wanted him to do even if he does not like the idea and hops off quickly. Within a week, he should be resting on your finger without any problems. Nevertheless, the older the bird, the longer each stage might take.

As both of you now have finger confidence, you can remove your hand with the parrot standing on one or more fingers from his cage. Be careful of open doors, uncovered windows, hot radiators or stoves, etc. At first, he may fly around like crazy.



During this cage-free episode you probably will be introduced to a host of new sounds, especially screams! As necessary, retrieve your bird and return him to his cage (hopefully on your finger or hand). Feed him a seed or whatever worked during earlier sessions as a *reward*. With parrots, always use reward systems, never use punishments except to withdraw your affection for a very short period of time. Typically, by the second or third time out of his cage, your new pet will accept and possibly like the idea.

You may want to work with him in his room before giving him the experiences of television, kids, and the other treasures of your house. Anxiety reduction (yours and his) must take place before you take him completely away from his initial taming area/room. Talk to him, put him on your shoulder and walk around somewhat. You and your new pet will have enough confidence to look at these activities as fun. In fact, your parrot probably will start to call

for you when he is ready to come out of his cage each day. Larger parrots may be kept on perches mostly, but the out of his area principle is the same. When you can take your bird just about anywhere in your house and you still maintain control, you and your bird have completed the mutual taming experience.

As the last taming activities before you and your potential movie star go on to bigger and better things, you may want to: teach your parrot the word "no" in a firm and slightly louder than usual voice as he goes after your beer, anything shiny, books and papers, etc. ("no" is a command, not a punishment); do some "toilet" training although most parrots quickly learn where and when it is acceptable to go;

regularly scratch his head; get him on a friendly basis with other family members; and, most importantly, get him to come to you (shoulder, arm, or hand) at your command (by calling his name) or whenever you stand up and/or begin to leave the room — this may be very critical training, particularly when or if the little bugger does get loose outside of your home.

These are some general observations that have worked for me with young and old parrots. However, each human is different and each parrot is different. If you put the safety and well-being of your pet first, many training methods will work. Discuss taming and training with the person who sold or gave your pet to you. Read more than this one short article if possible. And, always be patient, kind, and loving. You and your pet parrot can enjoy the mutual training endeavor very much. Most definitely, you both will enjoy the results. ●

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