



Las Vegas Parrot Training

By Chris Harris

Bright lights, cameras flashing, the noise of the crowd, and dazzling showgirls dancing on stage—you are one of the lucky few who have VIP tickets to the opening night of the newest and biggest show on the Las Vegas strip. The pyrotechnics are cued and with a deafening sound and a plume of smoke a flock of nine macaws soars above the crowd so close you could practically touch them, making it an interactive experience that stimulates every one of your senses. Then, as if by magic, they fly to the entertainer on the stage and the show has only just begun. The birds perform like precision instruments and you feel like they must have performed like this thousands of times before, but that is yet another Las Vegas illusion and this is only the first night of the show.

How do we do it? How do we have our birds in newspapers, on television, on stage and on the big screen before their

first birthday? The answer is simple and if you have read my blog before you know it is no secret. Ideally, I begin training birds when they are very young. It is now apparent to me that parrots can learn as soon as their eyes open. Many trainers do not start training with their birds at such a young age because they feel they are too young. I have found that my birds are often capable of performing shows before they are fully weaned onto solid foods. How do I do it? Let's take a look.

Here I will let you in on my biggest trick as to how I do what I do, and why I do what I do. These techniques are proven, working night after night and this is not a rehearsed DVD or presentation, but training methods that have to work because the birds' lives might depend on how well they are trained. If you want a bird that flies outdoors you will not find anything that works better than this process, a process where juveniles are raised from infancy to be Super Parrots. This is an A-to-Z guide

to how I work with training subjects, from selecting them, to eventually performing in shows.

Before Their Eyes Open

Ideally, birds are chosen for training before their eyes are open. Most of the birds I raise and train are pre-ordered, or the potential owner is put on a waiting list even before the egg is laid. Once a deposit is placed on a bird, its destiny is set in stone: to become a Super Parrot. Although I breed many of the birds I train from my own pairs, if I don't have the species that a particular entertainer or show is looking for, I may consult my network of trusted breeders in an attempt to match the client with the perfect bird. Sometimes these performers are hatched in an incubator and hand-raised from Day One, or sometimes they are parent-reared for 10 days to two weeks, basically until their eyes open. From here the number of feedings per day is naturally reduced and can be cut down



from every few hours around the clock to four hand-feedings per day. This is dependent on the species, but it usually around the time that the baby birds finally open their eyes.

If possible, I prefer not to be hand-rearing birds that are younger than this. Instead I choose to leave the bird with its parents, if at all possible. A typical and comfortable hand-feeding schedule for me would be 8 a.m., noon, 4 p.m. and 8 p.m. Training is not an option before this time because before their eyes open, baby parrots spend much of their time sleeping, eating and pooping. But as they mature to the stage where their eyes begin to open, I have noticed they become more aware of their surroundings with every passing day. At this stage of development they will respond to sounds as well as light (although at the time of hatching to the first 10 days or so their eyes aren't even fully formed yet). After they are chosen for training I usually have an idea of what



tricks or behaviors each particular bird will be performing and I start getting prepared by gathering the props and other items needed for later, as I plan the individual training of each subject. At this early stage of growth, the main health or biological concerns we have are cleanliness, and of course warmth and food. Therefore young birds are fed small amounts of food several

times per day and they are maintained at a controlled temperature at all times.

The Locomotor Stage

As I have expressed in previous writing in the past, I feel this is the most crucial stage of development. For example, I recently had a Rose-breasted Cockatoo (also called a Galah) who was hatched on May 10, 2011. By July 26, 2011, she had been on TV, been featured in the newspaper, had performed in at least three shows, had been participating in my Feather-peudic pet therapy program, and she was already flying free out of doors. She was NOT weaned at this point and was still taking one to two formula feedings per day. This is an example of what you can accomplish if you take advantage of the Locomotor Stage of development.

Many trainers disagree with training a bird this young and although I respect them and their opinions/work, the evidence shows that birds, especially parrots,

are investigating their environment and processing information at very young ages, and therefore this is a sign that they are old enough to grasp “cause and effect” concepts. Some may disagree with me, and that’s fine, but the facts demonstrate that while some are still twiddling your thumbs waiting for their birds to eat solid foods, I have begun training and many of my subjects would already be trick trained and talking “Super Parrots,” entertaining crowds across the U.S.

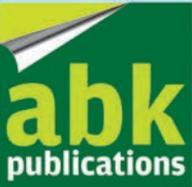
At such young ages, birds are aware and can move around at will. They are very food-motivated and most babies will make a habit of chasing the syringe around begging for food, even when their crops are so full they look like they are going to pop! This type of awareness and agility is perfect and it is exactly what you want. This is the stage where I begin holding the syringe an inch or so away from the begging chick and asking the bird to walk one or two steps to reach it. They usually don’t mind. Simply cue the bird and wait for them to



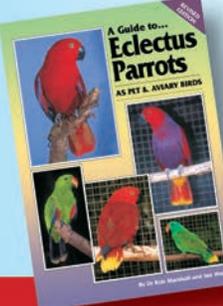
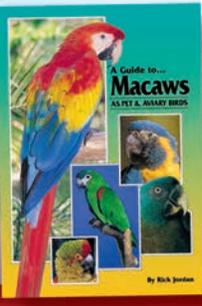
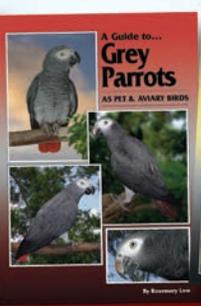
come to the syringe. At first they might just reach out by stretching their necks, but after they get the picture, you will have them crossing the living room in no time. This was the basis for early training with “Merlin,” one of my trained Macaws. His early training was as described above, and eventually he was crossing the showroom

of the Las Vegas casino where he was going to be performing.

During the Locomotor Stage, I also teach birds to spin on cue and target. This translates directly to flight training skills later if you shape the behaviors correctly. At this stage of life birds, grow faster than at any other point in their development.



Words on Birds...

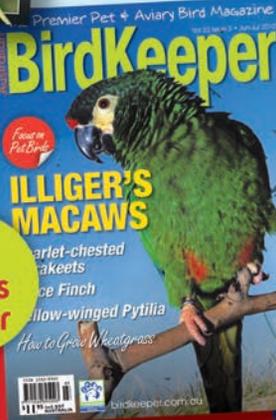

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It is the stage where they become covered in down-feathers and pin-feathers and begin to look more and more like a bird each day. This stage coincides with a very vocal time in the wild. It is normal to hear babies vocalizing several miles away from the nest. They are awake and conscious for longer periods of time each day. Their instinctive behaviors are already hard-wired in place and it is common to see them preening themselves and their clutch mates as well as performing other natural behaviors.

Before the First Flights

Before the birds are old enough to fly or leave the warmth of the brooder at night, they are often actively engaged in exploring their environment and are playing with toys. At this point, I expose them to props and begin to work on other behaviors such as gently bending their head down if I will be teaching them to do flips and somersaults, or teaching other behaviors such as waving on cue, shaking hands, or rolling over on cue. I expose them to a large assortment of other things as well. In addition to props they may see cameras, cables, lights, costume accessories, or they may interact with other animals for short periods of time so they become accustomed to this as well. If they will be working around pyrotechnics I use recordings of explosions playing them at a very low volume and gradually increasing the sound level with time.

It may seem like a lot to expose such young birds to, but this type of training



results in birds that are not as "spooky" or "flighty" as many others who have not experienced this type of early preparation. I feel that a baby who has taken part in this "birdie boot camp" has a better toolbox than a second-hand bird or even a new baby who is trained later in life. I am not saying you cannot be successful when you are training such birds but I am indeed suggesting that birds who are raised in this way are superior when you are discussing performance parrots.

At this early training age birds seem to be awake for longer periods of time and many will actively seek your companionship or attention. This results in some chicks that are fairly "clingy" and often noisy as well. Perhaps this is because they have associated you with food to such a degree that the mere sight of you can elicit a feeding response in an attempt to remind you, again and again, of their dependence on you. By the time young birds are covered with feathers (80 percent -90 percent of the body) they are usually hand-feeding around 2 to 3 times per day

and eating larger and larger amounts of formula, fewer times per day. Many may weigh as much or more than their parents. This is the stage where I am offering many types of food even though they usually only chew it or pick at it, but are not actually ingesting any of it. This is the beginning of the weaning stage, a time when they can already be performing several behaviors on cue.

Weaning and Fledging Age

At weaning time, I typically cut back to one feeding per day. This cut in feedings is accomplished only after I have maintained them on two feedings per day and have assessed the crop in the morning and at night to see if they are full and if I can safely get away with skipping a feeding. If the crop is full of seeds, pellets, peas and carrots or anything else I have offered then I feel it is safe to skip a feeding and I generally proceed with only one feeding per day from then on. Some birds may require you to offer that second feeding on occasion, going back and forth from one to two feedings for a few days, and making the transition gradual. Typically, young birds will fly to me on command about the same time they are old enough to be cut to one feeding per day.

When it is obvious that a young bird is thinking of flying to me, I cue them and show the syringe as a lure. Nine times out of 10, they fly to me, often missing the target and crashing against my chest, almost like a big hug. They are rewarded lavishly every time they fly to me, even if they were



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not cued to do so. Flight training a baby is very informal at first. It is basically just encouraging them to perform the behavior. Flying is pretty unpredictable and it can take them a while to figure out their "brakes," but it is not long before they get it and have them flying to you each time they are cued with the syringe. This flight training is very similar to the "walking" behavior they were presented with at a much younger age. Walking training is simply the ground work that preceded the actual flying recall.

For me, the weaning stage is the most stressful part of raising a baby because I am constantly wondering if they are eating enough. They may be pretending to eat but in reality they are just hulling the seed and not actually ingesting the food. When the feathers cover most of the body and they are able to thermo-regulate their bodies, young birds are moved to cages. This coincides with the time when my birds typically take their first flights outdoors; usually I fly them in aviaries and screened-in porches first, later allowing them to graduate to freedom and the out of doors.

Post-Weaning Juvenile Stage

In the wild when birds leave the nest they are programmed to stay close to their parents. Since many survival behaviors and skills necessary for their survival are not inherited, but rather learned through observation, the parents must teach them

where to safely find water and food. In my experience, successful training has no bearing on whether the species has fast reproductive cycles and high production rates. Some trainers feel that species with higher reproduction rates are not as trainable, but I do not agree. I trained a flock of 200 breeder cockatiels to fly to me on cue (even though some of them had babies in the nest). Furthermore, it has been documented that even baby Budgerigars (parakeets) stay with the father and continue to take feedings from him for about a week after they initially leave the nest. I utilize this natural "harness" to my advantage and I begin flying birds out of doors without restraints, relying solely on this natural tendency to stay close to the parent. Some would say I am "flight training using separation anxiety" but I do not feel that utilizing natural behaviors or tendencies in an effort to train a bird is in anyway harmful or detrimental to them. I am simply working with the bird's natural propensity to learn this behavior and I work to shape it from the very beginning to create the exact result I am looking for.

I have found no better method to train birds to free fly birds out of doors than starting them from infancy. Tricks taught later can have a basis for training in earlier development. For example, cuing a bird to fly from point A, in a circle, and back to Point A is simply building upon the early lesson of spinning on cue. These

lessons can be expanded whereas birds are trained to fly from point A to point B or to a certain person, or back to point A once again. I often use targeting behavior previously taught to a bird to teach them to fly from point A to B to C. Targeting works for flight training because wherever the beak goes to touch the target the body will follow.

Many trainers admit they have issues trying to get a bird to fly down from a tree or similar object. Stair cases or multi-level apartment buildings work well for flight training and help to teach birds to fly up and down and not just back and forth. Birds trained to fly up and down should fly to you on cue even from high places, eliminating any worries of such. I take this training further by having the bird fly to me from the top of a building and then switching places so they are dropping vertically to me from rooftops and window sills. You can gradually increase the distance as much as you desire until they are flying to you from the top of a 400 foot tall casino to a cued location.

As the birds reach full weaning, they are flight trained and are learning how to eat exclusively solid foods. This is the time to put the finishing touches on whatever tricks they will be performing, such as card tricks or chained behaviors. We begin exposing them to the "set" or wherever they will be performing and get them comfortable in that environment. They really are super parrots at this point and it is always difficult, emotionally, to send them to their new home and a new life as a performance parrot. I do get a certain satisfaction above and beyond that of raising a typical companion bird because it is a great feeling to know the bird will have a great life, be entertaining people, and possibly living in a mansion and performing in world class shows such as Cirque Du Soleil. It is plenty of hard work to raise any baby bird from such young ages, but it is always rewarding and I, for one, plan to continue raising performance parrots and to experiment with the learning abilities of neonate parrots.