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Five Behaviors for a Well Behaved Bird

By Barbara Heidenreich



Parrots are often described as inherently difficult companion animals. However a well behaved pet, whether it is a bird or mammal, is often in reality the result of good training and not necessarily the animal's genetics. When caregivers are armed with this knowledge, they are empowered to teach their birds to be wonderfully well behaved.

Well behaved birds are often thought of as ones who will readily respond to our requests for various behaviors. They are cooperative and eager to engage. Creating a parrot that can't wait to present good behavior is the result of training with positive reinforcement. When we reinforce an action, we are increasing the likelihood our bird will do the desired behavior again in the future. Positive reinforcers are anything we can add to the environment to increase behavior. Usually positive reinforcers are things our parrots seek to acquire such as food treats, toys and attention.

Another important aspect of training with positive reinforcement includes allowing your bird the choice to participate or not. This sometimes feels a bit counterintuitive, but in truth allowing your bird to walk or fly away will make him more likely to participate in the future.

Some caregivers may feel compelled to force a bird to comply with a request.

Photographs by Barbara Heidenreich

Unfortunately this often causes a bird to be even less cooperative. It can also often lead to a parrot resorting to aggressive behavior to cause the unwelcomed coercion to stop. In other situations it will cause the bird to retreat and be even more likely to avoid the caregiver. Aggressive behavior and fear responses are not something we typically associate with a well behaved parrot. The good news is by empowering our parrots to choose and refraining from using force we can avoid these problems altogether.

Instead we can focus on reinforcing our parrots every time they choose to present behavior we request. It may take a little time at first to build some history of your parrot presenting desired actions and getting reinforced for them. But once your bird understands his choices are resulting in things he enjoys, he will be eagerly presenting those behaviors again and again.

Five Behaviors

When we think of behaviors a well behaved parrot might present we find that in reality the list is quite short. In

many cases caregivers would be extremely satisfied if their parrot would present the following five behaviors:

- Step up
- Step down
- Go back into the cage
- Stepping onto new people
- Recall

Unfortunately for some birds these are difficult behaviors. This is often the result of information that has advised parrot owners to force a parrot to comply or obey. Caregivers have also been told to dominate parrots and show them who is boss. We now know these strategies have led to many of the behavior problems typically seen in companion parrots such as aggressive behavior and fear of hands. In the following section a more trust building approach is described for each of the five behaviors.

Step Up

Step up is probably the behavior desired the most by companion parrot owners. We are accustomed to being able to interact with our pets in a hands-on manner. However for some parrots this behavior is extremely challenging due to past experiences with hands


being used in a coercive manner. Retraining this behavior can take some time, but it is a very realistic goal.

Training step up is actually started by first training another behavior called targeting. When we teach an animal to target we teach it to orient a body part towards something. For parrots we usually teach them to orient their beak towards a chopstick or closed fist. An easy way to start this behavior is by offering treats from your right hand one after another. Very quickly your parrot will learn treats are dispensed from your right hand and will begin to orient towards it. Present your closed fist a few inches away from your parrot, if he moves towards it reinforce him. Soon he will go to the fist wherever it

is presented. This will give you a way to move your bird without having to touch him.

The targeting behavior can then be used to train your parrot to step onto your other hand. If a bird shows a fear or aggressive response to hands, place your left hand at the end of the perch to create an extension of the perch. Keep your hand very steady and use your target hand to encourage the bird to take steps towards your perch hand. This gives you the opportunity to reinforce small steps or approximations towards getting onto your perch hand. (This is a technique I developed after working with hundreds of parrot at my parrot training workshops that presented issues with hands.) Eventually you will create enough repetitions





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Reinforcers for Parrot Behavior

Food treats are usually easy to use when training parrots to present new behaviors. This is because they can be delivered and consumed quickly. This allows for quick repetitions and faster learning. Often the food item your bird eats first from his regular diet is his favorite. You can pull this item from the diet and save it for training to increase its value as a reinforcer. Parrots also respond to other types of reinforcers.

Some parrots respond well to head scratches. If a treat is not handy you can deliver a head scratch as soon as your parrot steps onto a perch. Attention and companionship can also be a reinforcer. Be careful not to accidentally use them to reinforce undesired behaviors such as screaming for attention. Toys are also great reinforcers, especially for going back into a cage or for staying on a play stand.

Try to identify as many reinforcers as you can for your parrot and start using them to reward your parrot for presenting desired behavior. Your parrot will learn to be well behaved in no time.

of your parrot stepping onto your hand that he will understand that stepping up earns lots of goodies. Overtime you

will be able to present your hand in front of your parrot's feet instead of at the end of the perch.

Presenting your hand should be done with careful forethought. Present the hand slowly to allow time to read and interpret your parrot's body language. If you see a fear response or aggressive behavior, remove your hand. Calm body language is a signal to continue. Your hand is best placed slightly higher than the perch and an inch or so in front of the bird. T

his allows your bird to comfortably step up. Allow your parrot to present the action. Your hand is simply a perch. Be sure both feet are settled on your hand before moving. This will also increase your parrots comfort and make it more likely he will be inclined to step up in the future. Most importantly be sure to

reinforce your parrot once both feet are on your hand.

Step Down

Stepping down is equally important as stepping up. Some parrots are fortunate to have had many pleasant interactions with hands and their caregivers. For these birds the challenge is not stepping up, but rather stepping down. Nothing is as reinforcing to them as spending time with their favorite human companions.

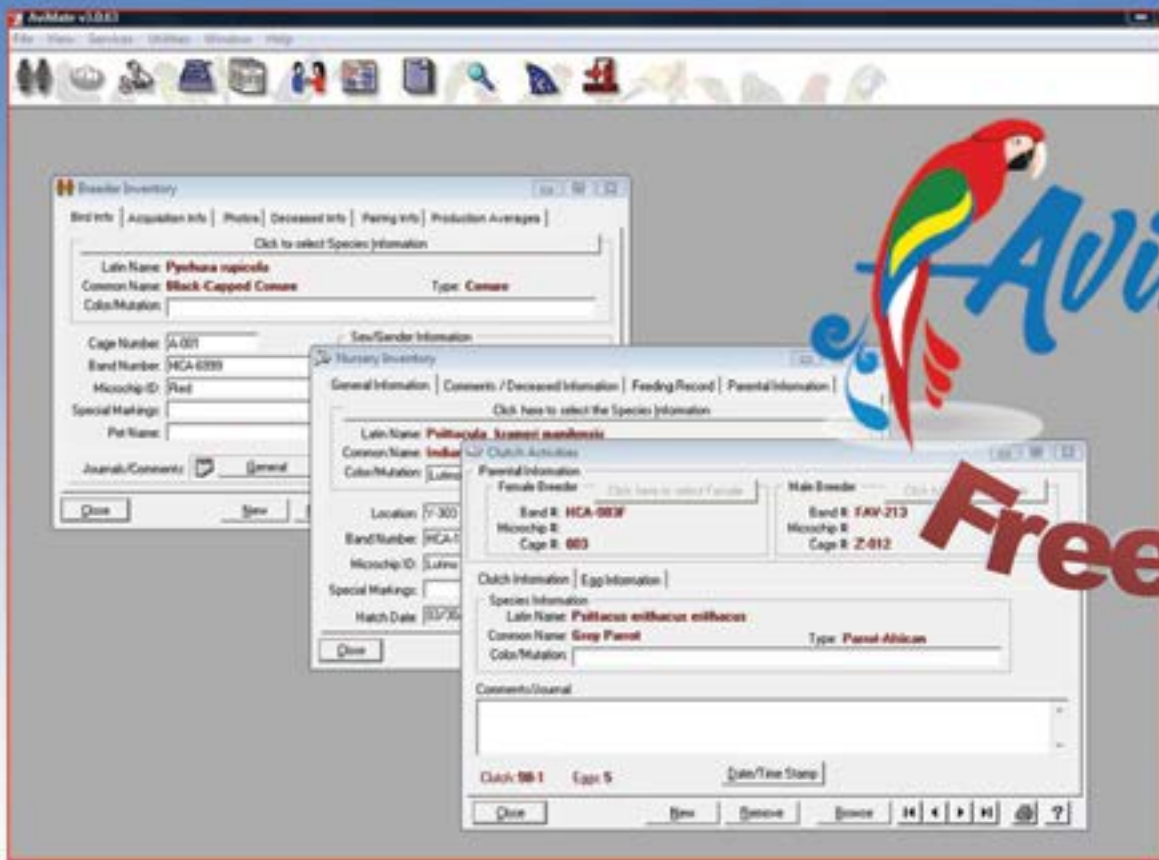
Training a parrot to step down also involves using the target. Present your parrot in front of and slightly lower than the perch. This is to allow your bird to comfortably step up onto the perch. Your parrot may show no intention of

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stepping onto the perch. This is where your target will be of help. Present the target on the other side of the perch. Reinforce your parrot if he leans over the perch to target. For each repetition place the target a little farther back to encourage more approximations towards stepping onto the perch. Eventually your parrot will place one foot and then two feet on the perch. Practice repetitions of this until it is presented consistently.

For some parrots human interaction is of more value than food reinforcers. For birds that prefer attention try to position your hand and body so that the bird will be stepping towards you when he steps onto the perch. You can then heavily reinforce your

parrot once on the perch with head scratches, cuddles or attention.

Go Back into the Cage

Some parrots find being outside the cage more fun than being inside the cage. Fortunately this is something we can easily address by using positive reinforcement. A good thing to keep in mind when faced with a behavior problem is that parrots will present the behavior that earns greater or better reinforcers. This means if a bird is resistant to going back into the cage we need to focus on ways to make being in the cage equally as fun as being outside of it.

Here are some ideas to help make the cage more reinforcing. Try rotating toys every

time your parrot is out of his cage. Keep a stash of 10 to 15 toys on hand that can be rotated daily. If your bird enjoys his toys, this novelty will help increase his motivation to go back into the cage.

Save his most preferred treat for going back in the cage. If you know your parrot loves a particular treat more than any other this can be a powerful tool for a difficult behavior. If you parrot learns he will only get that treat when he enters his enclosure he will quickly learn there is value in going back in the cage.

Put your bird back in his cage for unpredictable intervals of time. Instead of putting your parrot away for the day, try taking him right back out. Create an unpredictable

schedule and pair it with the other strategies and you will find your parrot will be more cooperative.

If you need to retrain the behavior be sure to break it down into smaller approximations. This may mean offering your bird treats for remaining calm as you slowly approach the cage. You can use your target to train your bird to step down onto a perch in the cage as described in the previous section.

Stepping onto New People

Pets are often expected to automatically respond in a receptive manner to new people. However we often see this is not as easy as it sounds with parrots. Again a parrot's

history and experience with strangers will greatly influence his desire to readily present this behavior. Outdated advice suggested passing the bird from person to person. Similar to forcing parrots to obey, this leads to a parrot who may comply but is not an eager participant. Instead we create a parrot who learns he has no choice in the matter or one that shows aggressive behavior or fear responses towards new people.

Positive reinforcement offers an effective pathway to creating a parrot that looks forward to interacting with strangers. Just like other behaviors discussed, we can focus on breaking this down into small steps or approximations.

To train this behavior it is best to have the new person stand still and hold their arm steady. The person with the bird reinforces the parrot for remaining calm as they approach the new person. Using the methods described for training a parrot to step down, the bird can be prompted to step onto the steady arm of the new person using the closed fist as a target. After several repetitions the new person can substitute his or her closed fist for the target and deliver the reinforcers. The next step is to allow the new person to approach the parrot when he is sitting on a perch and present an arm to cue step up. The previous experience of stepping on the arm and earning reinforcers will have taught the bird there is value in stepping up on the new person.

This process should be repeated with many different people so that the bird learns

Training vs. Maintaining Good Behavior

Training a new behavior may take some time, but the investment is worth it. Plan on a few sessions to get a new behavior trained. Difficult behaviors will take more time. If you really need a behavior trained quickly, have frequent short training sessions. This may mean up to three sessions a day depending on your parrot's interest in the reinforcer. Most parrots will participate in training sessions for five to 20 minutes on average.

To maintain behavior be sure to reinforce your bird every time you request behavior. You will no longer need to have daily training sessions to teach your parrot how to do the behavior. Instead you will reinforce your bird whenever he presents the behavior in your day to day interactions.

Once a behavior is solid, try offering a different reinforcer for each presentation of the behavior. This will help keep your bird motivated to present behavior. He never knows if he is going to get a head scratch, a toy or his favorite treat. If for any reason your parrot stops presenting the behavior, you can go back to your approximations and retrain it. Usually the behavior will get back on track very quickly.

to generalize the behavior. This makes it more likely he will step up onto any new person who presents the cue for step up in a manner to which the bird is accustomed.

Recall

More and more people are learning to live with flighted parrots. Flighted parrots have the ability to land on perches that are not easily accessed by people. Some caregivers find this lack of control unnerving. However others are discovering if you have trained your parrot to recall reliably, managing a flighted bird becomes easy.

Training a recall starts with a solid step up behavior. This means the parrot must know how to use its own body power to place itself on your hand. A parrot that has been trained through coercion to step up will have a difficult time understanding it needs to

make the effort to come to the hand. This means using positive reinforcement to train step up is critical for recall.

The first approximation for training recall is cueing the bird to step up. In the next approximation the hand is presented slightly farther away from the bird so that he must stretch his legs to get to the hand. In the following step the hand is presented at a distance that will require the bird to reach with his beak and pull his body to the hand. In some cases the bird may flap in conjunction with the step. This can be heavily reinforced to communicate flapping is desired. The next presentation of the hand should be far enough away that the bird will need to hop to the hand to gain reinforcers. Over time the distance can be increased. You can fine tune this training by presenting your cue for your

bird to fly to your hand when the bird looks very likely to fly to you. This will pair a quick response to the cue with the action. This will help create a solid recall.

If your bird is not flighted, recall is still a behavior worth training. Instead of asking your bird to fly to your hand, you will be asking him to walk towards your hand. Practice the behavior on a flat surface initially. Then add climbing to your hand as another type of recall. If your bird ever ends up in a tree you will find this behavior extremely helpful.

You Can Do It!

Well behaved parrots do exist. Parrot can learn to step up, step down, go back into the cage, step up on strangers and come to you when called. Spend a few training sessions getting these five important behaviors solid. You will find interacting with your parrot even more rewarding when he is cooperative and eager to respond to your requests. Most importantly you will enjoy a wonderful relationship with your parrot based on trust.

Barbara Heidenreich has been a professional animal trainer since 1990. Her company, Good Bird Inc., provides parrot training DVDs, books and workshops. She has been a featured speaker on six continents and has been published in nine languages. She is a former president of the International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators and served on the Board of Directors from 1997–2009. Barbara also consults on animal training in zoos.

AVIAN PROBIOTICS

By Jeanne Smith, DVM



Probiotics have become increasingly popular in both the human and animal health supplement industries. What exactly is a probiotic? The currently accepted Food and Agriculture Organization/World Health Organization definition of a probiotic is “live microorganisms which when administered in adequate amounts confer a health benefit on the host.” For many years, “beneficial bacteria” products have been available labeled as nutritional supplements. The big differences between a nutritional supplement and a probiotic is that the bacteria in the nutritional supplement doesn’t have to be alive and there is no implied claim it will have any health benefits.

Until recently the Food and Drug Administration required products labeled as probiotics to be FDA approved or indexed because the definition (and public perception) of a probiotic meets the FDA’s definition of a drug: “articles intended for use in the diagnosis, cure, mitigation, treatment, or prevention of disease” and “articles (other than food) intended to affect the structure or any function of the body of man or other animals” (Food, Drug, & Cosmetic Act, section 201 (g)(1). Now the FDA has relaxed its regulations on probiotics, allowing them to be labeled as probiotics with approval only necessary if any efficacy claims are made on the label. Now that FDA has changed its regulations, many products labeled as avian probiotics are being put on the market. It’s important to know more about avian probiotics to wisely choose among these new products.

Avian Normal Bacteria

Back in the 1950s researchers determined that various species of Lactobacilli and anaerobic coccoid bacteria were the main normal bacteria in chickens and turkeys. In the late 1970’s researchers began investigating the normal bacterial flora of pet birds. Most papers reported predominantly gram positive bacterial flora, and, as in poultry, most frequently various species of Lactobacilli and gram positive cocci. Gram negative bacteria were determined to be abnormal and potentially harmful to pet birds. One study examined the numbers of different bacteria in various healthy pet birds of different ages. They found that young birds had the highest numbers of normal bacteria and as birds aged they had fewer and fewer normal bacteria. At the same time, younger birds had fewer gram negative bacteria and

older birds had more.

Other factors besides age can affect a bird’s normal bacterial flora. Stress has been found to decrease numbers of normal bacteria in humans, animals, and poultry. The same research has not yet been done in pet birds, but they have systems similar to poultry so we would expect that they respond much the same way to stress. Antibiotic treatment not only gets rid of abnormal or pathogenic bacteria but normal bacteria as well. That’s why you’ll hear of birds getting yeast infections in their intestinal tract after treatment with tetracyclines. The yeast isn’t being held in check by normal bacteria anymore.

Parent birds dose their chicks with their normal bacteria when they feed them. If the parents are older, have been stressed, or have been treated with antibiotics they may not have the normal bacteria they need to pass on to their chicks. Handfed chicks don’t get their parents’ normal bacteria. This can be one reason why handfed chicks have more problems with gram negative bacterial infections and yeast infections than parent raised chicks do.

A good probiotic helps a bird by becoming its normal bacterial flora and supporting the growth of other normal bacteria. When it does this it strengthens all the natural defenses a normal bacterial flora provides.

Desirable Characteristics of an Avian Probiotic

Most of the research in avian probiotics has been done in poultry. Only a few studies have used pet bird species. The following information, therefore, comes primarily from poultry. The pet bird information is included where appropriate.

After decades of research, the following list of characteristics of an ideal avian probiotic has been proposed:

- Ability to adhere to intestinal lining cells
- Species specific
- Ability to colonize and reproduce in the bird
- Ability to survive throughout the GI tract
- Produce materials that harm pathogenic bacteria
- Ability to improve immunity
- Safe—doesn’t cause illness
- Survive processing and storage

ABILITY TO ADHERE: Adherence means that the bacteria attaches itself to the intestinal lining cells. Even if the intestine is rinsed off well the bacteria stay attached. Researchers became aware of the importance of adherence through a series of papers published in the 1970s by a man named Fuller. All the avian species he examined—chickens, turkeys, quail, ducks, pheasants, and pigeons—had *Lactobacillus* species which adhered to crop cells. *Lactobacillus* species isolated from ten different mammalian species did not. Also, the other bacteria he