

# Bird Show with a Message

by Lynne Page  
Olympia, Washington

"Rain forest" and "recycle" are not the easiest words for a bird to say but Sebastian, a Yellow-crowned Amazon, pronounces them clearly. As a featured performer in the bird show at the Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium in Tacoma, Washington, Sebastian helps express the message of the show: please learn to appreciate birds so you will protect the environment, conserve habitats, and not obtain a parrot as a pet without understanding what bird ownership entails.

By its setting alone, the Point Defiance Park reminds visitors of the importance of preserving the environment. Located at the tip of Point Defiance in Puget Sound, the 700-acre park offers spectacular views of the Sound, forests and nearby mountain peaks. Many people come to the park to enjoy miles of hiking trails, roam the gardens, play on the shore, or simply picnic. To those fascinated by animals, however, the highlight is the zoo, specializing in animals of the Pacific Rim. A few of the residents include Polar Bears, Beluga Whales, Arctic Foxes, sharks, Red Wolves, Golden Tamarins, and an amazing assortment of fish and tidepool denizens.

While waiting for the bird show, bird lovers can see both the familiar and the strange. The World of Adaptations building houses a lovely flock of finches, including Lady Gouldians, shafttails and weavers, flitting among potted plants and enjoying a little brick pool. A few steps away are Northern Pied Hornbills (*Anthracoceros malabaricus*), owls, a Tawny Frogmouth, Bali Mynahs and blue jays. Those wishing to broaden their interest in flying creatures to embrace the furry variety will be intrigued by the exhibit of Short-tailed Fruit Bats. Next, the avian aficionado must move outdoors to enjoy the tundra waterfowl, puffins, and Magellanic Penguins.

Compared to the numerous Pacific Rim water birds, the parrots of Point Defiance are few in number. These psittacines are crowd pleasers, nonetheless, because of the summer bird shows presented twice daily by staff biologist Peggy Lucas. Each member of her colorful cast lends his or her talents to convey the show's message.

Corey, a beautiful seven and a half year old Blue and Gold Macaw, opens the show. One of her favorite trained behaviors is to fly to the low railing separating the stage from the audience. In fact, she has been known to make unscheduled flights to "her" fence without waiting for a cue. (While performing, the fully flighted birds in the show wear lightweight tethers carefully designed to be safe when used by experts on trained birds. Pet owners are well-advised to keep their birds' wings clipped.) When she sticks to the script, Corey begins by playing the part of the two-year-old child a parrot is said to resemble; she gleefully throws cups and toys crashing to the floor. Peggy Lucas makes the first of many points supporting her argument that parrots are not good pets for most people. She points out that not only are parrots permanently in their "terrible twos" but that, as flock animals, they have a deep need for constant social interaction. A human flock member must spend hours each day to meet this need.

Robert, an 11 year old Moluccan Cockatoo, is another lesson to would-be bird owners. This impressive hand-raised bird drove his previous owners to distraction, and nearly to divorce, with his screaming and constant demands for attention. They were thrilled when the zoo agreed to take him off their hands, and ears. In the show, Robert screams on command as a warning to anyone considering sharing his home with a cockatoo. (Robert still manages to scream a fair amount of his off-duty time as well.) His

open-beaked screeching also allows Lucas to describe what that powerful chewing equipment can do to woodwork and furniture if the owner is not ever-vigilant.

Of course, a beak can also bite. Rufus, the African Gray, wails like an ambulance siren to underscore the point. On command, he also rings like a telephone, quacks, oinks, and says "hello" and "goodbye."

Next to appear is the bird Lucas calls the "most difficult," a deceptively sweet-looking blue-eyed Triton Cockatoo named Daisy. Possibly wild-caught, poor Daisy was passed from owner to owner before her luck changed and she landed at the zoo. Domineering and aggressive, Daisy earned the nickname "the alligator" by frequently drawing blood with her bites. She prefers men but, now that no men are involved with the show, has formed a firm friendship with one of her handlers, Lori Braun. Daisy adores cuddling with her friend, but even Lori Braun must play by Daisy's rules or pay the price. Robert, the Moluccan, has apparently decided Daisy's friendship is not worth the price. Unlike some cockatoos of different species who enjoy each other's company, Daisy and Robert are decidedly cool toward one another.

Daisy's contribution to the show is to dip into a can of "paint" (actually a clean can holding a treat) to remind the audience that many common substances are dangerously toxic. After "rescuing" Daisy, Lucas advises everyone to be careful with toxic materials, even everyday items such as little batteries, and to use safer alternatives whenever possible. She recommends, for example, returning to "old-fashioned" standbys such as baking soda and lemon oil for cleaning. Daisy underscores the lesson with a death scene worthy of Sarah Bernhardt. Perched on Lucas's hand, Daisy stretches up, then swoons backward, finishing hanging limply by her feet, her head straight down. (A humorous but vivid illustration of the environmental warning, this performance also proves that a simple trick done with flair may outshine some complex behavior using an expensive prop.)

In her leisure time, Daisy plays a strange game. (Lucas says she has seen one other bird, also a cockatoo, amuse itself in the same way.) Grasping a sunflower seed in her beak, she

rubs it through her feathers, possibly to coat it with powder to make it more slippery. Then, head turned sideways as though preening near her wing, Daisy tosses the seed onto her back and catches it as it slides down, or through her feathers. Most times, Daisy catches the seed successfully. When she misses and the seed falls, she sweetly calls, "Be a chicken," to let the closest person, preferably Lori Braun, know she wants another seed. Of course, Daisy usually gets what she wants, proving that even "professional bird people" are not immune to being enslaved by a "professional bird tyrant."

The other two parrots currently in the show are Sebastian and Tabbatha, five year old Yellow-crowned Amazons thought to be brother and sister. Tabbatha clucks like a chicken to say "don't be chicken" to do what is necessary to increase recycling and protect the environment. After Braun explains that the rain forest is being destroyed by strip mining for bauxite (the ore from which aluminum comes), she asks Sebastian what we must do. He clearly announces, "recycle." Asked what habitat we can help protect by recycling, he answers, "rain forest."

In addition to talking so well on cue, Sebastian sometimes interrupts with comments and sound effects of his own, a habit Braun finds distracting, even though the audience and Sebastian enjoy it.

Although he performs like a trooper, Sebastian has recently become a challenge to handle, having now reached sexual maturity. During the difficult two months of the breeding season, he attacked Lucas for the first time. Fortunately, he would still allow Lori Braun to handle him. With the end of the breeding season, Sebastian returned to his more friendly ways.

Even during his friendly times, the Amazon's wings are now kept clipped, but that was not always so. Any bird owner who believes his bird is "too tame" or "too well-trained" to fly off should heed the experience of Sebastian. As tame and well-trained as any bird, he flew off twice when his wings were not clipped enough. Perhaps he wanted to return but had never had the opportunity to master the technique of downward flight.

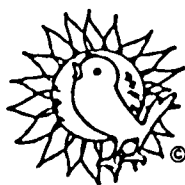
By instinct, a bird short of "frequent flyer" miles will fly upward and can

manage level flight, though without the strength and control of a wild bird. What the inexperienced bird cannot do is fly downward, so he is forced to seek higher and higher perches. Even if he can see his owner on the ground and wants to return to the familiar figure, the bird lacks the physical skill to do so. Undoubtedly, this inability adds to the bird's fear and confusion.

Luckily, both times Sebastian took off the zoo staff was able to retrieve him. One time a staff member had to

use tree-climbing equipment to scale the very tall pine tree in which Sebastian sat, weary from harassment by native crows.

That story leads to the last but in no way least member of the cast, Merlin the crow. Lucas notes that Merlin shares the impressive intelligence of the parrots but is a bit more high-strung and flighty. Certainly he is not shy. Apparently he was raised as a pet then deliberately or accidentally let go. Unwilling or unable to make it



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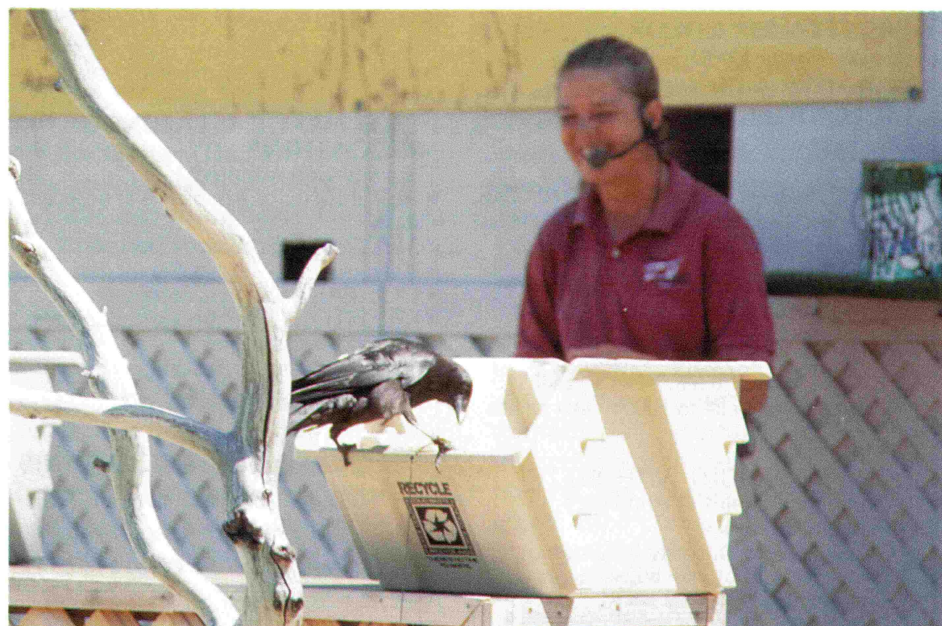




*Yellow-crowned Amazons, Sebastian and Tabbatha, help Lori Braun explain how recycling can help protect the rain forest.*



*Triton Cockatoo Daisy, aka "the alligator," in one of her sweet moments with Peggy Lucas.*



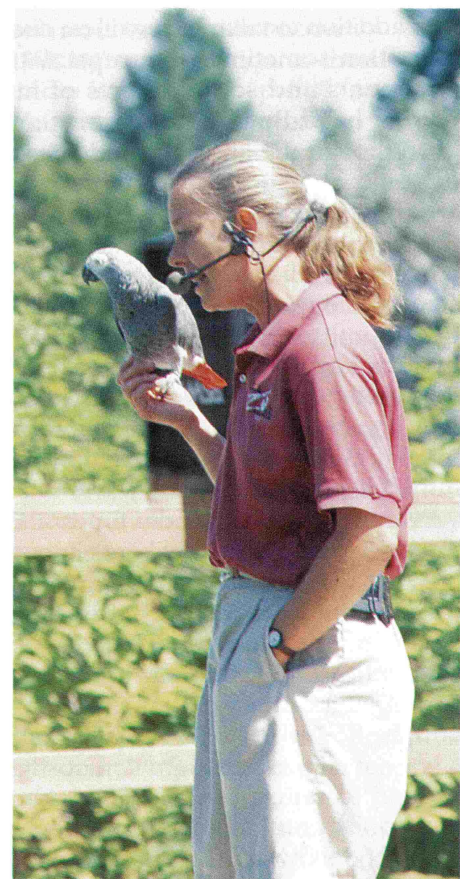
*Merlin the crow demonstrates recycling as Peggy Lucas watches.*

in the wild, Merlin adopted an elementary school and made a living grabbing food and trinkets from the children. Luckily for the students and Merlin, the zoo took him in over eight years ago and made him a "star."

Flying on his light cord leash, Merlin unhesitatingly demonstrates recycling. When a child in the audience volunteers to hold a scrap of paper, Merlin flies to the youngster's arm, retrieves the paper, then places it in a recycling bin. Next, Merlin removes a crushed aluminum can "mistakenly" put in the wrong bin and tosses it into a second bin. (The zoo does more than pay lip service to recycling. Throughout the grounds are special baskets for visitors' soft drink cans.)

Merlin tells the recycling story clearly by his actions; but he cannot tell his own story, and it must be a long and sometimes sad one. Recently the zoo's veterinarian removed a BB pellet from Merlin's leg, where it must have been embedded, without ill-effects, for eight years.

By the time the show has ended, the audience has gained a better appreciation of birds, their role as an indicator of the health of the environment, and the need to protect birds and their



*African Gray Rufus talks and makes sound effects on cue for Peggy Lucas.*



habitats. In no uncertain terms, Peggy Lucas admonishes people not to buy wild-caught birds as pets. She notes that importation for the pet trade is a significant factor in the decline of certain bird populations, as is loss of habitat. Also, she deplores the deaths of birds during capture and importation. She warns those thinking of purchasing a bird as a pet, even if captive bred, to consider the decision as carefully as the decision to have a child. The child eventually will grow up; but the parrot will remain dependent, needing hours of daily attention for the lifetime of the pet owner and well beyond. Lucas admits her actions in playing with her feathered friends contradict her statement that birds are not good pets for most people. However, she notes that birds are her job, so she is able to devote the time they need. Also, the show provides only a glimpse of "life with birds" so the audience must realize much more goes on behind the scenes, as birds are not easy to care for well. That this zoo, and every zoo, receives many pleas to accept pet birds from owners no longer able or willing to care for them is evidence that the decision to purchase a bird is often a mistake, a mistake for which the bird pays the highest price. Zoos rarely accept donations of birds or other animals. Point Defiance now refers all such calls to the local bird club. Lucas hopes many of these birds end up in satisfactory situations as breeders, helping to satisfy the demands of the pet trade so that fewer birds are imported.

Peggy Lucas has no birds in her own home because her work with the zoo flock does not leave her the time a pet would deserve. Although she had a Halfmoon Conure as a child, most of her preparation for her present position came as assistant to the renowned animal trainer, Ray Berwick. She has been with the Point Defiance Zoo more than three years, having taken over a flock already trained for the show which has evolved into the current production. Unlike some trainers, Lucas never deprives her birds of food to ensure they will perform. They strut their stuff willingly for treats and affection.

In the winter, the bird show stage is dark. The bird keepers consider their most important winter duty to be to guarantee that no bird in their care is

deprived of the hours of psychological stimulation and social contact it needs each day. In other words, the staff spends much time playing with their charges. Rehearsing is not necessarily part of this routine, as the birds do not forget their roles even if weeks go by without practice. The relationships between birds and humans must be maintained, however.

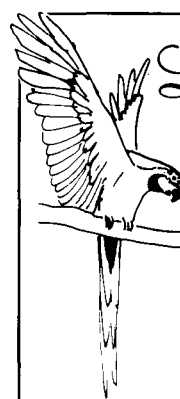
The key to building a successful relationship with a bird, Lucas says, is "always to be fair to the bird according to the bird's sense of justice and view of the world." This does not mean the human must abdicate as flock leader. "Being fair" does mean understanding what is important to the bird and not asking the bird to change its nature. For example, to ask a bird in the throes of the hormonal surge of the breeding season to play happily without biting may be very unfair. The best course for the human may be to withdraw, as Lucas withdrew from contact with Sebastian during the recent breeding season. She did not force him into situations in which he would become agitated and bite.

This is the advice Lucas gave to a woman who pleaded for the zoo to accept her African Gray. She had purchased the Gray as a baby about five years earlier and was closely bonded to the bird. When her pet attacked her upon becoming sexually mature, she took it as a personal rejection. Lucas suggested she must react with her head, not her heart, and understand that this behavior was the result of hormonal activity the bird could not control. After a couple of months, the bird would probably return to his old self. In the meantime, it would be "unfair" for the woman to force him to interact with her as usual, then to become upset when he bit. The bird would remember her anger and might never accept her as a friend again. Lucas advised the woman to continue to take scrupulous care of the bird's physical needs (clean cage, good food, sparkling water, plenty of toys) but not to interfere with him beyond what he could tolerate. If the bird liked her to talk to him, she should. If the bird wanted to come out on a playpen, let him, but let the bird set his limits. If he did bite, she should calmly retreat. (Because each bird and set of circumstances is different, a person facing the sexual maturity

aggressiveness of a pet parrot is well-advised to consult an experienced bird behaviorist.)

Similarly, it is unfair for a bird owner to ask a bird to act against its instincts in other ways. It is unfair to ask an Amazon completely to give up morning and evening vocalizing, a habit necessary to the survival of the flock in the wild. It is unfair to expect a bird easily to accept something it instinctively fears, even if we do not see that speck on the ceiling or recognize the threat presented by our new lamp. To the bird owner it should be enough that the bird's instincts drive it to fear for its life. Respect the bird's world view and natural drives. Be fair.

That one principle sums up the message of Sebastian and his friends, a message the visitor should have no trouble remembering after a rewarding day spent soaking up the sights and sounds of Point Defiance: protect the environment, recycle, and respect all birds in the wild and in your home. Be fair. ➤



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