

WE ASKED THE EXPERTS

Five avian experts share their philosophies on behavior, the magic of the Step up and more.

by Elizabeth Anderson

Meet the Panelists



▲ Sally Blanchard has worked with companion parrots and their behavior for more than 30 years. She produces the "Companion Parrot Quarterly," which features in-depth articles on avian behavior. She also owns and operates the "Laughing Parrot Gallery" in Loveland, CO.



▲ Susan G. Friedman, Ph.D., a psychology professor at Utah State University, has helped pioneer efforts to apply to animals the teaching technology and ethical standard of Applied Behavior Analysis, which has been effective with human learners. She has given a variety of workshops and presentations at veterinary, avian and exotics conferences.



▲ Chris Davis pioneered the field of avian behavior in 1974 while working at the Animal Actors show at Universal Studios, Hollywood, and the Bird Show at Lion Country Safari. She has lectured worldwide to avian veterinary groups and bird clubs. Davis has also contributed chapters to six veterinary and reference books.



▲ Mattie Sue Athan is an IAABC-certified companion parrot consultant and award-winning author of "Guide to a Well-Behaved Parrot." She is the winner of Amazon.com's Bestselling Bird Care Book award.



▲ Barbara Heidenreich, an animal training professional since 1990, consults on animal training for zoos and other animal-related facilities. She also runs Good Bird, Inc., which provides behavior and training products to the companion parrot community. She is author of "Good Bird! A Guide to Solving Behavior Problems in Companion Parrots" and "The Parrot Problem Solver. Finding Solutions to Aggressive Behavior."

We're kicking off 2008 with a panel discussion featuring five avian experts and their philosophies on key areas of life with a companion parrot.

The five panelists are Mattie Sue Athan, Sally Blanchard, Chris Davis, Susan Friedman, Ph.D. and Barbara Heidenreich. (Long-time behavior consultant and certified veterinary technician Liz Wilson was also invited to join but had to decline because of timing issues.) They followed strict word count limits, but each could easily write whole books on the topic — and some have! Their answers appear in alphabetical order within each topic.

1. IN REGARD TO COMPANION BIRDS, WHAT IS YOUR PHILOSOPHY ON SOCIALIZING YOUR BIRD?

ATHAN: In the past, a great deal of parrot behavior modification involved "socializing" or training wild-caught birds to enjoy interactions with humans. In this first decade of the 21st century in the United States, interactive responses to humans usually appear as a natural result of hand-feeding in young domestic parrots. In most cases, these activities are self-sustaining if they are simply accommodated. These days, I see more unwanted issues appear if a companion parrot fails to develop independent bird-like ways and becomes overly-dependent on human interaction.

BLANCHARD: For years, many people within aviculture believed that parrot behavior was "hard-wired." It is clear that parrot behavior is a unique combination of instinct and learning. Early learning and safe exposure to new situations is essential in teaching a companion parrot to adapt to life in our homes.

DAVIS: A well-socialized bird has a greatly increased ability to comfortably handle changes in his life. He is less stressed when strangers enter the home or when vacations or unforeseen circumstances — even his person's death — necessitate his being boarded by, cared for by, or adopted by strangers. Even emergency situations are less stressful for the

socialized bird. Decreased stress contributes to a more flexible and mentally, emotionally and physically healthier — and much happier — avian family member.

FRIEDMAN: Socialization should be a reciprocal learning process whereby our birds learn to interact acceptably in the culture of our homes and we learn to interact acceptably with them. Since the only constant is change, socialization is a life-long process. Two important goals of socialization are independence and resilience. These characteristics are facilitated by environments that stimulate daily exploration and problem-solving opportunities because parrots are built to behave, not to be still.

HEIDENREICH: Interacting with other people can be taught using positive reinforcement. This process includes using shaping with approximations to teach steps toward the desired behavior that are then paired with a positive reinforcer. When this process is repeated with numerous people, the bird can learn to generalize the behavior. This is quite different from forcing a bird to step repeatedly from one person to another. Without a desired outcome, the parrot learns to merely comply rather than look forward to interacting with others.

2. WHAT IS YOUR PHILOSOPHY ON DISCIPLINE?

ATHAN: The easiest, most effective "discipline" is simply walking away from these highly social animals.

BLANCHARD: If discipline is viewed as punishment, it is neither trust-building nor a valid way to change negative behaviors. Parrots don't understand the concept of changing their behavior to avoid punishment. The most effective way of changing negative behavior is to teach positive distractions.

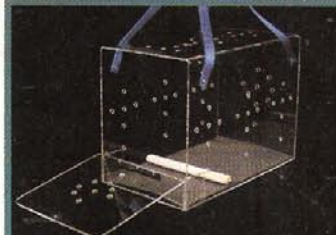
DAVIS: Appropriate consequences, for both positive and negative behaviors, are an essential aspect of teaching all beings, human or animal, acceptable boundaries. Positive consequences should always greatly outnumber the negative. It is important that negative consequences be gentle and reasonable and that they be performed in a consistent, predictable, non-confrontational manner and properly timed for maximum impact. They are also

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best applied subjectively, designed for each bird and for each specific problem.

FRIEDMAN: Discipline is a tricky word because it means so many different things. When used to mean self-control or order it's an important concept for caregivers. When used to mean punishing birds to gain control or enforce obedience, it represents a lack of knowledge about how animals learn. To foster successful companion behavior, parrots need skilled teachers, not disciplinarians. With skill, successful companion behaviors can be taught without force or coercion.

HEIDENREICH: My goal is to set parrots up for success, rather than put myself in the position of having to address undesired behavior after its occurrence. I can teach a bird what I would like it to do in place of undesired behavior. Better yet, I can avoid the situation in the first place by the choices I make with a bird. With this approach, there is rarely, if ever, a need for discipline and the end result is a well-behaved bird and a trusting relationship between parrot and caregiver.

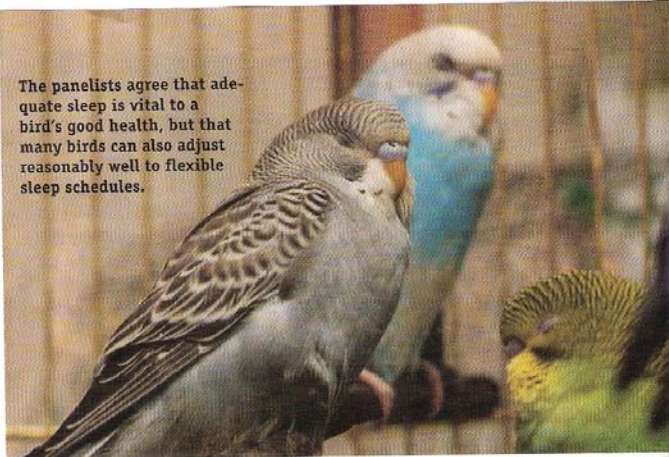
3. WHAT IS YOUR PHILOSOPHY ON EXCESSIVE SCREAMING?

ATHAN: This is the most commonly reported behavioral issue in "over-socialized" or human-dependent companion parrots, and it can be remedied by stimulating and reinforcing replacement behaviors until the bird can learn to self-reward (play or otherwise entertain itself).

BLANCHARD: Loud vocalization is a normal behavior for parrots and should not be punished. It is excessive and manipulative screaming that is the problem. This is a learned behavior that is usually a result of poor early socialization, unmet social needs and/or continual drama rewards (such as screaming back) that entrench the behavior.

DAVIS: Excessive screaming is not an essential part of a healthy parrot's existence, any more than constant yelling is part of a healthy child's development. Sadly, an excessively screaming bird often becomes doomed to being unwanted and shunted to one home after another. Understanding why the bird is screaming, addressing the cause and teaching him appropriate vocalization allows him to express himself in an

The panelists agree that adequate sleep is vital to a bird's good health, but that many birds can also adjust reasonably well to flexible sleep schedules.



acceptable manner, while remaining a beloved and permanent family member.

FRIEDMAN: This is a problem for people and parrots who should be using their time productively. However, eliminating excessive screaming isn't the only goal. A good behavior-change plan gives the bird the opportunity to replace the purpose served by the problem behavior with an acceptable, alternate behavior and learn new skills. This makes problem behaviors less likely. For example, birds can learn to communicate with pleasant sounds and engage in independent activities, instead of screaming.

HEIDENREICH: Screaming for attention is a behavior that is often inadvertently reinforced by caregivers. Reacting to screaming in small ways (gentle talking) and big ways (yelling back) often serves to increase the behavior, rather than decrease it. Choosing to reinforce other acceptable sounds and ignoring screaming are strategies that, when paired together, can successfully address the problem. My own Amazon parrot learned years ago to whistle for attention using this method.

4. WHAT IS YOUR PHILOSOPHY ON BEDTIME?

ATHAN: Adequate sleep is necessary for any animal's well-being. Most tropical parrots probably require something like 10 to 12 hours daily, but most companion parrots adjust readily to human schedules, napping midday if they stay up after dark to socialize.

BLANCHARD: Sleep is very important to companion parrots. If a parrot's cage is in

an area where people stay up late, a sleeping cage in a quiet room is advisable. While a parrot should have 8 to 12 hours of sleep a night, I think that parrots can adjust to our schedules. My grey stays up late at night with me but also sleeps in like I do.

DAVIS: Generally speaking, excessive variations in bedtimes are not healthy for birds, but those that have some reasonable flexibility (within an hour or so) in their bedtimes are also more flexible in other aspects of their lives. As long as they receive enough hours of darkness and quiet, they will be fine, especially if a comforting bedtime ritual, such as covering the bird's cage, offering a bedtime treat or saying a special "goodnight," is performed.

FRIEDMAN: Sleep is an area I know very little about. I look forward to learning more from scientific investigations. Having lived in Africa, I can tell you the nighttime "jungle" is a noisy, brightly moonlit place and animals tend to distribute their sleep periods around the clock. Some research indicates even humans do better with segmented sleep. Perhaps more important than one long, uninterrupted sleep period is predictable quiet times throughout the day and night.

HEIDENREICH: In my experience, birds are quite flexible and adaptable in behavior. In addition, each bird is an individual. How much sleep a parrot needs and at what hours will vary with each individual bird and household.

5. WHAT IS YOUR PHILOSOPHY ON THE STEP UP/STEP DOWN?

ATHAN: Step-up patterning increases

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both cooperation and confidence when done appropriately. Like any other interactive routine, Step ups must be enjoyable for the bird, or they can stimulate unintended consequences. I use the prompt "Step up" for both stepping up and stepping down, as one prompt is most easily understood and reinforced.

BLANCHARD: I am a firm believer in using words to communicate with our parrots. Not only does saying "Up" provide a parrot with a clear message, it also patterns us to provide a consistent way of approaching the parrot.

DAVIS: Establishing essential behaviors and appropriate verbal commands is an important early training tool for a bird to learn exactly what is expected of him. Any appropriate phrase can be used to convey the stepping-up and stepping-down procedures. This begins the training process. Over time, other desired behaviors, cues and commands can be added. Eventually, a visual cue, such as offering the hand in a particular manner, can replace the verbal cue.

FRIEDMAN: Some people assert that stepping onto a hand is the first and most important behavior for a bird to do and that birds must step up every time. These ideas have led caregivers to force their birds onto their hands to escape threatening towels and sticks. I disagree with these approaches. For many birds, stepping onto a human hand is an advanced skill. Other behaviors can be trained first with positive reinforcement, such as targeting.

HEIDENREICH: There is a misconception that a well-behaved parrot must obey a command to Step up/down. This forceful strategy has led to numerous problems seen in companion parrots, including aggressive behavior and fear responses. Fortunately when parrots are given the choice to Step up/down and positively reinforced, the result is a quick, reliable and repeatable performance of behavior. It also includes the added benefit of a parrot that eagerly anticipates Stepping up/down.

6. WHAT IS YOUR PHILOSOPHY ON AGGRESSION?

ATHAN: I don't see parrots as "aggressive," as a carnivorous animal might be,

but rather they may resort to force against perceived rivals for territory. That "territory" might be almost anything; the cage, a human, a human body part, the floor, a certain high perch, a chrome toaster or hair dryer.

BLANCHARD: Parrots are not aggressive by nature. I believe that a great deal of aggressive behavior starts because of uncertainty, confusion or even fear. It can also be a reflection of the way a bird is being handled. Approaching a parrot in a calm, indirect manner often prevents aggression.

DAVIS: An accurate behavioral assessment is essential before appropriate behavior modification techniques can be applied. For example, humans are often the inadvertent causes of, or contributors to, what appears to be aggression. Many birds that are considered to be "aggressive" are actually exhibiting fear, often of something or of someone. Or they are exhibiting territoriality that their humans have, to the bird's way of thinking, agreed upon. Once the causes are properly addressed, the behavior usually ceases.

FRIEDMAN: One barrier to solving behavior problems is the idea that behavior is something animals have, instead of something animals do, given certain conditions and not other conditions. Rather than describing behavior in terms of personality traits (is aggressive) or medical diagnoses (has aggression), assess the conditions under which the behavior occurs and change those conditions. Ask, "What do I want the bird to do instead?" and teach that behavior.

HEIDENREICH: Parrots exhibit body language that is associated with aggressive behavior. By learning to recognize this body language, situations that create aggressive behavior can be avoided. More often than not, people tend to disregard this body language. By respecting the parrots right to say "No," many incidents of aggressive behavior can be avoided. Caregivers can adjust their actions to create a comfortable bird. The focus can then be on actively training desired behavior for that situation. ■

Elizabeth Anderson is a freelance writer based in Orange County, CA, who frequently writes about pet-related topics.

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