

Training your New Parrot - Where to Begin?

By Barbara Heidenreich

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Photo: Barbara Heidenreich

It is a jungle out there, and quite frankly it can be in our homes too. Well, maybe not exactly a jungle, but it can be an overwhelming mix of new, exciting, stimulating, intimidating and perhaps frightening experiences when a bird first enters our home. Like any enthusiastic consumer, we are often compelled to unwrap our purchases and start putting tab A into slot B so that we can get our new apparatus up and running and ready to fulfill our needs, whatever they may be. However when bringing a living breathing organism into your home, such as a potential companion parrot, it is not quite so easy as perhaps setting up your new television or putting together a bed frame. A simple tightening of a few screws or plugging in the right cables doesn't suffice.

Prior to arriving in your home

Where does one begin? If you are a positive reinforcement trainer, you go back to what you may have already learned. Knowing that every experience your new bird is going to have with you will likely either build trust or create a loss of trust, causes one to think carefully. This means prior to your bird even entering your home, you will have done some preparations. For example, how will your bird be transported to your home? Will your bird be trained prior to travel to sit comfortably in a kennel or smaller cage for the journey? If your circumstance will allow this behavior to be trained, it will be extremely helpful to reducing stress a bird could experience if not used to travel. Hopefully you, and the person from whom the bird is coming, have an open communication and can work together to facilitate training prior to departure.

Before the bird arrives in your home, no doubt you will have prepared an



of preferred reinforcer such as head scratches, talking or food, they can be offered while the bird is inside the travel cage to reinforce calm behavior.

Going from travel cage to new enclosure

If the bird does not know how to step up on a hand, no problem! This is where positive reinforcement trainers get creative. Focus on other non-invasive ways of allowing the bird to go from the travel cage to the new enclosure. For example, can the travel cage be placed inside the new cage? Can the doors of the two enclosures be aligned in such a way to give the bird the option of either staying in the travel cage or only going into the new enclosure? Can it remain in the travel cage for some time until he appears more receptive to coming out? Sometimes we become so focused on the result we want, that is the bird to go into the new cage, that we abandon our good training strategies. If we plan to allow time for the transfer, the process does not need to be stressful.

Opening the door also needs to be considered with care. Again the movements are slow and attention is paid to the response of the bird. Should the

appropriate enclosure. Hopefully you will have been able to obtain a history on the bird to know what he or she is physically capable of doing. In your preparations think about the moment the bird is transferred into the new enclosure. How do you visualize that proceeding? In my mind I hope to see a calm bird either climb directly from the travel cage into the new cage, or step from my hand into the new cage. If it is not accustomed to spending time in a travel cage, it is quite likely the bird will want to come out of the travel cage quickly and perhaps be somewhat anxious or panicky in its responses. This means the bird may make quick movements, give darting looks, have its eyes wide open and scramble frantically out of the carrier or cage. Making slow movements can help diminish this type of response. This means when carrying the travel cage to the new enclosure the movements are very steady and slow. One is careful not to absentmindedly knock the carrier around. If the bird is receptive to any type



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Reinforcers can be offered while the bird is inside the travel cage to facilitate calm behaviour

bird back away as far as possible from the hand approaching the door, it is likely a fear response. In this case one might choose to place the travel cage inside the other cage, gently opening its door and stepping back. Give the bird enough space and time that the fear response diminishes. In this situation, it is often a better choice to allow the bird to come out on its own when it is ready.

Should you be fortunate enough to have acquired a young parrot that is familiar with hands, the bird may move towards a hand eager to step up. This



Photo: Barbara Heidenreich

Will your bird be trained prior to travel to sit comfortably in a kennel or smaller cage for the journey



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can make for an easy transfer from one enclosure to another. However again be mindful to make the journey on the hand as comfortable as possible for the bird. It might be tempting to take advantage of this moment of contact for cuddling and other tactile attention. Remember to watch the body language of the bird to see if this is something the bird finds reinforcing in that moment. This is possibly the first moment it has met you. If it is, the bird may not be open to such interactions yet.

If using the 'step down' procedure, that I have detailed in previous articles, give the bird the opportunity to choose to step onto a perch or the side of the enclosure from your hand. Avoid using force to roll the bird off or peel the bird off of your hand. Prior to the bird's arrival hopefully you will have placed fresh food and water in the cage. This is to avoid having to enter the enclosure with the new bird in it right away, should the bird display fear or aggressive behavior.

If you have a bird that is not comfortable with you near its food and water bowls, targeting behavior can be of help

Getting to know your bird

Professional animal trainers often give themselves time. What this means is there is usually not a rush to get to a desired result. The focus is on making sure the process is as positive as possible for the animal. Often you will hear recommendations to take advantage of the 'honeymoon' period. This is the first few days or weeks your bird is in your home. It is sometimes recommended by people to start interacting with the bird before it is comfortable and starts to possibly exhibit undesired behaviors. I find this a bit counterproductive to my training strategies. Instead my initial goal is

for the animal to desensitize to his new environment. I want it to be as comfortable as possible before I focus on interacting directly with the bird. Most of you reading this may already be familiar with the challenges presented when training with environmental distractions. A new environment in itself is quite a big distraction. The amount of time needed for a bird to desensitize will vary for each individual. For some it may be minutes, for others it may be days or more.

During this period of desensitization you will likely need to offer fresh food and water. Your positive reinforcement training

strategies can facilitate making this a pleasant experience for the bird. In a previous article on 'target training', it discusses the details of using the targeting behavior to teach your bird to perch somewhere away from the area to which you will need to attend.

If you have a bird that is not comfortable with you near food and water bowls, this targeting behavior can be of help. While your bird is adjusting to its new environment, you will want to continue to monitor your actions around the bird to ensure its comfort and help foster a trusting relationship.

Making first contact

Each bird is an individual and it will be important to read and interpret the body language your new bird exhibits. Doing things that create fear or aggressive behavior should be avoided in order to start building a foundation of trust between you and your new bird. When I teach parrot behavior and training workshops, I often work with birds I have not met before. Throughout the workshop I very intentionally do not go near the birds until I have entered 'training mode'. What this means is the first time I interact with a bird, I am focused on paying attention to every action I take and what kind of response it creates from the bird. As mentioned my goal is to not create any fear or aggressive behavior responses. This usually means

my first encounter with a bird involves presenting an outstretched hand bearing many treats. I present my hand in front of my body while I am quite a distance from the bird, usually five to ten feet. The food in my hand is visible to the bird during this process. With each step I take closer, I look for any body language that indicates interest in the food reinforcer. If the bird steps forward or looks towards the hand, I will continue moving forward. If the bird backs up or looks for a place to retreat, I will stop and try again later when it may have more interest in the food reinforcers.



Photo: Barbara Heidenreich

Once close enough, I will offer a treat to the bird. Even the way I offer a treat to a bird that I am interacting with for the first time, is carefully thought out. My hand is brought to the bird very slowly to allow myself time to look at the its body posture. If I continue to see body language that indicates interest and comfort, I will bring my hand closer. However when I do actually offer the treat to the bird, instead of an open palm, I generally switch to holding the treat between my thumb and forefinger. This allows me to present the treat in such a way that the bird will need to stretch his neck out. If I hold it at an appropriate distance, the bird will only be able to reach the treat with his beak, not my fingers, were he to decide to bite. This allows me to reinforce a nice gentle acceptance of the treat from my hand. Because it is not easy for the bird to land a bite, I am less likely to accidentally create or reinforce aggressive behavior.

Training your first behavior

After I offer the bird a treat, I generally take one step away from the bird and watch to see what it does next. Does it look at my hand at my side? Does it step or lean forward indicating more interest in treats? If so I offer another treat in the same manner as described previously. Again if the bird retreats, I come back for a session later. After a few repetitions of offering treats and watching for a response that indicates interest, I start training the targeting behavior. In essence the bird has likely already learned to orient towards the hand that has been delivering the treats. It is just a simple adjustment to turn this into a targeting behavior. Rather than showing treats, I simply start hiding the food reinforcers within the hand that has been delivering them. I then bring my closed hand up towards the bird, but hold it just slightly to the side of the its body. If it turns his head towards the hand, I offer a bridging stimulus and then produce a treat from my closed hand. My next approximation is to see if, by holding the target slightly farther away, the bird will lean or walk towards the hand. If so, another bridge and reinforcer follows. During this process the bird not only learns to target, but also learns the bridging stimulus and that it signifies forthcoming positive reinforcers.

I begin at a distance from the bird - usually five to ten feet

I will continue to train the targeting behavior until I am able to cue the bird to walk, climb or fly from anywhere in the cage to the target - the closed hand. Targeting can be trained relatively quickly. I usually use this as a first behavior for several reasons. One reason is that it is easy for your bird to learn and easy for you to train. A second reason is that it does not require physical contact with your bird other than offering it food. If the bird you have acquired is hesitant to engage in much contact with you, it gives you a place from which you can start to develop a relationship based on positive reinforcement. A third reason is that the targeting behavior can facilitate teaching other behaviors. If the bird in your home shows aggressive behavior and you are not quite ready to work on the behavior of stepping up onto a hand, you can focus on another 'hands off' behavior such as turning around in a circle, or retrieving an object. Targeting can be helpful in training these behaviors.

As mentioned in an article by Gay Noeth's, so called, "Stupid pet tricks", are in actuality, not so stupid. They help build trust, your bird learns to learn, and is enriched by the opportunity. In addition the trainer gains confidence. Instead of jumping into training behaviors that may present a greater challenge, you may

want to focus on initiating a relationship with some simple 'trick' type behaviors.

If I am fortunate enough to work with a bird that seems to demonstrate a good level of comfort and confidence around people, I usually move through these behaviors quickly. I may even go from targeting, directly to working on the step up behavior. As

has been mentioned, for me, an important element is remembering to treat each bird as an individual and respond to his or her body language. My training decisions are guided by this information.

It may seem extreme to go through some seemingly tiny baby steps to accomplish the task of connecting with your bird. However the pay off for such sensitivity is a bird that trusts you, will not do things to make life unpleasant, is unlikely to present aggressive behavior and most importantly, looks forward to your presence. ■



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