

Training your Bird to Turn Around on Cue

By

Barbara Heidenreich

Good Bird Inc

www.GoodBirdInc.com

Training a bird to turn around on cue is one of my favorite behaviors. Why, you might ask? There are a number of reasons. For one, it is a very simple behavior to train. Usually it can be trained to completion in one 20 minute training session if your bird has attention for treats or other food reinforcement. Because of this I often use it to demonstrate how the training process works during Parrot Behavior and Training Workshops that I teach.

In addition this behavior is completely “hands off”. In other words a bird does not need to know how to “step up” to do this behavior. Unfortunately many birds, especially second hand birds, may have been exposed to unpleasant experiences involving hands. This often makes training the behavior of “step up” very difficult and perhaps not a good first behavior for a bird. This can be especially true for a bird that demonstrates fear or aggressive behavior in response to the presence hands. Having the opportunity to learn a behavior that does not require the bird to touch a person or be touched by a person may be a great starting place for birds with such a history.

Another wonderful quality about the turn around behavior is that this behavior can also be a nice way for new people to learn to interact with a bird. Again the behavior does not require any contact between the person and the bird which automatically reduces the chances of aggressive behavior. The new person can cue the bird for the turn around behavior. This allows the bird to be focused on a task that he has learned earns positive reinforcement. In turn that positive reinforcement is then associated with the new person which can help foster a relationship based on positive reinforcement between the bird and new people he meets.

Here are the approximations to train your bird to turn around on cue:

To train this behavior it is recommended you choose a perch that allows you to move your hand underneath your bird. A T-perch is usually not recommended for training this behavior. See photos for a suitable type perch.

1. Choose a hand to always use to offer treats to your bird. Offer your bird a treat for stepping up onto the perch so that he learns food will be coming from that hand.
2. Hold a treat in your hand underneath the perch. If your bird has an interest in the treat he will follow it with his head.
3. Slowly move your hand in a circle underneath the perch so that your bird follows your hand.

4. When your bird has followed your hand back to the starting position, bridge and offer positive reinforcement (the treat in your hand)

5. Repeat this process a few times.

6. If your bird is following your hand consistently, the next step is to hide the treat within your fist. Again cue your bird to make the circle by allowing him to follow your closed fist as it moves under the perch. Bridge and reinforce when he returns to the starting position. At this point your hand is now acting like a target. Your bird has learned to orient his head towards the target to earn positive reinforcement.

7. After some repetitions of this your bird may begin to become faster at either starting the behavior or finishing the turn seemingly without needing to be quite as focused on your hand. When you see this happening it is time to start phasing out the target as a large cue to your bird to make the turn.

8. At this point in the training it can be helpful to insert a verbal cue if desired. Say your cue (for example the word “turn”) just as you initiate the behavior. At this point your bird is still following your fist under the perch.

9. As your bird responds quicker to the dual cue of the verbal and target hand, start to phase out the hand as a target. This means try to make a smaller circle with your hand. In addition move your hand closer towards your body as opposed to making the circle under the perch. This may take a few approximations to phase out.

10. Use magnitude reinforcement (bigger and better reinforcements) when you see your bird beginning to understand what it is you are trying to teach. Eventually you will get to the point of barely moving your hand to cue the behavior or just saying the chosen verbal cue. Parrots can learn two cues mean the same behavior. It is up to you to decide to phase out one or keep them both as the cue. However if you use your hands quite often when you talk, like I do, you may want to focus on the verbal cue. I had one little Meyer’s parrot spinning like a champ because I kept accidentally cueing him as I was talking with my hands!

Try this one at home and let Good Bird magazine know about your progress. We are looking to include your training success stories in upcoming issues. Document your experience and photograph your parrot in action and send it to info@goodbirdinc.com. You can also share your experience with other bird training enthusiasts in our Yahoo Group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GoodBirdGroup/>

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Barbara Heidenreich has been a professional in the field of animal training since 1990. She owns and operates a company, Good Bird, Inc., (www.goodbirdinc.com) that provides behavior and training products to the companion parrot community. These products include Good Bird magazine, books, videos, consulting services and behavior and training workshops. She is the author of "Good Bird! A Guide to Solving Behavior Problems in Companion Parrots" by Avian Publications and also the "The Parrot Problem Solver. Finding Solutions to Aggressive Behavior" by TFH Publications. She is the president of the International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators (www.IAATE.org).

Barbara's experience also includes consulting on animal behavior and training in zoos and other animal related facilities. Her specialty is free flight bird training. She has been a part of the development and production of more than 15 different free flight education programs. Barbara continues to provide consulting services to zoos, nature centers and other animal facilities through her other company Animal Training and Consulting Services (www.ATandCS.com). In her career she has trained animals, trained staff, and/or presented shows at facilities around the world.