

Positive Reinforcement for all

By THEA BENNETT

Last summer I signed up for the World Parrot Trust's "Parrot Behaviour, Training and Enrichment Workshop." On the pre-workshop form I noted that I would like to help my Goffin's Cockatoo Ben stop plucking his feathers - a very important goal for me. Then as a bit of an afterthought I added: "if only they could be quieter at dinner parties and not so clingy with the guests".

My partner Robert and I share a small cottage with two Goffin's Cockatoos (*Cacatua goffini*). Our female, Spot, is passionately sociable and adores people. Try to prevent her from making new friends and reuniting with old ones and she will scream with fury. Ben, the male, is shy and nervous. Introduce a lot of strange humans to "his" environment and he will out scream Spot. If we want to have a dinner party, we have to be sure that only the most ardent animal lovers are invited.

I didn't really believe that anything could be done about this behaviour. It was just a flippant comment - I simply reckoned on going to Paradise Park where the Workshop was being held, spending time with some parrots and parrot people, having a lot of fun and maybe picking up a few tips.

But I hadn't reckoned on David Woolcock. As Curator of Paradise Park, David led the Workshop. He and his staff train the Paradise Park birds with positive reinforcement and they really know how to get results.

David wasted no time on getting to the basics. We were introduced to some of the birds who perform the Free Flying Show and within minutes they were flying from hand to hand, all around the group. It was a magical experience. The youngest participant, Aaron, was enthralled as a huge Green-winged Macaw (*Ara chloroptera*) flew over to land on his outstretched hand.

Analysing behaviour

While we did not bring our own birds on the course we did bring videos or DVDs of problem behaviours. I was embarrassed by my film of Spot and Ben. They spent the entire time screaming at the scary video camera. It was deafening, and I felt inadequate, as I had been doing some training with Spot and I wanted everyone to see what she could do. David was quick to point out that distractions, like the video camera, can quickly put a stop to effective training sessions.

Watching our own birds on film (and perhaps more importantly ourselves!) was a revelation. From my video I could see that I was adding to Spot's stress by touching her on her back. This was something I wasn't aware that I was doing. David also showed me that there were moments when Spot calmed down and gave me an opportunity to interact with her more successfully, but I missed these.

Watching other film clips of parrot behaviour I made an interesting discovery.



Photo: WPT

Thea with Cedric (Citron-crested Cockatoo) practicing hand placement and reward.

I had labelled Ben as a nervous bird. He spends a lot of time sitting on one foot rubbing his own head. I had seen this as a sign that he was shy and withdrawn. In fact these are indications that a cockatoo is relaxed and at ease. From that one observation, I felt my attitude towards Ben changing, and felt relief that he was in fact showing signs of contentment.

Getting down to training

As the Workshop progressed there were more treats in store. Not only were there treats for us from the Paradise Park Café but every learning activity was great fun. We spent some time "clicker training" each other. This gave us the opportunity to understand and refine our training techniques. It also allowed us to experience some of the frustration our birds feel when they don't understand what we are asking them to do. An experienced horse trainer in the group found it very enlightening to be in the position of trainee. "Now I know why my horses get so cross!" she said, as she struggled to achieve a task with only the clicker to prompt her.

Enjoying enrichment

Then Louise, domestic goddess of the parrot kitchen at Paradise Park, appeared. "Do your parrots like warm food?" she asked, brandishing a tray of deliciously steaming goodies. Parrots have a good sense of taste and really appreciate different flavours and textures in their food.

After that Louise turned our classroom into the parrot equivalent of Santa's grotto with



Photo: WPT

Weighing your pet regularly helps you keep an eye on its health.

endless ideas for creating parrot toys on a shoestring budget. You'll be happy to know WPT is publishing a booklet about Parrot Enrichment.

Back at home

Back home with Spot and Ben, I got to work. Spot had been getting bored with training and the performance of some of her tricks was deteriorating. I started using the technique for holding a bird that we had learned at Paradise Park. With the bird sitting on the flat of your hand, you can bring them close to your face and make good eye contact. Spot loved this and was more attentive to training. She soon realised I had a pocket full of treats and started working really hard for them.

We are now working on a comedy routine. Rather than flying off to her perch when I pointed at it, Spot was copying me. She sat on my hand, raised one wing, and shouted "Go, go!" This made me laugh. Spot then laughed too. Now I shout "Go!" and gesture at the perch. Spot copies me. I say "Spot?" she says "Yup?" I say "What do you think you are doing?" and she responds with "Ha, ha, ha." This never fails to get a laugh.

Ben responded differently to my new approach. While we are still working on getting him to accept my hand, the great news is that he has stopped plucking. I think this is largely due to Louise's very inventive approach to parrot toys. Ben gets hours of pleasure from digging nuts out of cardboard tubes, and hunting for seeds in rolled-up paper bags much like birds in the wild forage for their food.

When I talked to David about Ben, he told me that some birds, like Spot, learn quickly, and others learn at their own pace.



Photos: Louise Pellow

A class of students from Duchy College with an assortment of enrichment items designed by Louise.

So I took the pressure off Ben for a while. After a couple of weeks, I looked at him on his perch, and thought "He looks as if he wants to fly over here." I held out my arm, and Ben flew across. Luckily I had one of his favourite treats, a piece of almond, in my pocket and I gave it to him straight away. Ben landed on my arm, rather than on my hand, but he flies to me every time I ask him now, and we are working so that he is gradually moving towards my hand. Now he will sit on my upturned wrist, and I am sure we are almost there.

Ben is also learning to do tricks on his perch. He will turn to the left and I am teaching him to twirl to the right as well. He gets very upset when I ask him to do this and screams at me. I remember that moment when I was "training the horsetrainer" at the workshop with the clicker and she got so frustrated! I'm sure that's exactly how Ben feels.

Last week, our friends came up for Sunday lunch. I was nervous, as they have never met the birds before. Spot and Ben behaved beautifully - no screaming! Spot introduced herself to everyone politely. She didn't cling or bite or throw anyone's dinner on the

floor. When I asked her she was happy to come back and sit with me. Ben came out too, which he has never done before when strangers have been in the house. He flew round the room to check everybody out, and then went to sit on his perch calmly, where he watched us and scratched his head with his foot. It was a lovely evening, and I later had an email complimenting us on our "well-behaved pets".

I have lived with Spot and Ben for nearly 20 years. I've read lots of books about parrot training, and watched lots of videos but there is no substitute for practical experience. The Workshop has given me a much more effective way of relating to my birds. Since the breakthroughs with Ben, I believe that I now have the knowledge and skill to solve any problems that come up in the future.

Spot and Ben are more relaxed and confident. The bond between us has strengthened. And Robert and I are overjoyed that dinner parties with the birds are now a delight and not an ordeal.

Positive reinforcement for all of us!



Next Parrot Workshop
5th & 6th May 2007
Paradise Park, Cornwall

Call Karen 01736 751026
or visit parrottraining.org.uk