

# Companion Parrot Workshop Series

## The Art and Science of Training Companion Parrots

By PRISCILLA OLD, Photos By STEVE MARTIN

How can I describe a workshop (*PsittaScene* Vol 16 No 3 Aug 04) that changed my relationship with my birds so completely? It was a huge leap, and one that I never envisioned ahead of time. My involvement with captive-raised parrots has led me to many educational conferences and exposed me to what I thought was humane treatment of my parrots. In my previous training there was basically one-way communication. I showed / told the bird what I wanted it to do, and expected the bird to respond in kind. If that didn't happen, I applied one of the many methods I'd learned to get the results I wanted. The introduction of two-way communication, which is a basic premise of Positive Reinforcement, has changed my outlook.

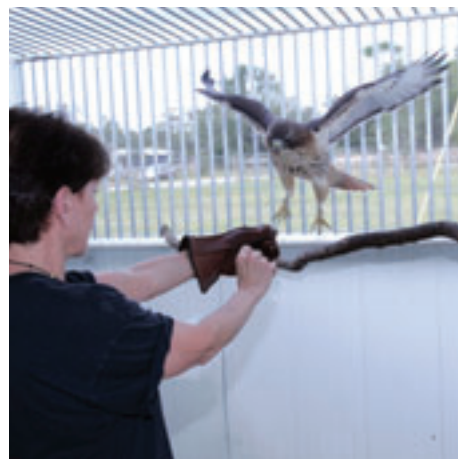
I often wondered why one of my birds would come right out on my hand 95% of the time, but now and then I'd reach for her/him and receive a zap of a bite? Now I don't ask why, but I read the body language - the behaviour - and I believe what my birds are telling me with their body language. I don't try to analyse "why" - just isolate the behaviour, what reinforces that behaviour (the consequence), and what transpires immediately before the behaviour occurs (the antecedent). With these tools in hand, I can then set out a plan to change the targeted behaviours that I'd like to change.

I learned these skills during a workshop offered by Susan Friedman and Steve Martin, which was titled, The Art and Science of Training Companion Parrots Workshop. It was offered in two sessions.



*Sometimes work starts from outside the cage.*

The first was a 2-day introduction to Positive Reinforcement. It was presented at an Orlando, Florida hotel. Steve demonstrated how he uses positive reinforcement training from his professional training aspect; Susan started us on our road to understanding the theory and labels from within the scholastic world.



*Red-tailed Hawk flying to student's glove.*

The second session was a 5-day workshop at Natural Encounters' bird ranch in Winter Haven (NEI). There, sixteen participants heard lectures from Susan and Steve each morning and afternoon, followed by two hours of hands-on training. This combination was great because the lectures gave us the foundation we needed and the hands-on experience gave us the training that can't be replaced by the classroom.

Each group of four participants was assigned to one of NEI's senior trainers. The first night we were in Winter Haven, Steve offered a list of birds that were available for training. Each person chose one or two birds they wanted to work with, and each group chose two or three as well. Several people asked to work with raptors.



*Showing a young Scarlet Macaw the reinforcer. Working to get him onto the scale.*

I hadn't considered this, and truly enjoyed the exposure I had with them. When I return for another workshop, I will definitely ask for more work with raptors.

The next morning we decided what behaviour(s) we wanted to teach our birds. Some of us chose very utilitarian behaviours, while others chose more complicated ones. The atmosphere at the workshop is very amiable and non-judgmental, and you can try anything. Some of us started out thinking we would accomplish this, this, and this; some of us had no idea what we wanted to try. Some had to change birds; some had to change what they were trying to do with the bird(s.) It was very fluid and very positive.

Often the birds themselves determined the behaviours. For example, if you were working with an older bird that had not been handled for a long time, you might train him to simply step up - or to come out of the cage - or to step onto the scale. If you were working with a ground bird, you wouldn't try to fly it. Others trained their birds to go into cages and carriers - to fly in a circle - to wave - or pull up a chain to get a treat cup - or take an item from the trainer, turn around on a given area of the perch, run across the perch and drop the item into a dish. This last chain of behaviours was learned by "Ike," a Kea (*Nestor notabilis*), who won over all our hearts. He learned so quickly that he constantly amazed us. At one point he



*Training Wizard the Red-fronted Macaw to climb a chain. He learned to climb the free hanging chain from the floor to the perch.*



*Wizard almost to the top of the chain.*

forgot to make his turn, so he picked up the object (a metal washer) from the dish, ran back across the perch, made his turn, and returned to the dish. As I said, he amazed us.

My group was lead by Wouter, a young trainer from Holland. After we worked with each bird we would talk about what had transpired - what had gone well, and what we might improve upon. The group would watch each person work with their bird. This helped us see what was transpiring with others, and would give us the opportunity to see what was going well and what could be improved. So we weren't only learning with our own bird - we were learning as our group worked. Sometimes we would have a chance to observe another group working, as well. All of us flew Scarlets, Greenwings, and raptors between us.

The last afternoon of the workshop was "Show and Tell" time. It was great fun, and a chance for attendees to show off what they'd accomplished with a bird they'd

never seen until five days before. I am not comfortable with being in front of a group, but I managed to show off my little Severe, Velcro, with great success. And, as the afternoon went on, we saw the results of the week's work and thrilled at the overall success of the group. We had many laughs, especially when the "trained" goats were worked.

As we left the ranch, our group of four from Michigan felt very positive about the whole experience. None of us had ever been in such a positive learning atmosphere. None of us wanted to leave, but we all wanted to have our birds with us. We were going back to 13-degree weather after enjoying 70's and 80's for a week. It was a hard trip home!

Following are some examples of how this workshop has helped my work with my own birds.....

1 I learned that I had been approaching my birds in a very cavalier manner. I would reach for them - expecting them to

WANT (no 2-way communication considered) to come out of their cage, for example - and as soon as a toe was on my finger, I'd be on the move.

2 I'd been approaching them by bringing my hand up from below - very unsettling to the birds. When Wouter pointed this out to me, I actually practiced holding my hand flat and offering it from my chest out toward the bird.

These two things have made a tremendous difference in the security my own birds display when I pick them up. Besides offering a very steady hand, I let them step fully onto my hand - with both feet - before I start moving - constantly being aware of the bird's comfort level.

Our birds have become more active since I've been working with them. They are learning to learn, as we were told would happen. It is very gratifying to see this occur with your own birds.

At NEI they "station" their birds. In every case where a bird had received any



*Sometimes we need help. Always expect the unexpected.*



*This is Julio, the Roseate Cockatoo (Galah) learning to go into his carrier. He learned to run into it by the end of the week.*



*This is a picture of a Scarlet being trained to fly in a full circle. At this point he is flying from the instructor (to left) around the metal pole, and landing on the student's hand.*

training, it went to the "station" perch as the trainer approached the cage if it wanted to come out of the cage. They never take a bird out of its cage while it's hanging from the top or side of the cage, and it's never allowed to leave the cage on its own. This station training was the first thing I started working on with my own birds.

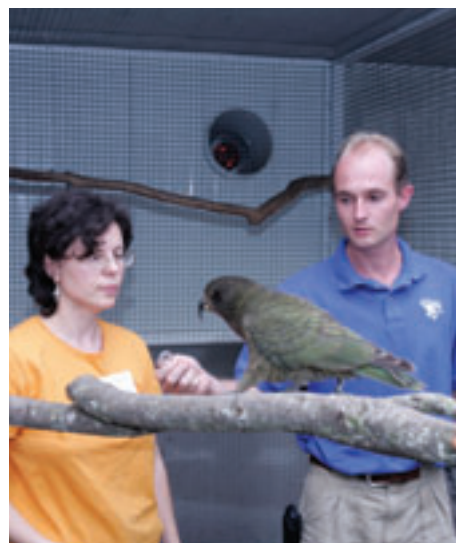
Here is an example of my own results while training several of my birds to go to their "station" perch. However, first let me explain that I had been shaping "stationing" by reinforcing the bird:

- when it looks at the perch,
- when it puts one foot on the perch,
- when it steps fully onto the perch with both feet,
- and when it stays until asked to step up.

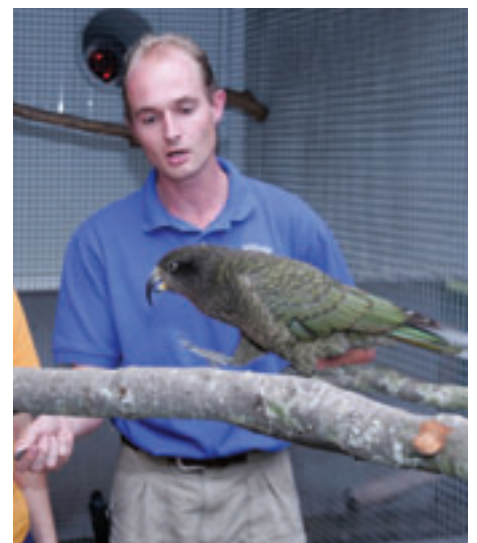
We have a 5-year-old Congo African Grey (Sparkle.) The pre-workshop Sparkle was: I



*This is Ike, the Kea, learning the cue to turn. He learned to take an item (a washer), turn in only the left area of the perch, run across the perch the full width of the cage and drop the washer into a metal dish. Ike learned this whole routine in an amazingly short time.*



*Ike learning to take the washer from trainer as student observes.*



*Ike going back to the starting point to get another washer.*



*Training Grover, Hyacinth Macaw, to retrieve items (plastic rings in this case). A similar chain of behaviours is used in Steve's conservation show when Crows and Ravens fly into the audience to retrieve donations, then put them in a box on stage.*

approached the cage, opened the door and she would be hanging on the cage door, or from the top of her cage and put her head down to be petted, or try chewing on fingers - or strike out if the mood hit her. I would go into any number of contortions to get her onto my hand to put her on her play stand.

Well, I decided to "tackle" her with my newly found workshop skills, along with several of our small birds. I've been concerned because I haven't found a food treat that works as a reinforcer for her. However, a few days ago I went to get her out of her cage, and she went into her usual routine. I closed the door after showing her a perch I wanted her to stand on. I held a pine nut near the side of the cage above the perch. She looked at the pine nut and me, promptly turned her back, and went to the top of the cage to hang upside down some more. I went to the next bird in the room (another CAG -who went to her station,)

took her out, reinforcing her with a pine nut, and put her on her stand in the living room.

When I returned to the bird room to get my little Severe out (who also goes to his station,) there was Sparkle standing on the desired perch waiting for me to return. I almost shouted with delight - but I didn't. I calmly went to the cage, stepped her up and walked her to her stand, with much praise and a pine nut.

There is an ample reading list for anyone who is interested in starting along the path of Positive Reinforcement with their parrots. One of the easiest books to read is, "Don't Shoot the Dog" by Karen Pryor. It gives great examples of how Positive Reinforcement is applied in all areas of one's life. The author is a well-known dog trainer, and her approach to training follows the Positive Reinforcement methods.

