

Flock Talk Interview with Steve Martin of Natural Encounters, Inc.

By the World Parrot Trust

[Flock Talk]

What is your basic philosophy or rule, if you will, about working with animals?

[Steve Martin]

Treat them as partners, not objects. So many people have this attitude that animals are there for our entertainment and that we can do with them what we want. For me, owning an animal comes with responsibilities and obligations that go far beyond feeding and housing. My philosophy is to treat them in the most positive way possible.

[Flock Talk]

What is the most common question/issue you see concerning pet animal behaviour/training?

[Steve Martin]

The most common question I hear about parrot behaviour is "How do I make my bird stop biting?" The answer to that question is often a reflection of the question itself. The bird's biting might just be in response to the owner "making it" do things it does not want to do. Most people take the approach of forcing their bird to comply with their commands. Unfortunately, there are many so called experts out there who encourage this line of thinking with direction such as "Make sure he knows you are the flock leader" "Don't let him get away with that" "Don't let him have too much control" or "Make sure he does what you tell him." These approaches set people up to have relationships with animals that are built on fear and coercion, instead of trust and positive experiences.

My approach is the opposite. I work hard to build relationships on solid foundations of positive experiences. I catch animals doing things right and reinforce them for things I want them to do rather than using punishment to try and stop behaviour I don't want. This strategy creates more healthy and productive relationships with animals. Where many companion parrot owners say biting is just part of having a parrot as a pet (often proudly displaying their scars as they say it), I believe parrot owners should not get bit ... if they have a healthy relationship with their parrot. I back this statement up with the fact that over 20 trainers on my staff work with over 40 parrots each day and never get bit. Well, I guess I can't say never. But, honestly, I am sure that over the past 10 years we have averaged less than three bites per year. And, I can't even remember the last time I got bit by a parrot.

[Flock Talk]

What is the most common mistake that people make in attempting to train their pets?

[Steve Martin]

Trying to force an animal to do something it does not want to do. When you force an animal you take a little trust out of the account at the relationship bank. Unfortunately, it works. It gets the animal to do what you want it to do in the short term. Because it works, it has made many so called parrot behaviour experts, and many dog trainers, look impressive to pet owners. When you see the Dog Whisperer jerk on the choke chain to control a dog, or see a so called parrot expert force a parrot to step up, you are often seeing the result of relationship built on fear caused by aggressive interactions. For many people, this is acceptable because the person talks about love and the need for respect as they are forcing the animal to comply with their commands.

For me, this type of treatment shows a lack of respect and love, and demonstrates the person's insensitivity and poor understanding of positive reinforcement methods. I find it sad that so many people believe you should use aversive techniques to "set boundaries," "implement rules," or establish positions of "leadership" with companion parrots. This approach is sure to leave people short of their desires for a healthy relationship with their bird. But, unfortunately most people can't envision the potential for a great relationship with their bird because there are so few models out there for people to see. Too many companion parrot owners are comfortably mired in the old school traditions and just blindly follow the mainstream aversive approaches to companion parrot behaviour.

[Flock Talk]

You've spent many days on the road, a lot of which have been spent consulting with zoos and aquariums. What do they generally request from you?

[Steve Martin]

My work at zoos usually involves teaching animal keepers the art and science of training. Zoos are becoming much more aware of animal welfare and are finding better ways to manage the behaviour of the animals in their care. Positive reinforcement training is a powerful tool that allows animals to voluntarily participate in their own husbandry and medical care. It gives animals opportunities to have more control over their environment and experience positive consequences of their actions. This level of training is extremely important in animal welfare, as well as animal management. Not only are animals learning to come up to the side of their enclosures and allow full body examinations, injections and even voluntary blood draws, they are becoming willing participants in other areas of their care. Shifting from the holding areas to the exhibits has caused problems with exhibit animals since zoos started keeping animals. The new approach to animal management rewards animals for moving from one place to another and eliminates most shifting problems at zoos.

[Flock Talk]

Where and when did the concept of free-flight begin?

[Steve Martin]

I set up the first free-flight, natural behaviour bird show in 1976 at the San Diego Wild Animal Park. Since falconry has been around for a couple thousand years, I am sure there were other free-flight demonstrations before that. However, this was the first formal show of its kind, at least as far as I have been told. These days, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of free-flight shows around the world.

[Flock Talk]

You've worked for many years with the World Parrot Trust. Could you highlight what you've done for the Trust?

[Steve Martin]

Hmmm, I guess I have to say what I have done for the Trust is minimal considering what Mike Reynolds, Jamie Gilardi, Ali Reynolds, and Steve Milpacher have done for the Trust. All I have done is promoted the Trust wherever I speak. I also act as a sounding board for ideas that Jamie or other board members might have about companion parrots and conservation projects, etc. I also raise money for the Trust at shows that we produce. But, my efforts for the Trust pale in comparison to the others I mentioned above.

[Flock Talk]

What is your biggest challenge these days?

[Steve Martin]

I think my biggest challenge these days is time ... or how I use my time would be a better way to say it. I am so busy with my consulting work and other projects associated with our shows, that I just don't have the time to do some of the things I have wanted to do over the past several years. I desperately want to do another parrot behaviour and training DVD. The other videos I did are outdated and lack so many important strategies and lessons I have learned, mostly from Dr. Susan Friedman. She has had a profound influence on my understanding of the science of behaviour and I would love to share that information with others. I also want to continue to travel and see these magnificent animals in their natural habitats. I get so much information and inspiration from these trips that I view them as critical to my growth in understanding of animal behaviour. And, I want to write that book someday. That is a time-consuming challenge that I hope to deal with sometime soon.

My other big challenge is how to get good information out to companion parrot owners. The current level of understanding of companion parrot behaviour is poor at best. Fortunately, there is the World Parrot Trust – and people like Susan Friedman – there to put forth valid information about companion parrot information. But, it is still an uphill battle. There is a wealth of questionable information out there encouraging people to dominate, force, and coerce their birds into complying with their commands. This challenge is a sad state of affairs for me, and unfortunately for companion parrots as well.

Steve Martin is President of both [Natural Encounters, Inc.](#), a company of over 20 professional animal trainers, and [Natural Encounters Conservation Fund, Inc.](#), a charity dedicated to raising funds for conservation projects.