

The Bird School

Clicker Training

Ann M. Castro

Also Covering:

**Flighted
Birds and
Taming**



for Parrots and Other Birds AdIA

Ann Castro

The Bird School

Clicker Training for
Parrots and Other Birds

Readers' Opinions

A Must Read for All Bird Owners!

It is very informative and beautifully written. It will guide anyone to the clicker way of training. I suggest it for anyone with parrots. After my first session with my bird it was working great! At last, something to read, something to do for your bird/parrot that really works.
– Tammie Thomas

A “Must” for Every Bird Person!!

Beautifully written and presented, Castro's book “The bird school: Clicker training for parrots and other birds” is exactly what I have been desiring for the avian community! She walks the reader through step by step, explaining the importance of behavior and bird individuality, all the way through to how to form a fun and trusting relationship and train our avian companions to do tricks. This is a book that I will send home with every bird that I adopt out and highly recommend to all of my customers and clients! This book should be a “must” on every bird person's list! – Andrea Fahy

The Best Bird Clicker Training Book Available.

Whether you're interested in getting into clicker training or an experienced trainer, I highly recommend this book. It explains the basics clearly and concisely, and presents many very useful behaviors with step-by-step

training plans for how to teach them to your birds. Ann Castro works with a wide range of parrots, from tiny budgies and parrotlets to African greys and the largest macaws. Castro focuses on truly useful behaviors like stepping up and “drop it.”

She also discusses how to deal with problem behaviors in a gentle and effective way. If you’re only going to buy one book on clicker training parrots, make it this one!
– C. Moore

Fantastic

I’ve really enjoyed using clicker training as a means to interact with my birds. It’s simple, easy, and fun. The birds are surprisingly VERY into it. If I have both of my parrotlets out at the same time they will compete to see who can get to the clicker stick first, knowing that a treat is about to follow. I highly recommend this book and training method to any bird owner, regardless of type of bird, level of training, or age. – Holly J.

Awesome!!

This book is a must have for bird owners easy to read step by step how to. I have clicker training for dogs and cats. Any this is way far the best book. – Lisa Dunne

Very Thorough

Ann is a very dedicated writer on the parrot ownership topic. She’s methodical in her explanation on

companion parrots and their training. If you really care about having a close relationship with your pet bird, this book might be your answer. – N.N.

Awesome!

This is the first book I purchased when I got my African Grey Parrot! It is very helpful & really made training make sense to a novice. A few years later, and I still refer back to this book! Easy to understand. – Loretta N.

A Must-Have Text and Reference for Any Bird Owner!

Great training for the owner, as well as, the pet bird. Well thought out and presented. Easy to follow, well paced approaches to basic training and a wake-up call for those of us who's been around birds all our lives. Ann Castro breaks down birds' psychological behaviors and shows you great ways to work with them so that you and your bird are both happy! I've owned pet birds for over 40 years and was amazed at the answers I got from this book. Thanks Ann, a book long overdue! – W. Veach

Fun for Parakeet Owners, a Must for Parrot Owners!

I have seen clicker training with dogs, monkeys and even rabbits. But I was skeptical that a small bird could actually be trained.

I was wrong! My two budgies are completely different in personality, and clicker training works for both.

Schnappi caught on very fast. She learnt to follow the target stick right away und does tricks now, like riding her own little skateboard. My second bird Snoopy spent time outside before I got her and is afraid of her own shadow. With clicker training she started enjoying life again. She learnt fast what the „click“ means and has fewer panic attacks. Soon, she'll be ready for the target stick. Now I can actually „do something“ with my birds rather than just talk to them.

The step-by-step instructions in „The Bird School“ by Ann Castro are very easy to follow, and the pictures are worth „a thousand words.“ But reading the book also brought back sad memories. Years ago, I had a friend who always showed up with bite marks on her arms, inflicted by her own parrot. I found the explanation in the „Bird School“: The bird was lonely and bored. The punishment for biting (screaming and yelling) was his reward, and that's why it never stopped. I wish a book like this had been available then! Clicker training is a fun activity for budgies and other small birds. For parrots, clicker training is even more important to socialize them and make life enjoyable for birds and owners alike.. – Sigrid Rhodes

Awesome!!

This book is a must have for bird owners. It is an easy to read step by step how to. I have clicker training for dogs and cats. Any this is by far the best book. – Lisa Dunne

Ann Castro

The Bird School

Clicker Training for
Parrots and Other Birds

AdlA Papageienhilfe gGmbH

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for Nikita

Our Stars

The birds shown in this book are mainly those belonging to our rescue organization AdLA Papageienhilfe gGmbH.

Some show the damage done to them, some don't. We have decided to purposely show also those animals that do not look perfect. They represent the many parrots and other birds that still suffer a sorry life due to poor or inappropriate keeping, as well as mental and physical abuse.

Our respect is given to those animals who, in spite of their pasts, find the courage to trust again, to learn new things and in turn to become teachers for us humans, but also to new additions to our flock.

Thank You

I would like to thank all the birds big and small, their owners, veterinarians, breeders and rescuers for allowing me to learn from them.

My thanks also goes to the ann's world team for their friendship and active, never-tiring support. My special thanks go to the photographer David Jayne who donated many photos for this book, as well as all others who kindly donated their time and photographs for this project.

Last, but not least, I would like to warmly thank my readers who have made the print version of this book such an overwhelming success.

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Photo: Ann Castro

Clicker training may be used to improve the quality of life for handicapped animals.



Photo: Antje Bittner

Even an entire flock of flighted birds may be trained and kept busy with clicker training.

1. Preamble

As a child, I had a budgie which I never managed to tame.

The instruction to hold my hand into her cage and to wait, until the bird would hop onto it on its own accord, was too difficult for this child's patience. Pretty soon I was bored with the budgie and my mother ended up taking care of it. My elder sister was similarly luckless in her attempts to tame her bird. She too gave it to our mother.

As my bird was a female and my sister's a male – the inevitable soon happened. My mother became at first an unwilling and then an increasingly enthusiastic breeder. But one thing set her apart from the other breeders. There was always a run on her chicks, while other people



Photo: David Jayne
Like all parrots, Tina smells delicious under her wings.

had a hard time finding new homes for their babies. What was the secret of her success? Right from the day of hatching, my mother occupied herself with the little ones, under the tolerant eyes of the parent birds who did all the raising work. Thus by the time she sought homes for the babies, they were already super tame. And everyone wanted one of her birds.

The charm of having a tame bird has survived to this day. Unfortunately, the methods of accomplishing such tameness are often the same as thirty years ago and usually similarly unsuccessful. The advice that is given to deal with unwanted behavior is at best useless. At worst, it even reinforces the unwanted behavior.

Recommendations are for example, to scream louder than the bird, to cover his cage, to squirt him with water or even to slap his beak. These kinds of measures are supposed to lead the bird to trust me, its keeper? To me, at the least, those methods are unloving and without respect for the living being in our care. Some of the recommendations are even cruel and have animal welfare relevancy.

When I finally bought my first parrot as an adult after years of study and career induced parrot abstinence, I was frustrated and disappointed. The “sweet” little bird that had been marketed to me as a super tame hand raised bird was terrified of hands and showed his displeasure through hefty bites. I read every book I could lay my hands on. However, the methods for training described in these books just did not “feel” right. Until, I discovered a comment about clicker training in one of the books. This is a Training Method that works exclusively with positive reinforcement of desired behavior. I had read about such methods in management literature and was enthusiastic to try it out on my parrot. But sadly, I had been excited too early. It was impossible to obtain a book in English, German, or any other language for that matter, on clicker training with birds.



Photo: David Jayne

A lot of trust is required, before your bird will lie on his back in your hand like Jack, one of my greenwing macaws.

Undaunted, I found myself a clicker trainer for dogs and talked him into giving it a try with my parrots (meanwhile, little Hector had gotten a mate). The result was less than convincing. The trainer knew how to clicker train – but, only with dogs. The problem we were facing was that dogs are hunters, parrots however are – “dinner”. This results in completely different behaviors which means that the training of parrots must be structured differently.

Frustrated again, I searched the internet some more and signed up with several mailing lists for parrots. On some of these mailing lists professional animal trainers participated and discussed their training issues. Thus, I became



Photo: David Jayne
Hector entertains himself playing the hat game – learned with clicker training.

acquainted with trainers of birds for flight shows in zoos, animal parks and the like who without exception utilized positive reinforcement methods for their training purposes.

What a breakthrough! A new world seemed to open up for me. Nothing was impossible. The animal was not a “stubborn beast”, but my training partner with whom I had to communicate. This attitude alone makes a huge difference in training. Trainers who view the animals as their partners, will not attempt to increase the intensity of the Training Method when an exercise does not work. They do not get angry or increasingly impatient which only makes the situation worse and hinders learning

even more. Trainers with this kind of attitude take a step back and think about why the animal does not understand them. And then they think about what they can do to help the animal toward its learning success. These trainers want to make it easy for the animal to be successful. The bird is their friend and partner, not their adversary. If one does not advance through the front door in a training situation, one tries going through the back door instead or even through a window, always remaining calm and friendly towards the animal and reinforcing wanted behaviors. What a discovery! After I had learned this philosophy, everything became so easy. One of my parrots needed to be taken to the vet? No problem. I simply grabbed the clicker and quickly taught him to go into his carrier. A bird refused to eat his very-healthy-and-good-for-you-broccoli? No problem. This too was easily trained. It was so much fun!

In the mornings, while putting on my make-up, I had the two African greys, Hector and Lily, besides me learning handshakes and high fives somewhere between lipstick and mascara. In the evenings, in front of the TV, one of my macaws (my flock had expanded significantly by then) learned to retrieve. And my lovebirds played “soccer” on the dining room table. Of

course, I could not keep our successes and the fun we were having to myself. And so I started reporting and giving tips to other bird owners in Germany's largest online message board for birds.

Eventually the board's owner created an extra clicker sub-board for us. During the following years, this board expanded steadily. Apart from helping owners with problems there, I also supported them by e-mail, telephone and in personal consultations. As a group, we achieved a lot with very many birds.

Many questions are regularly and repeatedly asked. At the very top of the list are taming, basic training, and husbandry issues. Another big topic is occupational therapy for these highly intelligent creatures which are often terribly bored in captivity. Boredom is a major cause of behavioral disorders in captive parrots. Other important issues addressed are solving problem behaviors, especially biting and screaming, as well as learning wanted behaviors. These include "eating broccoli" and "being nice" to other birds, animals, and humans.

Clicker training can also greatly support the re-socialization and pairing up of birds which have been kept in solitary confinement for years. There are no limits on how clicker training may

be utilized for the well-being of the animals. By no means are we constrained to training only parrots. On our message board people participated who trained with chicken and even with a crow who astounded all of us with her ability to identify colors.

With the help of clicker training, you can prepare your birds for various husbandry procedures, such as giving them medicine out of a syringe or grooming their claws and beaks. The need for help is still unlimited. In order for this wonderful training method to become available to more owners and their birds, I decided to write this introductory book on clicker training. After all, not everyone has access to the internet and often people find it easier to train with a written text in their hands.

Clicker Training for Parrots and Other Birds



Photo: David Jayne

It is so much more pleasant for you and your bird to learn grooming techniques via clicker training than to have to use a towel and force.



Photo: David Jayne

Jack's upper beak was bitten off by his parents and will not grow back. His lower beak must be trimmed regularly, in order to not hinder Jack when eating or cause misalignment of his jaw. Having his beak trimmed is a painless procedure for Jack. Trained with clicker training, it can easily be done without toweling or other constraints while his mate, Scarlett, looks on.

Ann M. Castro



2. Introduction

Many books on dog training are available, but hardly any on how to train birds.

This is particularly surprising, as parrots are such popular pets. Sadly though, many of them are integrated poorly into their households and families. Often taming and “good” behavior are a problem. Necessary actions, such as grooming, cage cleaning, or trips to the veterinarian are high-stress situations for the bird and his owner. In addition, there exist a variety of problems, such as screaming, biting, and feather picking. These may reduce the living quality of the owners



Photo: David Jayne
Clicker training helps humans and animals to communicate better with each other.

to the point where they no longer want to keep their birds. Fortunately, such issues may easily be resolved with suitable training. All you need is the right method, some patience, and consistency.

Is Training Equal to Training?

There are dozens of books on dog training. Why then do we need an extra book on bird training? Dogs are hunters, parrots are prey. Thus, parrots and dogs exhibit different behaviors and reactions. In dogs you can utilize their hunting impulses for training. The same



Photo: David Jayne
Clicker training is fun for teacher and student alike.

methods would simply not work with parrots. As an example, think of the simple “come” command in which the animal is supposed to return to you whenever you call it. In teaching a dog, you would run away from it and it would follow. When it reaches you, you would lavishly praise and reward it, reinforcing its following behavior. When you run away from a parrot, however, the bird might look at you and be mildly surprised at the antics of its crazy owner. But it will hardly start chasing you, as it does not have a hunting instinct. This is just one example of why you need another method



Photo: David Jayne

Taking medication from a syringe is another behavior that may be clicker trained.

for training a parrot as opposed to a dog. There are many others, as apart from their behavior their body languages are also completely different. Furthermore, dogs cannot fly. The additional dimension of height results in increased challenges for parrot owners.

Why Clicker Training?

The basic principle of clicker training is to catch the animal doing something you like and to reinforce that behavior. Clicker training's advantages are many:

- 👉 it is humane

Clicker Training for Parrots and Other Birds



- 👉 it shows results quickly
- 👉 it is easy
- 👉 you do not have to know what caused a behavioral problem to solve it
- 👉 the animals love it!
- 👉 it works.

The beautiful thing is that in clicker training, the animal is always treated kindly and respectfully. It will never make negative experiences with its trainer – that’s us. Thus, the relationship and trust between the animal and us improves continuously with training.

In addition, clicker training will give the animal a certain feeling of control over its environment. It learns that it can communicate with us and that it can actively influence what happens. If it would like a treat, the bird knows it can do something to get its caretaker to give it a treat. This will increase its self-confidence which in turn has a positive effect on its behavior. Many behavioral problems result from fear – self confidence counteracts fearfulness. But apart from the theory, the best part of clicker training is quite simply that it works and that it is a lot of fun for both, the birds and their owners, alike.

3. Before We Begin

Please note that clicker training cannot compensate for poor keeping conditions or even illnesses.

If a parrot suddenly changes its behavior, this should always be viewed as a warning signal by the owner. Please, do your animal and yourself a favor and consult an experienced avian veterinarian without delay. In the wild, if a parrot is obviously ill or injured, it is recognized by animals of prey as an easy target. In addition, because it will attract predators which may endanger the flock, ill or injured animals may be excluded from the flock. This is a

NOTE

A sad story is that of an Amazon parrot which had for years been a sweet cuddly bird when it suddenly started to bite. An experienced behavioral consultant who visited the family, immediately saw that the bird's wing was broken and that the animal was in pain. After the fracture had healed, the Amazon was as sweet as ever.

death sentence for the bird in question. Therefore, parrots, being prey animals, hide their illnesses and injuries for as long as possible. Once your parrot has become ill enough that clearly noticeable symptoms appear, it may be too late to help him. Therefore, it is strongly advisable to start off a new parrot to your home with a thorough health exam. This ascertains that you obtained a healthy bird. It also gives you a baseline, a point of reference, should your bird become ill at a later point. In addition, an acquisition check-up plus quarantine will ensure that you do not endanger any birds already living in your household by inadvertently exposing them to an ill bird. A yearly general well bird check-up by an experienced avian veterinarian specialized on parrots is a must. It is of utmost importance that your veterinarian is truly experienced in parrots. Many



Photo: Maike Schumann

Healthy or ill? Regular well-bird check-ups are a must.

symptoms for parrot diseases are rather unspecific. Thus for any given symptom, several illnesses could apply. An accurate diagnosis may be difficult to make, especially, if the veterinarian has little experience with parrots. Also, some of the symptoms may be so subtle that they may only be recognized by an experienced avian veterinarian. Last, but not least, experience is required to safely catch, restrain, and examine an unwilling parrot.

Keeping

Factors contributing to your parrots' health and well being can be best deduced from observing

parrots and their habitats, mostly humid-tropical areas, in the wild.

Happy Only With Mates

Parrots are flock animals. Most species also undergo pair-bonding and spend their entire lives with a mate. A human being is not able to replace a parrot's mate. It is highly unlikely that you will be able to provide twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week non-stop company for your parrot for the next thirty to sixty years.

As parrots are prey animals, their mates and flocks, apart from their social importance, also provide safety. A parrot in the wild is “lunch” – literally – for predators. Thus, he finds himself in a life-threatening situation when he is alone. These instincts are still very much present in birds bred and raised in captivity. Therefore, to a parrot living in captivity, being left alone while you go to work, shopping, or to the movies, is highly stressful.

This kind of stress will often lead to behavioral problems. Contact calls to the flock that develop into continuous screaming, for example, are no rarity. Other birds are so stressed that they pluck their feathers or even self-mutilate. I would strongly advise for the love of

your bird (and your eardrums), to give him a same species, opposite gender mate. Unfortunately, traditional belief holds that only a single parrot will be a tame parrot. Also, many people believe that only a single parrot will learn to speak which may be important to some owners. All of this is simply not true. If you lavish as much time and attention on each individual of a pair or flock of parrots, as you would on a single bird, each of them will be at least as tame as any single bird.

While I am writing these lines, eighteen parrots live with me in a flock. Most of them come from several previous homes, some of them abusive. Not all of them were tame when they came to live with me. Many of them were given up, because of behavioral problems, usually screaming and biting. These birds have in all cases improved tremendously after integration into the flock and have turned into well-adjusted happy parrots.

And regarding tameness – oh, I wish you could visit me! Most of my parrots are so tame that they are almost a nuisance. Here too, the adage holds that “competition is good for business”, as they all vie for my attention. Newcomers learn quickly by observing the more senior inhabitants, how nice it



Photo: David Jayne
Hector and Lily: Snuggling is no reason to give up the clicker.



Photo: Frank Kroner/Nicola Penski
Even when parrots have mates and live in a flock – they love human attention. Here you can see Nicola's gang eagerly clicker training with her. By the way, none of her birds are handraised – they were all lovingly reared by their parents. This debunks another myth – that only handraised parrots make good pets.

is to be cuddled, coddled, and spoiled with treats. They also learn from each other how to speak and constantly surprise me with new phrases that spread in no time throughout the flock. My beloved Blue and Gold Macaw Nikita passed away in late November 2003. But, she lives on in the phrases of the flock. Her favorite saying is imitated so exactly in voice by birds which joined the flock after her death that it regularly drives tears to my eyes. The animals never met, but learned the phrase from Nikita's surviving mate, Jack, who still says it from time to time.

Cage Sizes

Parrots must fly to stay physically and mentally healthy. Their whole organism has evolved and is geared for flight. In 1995, a group of experts was commissioned by the German government, as represented by the ministry of consumer protection, nutrition, and agriculture, to create a white paper regarding the appropriate keeping of parrots in captivity. This paper, "The experts' report on the minimum requirements regarding the keeping of parrots", is used in Germany by government officials when they determine whether parrots are kept in accordance with the applicable animal welfare laws.

I realize, that any German rules and regulations will not apply to most readers of this English version of the book, but I think it is worthwhile for you to read about and reflect on them, nevertheless. In fact, even in Germany, it is highly unlikely that a private person would have the keeping conditions of their parrots checked by government officials. They are simply too busy to do that.

In spite or maybe even because of this, the minimum requirements should be considered an important guideline for all those who love their parrots and would like to optimize their keeping – not because the owners want to stick to the rules for fear of repercussion, but simply because they love their animals and want the best for them. A non-official English version of this report is posted on my homepage (www.thebirdschool.com). It can also be obtained from me by e-mail. For simplicity's sake and because it is so very important, I am giving you a short overview of the main points of this report here: In general, parrots are flock animals who furthermore usually form life long bonds with their mates. Therefore, they must be kept at least in pairs in cages with specified minimum sizes which you may view in the table posted below. Because the stated sizes are

MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS FOR THE KEEPING OF PARROTS		
Total Body Length	Cage	Measurements
Parakeets	(Width x Depth x Height)	
< 25cm (<10")	1,0m x 0,5m x 0,5m (40" x 20" x 20")	
25cm – 40cm (10" – 16")	2,0m x 1,0m x 1,0m (80" x 40" x 40")	
> 40cm (> 16")	3,0m x 1,0m x 2,0m (120" x 40" x 80")	
Short Tailed Parrots		
< 25cm (<10")	1,0m x 0,5m x 0,5m (40" x 20" x 20")	
25cm – 40cm (10" – 16")	2,0m x 1,0m x 1,0m (80" x 40" x 40")	
> 40cm (> 16")	3,0m x 1,0m x 2,0m (120" x 40" x 80")	
Macaws		
< 40cm (< 16")	2,0m x 1,0m x 1,5m (80" x 40" x 60")	
40cm – 60cm (16" – 24")	3,0m x 1,0m x 2,0m (120" x 40" x 80")	
> 60cm (> 24")	4,0m x 2,0m x 2,0m (160" x 80" x 80")	
Loris & other Fructivores		
< 20cm (< 8")	1,0m x 0,5m x 0,5m (40" x 20" x 20")	
> 20cm (> 8")	2,0m x 1,0m x 1,0m (80" x 40" x 40")	

minimum requirements, each of the German states may, and some do, require larger containments for parrots.

Humidity

Barring few exceptions, parrots require a minimum environmental humidity of 60%, or better 70%. It is advisable to purchase a humidifier and a hygrometer to increase and monitor the humidity in the area where the birds are kept.

Light

Parrots require much natural light. Access to an outdoor aviary would be ideal. If this is not



Photo: Maike Schumann
Daily showers help increase the humidity around your parrots – and most of them love it!



Photo: David Jayne
Pedro and Oscarine enjoy their UV-bird lamp close-up.

possible, the animals must be provided with artificial sunlight via specialized UV-lights for parrots. Please keep in mind that natural sunlight loses its UV-components when filtered through glass. Thus placing the cage in front of a closed window might give your birds something to look at, but it will not be sufficient to provide them with vital UV-light.

Nutrition

Nutrition is a vast topic about which volumes of books may be written. As this is not a book on nutrition and space is limited, I will just give a short overview of some important cornerstones. Your parrots' diet should be varied and nutritious. Typical seed mixes may make up part of the diet, but should by no means be the only component. Do keep in mind that seed mixes may pose a health risk through microbiological and fungal contamination. Also, please make sure that your feed mix does not contain peanuts in the shell. These are often highly contaminated with *Aspergillus* spores. The dreaded aspergillosis disease can be caused by those spores. This is a lung and air sack disease which may prove to be fatal to your parrots. Instead you may feed your parrots roasted, unsalted peanuts, manufactured for human

consumption, as a treat. Absolutely forbidden are chocolate and avocados, as both can be lethal to parrots. Recipes for a well balanced diet for parrots may be found in many books and on the internet.

Ann M. Castro



4. Behavior

For starters, I would like to give you a short overview of behavior and how it is formed.

With this basis, the principles and applications of clicker training may be more easily understood and implemented.

Behavior Must be Worthwhile

Every living being, regardless of whether it is domesticated or not, will over time only exhibit behavior that in one way or another is worthwhile to it. In the wild, these are primarily behaviors that allow the individual animal and its species to survive. These behaviors include those that ensure food supply, finding a mate, and escaping from predators. For domesticated

animals, usually behaviors that gain them attention and avoid punishment may be added to this list. How then, as an owner, can I use this knowledge to form the behavior of my animals? There are four means of influencing behavior. Two are rewards and two are punishments. These will be explained in detail in the following section:

Rewards

Something Desirable is Added

The animal is rewarded for a behavior, for example with treats, cuddling or a favored toy.

Something Undesirable is removed

In other words, the trainer stops hitting the animal, covering the cage, locking the animal away, squirting it with water, etc. The removal of something undesirable is rarely used in clicker training, as we do not punish the animals in the first place. Thus, there is no punishment that can be removed.

There are some trainers who use removal of their own presence as a reward with untamed or scared animals. This is a questionable practice, as the animal first has to be annoyed or frightened by the trainer's presence so that it may then view the removal of that presence as

a reward. The danger is that the animal will connect the trainer's presence with fear, panic, or other negative emotions which hampers the building of trust and a positive relationship between animal and trainer.

Punishment

Something Undesirable is Added

Examples of this are screaming at the bird, squirting it, locking it away, hitting it, banging against the cage, shaking it etc. We do not use such methods in clicker training!

Something Desired is Removed

An excellent example of this is withdrawal of attention when the bird exhibits unwanted behaviors, such as when the bird screams or is aggressive and we turn around and leave the room. Another example is the removal of a reward, if the bird behaves in an undesirable way. In clicker training, we mainly use the adding of rewards to influence behavior.

What are Punishments?

A punishment is anything that results in a behavior being interrupted. Punishment in its mildest form can be a stern look or a gentle chide. In extreme cases, it can also be heavy

EXTINCTION BEHAVIOR

If an animal is always rewarded for a certain behavior, it will show an extinction burst, if a reward is omitted.

This is a more pronounced version of the same behavior. Extinction bursts can be used in training to shape behaviors. However, they can also become a real problem, when you are trying to get rid of unwanted behaviors.

If, e.g. in the past, a bird's screaming made you go to his cage and give him a treat, he will now scream longer and louder, should you ignore his screaming. If you then are not strong, cave in and give him a treat, as you did before, you will have effectively trained your bird to scream longer and louder. Thus, you will have a worse problem than when you started.

Therefore, it is extremely important to stick to your guns when you are ignoring undesired behaviors in order to get rid of them.

physical abuse. Whether an intervention is a punishment or not does not lie in the intention or judgment of the trainer, but in the animal's reaction to it.

I often hear argumentations that a sharp "no", the showing of, but not squirting with a squirt gun, or a slap on the beak are not really punishments. This is not so. If these actions

interrupt the animal's behavior, they are, by definition, punishments. There is no point in discussing, whether an action a trainer takes is a punishment or not. The animal's behavior is a clear indicator as to what constitutes punishment and what does not.

In addition, a trainer will take such actions only when he expects some sort of a reaction from the animal. Thus, if he is honest with himself, he knows that they are meant as punishment and that he uses them as such. Therefore, we should stop justifying and using punishments – and lying to ourselves about it.

The Lure of Punishment

Many times I am asked by parrot owners, if they really must not use punishment. In spite of them saying that they love their animals, which I believe them, they feel the need to utilize punishment as a training tool.

Often they then discuss the harshness of punishment with me trying to get a carte blanche where “mild” punishments are concerned. There are even trainers who condition a negative marker parallel to the clicker so that they may deliver punishment with the same precision as a reward. Humans want to punish. Why is that so?

Punishment is Self-Rewarding

At the time that the trainer delivers a punishment he feels in control. He feels superior and his ego is strengthened. All this, of course, feels good to him. Thus, the act of punishing is rewarded and very much worthwhile to the trainer. Whether the punishment is an effective training measure, becomes a secondary issue at that point, because the trainer's attention is no longer focused on the effect of his action, but on his own reward. This is the reason why punishment tends to escalate. Over time it will be used more frequently and more harshly, because it is used to generate positive feelings for the trainer. Like a drug, however, the effect weakens with use. Thus, the "kick" has to be increased. This leads to an escalation of the punishment which in extreme cases can lead to heavy and sometimes life-threatening or even deadly physical abuse. The utilization of punishment means entering a devil's cycle of escalating violence. This is beneath us. And our animals deserve better than that!

Why Don't We Punish?

Now let's assume for arguments sake that you have good self control and will only ever use mild forms of punishment. Why should you

nevertheless forego the use of punishment? Several good reasons exist for that:

We Want to Build a Positive Relationship With Our Animals That is Built on Trust

How is an animal supposed to trust us without reservations, if it experiences unpleasantness from us or even pain?

Through Punishment Behavioral Problems May be Created

Would you like to have parrots that are fearful, afraid of everything and in particular of you? Who, according to their personalities will turn into fear aggressive birds, screamers, pluckers, or self-mutilators? Who possibly are constantly ill, because fear-induced stress depresses the immune system? All this does not have to happen, but it can, if you work with punishment. Such a risk should not and does not need to be taken, as punishment is not a particularly successful Training Method anyway.

Our Punishment Could be Reinforcing to the Animal

To most living beings even negative attention is better than no attention. You only need to go into a crowded supermarket on any

Saturday morning to observe cranky children and exasperated parents. Do you really believe that those children would behave that way, if there was not something in it for them? But let's get back to parrots. If your parrot sits by himself in his cage, screaming will definitely be worthwhile to him, if as a consequence you start yelling at him. When that happens, he is no longer alone. He gets attention. In addition, screaming for many parrots is not a punishment, anyway. It is a wonderful flock activity. Have you ever had the chance to observe a group of parrots playing? The more fun they are having, the louder they get. So much the better, if the whole flock, including you, participates. Can't you just see your bird thinking "Yippieeee ... my humans love this game just as much as I do. Look how they participate!"

Punishments are Difficult to Implement

In order for the bird to connect a negative consequence to its behavior, the punishment has to follow without delay. This means punishment must happen at virtually the same moment in which the unwanted behavior occurs. The time frame for this is only a few seconds. In addition, you have to catch the bird every time an unwanted behavior is shown. If you don't and



Photo: David Jayne
Polly – a blue crowned conure – is adorable. However, her voice is not. Attention has to be paid to not inadvertently reinforce her screaming.

only catch it occasionally, you may very well end up variably reinforcing the unwanted behavior. After all, whatever “reward” the bird gets from this behavior is still present. Variable reinforcement, however, is used in training to strengthen and solidify a trained behavior. This is not something you should risk happening for an unwanted behavior.

Punishments Do Not Show the Animal Which Behaviors are Desired

The animal learns by punishment only what it should not do, but not what it should do. In

the worst case, this may lead to the animal sitting apathetically in a corner, not daring to do anything anymore in its effort to avoid being punished.

How is Behavior Achieved?

Now that we have agreed to forego punishment, of course, the question arises, how the trainer can induce the animal to show a behavior that may then be rewarded.

There are five methods to draw out wanted behaviors:

Catching the Behavior

Observe your parrots and reward them whenever they show any wanted behaviors. The more often you catch and reward a certain behavior, the faster your bird will realize that this particular behavior is worthwhile to him. As a consequence, he will show this behavior more frequently.

With this method, simple behaviors, such as body stance, wing lifts, foot lifts, tail shakes, and head nods, can be trained. But it also lends itself to the chaining of several simple behaviors into more complex ones, such as somersaults around a perch, going into the cage or carrier, or “dancing”.

Showing the Behavior

Using this method, you show the bird the desired behavior. One example of this, that many of us use, is to repeat a word or phrase in the hopes that the bird will mimic it. Another example is us playing with a new toy that the bird is afraid of or eating foods in front of him that we want him to try.

Shaping Behavior

In shaping, you start by capturing behaviors which are part of a desired behavior. You catch the bird when it shows a behavior that can be built-up to the planned exercise. If, for example, you would like to teach a wave, you will at first reward the bird for lifting its foot slightly. When he has learned to regularly lift his foot a little bit, you skip a reward. This results in an extinction burst which makes him lift his foot more pronounced than before. This is then rewarded. Subsequently, only higher foot lifts are rewarded. We will learn more about this in a later chapter.

Enticement

The bird can also be enticed to show a behavior, for example when we let him follow a treat and reward him for following. In clicker training,



Photo: David Jayne
The "big eagle" is taught via shaping.

we use a target stick, because it is easier and more general to use. You can use enticement with a target stick to teach turns, rolls, stepping-up, recalls, and so forth.

Physical Assistance

Some exercises can best be taught with physical assistance. One example of this is the bird sitting on your hand and you gently fixing the toes with your thumb. You can then carefully roll the bird forwards or backwards to teach him to swing from your hand.



Photo: David Jayne
The “swing” is taught via physical assistance.

Ann M. Castro

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The Author

Since childhood, Ann Castro has been surrounded by birds and other animals. Both parents being medical doctors – her father a psychiatrist and neurologist, her mother a general practitioner who also bred budgerigars – Ann was introduced to behavioral, as well as medical topics at an early age.

The author has been involved with parrots for many years. She teaches clicker training for birds and gives advice to parrots owners regarding all issues related to their pets. Her area of specialization is the resocialization of birds with behavioral issues.

In 2003, Ann Castro founded a not-for-profit organization, the AdlA Papageienhilfe gGmbH. AdlA stands for Amigos de las Aves which means friends of the birds. Papageienhilfe is the German word for parrot aid. The aim of the AdlA Papageienhilfe is to improve the relationships and understanding between birds and owners and thus minimizing the number of birds losing their homes. Ann Castro's advice is sought by pet owners, veterinarians and pet shops alike. She has also appeared in various TV shows as a parrot expert.

Ann Castro, a born Canadian who currently lives in Germany, holds a Bachelor of Applied Science degree in Chemical Engineering from the University of Toronto and a Masters degree in Business Administration from York University, Canada.

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