



# *Paws, Claws & Wings*

*Physical and Behavioral Rehabilitation for Animals*



## How birds learn:

Firstly do not let anyone tell you that birds don't have feelings and are stupid (to be called a bird brain is actually a compliment). Birds learn by associating their actions with the immediate consequences. They need a positive reaction to their correct actions within one second of the required action being performed. The consequences of their reactions are viewed as positive if they offer a reward to the bird. Some results that birds view as positive are: treats, attention (even if it is seen by the owner as scolding the bird) play, interaction, toys, touch. The body language that the owner uses around the bird is very valuable to the bird as he interprets it as either positive or negative.

## How to train birds:

I use a program that is called operant conditioning. This entails getting the bird to perform an action because the action has a positive result or reward. An action that the bird performs that is undesirable (remember for a bird, biting the mate when there are undesirable people around is normal, but usually undesirable for the owner) must receive an immediate negative reaction. This does NOT include physical punishment or shouting at the bird. A negative reaction from the owner is not reacting to the undesirable action at all or interrupting the action. Shouting at the bird will cause him to shout back and becomes a game. The bird must be motivated and have a reason to perform the desirable behaviour. Overzealous punishment is the main reason birds develop behaviour problems. The bird sees it as painful and scary and will avoid the owner as he sees the owner as the cause of the punishment and not the undesirable action he has performed. Anything that causes the bird to show fear towards the owner is seen as abuse.

The ideal way to train a bird to perform desirable reactions is to immediately reward the correct actions and immediately ignore the incorrect actions. Remember that the behaviours the owner often sees as 'wrong' are often quite normal for the bird. That is why we refer to behaviours as acceptable or unacceptable (to the owner, not the bird). The owner must only have realistic expectations of the bird's behaviour and not expect the bird to perform miracles. No physical force must be used when working with any animal. Consistency and lots and lots of practice are very important in training a bird.

## Socialisation and habituation:

If a bird is going to be a pleasurable, well behaved bird in social situations he will need to be socialized. Socialisation includes exposing the bird to as many different experiences as possible from as young an age as possible. Ensure that the experiences are seen as pleasurable and do not scare the bird. This includes exposing the bird to other animals, other animals (ensure that the bird is not endangered), different races, genders, sizes, and clothing. The bird will then see that new things are usually fun and will be much more open to accept new situations. This will 'habituate' or get the bird

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accept new stimuli without being afraid or stressed.

## Environmental enrichment:

One of the easiest ways to ensure you have a happy, healthy bird is to provide environmental enrichment. This includes providing the bird with many choices of activities. The bird must have lots of variety in its environment. Environmental enrichment includes many different toys, games, objects to destroy and places to explore. A bird in the wild spends up to 95% of its waking hours foraging for food, but we just give them a food bowl, normally in the same place, at the same time and with the same food in it - how boring! The bird will be happiest if the owner handles his resources, this includes: deciding when to give or take away toys, initiate the games, decide when it is quiet time and control access to high value areas (boundaries, kitchen, areas where the most interactions occur). This enables the bird to see where they fit into the family / flock. The bird that is sure of its place in the world will be much more secure in its environment, and you will not have dominance issues when the bird reaches sexual maturity.

## Shaping behaviour:

The way that we teach a bird to perform desired behaviours is called shaping or luring. We lure the bird with a treat until he does what we want, and then we treat him. We start with very small steps and then add the steps together to create a complete behaviour. Remember that birds are not stupid and are very capable of training you to perform behaviours that they want.