



Paws, Claws & Wings

Physical and Behavioral Rehabilitation for Animals



Abby: Screaming

Abby is a 6 year old female Moluccan Cockatoo. She and her owner have a very good relationship and a very close bond. She has always screamed a little at sunset and sundown (a completely normal activity for all birds but Cockatoos seem to take it to the extreme), but over the last 2 weeks she has been screaming very loudly at nearly hourly intervals during the day. Her owner, Kirsty works from home and therefore spends a lot of time with Abby during the day. She is afraid that her neighbors will try to force her to get rid of Abby due to all the noise even though she lives on a plot and has very understanding neighbors, and also is beginning to find it difficult to work with all the screaming going on. Abby is at the age when a female Moluccan becomes completely sexually and socially mature and as this is now the end of winter, beginning of summer, she is beginning to instinctively announce her presence. Kirsty is experienced as a dog trainer but has never trained birds before. What I plan to do with Abby and Kirsty is to make screaming acceptable at certain times but not at others.

E-Mail:

As discussed during the consultation, our plan is to train Abby to scream. For this to work, please speak to your neighbors and ask if they can tolerate screaming for a little longer as you are working to resolve the problem. As you said that they understand the fact that birds scream at dusk and dawn and are happy for Abby to do this, I feel they will be supportive to this plan. I know this sounds very counterproductive as it is the screaming we are trying to stop but if we train her to only scream when asked to you will be in control of when she screams. This will mean that we can control her screaming. Remember that screaming is a natural outlet for birds as they are very vocal animals and communicate using vocal signals. The last thing we want is to suppress a natural part of Abby's life and in result make her miserable. We aim to teach Abby that you are in control of the screaming 'game' or resource and you must initiate it and end it. How we plan to do this is: when Abby is screaming, blatantly ignore her, immediately place her in her cage and cover it with a dark blanket. She will soon realize that it is the screaming that causes her to be punished. Removing a pleasant stimulus is called negative punishment. We are not aiming to hurt her in any way or cause her any fear, we just want her to connect her screaming with being placed in a boring, dark place. To deal with her normal screaming in the mornings, we will let her continue this, but we will place it on cue. A few minutes before you know Abby is about to begin her ritual screaming, say your cue word and begin yelling, shouting or singing - as long as it is loud! Remember we want her to join in, so encourage her; this must be a fun game for both of you. One of the side effects of this training may be stress relief for you! When you can see that Abby is beginning to tire if the screaming game, stop and say the ending cue. Then offer her a favorite treat as a reward. When she is eating, she cannot scream. Initiate this game on an hourly basis to try and stop her screaming on her own. When she is sitting quietly and behaving calmly, reward her by giving her attention.

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This is the same technique that many people use to stop problematic dogs barking continually.

Follow up:

Abby grasped the idea that it is much more fun to scream with a friend than by herself, she actually began to mimic Kristy's starting and finishing cues. She learnt within 2 weeks that a cue word meant she can scream, with Kirsty, have fun and then get rewarded. She began only to scream during the game and after 2 months has now only screamed unprompted once in the last 3 days, she stopped as soon as she was shown her cage and the covering blanket.

Sr Emmylou Rivers

